

*“You could feel the effect and smell the real thing, gunpower.
D-Day was the day it was for real.
It wasn’t a maneuver anymore.
It was not an exercise.
Either you knew how to pray or you learned how to pray ”*

—Shipfitter, 3rd Class, George Narozonick, U.S. Navy

No one had ever witnessed anything like it when they came by sea and by air. A massive armada as far as any bystander could see crossed the English Channel. Aircraft rumbled up and down the French coastline. The blustery storm had softened by then, but dawn still broke in a gray fog with heavy winds gusting from the Northwest. And four-foot waves still rose.

George Narozonick, an 18-year-old shipfitter from central New Jersey, stood topside on a ship longer than a football field. He peered out at the coastline. Years of logistical and intelligence planning approached a daring end. “You could feel the effect and smell the real thing, gunpowder,” he remembered. “D-Day was the day it was for real. It wasn’t a maneuver anymore. It was not an exercise. Either you knew how to pray or you learned how to pray.”



One of the largest amphibious assaults in world history, D-Day turned the tide in World War II and lives on in survivors like Narozonick. *National Archives*



This American flag, a gift presented to Narozonick years ago, once flew over the beaches of Normandy. It was one of his most treasured possessions. *Laura Mott*

Narozonick watched the men climb down cargo nets to landing craft swaying and pitching in the water below. He'd see their faces the next 70 years, heroes with dreams like his drifting away to a fate unknown.

Seventy years on in 2015, Narozonick, 89, remembered the heavy price of freedom, the unlucky and lucky of history's Longest Day. Photos and scrapbooks were scattered across his dining room table in Olympia, Wash. He glanced at a model of his famous ship. Outside his living room window was a symbol of his sacrifice: An American flag that once flew over the very coastline of one of the largest amphibious assaults in world history. Here he could easily flash back to his small mattress and the large mess hall. He could feel the fatigue that could lull him to sleep anyplace and the seasickness on the high seas of the North Atlantic. But mostly, he remembered those men he'd last seen in the churning surf. He never forgot them. The GIs gallantly waded through the water. It was miserably cold. They stormed Utah Beach—wide open, sandy and pocked with dunes—and amid howling chaos, helped liberate France.

GEORGE NAROZONICK took his first breath 50 miles from Manhat-

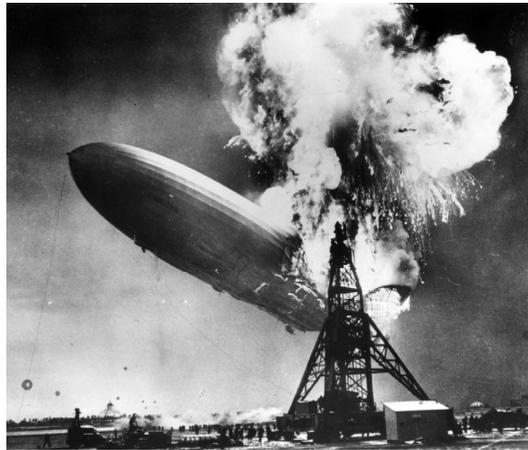


Narozonick, born on a farm in Manalapan, New Jersey, was raised in a large Catholic family. Shown here with his sister Jenny on the day of their First Communion.

George Narozonick collection

the 102-acre farm and they raised their own animals. His attractive mother Alice had emigrated in 1906 while the Poles rebelled against their Russian rulers. Alice left the upheaval in Poland and went to work in an American tobacco mill. His father Stanley, a native New Jerseyan, had chauffeured the owner.

Narozonick remembered the skies darkening when a marvel as long as three city blocks flew overhead to nearby Lakehurst. The luxury airship *Hindenburg* was the fastest way across the Atlantic. He was 11 when the monster airship blew apart in that New Jersey town and erupted into a ball of flames. “Oh, the



As long as three city blocks, the *Hindenburg* burst into a ball of flames near Narozonick's hometown in 1937.

tan. His hometown, Manalapan, New Jersey, proudly holds a place in history as the site of the Battle of Monmouth in the Revolutionary War. (With great fanfare, re-enactments of the 1778 battle still take place in Manalapan every June.) Narozonick arrived in 1925, the year Adolf Hitler released his hate-filled manifesto, *Mein Kampf*. He could have been any farm boy around—racing through the fields, milking Bessie and watching over the garden with his siblings. They grew all the food they could ever need on



