

## War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: Kent Cahlander

Current home town: Columbus, Ohio

Age: Not given

At the front end of my journalism career nearly 20 years ago, I had the opportunity to interview some World War II veterans from Ohio on the 50th anniversary of D-Day and other historical events. The four stories included in this collection, all published originally in the *Worthington Suburbia News*, include the accounts of three men who participated in the invasion of Normandy and another on one of the first women to enter Europe with the allied forces, who then had to make a hasty retreat during the Nazi counteroffensive known as the Battle of the Bulge.

What struck me in interviewing these heroes was how matter-of-fact they were in relating these life-and-death situations, and how proud they were to relate their experiences in serving their country. Unfortunately, all four are now deceased. Peggy Fleming died in 2007 at age 87; Darrell Baker in 2008 at age 82; Gerald Ballard in 1998 at age 86; and William Smith in 2011 at 93.

Nevertheless, I feel good about having written these stories and chronicling their heroic exploits for posterity. Hopefully you will find them as intriguing as I did when I met these interesting Ohioans in 1994.

# WORTHINGTON

## SUBURBIA NEWS

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### Baker recalls D-Day action

By Kent Cahlander  
SNP Staff Writer

The young coxswain from Akron was not afraid as he watched the shells hit Omaha Beach during the D-Day invasion 50 years ago June 6.

Watching from his station on board the battleship USS Arkansas, he didn't have much time to think at all.

"It's kind of hard to describe," said Darrell Baker.

"I was just 18, a young kid. I had no fear, but you wondered ... you wondered if you

were going to get back."

Baker, a longtime Worthington resident, recalled that fateful day from his house in Delaware County recently.

Baker, now 69, said the intensity of the moment overwhelmed his thoughts.

"There was a number of planes shot down and ships getting hit around us. It was general chaos," he said.

"As for thinking, you just stayed and kind of watched. You could see the shells hitting. (Continued on page 26A)

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#### • BAKER

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the flames and the ships going onto the beach.

"But as for a feeling, I really can't say, you just went along ... everybody was pretty well-trained."

Baker, like so many of his comrades, was hustled quickly from his Ohio home into military service. Six months out of basic training he was on a battleship, sleeping in a hammock and eating K-rations.

A few months later, in 1944, he was steaming towards France as part of the largest armada ever assembled.

His ship had spent the days leading up to the battle preparing off the coast of Ireland. Flammables and other hazardous materials

"I had no fear, but you wondered ... you wondered if you were going to get back."

—Darrell Baker

were unloaded and stored before the invasion.

Psyched up and ready to fight, Baker and his shipmates were on their way to France June 4 when the operation was postponed for a day because of rough seas. Baker said the delay was agonizing.

"We didn't want to go back," he said.

Once the weather cleared, Baker's ship moved into position off the coast in the early morning hours of June 6.

"We anchored about 4,000 to 6,000 yards off the

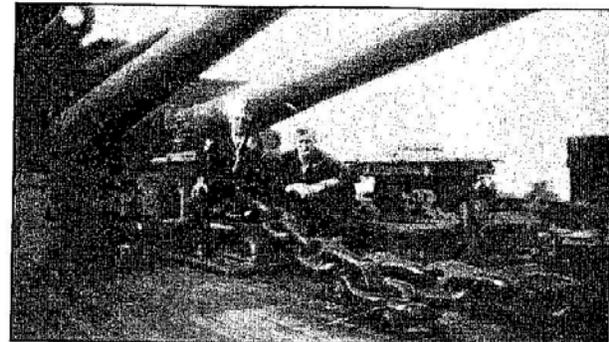
beach there and waited for dawn and the invasion to start," Baker said.

The steady drone of Allied aircraft punctuated the night as they made their final bombing runs before the invasion.

Baker remembered a German bomber came in at pitch dark and headed for the ship.

"We could hear it," he said. "We shot it down before it could skip-bomb us in the rear of the ship."

Baker's ship helped soften the beaches for the landing troops. Used mostly for bombardment, the battleship could lob shells up to 20 miles. His general quarters



Darrell Baker (left) and his friend Jockey, a gunner's mate on the deck of the USS Arkansas, pose near the No. 1 turret of the ship in 1946.

duty during the battle was as an anti-aircraft gunner, manning a mid-range 40mm "quad" machine gun. "We didn't sleep," he said.

