



**Willis
Henderson**
Army

Willis Henderson

May 9, 1912 - Nov 29, 2010

BIRTHPLACE: Downs, Kansas

SOLDIER DETAILS

DIVISION: Army, 149 Combat Engineers

THEATER OF OPERATION: European

SERVED: Feb 16, 1943 - Dec 8, 1945

HONORED BY: self

BIOGRAPHY

Our landing craft was number 613 - there are a lot of things I've forgotten, but I remember that very well. They had 1,200 to 1,500 pounds of TNT in netting above our heads. If they'd ever hit that, we'd have hit the moon! I was 30, married, and running my own trucking business when I was drafted. I was drafted from Garnett, where I still live today, in Feb 1943. I got on the Santa Fe, rode into Fort Leavenworth and was inducted into the Army. They ran us around about half-naked and I got the flu. I was in the hospital for 2 or 3 days; then they sent me back. I probably had training better than most of my buddies as my wife, Ruby, stayed about 40 miles from where the 149th was training. When word came down that we would be leaving for Ft Pierce, FL, she made plans to get our car. I told her not to, by she said, 'I'm going to get that car!' We went to Florida early with the cook's wife, in our car! When we got there, we went swimming in the ocean. That was the most fun we'd ever had in our lives. On 29 Dec 1943, I left New York. I can always remember the Statue of Liberty just getting lower and lower, and my heart sinking with it. I didn't think I'd ever see the US again. Even though I'd been a trucker in civilian life and had already painted Ruby's name on the Jeep I'd been assigned, in England someone decided they needed me to ride a motorcycle instead. I told that fella that I'd never even had a bicycle when I was a kid, but he said to ride it anyway. I gave it gas, went through a lady's yard, tore up her victory garden, and hit the side of the house. That fella came walking over and said, 'We don't need you!' I had never gambled, but one night I got in on a craps game and cleaned them out. I won \$83 and sent it home to my wife. I lived on \$13 a month the whole time I was in the military. We left England on 5 June, but the channel was so rough we had to turn back. The captain of our boat had been at Anzio and Salerno (two previous beach landing battles in Italy). He said, 'I'll put you boys in; don't worry about that.' They gave us chicken soup to eat, but the sea was so rough it wasn't too long before all that soup was in the bottom of the boat! I didn't throw up though; I stayed with mine. All of a sudden, the USS Texas veered off in a different direction and that big battleship turned sideways. Those guns went off, and you could just see that big ship rocking. They put our ramp down and we went off in water up to our chest. We were in the second wave to land on Omaha Beach and a huge portion of the first hadn't even made it out of the water. It wasn't like the movies, where they come

running off the ramp ? we were crawling. It was the most horrible thing you'd ever seen. More bodies than you can imagine. Later, we ran into snipers. They were just shooting and shooting from concrete bunkers. One of our guys got a bulldozer and just went down through there, covering them up. The Germans weren't the only ones we buried with the dozers though. The allied death toll from the landings had been so high that we had to dispose of the bodies by digging huge trenches and putting the bodies in. Once the fighting had moved further inland, those soldiers were exhumed and moved to permanent graves on higher ground, where they're still buried today. I've forgotten a lot of it, but a lot of it I remember at night. Our direct engagement with enemy forces during the invasion ? far beyond our duties as engineers ? earned us a special commendation from General Eisenhower. On my European Theater Operation Ribbon is 1 Arrow Head, 4 Bronze Stars. I am one of the lucky to get to come home. I said the good Lord was with me all the way.