

# T.Sgt. William Thomas Lemon

Company C, 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division



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The Albert H. Small Normandy Institute

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***“The nation which forgets its defenders will itself be forgotten”***

***- Calvin Coolidge***

Most people have never heard of T.Sgt. William T. Lemon, and most probably never will. Most people will continue to go about their lives, ignorant of the fact that this man sacrificed his life to defend theirs. They will continue worry over their small inconveniences and daily duties, without thought or thankful remembrance of those to whom they owe so much. They do not see the white headstones, stretched row on row, engraved with thousands of faceless names. They do not see the bridges, towns, and bunkers where men struggled for freedom. They do not see the coastlines, the hills, and hedgerows where men who they will never meet fell for their country, and for them.

To most who hear of William Lemon, he will remain simply another faceless name, a number in the statistics, another lifeless soldier. Most soldiers will continue to go unnoticed, with their stories still untold, until the slow erosion of time washes them from living memory. It is of the utmost importance that this is not allowed to happen. William Lemon and all the soldiers who died for our country did not just sacrifice their corporal existence; they sacrificed their opportunities and talents; they sacrificed their hopes and dreams; they sacrificed long and happy lives among their families and their children. It is our duty to ensure that their individual sacrifices are not forgotten. The stories of our country's heroes deserve to be told. This biography, however inadequate, will attempt to tell the story of William Lemon, in order that his memory may continue to be honored.

## Birth and Early Life

William Thomas Lemon was born on October 12, 1918 in Purcellville, Virginia.<sup>1</sup> Like many others living in rural Virginia during the Great Depression, William's father, Walter Lemon, struggled to provide for his family. Well-paying jobs were few and far between, leaving Walter to scrape together a living working whatever odd jobs that he could find. Walter Lemon found work as a carpenter and farm hand to try and put food on the table for his wife, Francis, and his two young children.<sup>2</sup>

In 1922, when William was only three years old, Walter Lemon filed for a divorce from his wife Francis Lemon, alleging that Francis had an affair. Francis did not contest the divorce and was given no alimony. Within six months, Francis remarried, leaving for a new life and leaving her family behind. William and his older sister, Laura Lemon, who was about five at the time of the divorce, grew up without any maternal presence in their lives, and were no doubt emotionally scarred as a result.<sup>3</sup> It does not appear that their mother or her new family made any attempt to contact William or his sister, or perhaps her efforts to maintain or revive her relationship with her children were rebuffed. Either way, there existed a rift between the two sides of the family which continues to this day.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter H. Lemon, 1920 U.S. Federal Census Record; Loudoun, Virginia; Roll: T625\_1893; Page: 9B; District: 0076; From *Ancestry.com* (accessed July 28, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Walter H. Lemon, 1920 U.S. Federal Census Record; Loudoun, Virginia; Roll: T625\_1893; Page: 9B; District: 0076; From *Ancestry.com* (accessed July 28, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Record of a Divorce Granted, 13 April 1922, File No. 22-000638, Commonwealth of Virginia, Bureau of Vital Statistics-State Board of Health. *Ancestry.com* (accessed July 28, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> George K. Cummings interview by author, notes of conversation, May 18, 2019.

Walter Lemon, now a single father of two, faced with the seemingly impossible task of earning a living during the Great Depression while simultaneously raising two children by himself. Because of his parents' divorce and tough financial situation, William likely took on many responsibilities at a young age. In addition to taking care of many of his own needs, William probably worked small jobs or helped his father to perform odd jobs like sharpening saw blades.<sup>5</sup> In spite of his difficult personal life, William still managed to do well in school, even earning first honor roll.<sup>6</sup>

In 1930, the Lemons moved in with Walter's aunt and uncle on 163 Fallin Street in Purcellville, Virginia. While the exact reasons for their move are unknown, it is likely that they did so for a combination of financial and family reasons. Walter may have thought that moving in with John and Laura Young would help provide his children with the strong family structure which they so desperately needed. It would also allow him to work longer hours, without having to worry about leaving his children unattended.<sup>7</sup>

### **For Family and Country**

In 1937, William Lemon dropped out of high school after his junior year, not because of failing grades, but likely in order to help support his family, which was still struggling financially. He found employment as plumber, gas fitter, and steam fitter in the years following his departure from school.<sup>8</sup> William registered for the draft in 1940, and was described as being