Narozonick as a young boy in New Jersey. *George Narozonick collection*

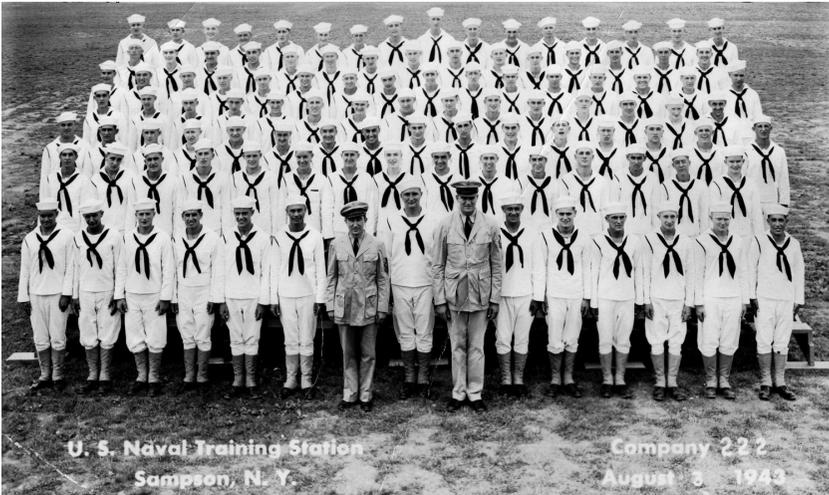
humanity! All the passengers! I don't believe it!" a reporter had said. The explosion, likely the result of a hydrogen leak, rattled the windows in homes below and took the lives of 36 people.

Hard times had fallen upon the country by then. The American economy had collapsed in 1929, putting millions out of work. The kids never understood they were living in a Great Depression, but it uprooted their lives just the same. Farmers the country over struggled with falling agricultural prices

and mounting debt. And George's father Stanley lost his farm in Manalapan. The Narozonicks packed up their family of 10 and moved to nearby Freehold. Stanley found a steady job as a lineman for the Jersey Central Power Company.

Years passed in the small community. Narozonick graduated from Lakewood High School and promptly enlisted in the U.S. Navy—a decision sealed by his love for his country and the Navy's sharp uniforms. (He'd tried to enlist the year before, at 16, but his mother had refused to sign the papers.) It was the summer of 1943. World War II had raged in Europe for nearly four years by then, and engaged the U.S. for two. The month Narozonick enlisted, the Allies toppled Benito Mussolini from power and the Nazis liquidated Jewish ghettos in Belorussia and the Baltic states. Narozonick would join the war effort in a matter of months.

The young recruit first acquired the grit of a sailor at Sampson Naval Training Station in Seneca, New York, where more than 400,000 "boots" trained during World War II. The military installation, built in nine months, spread across 2,600 acres of former farmlands and vineyards. "You walk into this big camp and there's 50,000 recruits in there," he remembered. "People from all walks of life—probably gangsters and criminals and medical people, who knows? We had some pret-



Narozonick, one of 400,000 recruits trained in Seneca, New York, during the war, said boot camp taught him how a teenager should behave. “They kept us up day and night—in the rain, in the sun.” *George Narozonick collection*

ty wild kids. They rebelled against authority. They were rough and tough. And they didn’t like discipline. You glob that many people into one big camp, it takes a lot of discipline to keep that place running. Otherwise, the boots would take over the camp.

“They kept us up day and night—in the rain, in the sun. The transition from a civilian life to military life is not easy. It took its toll on a lot of people. And I would say about a half-dozen in our company got out ... They didn’t like authority.” Narozonick met the challenge. He was bound for war.