"We stayed on the guns at general quarters for four or five days until they got the troops in and it quieted down."

Ironically, the most dangerous moment of the battle came when an Allied ship nearly collided with the Arkansas.

"We had the closest call of all after we went in there and anchored," Baker said.

"An English ship, in crossing our bow, cut in too close and a depth charge rack caught on the anchor chain. Five depth charges with 300 pounds of TNT each went rattling down our anchor chain down the side of the ship to the bottom of the bay.

"It was sure tense for a while, but they didn't happen to go off."

After the battle, there was no rest for the Arkansas. She steamed back to Ireland, loaded up with ammunition and headed to Cherbourg, France, to help spearhead another invasion. The ship finished the war escorting troopships across the Atlantic.

Over the years Baker said he has kept in touch with



Darrell Baker

some of his shipmates through letters and reunions.

"I write to them occasionally to ask them what their life has been like," he said.

"A lot of the fellas I served with have died over the years. It seems like every year there's more and more of them gone."

For those who remain, the magnitude and the historical significance of the battle is still sinking in.

"Today I realize what it means much more than I did when I was 18 or 19 years old," Baker said.

"I think more about it today than I did at that time."

# Years don't make WWII memories easier for Ballard

By Kent Cahlander  
SNP Staff Writer

Worthington resident Gerald Ballard doesn't remember 50 years ago today.

Ballard's last recollection of that week in 1944 was two days before, June 6, when the glider he was on flew silently into France and prepared for a landing on D-Day.

Ballard, now 82, was a technician in the 82nd Airborne's signal corps company on a mission to set up a message center in enemy territory. The gliders were towed across the channel and cut loose to cruise quietly down onto the French countryside. Most of the planes that day were able to land safely.

Ballard's didn't.

"I didn't go in on a weekend picnic," Ballard said. "We were wiped out."

Ballard was one of three survivors out of the 25 men on the glider. The pilot and copilot both were killed after the plane was shot down and ended up in a

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## • BALLARD

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hedgerow near Ste. Mere Eg-lise.

The glider was 50 feet above the ground, Ballard said, when all hell broke loose.

"I remember seeing gunfire all around us and tracer fire coming up through the bottom of the plane," he said. "Then I lost consciousness."

Ballard's next clear recollection was on the Normandy beach several days later when he was being evacuated to England. He pieced together the story of his lost days through government records.

Ballard still bears the scars of the shrapnel that was removed from his face later. He also suffered a broken hip.

While recovering from his ordeal in a hospital in Bristol, England, Ballard was awarded the Purple Heart for his wounds. He also received six Bronze Stars and a Silver Star for his service during the war.

Before his ill-fated trip into Normandy, Ballard had flown several successful missions into Italy and Sicily. He was well-trained to tackle his assignment.

"When you come right down to it, they were all so routine," he said.

"We really knew what we were supposed to do if we got there, but we never got there."

Ballard had another close call in Sicily earlier in the war when the plane he was on landed 70 miles out of position. Using a local transport to get back into position, Ballard's company ran into enemy gunfire.

"We ran into a German patrol," Ballard said. "A buddy of mine was killed in the firefight."

Ballard wasn't given much time to relax after his trials at Normandy. Reconditioning himself quickly, he was back on the obstacle course in August and went on to fly in more missions into Holland and central Europe.

"I guess I have a pretty good body or something," he said.

Ballard has seldom talked about his war experiences over the years, even with his own family. He shared these memories last week from his home on Pingree Drive. A longtime Worthington resident, he lives there with his wife of 54 years, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Ballard said many of the World War II veterans keep silent about their experiences, for good reason.

"He has never ever talked about this," she said. "He said most of the people who were there didn't want to talk about it. It was so horrible."

But despite his close shaves and his scarred memories, Ballard said he has no regrets about his service.

"I'm proud of the fact I served my country," he said.

# Fleming had front row seat for Battle of the Bulge

## Woman made exciting escape 50 years ago

By KENT CAHLANDER

Worthington Suburbia News Reporter

Trapped by Tiger tanks in a small rest-center town in Luxembourg, directly in the path of the first German breakthrough, F-Group's Clubmobile Peggy Henry, who was running 2 recreation rooms in a quiet hotel, suddenly found herself involved in one of the most hair-raising escape stories so far. A story of street-fighting, flames in the night, and a mad dash for freedom in the face of machine gun fire, ...