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<sup>5</sup> George K. Cummings interview by author, notes of conversation, May 18, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, John Kelly. *The Town of Purcellville: 1910 to 1940*. Vol. 2, John K. Barrett, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Walter H. Lemon, 1930 U.S. Federal Census Record; Purcellville, Loudoun, Virginia; Page: 6A; District 0018; FHL microfilm: 2342182; From *Ancestry.com* (accessed July 28, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> U.S., World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1948-1946.

about 5'10, 145 pounds, with blue eyes, brown hair, and a dark complexion.<sup>9</sup> Although he was a handsome and hard-working young man, he was not known to have any serious romantic interests. He enlisted in the army on May 6, 1941 in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that William enlisted in May of 1941, well before the attack on Pearl Harbor, perhaps demonstrating his patriotism and willingness to serve his country. In addition to serving his country, enlisting in the Army provided steady work and a consistent income to help support his family.

In February of 1941, William's military service intensified when the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was reactivated. He trained alongside men from National Guard units from Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina. William likely became a member of C Company with which he trained in Fort Meade in Maryland, Camp A. P. Hill in Virginia, and Fort Bragg in North Carolina.<sup>11</sup> The unit moved to Jacksonville, Florida before moving back north to New Jersey.<sup>12</sup> On September 26, 1942, they boarded the *Queen Mary* and sailed to England. The *Queen Mary*, formerly luxury ocean liner, had been stripped bare and was to be used for the transportation of troops and supplies to England. William and about 15,000 others from the 29<sup>th</sup> Division would spend a week in the packed quarters below deck, with barely enough room to take a step and without the option of showering.<sup>13</sup> For most men, days aboard the ship consisted of gambling, writing letters, or reading whatever government issued handout or book was available.<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; St. Louis Missouri; Record Group: Records of the Selective System, 147; Box: 445. (accessed July 28, 2019) (Draft Card)

<sup>10</sup> U.S., World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1948-1946.

<sup>11</sup> Kershaw, Alex. *The Bedford Boys*. Da Capo Press, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 35

<sup>13</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 38/43

<sup>14</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 46

most eventful thing that occurred while Lemon was aboard was the *Queen Mary*'s collision with its escort, the *Curacoa*. Though the *Queen Mary* did not suffer any serious damage, the smaller *Curacoa* was split in two, sinking within ten minutes of the collision.<sup>15</sup> This accident deeply affected many aboard the *Queen Mary*, especially those who witnessed the crash as it happened. They were sickened by the thought that their boat had killed so many young British soldiers and that there was nothing they or their boat could do. The *Queen Mary* was under strict orders not to break her speed before reaching port, as it would provide an easy target for any German submarine in the area if it were to stop. Three hundred thirty-eight of the four hundred thirty-nine sailors aboard the *Curacoa* were killed. This was, however, a small number compared with the 11,000 that would have been risked in stopping the *Queen Mary* to bring aboard survivors. For many aboard the *Queen Mary*, this was their first experience with death and the cruelty of war.<sup>16</sup>

### **Preparing for Combat**

When the William and the 29<sup>th</sup> finally landed in England on October 3, 1942, it was a typical day in England; cold and rainy.<sup>17</sup> After disembarking from the ship, William and his crowded into old British railway cars which took them to Tidworth barracks on Salisbury Plain.<sup>18</sup> The training that was given there would be responsible for turning the green troops of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division into a well-trained and extremely capable fighting force. The 29<sup>th</sup> Division was subjected to the longest, and perhaps the most rigorous, training program of any American infantry unit in World War II. They were placed under the command of General Leonard Gerow, a rough and demanding commander who was determined to prove that men from the National

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<sup>15</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 48/49

<sup>16</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 50/51

<sup>17</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 51

<sup>18</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 53

Guard could be turned into an expert combat division. In order to do so, General Gerow subjected the men under his command to some of the harshest and most grueling combat training seen in the Allied army.<sup>19</sup> Other than one forty-eight hour pass per month, William and those of the 29<sup>th</sup> trained seven days a week, every week, for over twenty months. In order to remain in a combat outfit and earn an extra five dollars a month, William had to pass difficult physical fitness tests called burp-up exercises. William had to run one hundred yards in under twelve seconds, while in full army uniform, complete thirty-five pushups and ten chin-ups, sprint through an obstacle course, and then prove his competence with a Colt .45, a Garand M-1 rifle, and a Browning Automatic Rifle. William successfully completed his burp-up test, earning the expert infantryman's badge and an extra five dollars per month to help support his father and sister.<sup>20</sup> Although the winter of 1942-1943 was one of England's coldest on record, William and the men of the 29<sup>th</sup> spent much of their time training out-of-doors. Among other exercises, the men of the 29<sup>th</sup> were forced to complete a hated twenty five mile hike each week, regardless of the weather.<sup>21</sup> Even indoors, the barracks were cold, heated by only two potbellied stoves, which were extinguished at lights out. The food was also an object of complaint by men who were used to the much more generous portions of America.<sup>22</sup>

