Peter Rubino
29th Infantry Division

D-Day veteran one of the lucky ones - After decades of silence, West Long Branch man now tells his story
By Sherry Conohan
Staff Writer

Peter Rubino's first taste of battle came during the invasion of Normandy, France, on D-Day — June 6, 1944.

Rubino stormed Omaha Beach with the Army's 29th Division in the sixth wave to go ashore and would later fight in the Battle of the Bulge.

He remembers all the noise from the assault, but at the same time said he didn't really hear it.

"I was so scared," he recalled, as he sat in the peace and quiet of his West Long Branch home on Fulton Avenue where he lives with his wife, Sandra. "I saw the flashes."

Rubino, who lived in Long Branch at the time, joined the Army in December 1942 shortly after he turned 18. He started out as an engineer but caught pneumonia during basic training at Fort Belvoir, Va. While he was ill, his group shipped out, so he fell back to an infantry unit. His new unit shipped out to England in early 1943.

"We were supposed to go to Africa, but the fighting was winding up there, so we went to England," he said. "We stayed there until the invasion."

Rubino said his unit lived in tents "out in the woods somewhere" and avoided the Germans' bombing of London and other British cities.

"Before the invasion, they put us in something like a concentration camp, with English soldiers guarding us," he continued.

"In that camp we had it made," he said. "They gave us fresh eggs, steak and white bread, which we never had, and fresh milk. Everything [usually] was powder. They fed us before they sent us to the slaughter."

Rubino said he crossed the English Channel on a naval ship, then transferred to a landing craft with fighting going on all around. "It was a misty morning," he remembered. "I was short and couldn't see ahead. When we were unloading, the destroyers and other ships were shelling [enemy lines]. They were firing over our heads.

"And there were airplanes galore," he added. "They were bombing the shore and behind the shore. There was a lot of noise between the rockets and guns."

Rubino noted the paratroopers, rangers and gliders had landed the night before and knocked out a lot of gun emplacements.

"They were directing the ships where to fire," he said.

"The first wave, forget it," he said of the men who stormed the beach. "Bodies were floating all over. It was a shame."

Rubino said they didn't know how deep the water would be where they were going to be dropped off, which worried him. Even though he had grown up at the Shore, he didn't know how to swim.

"These two tall Texans said, 'Dago, put your arms around our shoulders and we'll take you to where you can walk,' " he related. "But when we got on the ramp, the fellow on my right got hit. He had taken my rifle, so I came aground with no rifle, but there were plenty on the beach so I grabbed one."

Rubino said that, once on the beach, he would take a few steps, then lie down, the bullets whizzing overhead. Then he would take another few steps, and lie down, and do this again and again, sometimes lying next to a dead man.

"We got to a little bluff — a cliff," he said. "There were maybe about 100 of us. A young lieutenant said we have two choices — either we stay here and get killed or we climb up. So we climbed up."

Rubino said a lot of men died in that climb, and he was lucky to make it to the top. He said when they got to the hedgerows, it got really bad. His unit wound up following the lieutenant up to Cherbourg.

Once there, he was among four volunteers who went ahead to scout.

"We walked down the pier to the dock where there was a V in the road. Two went to the left and two went to the right," he said. "I felt something in my back. I told my partner this was no time to play around. I turned around and it was a German with a gun in my back. Another German had my buddy."

Rubino recalled that there were six Germans in all, and they held him and the others in a shack by the beach. The next morning the American troops began moving in; the Germans moved out, leaving them behind.

The former captives rejoined the American troops and moved ahead.

"After that it was just a matter of running — catching up with the Germans," he said.

When running up a hill, he continued, he hit a mine and instinctively put his arms up to guard his face. As a result, both arms were lacerated by shrapnel and he has the scars to show for it.

"It was nothing serious, just bled like heck," he said, brushing off the incident. "They just bandaged it up, and I took off.