THE NEW SAILOR FOUND HER IN INDIANA. Looking at her—328 feet long, rugged, and homely—you could see why they called her a low, slow target or a sea sled or a floating barge. Or why they likened her to a large, empty self-propelled box. Some even labeled her a nautical monstrosity. Winston Churchill once quipped to General Eisenhower that “The destinies of two great empires seemed to be tied up in some goddamn things called LSTs.” The *USS LST-501*, the only name she’d ever been given, was a Landing Ship, Tank or LST. Built 600 miles from the Atlantic Seaboard—in one of those cornfield shipyards—she was a vessel historians would call the linchpin of the seaborne assault that turned the tide in World War II.

She was conceptualized by the British after the Battle of Dunkirk—a staggering maritime evacuation Churchill described as a “miracle of deliverance.” The Germans had stormed into Belgium, Luxemburg and ultimately France. They dominated the Allies in the spring of 1940, trapping British, French and Belgian troops on three sides, near the Port of Dunkirk. The flotilla sent to save them from German capture included 900 naval and civilian craft—the result of a public plea for personal craft. Rescuers lifted nearly 340,000 men from the beaches and waters of Dunkirk in only 10 days. Whenever weather permitted, the Luftwaffe attacked. The lives of 5,000 people and tons of heavy equipment were lost.

The need for a large vessel that could make shore-to-shore deliveries with men, vehicles and artilleries was abundantly clear. Shipbuilders made LSTs at a fever pitch in the coming years—more than 1,000 to be used in World War II. You might find the seafaring LST swinging open her enormous bow doors and disgorging Sherman tanks and landing

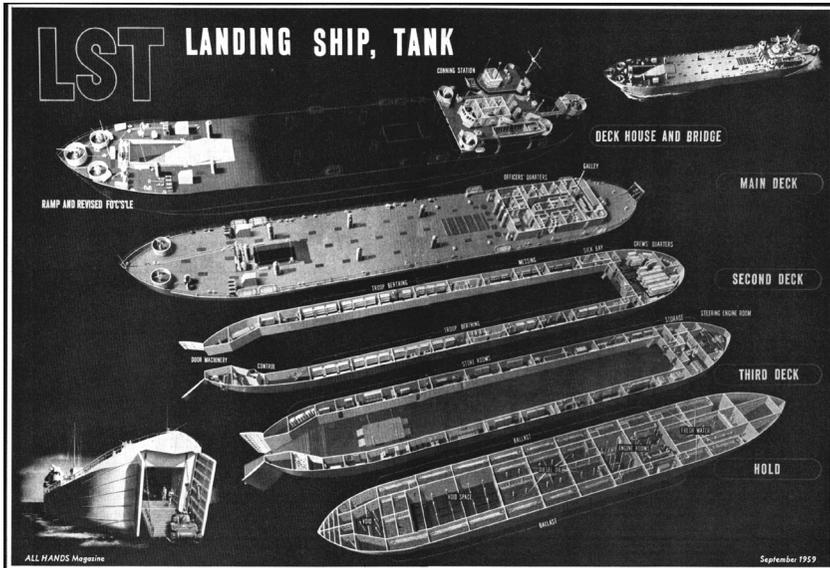


Historians called Narozonick's ship the linchpin of D-Day. Longer than an American football field, the vessel could make shore-to-shore deliveries of men and machines. *Navsource.org/Paulo Soukup*



The LST could swing open her enormous bow doors to disgorge Sherman tanks directly onto a sloped beach. *National Archives*

craft directly onto enemy turf. All she needed was a gradually sloped beach. Sometimes, she hauled as many as 15 Sherman tanks and 14 craft in a single crossing. Sailors could wait out the tide and pull the vessel back off the shore. Narozonick became engrossed in the mechanics of the LST. He proudly displayed models of the ship and had a collection of books detailing her crucial role: “You get in late in the afternoon. You get



More than 1,000 landing ship, tanks (LSTs) were built for use in World War II. The seagoing vessels traveled around the globe.

your stern anchor out and your bow anchor out,” he explained, eyes lighting up. “When the tide goes out, you’re left high and dry—without a drop of water beneath the ship. It’s all flat-bottom, like a tabletop.”

He boarded his vessel, becoming one of 16 million service members to serve in the conflict. There were no cameras or radios allowed and limited technology. “We didn’t know how many men Hitler had behind the lines marching toward us or who was going ahead. We didn’t have any idea. At that time, there was no radar. There wasn’t any equipment to let us know how far anybody was away. You couldn’t even determine what kind of weather it was the next day.”