On May 23, 1943, William and the 29<sup>th</sup> began a six-day journey south to their new barracks near Ivybridge, in Devon. They marched for four days and rode for two days in the back of trucks, covering a total of one hundred sixty miles. Once there, they also began a regular practice of camping on the damp and muddy moors.<sup>23</sup> When they weren't busy training, many

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<sup>19</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 54/55

<sup>20</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 55

<sup>21</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 57

<sup>22</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 54

<sup>23</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 58

soldiers enjoyed going to local pubs where they could talk, get a good hot meal and if lucky, some alcohol.<sup>24</sup> Others preferred a visit to the American Red Cross's Tidworth House, where they could dance all night.<sup>25</sup> In July of 1943, General Charles Gerhardt replaced Major General Leonard Gerow as commander of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>26</sup> In August, the 29<sup>th</sup> Division intensified its training, focusing on preparations for an amphibious assault. The men stormed banks of heather 29<sup>th</sup> Division also took swimming lessons in the nearby rivers and ponds, regardless of the weather, in order to prepare for the assault on fortress Europe.<sup>27</sup>

In March of 1944, the intensity of the training increased even more and the men of C Company were split into boat teams. The team members ate, slept, and trained together until the assault on D-Day. They also began increasingly realistic training sessions at ACT's (Assault Training Centers) along the coast, meant to simulate the initial landings.<sup>28</sup> Once every one or two months, C Company shipped out to Slapton Sands, a set of beaches along England's south coast, where they practiced a large scale and realistic simulation of the invasion. Live ammunition fired from the top of the bluffs burst overhead, as the assault teams practiced their landings in LCVPs (Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel).<sup>29</sup> On May 18, 1944, the entire 29<sup>th</sup> Division relocated to a series of sealed camps ten miles north of Dorchester, called sausages. They would stay here until the start of the invasion.<sup>30</sup> Though they were isolated, life in the sausages was not altogether unpleasant. Men were allowed generous amounts of recreation time, reading, writing letters, and

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<sup>24</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 60

<sup>25</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 63

<sup>26</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 67

<sup>27</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 69

<sup>28</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 81

<sup>29</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 82/83

<sup>30</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 93

playing baseball or football. As the invasion grew closer, Lemon and his comrades meticulously prepared and checked their kit, determined not to be caught unprepared.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Longest Day**

On June 4, 1944, Lemon and the 29<sup>th</sup> Division left their camps and boarded the *HMS Empire Javelin*.<sup>32</sup> Due to unfavorable weather conditions, the invasion was postponed from June 5<sup>th</sup> to June 6<sup>th</sup>, in hopes of a break in the weather. For Lemon and everyone else aboard, this meant more time waiting aboard the *Javelin*, with nothing else to think about besides what might happen once they reached shore. Many aboard looked around at the faces surrounding them, knowing that many might not survive the landings. Some tried to laugh and make light of the situation, but tense anticipation was in the air.<sup>33</sup>

At 4 a.m. on the morning of June 6, 1944 those who were to land in the initial waves of the invasion began to board their landing craft. Their landing craft had to make the twelve mile journey from the *Javelin* to shore.<sup>34</sup> Their anticipation mounted as their landing was delayed by thirty minutes to coordinate with others in the second wave of infantry to land. Lemon and his crew spent around two hours in the rough seas before even reaching the beach. As the swells tossed the boats violently in every direction, many became unbearably seasick, throwing up in paper bags or even their helmets. By the time C Company began its final approach, some men were so seasick that they preferred the dangerous landing to continued time at sea.<sup>35</sup> They had been assured by their commanders that the combined air and naval bombardments would be so

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<sup>31</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 94/99