— from *Over There*, the American Red Cross News, Jan. 1, 1945.



Peggy Fleming

she ran a rest center club out of a hotel.

The old town was set in a deep valley on both banks of the river. Among its landmarks was an abbey high in the hills overlooking the town and the 800-year-old ruins of a medieval chateau.

Even though the town was less than five miles from the enemy lines, little did Fleming know she would soon be running down its quaint cobblestone streets fleeing for her life.

It was about 5:30 a.m., Dec. 16 when Fleming knew something was happening.

"We were aware we were being shelled," she said. "We could tell things were going on."

The magnitude of the military movements were soon to be felt as the shelling intensified and German patrols were spotted outside of town. Lt. Col. Benjamin Trapani told Fleming he was sending her back to Bastogne, Belgium — out of the path of the advancing German army.

At that point, the Germans were so close, soldiers were stationed at the door of the hotel prepared to shoot. Fleming was told to remove her 28th Division patch, leaving only her Red Cross insignia in case of capture.

Suddenly, there was one last phone call from the switchboard operator. He had lost all connections except with the hotel and was asking the colonel what to do.

"Get the hell out," Trapani said. And the group decided to do the same.

With eight others, Fleming and two local girls which had worked in the club made their way out of the hotel and headed for the abbey on the hill.

"We took them with us because we were afraid to leave them for the Germans to capture and do whatever they might have done," she said.

Running through bursts of tank fire and dodging searchlights, the group made the abbey about a half-hour later. An infantry division was on their way out of town so Fleming and the two girls hitched a ride with the men.

But her ordeal wasn't over. The roads were constantly under attack, and Fleming was forced to climb out and hit the ditch several times on the way to Bastogne.

She lost everything except the clothes she was wearing and so Fleming was sent back to Paris to be re-outfitted. It was rumored a German woman was picked up later wearing some of her clothes.

### A return trip

Nearly 50 years had passed since the traumatic event when Fleming recently returned to Europe as part of a tour of war veterans. With some help from the mayor of Clervaux, she was able to track down the two Luxembourg women she fled town with and share some memories.

"I was curious whether I'd be able to find them," she said of Kettie and Finy.

"It was interesting. Their English wasn't as good as it used to be and my French wasn't as good as it used to be."

Fleming said she was overwhelmed at all the attention given to the returning veterans.

"You wouldn't believe the things they are doing," she said. Every town they visited had ceremonies, receptions and war museums commemorating the events of World War II.

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Worthington resident Peggy Henry Fleming (center) visited a newsstand in Paris Jan. 3, 1945, less than a month after her harrowing escape from the advancing German army in the Battle of the Bulge. With her is an unknown U.S. soldier and Camilla Moss, head of Red Cross recreation in Europe at the time.

## FLEMING

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"Ever place you went there were things of that sort."

After returning from Europe, she married her husband — whom she had dated once in England during the war — and the two ran Fleming's Book Store from 1949 until 1974.

Ironically, she and her husband grew up in the same small town of Alexan-

dria in Licking County. After their first date in England, however, the couple had to wait two years for the next.

Despite the dangers she survived and the time she spent overseas during the war, Fleming said she wouldn't trade her memories for anything.

"There's nothing else I would have chosen to do rather than being in the Red

Cross," she said. "I was very satisfied and you felt good about what

you were doing. "I was treated with the utmost respect."

### *Fleming, McCormick plan battle presentations*

Worthington resident Peggy Fleming outran the German army to safety in the Battle of the Bulge, which started in Europe 50 years ago Dec. 16.

She and resident Robert McCormick will give presentations on the events surrounding the German's last major offensive in World War II 7:30 Dec. 16 at the Griswold Center, 777 High St.

Fleming will feature a slide show from her recent return to Europe, where she was reunited with two Luxembourg women she escaped with.

The event, sponsored by the World War II Commemorative Committee, is free and open to the public.

Fleming was awarded the Bronze Star for her service with the American Red Cross in World War II. Her citation, signed by Harry Truman, reads:

"Miss Margaret Henry, American Red Cross, rendered meritorious service with Clubmobile Group F, 28th Infantry Division Rest Center, Clervoux, Luxembourg, from 17 November to 25 December 1944.