OUT ON THE NORTH ATLANTIC, in the winter of 1944, storms battered the *USS LST-501* more than the enemy, tossing her about on violent, high seas. The big vessel lived up to her reputation as a sea sled every time she slammed down onto waves as high as 15 or 25 feet. She’d departed the major convoy port in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for England with 60 ships and Canadian corvettes as escort. No mighty convoy could guard against the brutal crossing. The sea-lanes delivered men and materiel to

Europe, but crossed an open ocean of relentless winds, chilling cold and rough seas. The seasickness was debilitating.

A shipmate of Narozonick's, Eddie Cochran, manned the engines in the bowels of the 501 as they crossed the North Atlantic. "Sometimes you were sitting on top of two waves and there was no water under the middle of you. You'd flop off of one and down on another. You're underneath the water and you come up. You get the next one—head on. Or, you land flat on it. It vibrates the whole ship." Another Navy sailor explains, "LSTs go through all of the usual rocking motions that ships go through on the sea. But in addition to those, because the front end is so shallow, it smacks the waves and sets up a rolling vibration throughout the ship."

"We had a British converter carrier," Narozonick added. "It [the water] was so rough he could not land the plane or take off from the carrier for 18 days. It was the North Atlantic. The weather was 18 days of the wilds of the ocean. The North Atlantic is notorious for the winter months. I don't think there was anybody who didn't get seasick. Some guys had chronic seasickness and they finally had to let them go."

Every morning and every evening, destroyers dropped depth charges, explosives designed to detonate enemy subs. Narozonick, in charge of a 40mm anti-aircraft gun, took his post in four-hour stints, day and night. "We had a pointer on the left side and a trainer on the other side. And then if we heard from the convoy boss, if he suspected anything, or if it was close to us, we'd solicit depth charges. Seventeen years old!"



Eddie Cochran, a machinist from Ohio, crossed the North Atlantic and hit the beaches on The Longest Day with Narozonick. The two survivors always hoped to correspond. *Eddie Cochran collection*



After years of meticulous planning, the Allies ready to cross the English Channel, a formidable military barrier. *U.S. Coast Guard*

Narozonick and the *USS LST 501* arrived in Torquay, England, in one piece after nearly three weeks at sea. For more than four months, and in practiced maneuvers, the crew darted into ports along the English coast—landing, offloading and retreating. “We hit about every port in southern England,” Narozonick said. “We had some close calls, but nothing like ‘Tiger’—which was when four or five of our LSTs were damaged or sunk, along with hundreds of troops. This was pre-invasion maneuvers, which went on for months before the big one. There were so many troops and equipment on the British Isles everywhere, and everywhere and everywhere. They were waiting for the word to invade.”

THE WORD CAME. The Normandy Invasion made history before a single paratrooper dropped from the skies. No invading army had braved the English Channel since the 17th century. Nearly 100 miles wide, it was a formidable military barrier. The assault demanded a spring tide and moonlight for paratroopers and bombardiers, limiting possible launch dates to a scant few. But Invasion Day came again in June 1944—despite fears of bad weather that resulted in a 24-hour delay.

The top-secret plan was code-named Operation Neptune.



Landing ship, tanks unload vehicles onto Omaha Beach. Of their crucial role in World War II, Winston Churchill once quipped to General Eisenhower: “The destinies of two great empires seemed to be tied up in some goddamn things called LSTs.” *National Archives*

It would carry hundreds of thousands of Allies—millions of tons of weapons—across the English Channel and into Fortress Europe.

The assault began when more than 21,000 paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions began descending in darkness—to land behind enemy lines, to seize positions, to eliminate defenses and to capture causeway bridges.

Some 5,000 ships had traveled across the Channel, encountering five- and six-foot waves, and strong wind gusts. But somehow, they’d approached the French coast undetected “without a murmur from the enemy” and stopped miles from the Normandy coast. Grappling with a 75-pound radio device, George Hicks, aboard the *USS Ancon*, observed the ships lying in all directions, “just like black shadows on the grey sky.” Narozonick’s ship had dropped anchor a few miles from Utah Beach, the Allies’ westernmost target on the east coast of the Cotentin Peninsula.