<sup>32</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 111

<sup>33</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 117/118

<sup>34</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 119/121

<sup>35</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 122

destructive that there would be little work for the infantry other than clearing scattered pockets of resistance. This could not have been further from the truth. The air and naval bombardments had been inaccurate and ineffective, leaving most enemy emplacements completely untouched.<sup>36</sup> A Company, which landed thirty minutes before C Company, had been almost completely destroyed and failed to make any progress in moving off of Omaha beach.<sup>37</sup> The beach was already covered with bodies. Most of those who were still alive sought refuge behind a rocky embankment or “shingle” midway up the beach. Some had even made it to a low seawall at the far end of the beach, which provided some protection from the merciless German fire.<sup>38</sup>

As the LCVP carrying William Lemon drew closer to the beach, bullets clanged against the craft with increasing frequency. Mortars splashed around the boat, soaking the men inside. William and his comrades could not see the beach as they approached, but they could hear the snarl of the German Mg-42’s and the deafening impact of the mortars on the beach and in the waves around them. When the ramp dropped, Lemon and his comrades got their first look at Omaha beach. They saw countless bodies strewn across the beach and floating in the shallows. They rushed out of their landing craft, spreading out to minimize casualties from the Mg-42’s strafing the beach. The men waded ashore among the bodies of those who had already fallen, before racing up the beach and dropping to the ground whenever machine gun fire came too close.<sup>39</sup> Luckily, Company C landed on a less heavily defended sector slightly east of their intended landing site and William Lemon made it to the shingle and then the seawall without sustaining any serious injuries.<sup>40</sup> However, he was still far from safety. German mortar crews

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<sup>36</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 127

<sup>37</sup> Balkoski, Joseph. *Omaha Beach: D-Day, June 6, 1944*. Stackpole Books, 2004. Page 123

<sup>38</sup> Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 194

<sup>39</sup> Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 143/144

<sup>40</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 130

along the top of the bluffs knew there were men hiding behind the seawall and began to dial in their aim. With the mortar fire becoming increasingly accurate and the tide beginning to close in, it became clear that the only way to survive was to get off the beach.<sup>41</sup>

At 7:30 AM, one hour after H-hour (the official start of the invasion), LCVP 71(landing craft, vehicle, personnel) approached Dog White beach carrying eleven radiomen and twelve officers, one of whom was Brigadier General Norman Cota, second in command of the entire 29<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>42</sup> When Cota reached the beach, he was greeted by the sight of hundreds of men crowded against the seawall, pinned down by rifle and machine-gun fire.<sup>43</sup>

Cota ran across the beach under heavy gunfire, until he reached the shingle, where he found the Company C of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry as well as the 5<sup>th</sup> Rangers, both relatively intact. Knowing that the success of the invasion depended on the speed with which the Allies could accomplish their objectives, General Cota began walking upright behind the seawall, exhorting the soldiers lying there to advance and get off the beach. Though he was a brigadier general, Cota exposed himself to machine-gun and rifle fire, instilling confidence into his soldiers, inspiring them to come out from the relative safety of the seawall as well.<sup>44</sup>

In order to get to the enemy emplacements, the men of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 5<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion abandoned the cover of the seawall, running to the road which ran parallel to the beach itself. From there, they used wire cutters and Bangalore torpedoes to create gaps in the barbed wire on either side of the road, before running across another 150 yards of open ground to

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<sup>41</sup> Beevor 97

<sup>42</sup> Balkoski, Omaha Beach, 191

<sup>43</sup> Balkoski, Omaha Beach, 194

<sup>44</sup>Balkoski, Omaha Beach, 195

the bluff, all while under enemy fire.<sup>45</sup> After blowing gaps in the wire, the first man through was instantly hit and killed by a burst of machine gun fire. This shocked the men and caused them to stop. General Cota, seeing the men's hesitation, led the men through the gap himself and charged to the base of the bluff.<sup>46</sup> Luckily, Company C of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry accidentally discovered a series of German communication trenches, which they promptly fell into and used to aid their advance from the beach to the bluffs.<sup>47</sup> Once the men gained the bluffs, the enemy fire slackened somewhat. The smoke of burning seagrass obstructed the Germans vision, providing cover for those advancing upwards.<sup>48</sup> General Cota led elements of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 5<sup>th</sup> Rangers through minefields and all the way to the top of the bluffs. From there, his fighting force began to split into smaller units, either engaging with enemy positions in the hedgerows or continuing to move farther inland.<sup>49</sup> At roughly 08:30 hours, General Cota left his troops on the bluffs to their own means, returning to the beach to meet Col. Canham at their makeshift command post at the foot of the bluff.<sup>50</sup>

