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Capt. Walter Bodlander's military portrait. Photo courtesy of Walter Bodlander

A German Jew Who Served the U.S. at Utah Beach

by Ellie Kahn, Oral Historian

“Col. James Van Fleet took me aside and said, ‘Bodlander, since you speak both French and German, I want you on my boat when we go ashore. And, incidentally, I will be the first person to step onto land; you’ll be the second.’” Walter Bodlander said in a recent interview.

“Land,” in this case, was Utah Beach in Normandy, France. The date was June 6, 1944.

Nearly 71 years later, on May 8, 2015, Capt. Walter Bodlander was awarded the French Legion of Honor in a ceremony aboard the USS Iowa, in San Pedro.

Born in Breslau, Germany, in 1920, Bodlander didn't know he was Jewish until he was 12. “My father, Franz Bodlander, mistrusted all organized religions, so he didn't tell me, until the Nazis came to power. Then he wanted me to understand our vulnerability and to feel pride in my Jewish heritage. I went from being a proud German to becoming a proud Jew.”

The Bodlanders sent their son to study in Switzerland, at Ecole de Commerce, in 1935. The next year, Franz suffered a fatal heart attack, which his son thought was a result of the stress under the Nazis. “With great difficulty and financial loss, my mother sold our business. She was anxious to leave Germany, and, fortunately, a wealthy uncle procured visas to Palestine for us both. Immediately after Kristallnacht, my mother left.”

Bodlander, who is also the author of “The Unauthorized Autobiography of W.B.: The War Years (1933-1945) (Twentieth Century, 2012), graduated in June 1939. Over the following months, he tried to join France's army, was rejected for being German and was threatened with internment. Bodlander joined his mother in Palestine while awaiting a visa to the United States. Finally, after four months on an Egyptian merchant ship, he arrived in New York in January 1941.

The young Bodlander felt strongly that America should join the war. “After Pearl Harbor was attacked, Congress passed a law allowing resident aliens to volunteer for service, and I immediately joined the Army.”

Bodlander went from basic training to officers training to military intelligence training. In June 1943, he was given command of Interrogation of Prisoners of War Team 34, consisting of six men and two jeeps. They reported to the 8th Infantry Regiment in Exeter, England.

“We knew that we'd be the assault regiment in the invasion of Europe. In July of '43, we started training, which included physical exercise, waterproofing all vehicles for immersion in saltwater, then undoing the waterproofing once on land so the vehicles wouldn't overheat.

“Once out on the LCVP, the landing craft that carried the vehicles and men to shore, we jumped into deep water, holding rifles overhead as we made it to shore. We did all of this over and over again. Every time we went through our maneuvers, we hoped that this would be the actual invasion. It never was.”

“Then, in early June 1944, we got orders to move out. “The convoy stopped in a camouflaged field, divided into units. The officers were summoned to a tent with huge tables covered with

relief maps. That's when we discovered that our divisions were to land at Utah and Omaha beaches. We studied the relief maps and were briefed: 'You'll land here. Notice the trees over there and the two windmills to the left. Here's the road.' ”

It was when Bodlander was leaving the tent that he recalls Van Fleet informed him that they would be the first two people on Utah Beach.

On June 4, the convoy moved onward to the embarkation point. “Local townspeople were along the road, shouting and throwing flowers, as if they knew something was about to happen. How they knew before we did is still a mystery to me.”

Bodlander recalls that the plan was to land the next morning, June 5. “The weather couldn't have been worse — pouring rain and cold. There was no shelter. Through that day and night, and the next day and night, the seas were rough, the rain unrelenting. Everyone was soaking wet and miserable. Many of us were seasick.”

Bodlander was reaching his limit. “I thought, I'd rather be shot than spend another hour on this boat.”

Early on the morning of June 6, they saw the first Allied bombers overhead. Bodlander was relieved and excited. “I knew it was history — that this was going to be on the radio everywhere! And yes, Van Fleet was the first to step on land, and I was the second.”

Unfortunately, Bodlander said, nothing in the terrain resembled the maps they'd seen. No trees. No windmills. No road. The storm had pushed their boat two miles from the intended landing site.

“Nobody knew where we were, and it started raining artillery and mortars. Things went from exciting to very unpleasant and frightening. Several people were killed or injured. I had only a pistol and a rifle with me. My machine gun was on my jeep, and my jeep was somewhere else. There was little I could do; I gave my morphine to one of the injured men.”

The first German prisoners were soon brought to the beach for Bodlander and his team to interrogate. “They were scared like we were, with no protection from incoming shells. I was able to get some information from them, and then I was to return to my unit. But it was dark and raining, and I was lost. All I could do was hide under some hedgerows with the mortar and artillery around me.”

Ellie Kahn is an oral historian, psychotherapist and documentary filmmaker. She can be reached at ekzmail@gmail.com and www.livinglegaciesproductions.com