"When we got to Paris, they held us up. I'll never forget it. I was in a pickup truck under the Eiffel Tower," he said. "They held us back because they wanted the French troops to come through to liberate Paris.

"I was pretty lucky," Rubino said. "I got near the Ruhr [River] and something hit me in the leg — I don't know if it was a bomb or an explosion or debris — but something knocked me out of commission, and I went into the hospital. When I got out, my outfit was going on a rest. They figured I had my rest so they put me with the 106th Division, fresh from the states, and they put them in the Battle of the Bulge.

"The first night, we're out there in the perimeter and we hear a lot of action up front. … All of a sudden they started shelling," he said. "My buddy said, 'I hear a tank.' I said, 'What are we going to do with rifles against a tank?' He said the best thing is for us to go back where our artillery is to have a chance to knock them out.

"We got back maybe 25 or 50 yards and ran into two fellows in a jeep and piled in.

"We went a short distance. All I saw was a big red flash and the next thing I knew I woke up in the hospital," he recalled. "I stayed there in the hospital until January. I had a severe concussion. I asked what happened to the guys. They said, 'You're lucky. You're the only one to come out of the jeep.' "

Rubino said he was sent back to his outfit but he must have done something crazy because the captain told the sergeant to get rid of him. "The captain said, 'He's no good to us,' "Rubino related. "The concussion must have acted up or something. So they sent me back to the hospital."

The war was over for Rubino. He stayed in the hospital from April until July and then, fittingly, on July Fourth he was flown back to the states. He was sent to Camp Upton on Long Island, N.Y., to recuperate. In the meantime, the Red Cross tracked him down to tell him his mother was sick and dying.

Rubino said he had no money and only his winter uniform, but an officer at Camp Upton gave him $5 for the train from Penn Station to Long Branch.

When he got to Penn Station, he said, a couple of MPs stopped him. "They said, 'Hey, soldier, you're out of uniform,' " he recalled. "Well, I cussed those guys up and down. I told them the situation and they felt so guilty they escorted me to the train."

When he got home, his mother was still living — it was July 6 — so he visited with her and then returned to Camp Upton. However, one of the officers told him to go back home. He did and was there when his mother passed away.

"She waited for me," he said gently. "I was a real mama's boy. When we were on the ship going to shore [at Omaha Beach], I prayed to mother. She got me through."

Rubino received a medical discharge from the Army, as a private first class, on Sept. 15, 1945, the day after the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan.

He married his high school sweetheart in 1946 — "She waited for me to come back" — and they had a son, Barry, now a doctor with an office in Long Branch. Barry and his wife, Barbara, who also live in West Long Branch, have a daughter, Briana, 13, and a son, Barry Jr., 10, the pride and joy of their grandparents.

Rubino worked as a printer for the now-defunct Long Branch Record and for several newspapers in New York, then joined his brother-in-law's painting business as an estimator. For the last 13 years, Rubino, 80, has worked at the Fort Monmouth golf course.

Rubino joined the Jersey Shore Chapter 13 of the Disabled Veterans after his discharge from the Army and goes to the veterans clinic in Brick, which provides him with hearing aids and treatment for his hearing loss from the war.

He also walks with a limp, which becomes more pronounced on damp days.

Rubino said he had been thinking about returning to Normandy next year for the 60th anniversary of D-Day, but after France's performance during the war in Iraq, he doesn't really think he wants to go now. He showed an "Omaha Beach D-Day" T-shirt that Lt. Renita Foster, of Fort Monmouth, brought back for him when she went visited Normandy last year.

"I couldn't talk about this for 40 years," he said, of his wartime experiences. "I had nightmares for years and would wake up at night screaming.

"I watch the History Channel on television a lot, and just a couple of months ago, when I dozed off, there was machine gun fire on the TV, and I jumped off the sofa and dove down to the floor in front of the fireplace."

Rubino is at the point where he will now talk about the war at local schools.

"I think it's good therapy," he explained. "I was lucky, really lucky."