Bombs thundered across the coastline, clearing the way for troops. Aircraft hovered overhead. From the engine room of Narozonick’s ship, Cochran, the machinist, poked his head through the escape hatch. “It sounded like a bunch of bees—bombers going straight over the top of us,” he recalls.

“It was noisy. It was confusing. We had the rest of the U.S. Navy with us... battleships, cruisers, all pounding away on the beaches trying to get our troops ashore,” Narozonick said.

The first wave of troops, some 600 men, plunged into the water, headed for the beach, but missed targets. Allied Forces captured the Port of Cherbourg, as planned, after the initial confusion. Of some 20,000 men who landed on Utah Beach, the Allies suffered only 200 casualties, the best casualty record of any D-Day Invasion beach.

That first night on Utah Beach Narozonick sat with fellow sailors on dry land when the Germans dropped flares on the beach, landing between the men and a British Air Ministry ship. “We did not have any air protection. That’s when the Germans snuck in and bombed us. Scared the hell out of us. Here we were high and dry. No water around us. Oh yeah, it missed. But it rolls you out of the sack.”

By nightfall, the wounded and dead Allies on all five, code-named beaches of Operation Overlord numbered 9,000. The bloodiest warfare took place on Omaha Beach where strong currents pushed landing craft east of their targets and troops landed ashore disoriented. Tanks were swamped and overcast skies made gunfire less precise.

Back in the states, an exhausted President Roosevelt addressed the American people in prayer: “Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity.

“Lead them straight and true; give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness in their faith.

“They will need Thy blessings. Their road will be long and hard. For the enemy is strong. He may hurl back our forces. Success may not come with rushing speed, but we shall return again and again; and we know that by Thy grace, and by the righteousness of our cause, our sons will triumph.”

TRIUMPH CAME AT A COST. With the next tide, Narozonick prepared for the grim job of hauling hundreds of prisoners and the dead, both German and American, back to England. Troops led

the wounded and German POWs away—their hands clasped behind their heads—and collected the dead. “They took them all off the frontlines,” he said. “All off the beaches. Take them back to England. Put them in a prisoner-of-war camp or a hospital. That was the only way to clean the beach up. We had a shipload going back the first day. There was nowhere else for them to go. There wasn’t enough room on the beach to hold them all. The first load we took back—I think that when they came aboard the ship, they were afraid we were going to take them out to sea and sink them. That wasn’t the case.”



Men prepare to ferry the wounded and prisoners of war across the English Channel. “The first load we took back—I think that when they came aboard the ship, they were afraid we were going to take them out to sea and sink them. That wasn’t the case,” Narozonick said. *National Archives*

The LST doubled as a makeshift hospital. During her second cross-Channel return to England, the *USS LST-501* carried a striking 16-year-old German girl who suffered from chest wounds. As Cochran overheard her talking with the attending physician, he'd learned she'd trained as a sniper for four years. Her hatred for the enemy was also made clear. "She picked up one of these scalpels on the table by him and stuck it in his back and just missed his kidney."

All told, Narozonick's LST made more than a dozen crossings in the ensuing weeks of D-Day. The Allies secured a foothold by the end of June. The tide had turned, but the war kept on.

YOU NEVER HEAR MUCH about the forgotten Invasion of southern France. Originally code-named Anvil, Operation Dragoon depended on the might of 450,000 troops and more than 800 warships. For Narozonick, it brought the most frightening moments of the conflict. "With Normandy secured, the amphibious forces were available. And the battlewagons that had pounded Normandy. The goal was to secure the ports of Marseille and the Toulon because Cherbourg had been scuttled by the Germans," he remembered.



Preparations are underway at Nisida, Italy for Operation Dragoon. The code-named invasion of southern France depended on some 800 warships. Narozonick's LST again carried men and vehicles to the beaches. *National Archives*

Narozonick and the crew headed to the Mediterranean, supporting the Invasion of southern France from August 15 to September 25. The assault won the critical ports of Marseille and Toulon.

