

## Veterans' Vignettes

*By Pete Clark*

During the years of my youth, I crossed paths with many veterans of the Second World War. A man from my hometown had served aboard the Battleship South Dakota. The ship had been in port at Reykjavik, Iceland, when the Captain received sealed orders to set sail. Due to security restrictions, the Captain could not tell his crew where they were going. Once the South Dakota was well out to sea and had passed beyond the horizon from Iceland, the Captain had the ship's band strike up "The Sidewalks of New York." They dropped anchor in the Brooklyn Naval Yard for repairs and refitting. Once again, the South Dakota put to sea under sealed orders and when they crossed over the horizon the Captain had the ship's band play "San Francisco, Here I Come" and his men knew they were going to the Pacific. This friend was very proud of his ship and the part she played in softening up many invasion beaches.

One of my teachers was a veteran. My science teacher had been the Bombardier in a B-17. Returning from their third mission over Germany, the crew sighted two echelons of Fighters over the Channel Coast, three aircraft high and three low, coming toward them. They identified the planes as American P-47's: they were German FW-190's. All six of the German Fighters attacked his B-17. He said he had only time to fire three rounds from the plane's nose gun before an incoming 20mm projectile exploded in his compartment, seriously wounding him. He managed to bail out and was captured. He spent the rest of the war in a POW Camp. He said when the prisoners didn't eat, the guards also did not have food and you were beaten only if you tried to escape. The Germans let the POWs swim in the Baltic Sea. Once, while swimming, he felt something odd under his foot. He reached down and brought the object to the surface, a Neolithic spearhead. The Germans let him keep it.

A man I worked with was a veteran of the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, who arrived in France by way of Utah Beach in Normandy, June 6, 1944. His unit fought its way across France, into the Saar Basin in Germany. He told me that as they moved east, they began to smell a terrible odor and they did not know its source. After moving forward another twenty miles, they broke out of heavy timber and faced a vision of hell. It was a prison camp, the source of the odor, with living skeletons hanging on the fence. They surrounded the camp, tore the gate open and killed all of the Germans in the camp. Next they moved the survivors out of the camp, where it was not so filthy and fetid. My friend saw the mounds of hair, the piles of gold teeth, the ovens and was sickened. The Germans in the nearby town said they did not know the extermination camp was there.