Though the pre-invasion bombardment of Omaha had little to no effect on the German pillboxes and gun emplacements, the much more targeted shelling by the destroyers and tanks during the invasion was extremely effective and largely contributed to the overall success of the Allied invasion at Omaha. The destroyers came in parallel to the beach and fired upon German positions from close range.<sup>51</sup> The soldiers on the beaches themselves were able to contact the destroyers via radio, identifying the location of well-hidden German fortifications and calling in

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<sup>45</sup> Balkoski, Omaha Beach, 217/218

<sup>46</sup> Beevor 103

<sup>47</sup> Balkoski, Omaha Beach, 220

<sup>48</sup> Balkoski, Omaha Beach, 228

<sup>49</sup> Ambrose 433

<sup>50</sup> Beevor 103

<sup>51</sup> Beevor 106

fire on them. The destroyers were responsible for the neutralization of some of the most dangerous German pillboxes, taking some pressure off the infantry trapped on the beaches and allowing them to move up the bluffs.<sup>52</sup> Though many of the DD Sherman Tanks foundered before reaching the beach, the tanks that did make it to shore proved extremely helpful in many cases.<sup>53</sup> The tanks were open targets, because they were not able to pass the shingle and were continuously being knocked out by mines or German artillery. However, the tanks that did survive the rough seas and heavy fire were able to fire directly on German fortifications, knocking a number of them out. Even after a tank was knocked out or immobilized, it provided cover from rifle and machine gun fire for men on the beach.<sup>54</sup> Though they were not able to fulfill all of the promises made by the aerial bombardments, the Destroyers and amphibious tanks were able to knock out some of the German positions, reducing the number of potential casualties and allowing the soldiers to advance off of the beaches.<sup>55</sup>

After consulting with Col. Canham and various other officers at the command post, General Cota returned to the top of the bluff to see how the men he left there were progressing. The men were static, pinned down by machine gun fire from inside the hedgerows. General Cota led a charge and was able to bypass the machine gun position.<sup>56</sup> After advancing westwards toward Vierville-sur-Mur, General Cota's men were again pinned down by machine gun fire, this time near the Vierville Draw (D-1). General Cota came to the front and organized a group to conduct a flanking maneuver, which proved to be successful.<sup>57</sup> Around this time, General Cota

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<sup>52</sup> Beevor 106

<sup>53</sup> Balkoski, Omaha Beach, 104

<sup>54</sup> Balkoski, Omaha Beach, 245

<sup>55</sup> Beevor 106

<sup>56</sup> Beevor 107

<sup>57</sup> Beevor 107

met up with C Company of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry, as well as another group led by Col. Canham. Gen. Cota and Col. Canham assigned a mixed force (composed of men from the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 5<sup>th</sup> Rangers) later known as General Cota's "bastard brigade", to advance to Pointe et Raz de la Percee.<sup>58</sup>

Noticing that no tanks or other vehicles had yet come up the draw, Gen. Cota waited for the naval bombardment on the draw to stop before leading his men down the exit. Gen. Cota and his cleared out most of the remaining German positions, leaving only scattered small arms fire from the sides of the draw.<sup>59</sup> After destroying the large anti-tank wall which ran across the Vierville draw, the engineers cleared the rubble off of the road, neutralized the remaining minefields, and demolished other smaller obstacles to prepare the beach for vehicle traffic.<sup>60</sup>

It is unclear exactly where T.Sgt. Lemon was during all of this, but it is entirely possible that he was among those who fought alongside General Cota as he moved up the bluffs. Lemon was in C Company in the same area where Cota led multiple groups up the bluffs, meaning that he was most likely fighting beyond the beaches before D-Day came to a close. Though William Lemon survived D-Day unharmed, many of those around him were not so lucky. The beach was strewn with hundreds of brave soldiers who had all been living earlier that morning. On Omaha Beach alone, 1,465 men were killed just within the first twenty four hours of the invasion.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Beevor 108