"Despite heavy enemy shelling on the town, she steadfastly remained and continued to dispense coffee and doughnuts to the hard-pressed men. Her display of courage in the face of the violent German Ardennes Offensive materially furthered the morale of the American Combat Soldiers she served."

—KENT CAHLANDER



Peggy Fleming (with husband Fred looking on) points to a map where the epic Battle of the Bulge took place 50 years ago on Dec. 16.

# Smith beat Allied invasion to the beach on D-Day

By Kent Cahlander  
SNP Staff Writer

First Lt. William Smith wasn't exactly green behind the ears when he waded up to the Normandy shores 50 years ago June 6.

After being part of invasions in northern Africa and Sicily, Smith had already seen a lot of action as a forward observer for the Army's 1st Division. But even battle-scarred veterans knew the magnitude of the D-Day invasion as it unfolded.

"We knew it was going to be big-

ger than anything we had ever done," Smith said.

Smith, 76, spoke of his experiences leading up to "H-Hour" last week from his house on Pinney Drive in Worthington. He lives there with his wife of 54 years, Bernice.

"I was fortunate because I went in with the very first people," Smith said. "I was there H-minus five minutes. We were individuals ... a few ... scattered."

Smith hit the beach early that

morning, landing ahead of an infantry assault element. He was one of a few men trained by the Navy to sight targets inland for artillery on the ships.

Smith recalled those first anxious steps into France.

"You weren't walking," Smith said. "You bent over and ran like hell to get as far forward as you could before they started shooting at you."

Being part of that initial "pre-invasion" invasion, was a blessing in

disguise according to Smith.

"When the very first people hit, we weren't a very good target," he said.

"They were more interested in trying to get the guys coming down the rope ladders on the sides of the transports.

"I was very fortunate to get in there that early. They wouldn't even shoot at you because they were so interested in the gangs coming up in lines behind you."

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## • ALLIED

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Once Smith and the other forward observers landed, their training took over. After scattering out, there were

only two things on their minds, Smith said. Where they were going to move to next and whether it would give them a better view.

There was no time for fear.

## Smith brings back war 'souvenir'

First Lt. William Smith came back from World War II with more than just memories.

He also brought with him a pipe-smoking habit which he related to a battle in north Africa.

His division was under fire at the time and one of the recruits at the post was worried about the shelling. Smith overheard his sergeant trying to calm the young man down.

"I heard the sergeant say 'Look kid, stop worrying. The lieutenant doesn't even have his pipe out of his mouth yet,'" Smith said.

"I figured if that's how they were deciding if we were in trouble, then that pipe is going to stay in my mouth all the time."

It's been 50 years now and the pipe's still there.

"It doesn't even occur to you," he said.

"You don't have time to worry about being killed. It always happens to someone else."

Smith's job from there was to watch out for enemy artillery and radio back to the "Battlewagons" where to fire.

"When they started pounding and got the artillery going you found out where it was coming from and called fire on them," Smith said.

"Calling fire" on the targets brought rains of shells from the big guns on the ships. Smith recalled the closeness of one bombardment.

"I could feel that shell going over my head and let me tell you ... it was like a vacuum," Smith said.

Smith's participation in the great battle earned him a Bronze Star. He was also awarded a Bravery Citation for his deeds in the invasion of Africa. That invasion helped prepare Smith and his division for the big battle to come.

"We fought (German Gen. Erwin J.E.) Rommel up and down the desert and cleared him out of Tunis — that was the first invasion we made," Smith said. "Then we went over to Sicily and cleared Sicily out."

"The Nazis went back into Italy. Then they took us back around to England and from there we got ready to jump the channel into Omaha Red."

In recounting his D-Day experiences, Smith spoke modestly about his accomplishments, but expressed hope that something could be learned from it.

"I didn't do anything that millions of other kids didn't do," Smith said. "But what we did is going to have to be done again unless we wake up and stop trying to be the policemen of the world and take care of our own defenses — we can't let them down."

Smith said the lessons of the past should be remembered by the children of the future.

"That's what Memorial Day is all about — remembering what it cost us," Smith said.

"I hope that our kids, my grandchildren, don't have to do what I've already done."



Lt. William Smith, in 1941



Lt. William Smith shows off one of his military medals from his Worthington house.

"You don't have time to worry about being killed. It always happens to someone else."

—William Smith