But at twilight one day, a bomb missile struck the ship next to Narozonick's, the *USS LST-282*, only 500 feet away. He ducked for cover under a gun tub and watched in horror. "This German bomber up 25,000 feet, he dropped a radio-controlled bomb. We didn't know what the hell it was. Well, this bomb came down and hit the ship next to us. It hit with a terrific explosion. The fully loaded ship was being torn apart with all the ammo gas that the Army had on board. We could see the bomber that dropped the bomb, and we fired back in vain. It was much out of our reach with our 20 and 40mm guns. Everybody was hiding. We had shells and everything else coming over the ship. It was a disaster."

Operation Dragoon was a victory for the Allies. For Narozonick, its end meant a new landing ship tank and a new theater of war. He participated in the three-month campaign for Okinawa Gunto, one of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific. While the Allies won control of the island, the U.S. lost approximately 12,000 soldiers and sailors. The Japanese lost 100,000. The landing ship tank fulfilled much the same mission. "The only scares we got there was when they started using the kamikaze bombers. They would level off at about 30 or 40 feet and we'd make smoke in order to detour them not knowing where we were. And they would fly along at that height until they hit somebody."

NAROZONICK LEFT THE PERILOUS FLIGHT of the kamikaze bombers to his memories alone after he was discharged from the Navy. He rarely mentioned the conflict at all. "What I went through in that war was like a nightmare and nightmares you don't talk about," he said. "I could say a lot of things that fill your imagination. I wish I had all my mementoes and a Bible."

Life took a much different course after the war. Narozonick spent his modest allowances from the Navy courting a pretty young ice skater named Vila Hanaford. The dark-haired girl with delicate features had taken a spill on a frozen lake, attempting to show off. They fell in love. He followed her to Washington so she

could care for her ailing mother. They married in the fall of 1947 at St. Michael's Church in Olympia. Nearly 68 years later, they were still together. Their two daughters are now grandmothers.

Time brought a change of heart for George. In recent years, he opened up about his war experiences. As he looked way back, he counted himself among the lucky of the Longest Day. "If you had a company of infantrymen and you go through training, and you're together, you're real buddies. And then pretty soon, in one attack, 10 or 15 of them may be killed. They're good friends and they're dying in front of you."

He most appreciated the sense of camaraderie he found in the Navy. "Number one is probably the comfort that you get around men who are there for the same reason, same purpose. And the majority of them are too young to realize what danger they were in or realize what their objective was.

"Being just 18 years old, I didn't realize the major importance of the invasion at the time. It's really important that people do remember. With the passing years, some of the memories from D-Day are starting to fade, but the importance of what we did is still with me."

Narozonick returned to Normandy several times and was awarded the French Legion of Honor at Napoleon's tomb. He met movie stars and presidents. His attentive wife took meticulous notes of their journeys, stowing them in folders with his scrapbooks and photo albums.

At 89, George was the lone survivor of his large family. Memories of war and life itself tempered



George and Vila Narozonick stand with Elizabeth Dole, former senator, in 2009, marking the 65th anniversary of D-Day. Narozonick is awarded the French Legion of Honor, the country's highest award. *U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*



Kim Wyman, Secretary of State, relived D-Day with Narozonick at his home in Olympia, Wash., in 2015. “Veterans like George are humble, but they are true heroes,” Wyman says. “To learn from their stories is a gift.” *Laura Mott*

him. “As he’s grown older, I’ve seen more of a softening in his emotional reactions with people,” daughter Barbara said in 2015. “He’s gotten down to the basics of life. You don’t know how much longer you’re going to have.”

Narozonick remained deeply proud of the seafaring LST that ferried men and machines to Africa, the South Pacific, Italy and the coastline of northern France during the war. He was especially proud, as a longtime Washingtonian, of the state’s military heritage. “I think it’s a great thing to have Fort Lewis and McChord up here. It’s better than a concentration camp.”

George and his wife Vila were seated in the living room by a window that overlooks Budd Inlet, the southernmost arm of Puget Sound. Narozonick’s gaze returned to the American flag. “You see that flag out there?”

His wife Vila answered. “Sometimes, I think it should be in a case. But no, let it fly. I love having it there. To me, it just says, ‘Hey, we’re America and we’re free.’ ”

George Narozonick died a few months later on October 1, 2015.

Trova Heffernan