<sup>59</sup> Beevor 108

<sup>60</sup> Balkoski, Omaha Beach, 312

<sup>61</sup> Beevor 112

## Fighting in the Bocage

William Lemon and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion spent the night in hastily made foxholes and slit trenches along fields and hedgerows a few hundred yards west of Vierville. Despite being badly battered and reduced, the 116<sup>th</sup> was not given a chance to rest and regroup. Instead, they were ordered to make their way towards Pointe du Hoc as quickly as possible to rescue the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion, which was now in grave danger of being destroyed by a much larger German force. Lt. Col. John Metcalf gathered about 250 men from the 116<sup>th</sup> along with an almost equal number of the 5<sup>th</sup> Rangers and about ten Sherman tanks and began making his way west towards Pointe du Hoc early on June 7.<sup>62</sup> The force met scattered enemy resistance and came within half a mile of Pointe du Hoc before noon. Here, they met fierce enemy resistance and, despite using Sherman tanks in both attacks, were repelled twice. The soldiers dug in for the night. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions of the 116<sup>th</sup> joined the attack early the next day. The 116<sup>th</sup> pushed through, only encountering light resistance at first. As they progressed, the would be liberators opened fire at the sound of German weapons, only to find out that it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rangers, who had run out of ammunition and had begun using captured German weapons. Unfortunately, several of the Rangers were killed or wounded by the friendly fire.<sup>63</sup>

The ultimate objective of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division in Normandy was the city of St. Lo, an important road junction only twenty miles south of Omaha Beach. The situation was made more difficult for the Allies, however, because the ancient hedgerows in Normandy made the area between Omaha beach and St. Lo some of the most difficult terrain in the entire European

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<sup>62</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 157

<sup>63</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 159

theatre.<sup>64</sup> The hedgerows provided the Germans a perfect, naturally defensible terrain, enabling them to almost nullify their numbers disadvantage. During the occupation of France, the Germans familiarized themselves with every aspect of the hedgerows, constructing positions at key points in nearly every hedgerow. The hedgerows also provided near perfect camouflage for the Germans, as well as protection from small arms fire. In contrast, American units were forced to advance through open fields, screened on all sides by hedgerows. They did not know whether a German or a whole company of Germans was laid waiting for them. In addition, Allied troops had no choice but to go through pre-existing gaps in the hedgerows because they initially had no effective way to create their own gaps.<sup>65</sup>

After constant fighting among the hedgerows near the coast, the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry was temporarily designated as a reserve regiment June 9 and given a chance to rest and regroup.<sup>66</sup> The 29<sup>th</sup> Division spent its brief respite primarily in small French towns along the coast, where many locals hailed them as heroes, presenting them with gifts and flowers.

After a few days of rest, the battered 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry was called back into action. Though it was under the same name, it was hardly the same regiment that landed on D-Day. It had suffered extremely heavy casualties and was now almost an equal split of veterans and replacements. Many of those who trained with the regiment since England did not trust and even resented the men who were supposed to “replace” their fallen comrades. To make matters worse, the replacements often had not received the same intense training as those who they replaced. There was also a leadership crisis. Due to the large number of officers who were killed

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<sup>64</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 161

<sup>65</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 160

<sup>66</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 164

and wounded in the initial waves on D-Day, those who previously filled lower ranks quickly moved into responsibilities for which they had no experience.<sup>67</sup>

On June 13<sup>th</sup>, the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry launched an attack across the German line at the Elle River, an area the 115<sup>th</sup> Infantry had recently failed to hold. Despite having to fight their way across the heavily defended river and surrounding hedgerow country, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 116<sup>th</sup> made remarkable progress. They even captured the town of Couvains in the first day, and came within five miles of St. Lo. The entire 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry was then ordered to stop their advance and dig in at their current position.<sup>68</sup> The 116<sup>th</sup> resumed their attack on June 16<sup>th</sup>, heading towards the town of St. Andre de l'Epine, making good progress. Things changed, however, when elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> FJ Division and the 353<sup>rd</sup> Division reinforced the German 352<sup>nd</sup> Division. The advance of the entire 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry slowed in the face of fierce hedgerow to hedgerow fighting against fresh German troops.<sup>69</sup>

### **The Ultimate Sacrifice**

Sometime during the fighting on June 16 or 17, William Lemon's unit encountered extremely fierce resistance among the hedgerows. Lemon's unit was pinned down by a German position concealed in the next hedgerow and was unable to advance towards the position.<sup>70</sup> It was at this time, according to his Silver Star citation that he would later receive, that T.Sgt. William Lemon "with utter disregard for his own safety, led his platoon over a hedgerow in order to keep the attack moving forward. In so doing, he continually exposed himself to enemy fire and it was through his efforts that the platoon was inspired to continue the advance and

