

# ★ FROM D-PORT

## Sailing Against Germany

By Cpl. IRWIN SWERDLOW

**E**NGLAND—Tens of thousands of troops left their Marshalling Areas and marched or rode down to scores of concrete beaches, known as "hards." Simultaneously, the giant cranes of one of the busiest ports in England bowed their heads. A forest of ships got underway. Meanwhile, the winding streets of the port became a heaving sea of vehicles and men. The holiday trams, with their open-air platforms, which once rocked gaily through the blitzed thoroughfares, had ceased running. Columns of marching troops—British and American—cargo trucks, tank wreckers, DUKWS, guns, ambulances, prime movers, trailers and tanks poured in a steady stream from every direction, all headed for the quay. A thousand civilian stevedores and a thousand British army stevedores manned the piers. Buses moved an American Negro port battalion of stevedores from the billeting area to the docks.

When the port-battalion men were ordered to fall out in the compound that morning, Bulldozer knew that the show had started. He had played professional baseball, and it felt like the ninth inning. He was playing second base; there were two outs, with a man on third, and the ball was knocked to him. Would he get it? He was one of 21 men working a hatch into which a vehicle—truck or tank—had to go every 20 minutes. The port would be loading thousands of vehicles. There were acres of jeeps alone that would have to go down the hatch. Bulldozer hoped that he remembered his safety rules and proper slinging. "I hope the crowd doesn't see me do anything wrong," he thought.

He wondered about the guys on each side of him. They were keyed up and tense. He himself was scared, sure. The sergeant was grinning with excitement. He could do some good GI bitching, but when the boys got choked up, his silly jokes would get them going right again. They wanted it now.

At the gate, the MP gave the signal, and the bus of army longshoremen left the compound and joined the parade of mechanized armor to the wharves. The men were obviously relieved, and were laughing and singing. There were shouts of "Noah's Ark" and "Invasion from Mars." It was odd, but it reminded Bulldozer of an incident in his childhood. The Barnum and Bailey Circus had come to town and there was a procession past his house. It had seemed to continue all day. There were men dressed in the costumes of the Crusades and the Norman Conquest. The elephants looked fatherly and kind, and Bulldozer distrusted the chattering monkeys, who were like some kids he knew, but when the lions and tigers began to roar, he let out a wail and departed in headlong flight. His father had told him that the circus never visited the same street twice, and since the street represented the limits of his child's world, he was resigned to accepting this pilgrimage of beasts and history as a unique event in his life.

**T**HE bus rumbled on to the docks. D-day was now several minutes old. Many different types of craft were milling about in the harbor. The berths in the port were filled with loading ships, half of which would sail that day. Liberty ships, which were allocated to this port every day, loaded hundreds of vehicles on an eight-hour schedule. Coasters moved from berths out into the stream. LSTs and LCTs (landing ship tanks and landing craft tanks) were loading right on the three cement hards. LCIs (landing craft infantry), hospital ships, and MTLs (motor towboats large) were coming into the harbor

from all the neighboring waterways.

Bulldozer had been unemployed after 1929 and had spent most of his time in Manhattan at the Battery, with a nickel bag of peanuts, watching the shipping. But this concentration of craft far exceeded anything he had ever seen in the port of New York.

Planes zoomed overhead. The "Red Ball Express," a high-priority cargo carrier with blood, was one of the first craft to clear the port. From the direction of the mouth of the harbor there was the noise of anti-aircraft and the crash of exploding bombs. Bulldozer remembered the warning—that this port would be wiped out. Two flak ships lumbered off. Some crippled invasion craft, carrying casualties, were being towed back to the hards by tugs. At the water front, ambulances drew up before the medical tents. They expected to lose part of the cargo; Bulldozer couldn't guess the human percentage. There was a terrific blast down at the island, as the flak ships let go. The noise itself, Bulldozer agreed, was enough to shake the confidence of any snooping Jerry.

**A**s George, the infantryman, marched up the main street of the port, it reminded him of 42nd St. & Broadway at five o'clock in the afternoon. Then it reminded him of other things. He missed the English girls who should have been there, racing past on bicycles, pulling their skirts down over their knees. He moved on to the docks, through the mobile jigsaw puzzle that General Ross's Transportation Corps had set in motion.

George had been on the move since dawn. In the early morning drizzle the news that they were leaving the Marshalling Area had evoked feelings similar to those the Thanksgiving Day game with New Utrecht High School used to at home. A chill November wind had raked the gridiron and he had had to urinate badly; then suddenly the whistle blew, and he had the ball and he forgot all about it.

George had entered the Marshalling Area a couple of weeks before. He smiled ruefully when he re-



**Normandy-bound, these GIs crowding into an assault barge are ready for anything.**

flected that in comparison with this the Staging Area in Virginia had merely been a dress rehearsal. Here, as an infantryman, he formed part of a tactical team, which was assembled to perform a particular mission, and which included medics, engineers, signalmen, and sappers to go ashore with the infantry to get mines out of the way. There was even a soldier with



**Sober-faced group of Engineers get their final briefing on D-Day objective.**

a huge cage of fluttering and excited pigeons, the size of whose enclosure testified to the Lebensraum essential to the birds' life.

George's unit was briefed, given all the information—what units would be on their right and left flanks. He was taught as much as possible to be on his own.

When George reached the hards, he looked dirty, tired, and—strong. With the weird camouflage net on his helmet, the bandoleers of M1 ammunition slung over his shoulder, and the grenades suspended from his neck, he looked deadly—built to kill. In front of George stood Mike, a veteran of Tunisia, North Africa, and Sicily. He chewed gum incessantly. He was leery of his fourth D-day; he had seen too many old soldiers die.

George found his thoughts revolving chiefly around home. He remembered the morning of his departure for the Army. His mother had wept silently, pressing her handkerchief to her mouth. His father had smiled wryly. At the station, a mother and a wife alternately embraced each other, like mechanical toys, their bodies and faces rigid with grief. George had determined that he did not think much of a race which asserted its mastery by making women and helpless old men cry. He had since spent two white, barren Christmases away from home. He had lain around the Red Cross clubs in London, too homesick to move, studying the faces of the Joes sullen with misery.

**T**HERE was no waiting at the hards, as indeed there had been no waiting anywhere along the way. Weeks previously the distances that Ship Loads had to traverse from the Marshalling Area to Embarkation Points had been clocked off to the fraction of a second. Now the craft, in which George took his place, had to gauge the hour of its arrival in France to coincide with the influx of the tide, or the whole voyage might prove fatal.

The men sat silently in the boat. They were overtrained, lethal, and just did not know the word defeat. They only knew that the longest way around was the shortest way home, and they were anxious to get going.

"Homesick?" said George.

"Country sick," replied Mike, the acid kid. "I'm sick of England."

It was moving day in the forward dump for the attack on Hitler's fortress in Europe. The biggest job of coordination that the world has ever known was under way. Thousands of things had to happen at a certain time, things which, if they did not happen, would delay the entire movement. Every damned depot had to be emptied of ammunition, supplies, food, petrol, and men, and funnelled through ships to give preponderance in fire power and man power and to smother resistance on the other side.

Despite enemy action, the program of ships sailing every day was rigidly adhered to.

Bulldozer and his port-battalion mates, who normally worked many hours a day, toiled even longer hours and increased their pace in order to assure a quicker turn-around of the vessels, to compensate for the irreparable destruction of ships and berths. As George's craft rounded the island, he became part of a moving bridge of ships and men straining towards the Continent.