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<sup>67</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 212

<sup>68</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 207

<sup>69</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 210

<sup>70</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 210

capture the objective.” It appears that, while Lemon survived the charge he led on the hedgerow, he died later that day during a mortar barrage. During the barrage, Lemon was hit in the head by shrapnel and died before reaching an aide station.<sup>71</sup>

Following his death, T.Sgt. Lemon was temporarily buried in the 3<sup>rd</sup> American Cemetery at La Cambe. His father, Walter Lemon, received a letter notifying him of his son’s death soon thereafter. In December, Walter Lemon also received the personal effects found on Lemon at the time of his death. These included a notebook, photos, a wallet, his testament, two lighters, a ring, a knife, a pen and pencil, and 300 Francs.<sup>72</sup> Walter Lemon was given the option of having his son’s body brought back to the U.S., but instead chose to have his son interred next to the men with whom he had fought alongside. Lemon’s body was later transferred from La Cambe to its final resting place in the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer.<sup>73</sup>

### **“29 Lets’ Go”: Following the 116<sup>th</sup>**

After his death, Lemon’s unit continued their push to St. Lo and finally took the town on July 18, after forty-two days of hard fighting since Omaha Beach.<sup>74</sup> After taking St. Lo, the 29<sup>th</sup> Division was relieved and received an eight days to recuperate behind the forward lines. Though still far from fully recovered, the 29<sup>th</sup> Division returned to active service and participated in Operation Cobra, the Allied plan to achieve a final breakout from Normandy.<sup>75</sup> The 29<sup>th</sup> Division

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<sup>71</sup> Hobbie. “TSGT William Thomas Lemon.” TSGT William Thomas Lemon, 1 Jan. 1970, Accessed April 23, 2019. [116thregimentrollofthonor.blogspot.com/2016/06/tsgt-william-thomas-lemon.html](http://116thregimentrollofthonor.blogspot.com/2016/06/tsgt-william-thomas-lemon.html).

<sup>72</sup> U.S. Army Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Operations Center, National Archives at St. Louis, Army Effects Bureau; William T. Lemon, SSN: 33043363. Inventory List, (accessed February 5, 2019).

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Army Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Operations Center, National Archives at St. Louis, Graves Registration; William T. Lemon, SSN: 33043363. Report of Burial, (accessed February 5, 2019).

<sup>74</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 276

<sup>75</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 281

spent the next three weeks fighting south from St. Lo, helping to bolster the First Army's left flank.<sup>76</sup> The 116<sup>th</sup> was then able to take the heavily defended town of Vire on August 7, after only one day of fighting. It then immediately attacked Hills 203 and 251 which dominated the surrounding landscape and threatened the Allies' position in Vire. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 116<sup>th</sup> attacked the hills under the cover of darkness and achieved a victory so rapid and so complete that they would later be awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation and the Croix de Guerre with Silver-Guilt Star for their actions.<sup>77</sup> Following their success on August 8, the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry was relieved of their front line positions and were again designated as a division reserve, effectively ending their participation in the Normandy campaign. Though their role in Normandy had ended, the 116<sup>th</sup> would go on participate in the Brittany campaign and the final push into Germany.<sup>78</sup>

### **The Legacy**

Though to many William Lemon will just be another name in an after-action report, or another white headstone amid thousands of others, he was a son, a brother, a friend, and a brother in arms who died fighting for what he believed in. Though he died that day among the fields and hedgerows, the heroic sacrifice of T.Sgt. William Thomas Lemon inspired those around him to not only advance over the next hedgerow, but to keep fighting and advance until the fighting was over and victory achieved. His legacy lives on through the memory of those whose lives he touched and continues to touch through his example of sacrificial service.

T.Sgt. William Thomas Lemon serves as a reminder for each of us that freedom is not free. William Lemon and the thousands of others who have made the ultimate sacrifice for the

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<sup>76</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 218

<sup>77</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 294

<sup>78</sup> Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead*, 296

country which we so often take for granted, should inspire us to serve in whatever way we can. Not all of us are called upon to give everything, but each of us is called to give something, living each day in honor of their sacrifice. It is up to each of us to preserve the memory of William Lemon and to justify his immense sacrifice.

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