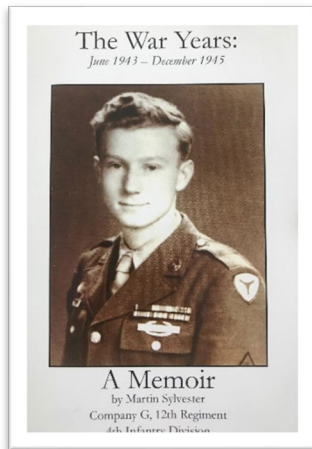


The Captivating Story of a WW II Hero

John Shoemaker

In a continuing effort to recognize “Highland Beach Heroes,” this story features 95-year-old Martin Sylvester, a resident in the Boca Highland Condominium community, who enjoys life with Maris Elman.



Mr. Sylvester’s heroic story began in 1943 when he joined the U.S. Army at age 18. In his “A Memoir by Martin Sylvester, *The War Years: June 1943 - December 1945*,” he wrote about his harrowing war tale in hopes that his family and others “will never have to experience the horrors of war.”

Being in the U.S. Army was not easy for Mr. Sylvester as he was thrust into a world of hard Army training, which consisted of 20-mile hikes with full field packs and more. Mr. Sylvester took on this new challenge in exhibiting his prowess in marksmanship by means of an M1 rifle. Mr. Sylvester was also shipped out to England where the training became more rigorous. His days spent in England were extremely monotonous. Nonetheless, on one early morning, at approximately 2:00 A.M, his unit was awakened and taken to the waterfront to board a landing craft. The unit had no idea where the landing

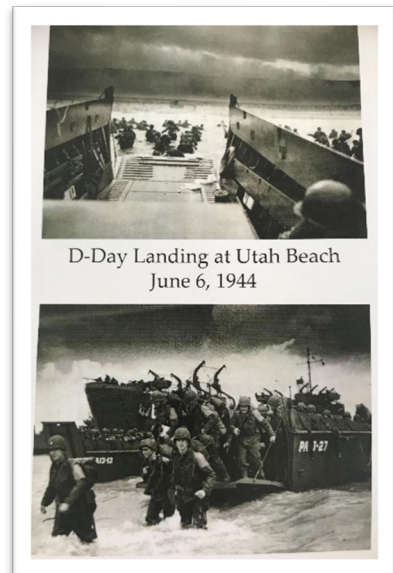
craft was transporting them and fought against nausea in the rough sea.

Finally, on June 6, 1944, when the landing craft ramp dropped, Mr. Sylvester and the men rushed onto Utah Beach in Normandy France. Moving fast off the beach into the countryside, Mr. Sylvester’s 4th Infantry Division Force marched for miles, racing to move inland and continually pushing the Germans back. Months passed with non-stop battling. For soldiers on both sides, there were major battles that in the fog of war created confusing and difficult situations. One of the great battles was in the “Hurtgen Forest.” War buffs know the fighting was fierce, attacks were followed by counterattacks, battle lines changed constantly with massive artillery and there were tank attacks supported by the infantry on both sides. An estimated 50,000 Americans were killed or wounded in the battles.

Mr. Sylvester was a line infantry soldier who worked his way forward from foxhole to bunkers to buildings in one village after another. Thereafter, winter brought snow and freezing rain and the area was pock-marked with tank traps, pillboxes, and minefields. It was December 16, 1944 and the beginning of the infamous “Battle of the Bulge.” The artillery barrages were like steel rain and hundreds of tanks and thousands of soldiers were attacked on both sides. Battle lines were broken and chaos ensued. Soon after, Mr. Sylvester’s unit was surrounded by Germans. Simultaneously, a sniper shot Mr. Sylvester in his left ankle. The unit seeking refuge in a building, were overcome and captured by Germans. Because of Mr. Sylvester’s Jewish nationality, prior to capture, he tried to rid himself of all identifications on his person.

After being capture Mr. Sylvester was led to a column of other POWs and began a march deep behind the lines. While marching on a curve in the road, when sentries were not watching, Mr. Sylvester dropped off into the bushes and escaped by crawling and running through woods and war debris. Days after his escaped, he sought refuge in a barn where he fell asleep. Unfortunately, a woman came into the barn, saw Mr. Sylvester sleeping and informed German soldiers of his location and he was captured a second time.

Wounded by the gun shot he received to his left ankle; Mr. Sylvester’s foot become infected causing him pain. Needing serious medical attention, Mr. Sylvester knew he had to get back to the American lines. In



D-Day Landing at Utah Beach
June 6, 1944

becoming desperate with little to eat, Mr. Sylvester was transported by train with other POWs to avoid being killed by American fighter plane strafing trains. While marching alongside another road using the same tactic as before, Mr. Sylvester dropped off in the woods. For days, he evaded capture. However, once again, local German partisans and some old soldiers from WW I saw him hiding in a village and turned him over to the German Army – he was captured a third time. He was now deep in German territory. Days later, at another opportune time while marching with a hundred or more other POWs, Mr. Sylvester incredibly escaped a third time by using the same escape method!

While attempting to avoid booby traps and German soldiers, for days, Mr. Sylvester wander alone without a map, scrounged for food, and drank water from puddles. Cold and completely exhausted, Mr. Sylvester entered a house looking for a place to rest. As luck would have it, a German family locked him in their basement, which hours earlier had been used as a German SS Headquarter. The family's intent was to use him as a bargaining chip with whoever showed up at their home first. Mr. Sylvester was finally saved by advancing Americans and taken to safety.



Once each day, we were fed a cup of watery soup and

Joe Demler became a poster-boy for the way the Germans treated American POWs. He was left behind when the Germans evacuated Stalag 12A in Limburg, Germany and was rescued by the advancing Americans.

Mr. Sylvester, who at that time weighed about 80 lbs, was told by a doctor that his ankle was gangrenous and if he did not get attention to it within a couple of weeks, he would lose his foot and that another week or two without medical attention, he would have died. How fortunate he was in this situation! He was also covered with lice and fleas, had typhoid fever and suffering from dehydration. He received penicillin treatments for the conditions, which ultimately saved his life. After months in the hospitals, Mr. Sylvester returned to the States and worked his remaining time in the Army as a military policeman.

Mr. Sylvester grew up in Brooklyn, NY. In 2000, he retired from his private practice as a Psychotherapy, Psychoanalysis, and Group Analysis. He was on the faculty of the Post-Graduate Center for Mental

Health and was an Associate Professor at the NY University Graduate School of Social Work and a founder of The NY Counseling and Guidance Service. After graduating with his degrees, he worked a demanding career for 34 years following a minute-by-minute weekday schedule, from 8:00 A.M. to 10:00 P.M. He has two sons, three grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Mr. Sylvester survived a World War from the beaches of Normandy to the historic Battle of the Bulge that required him to keep a positive focus on his survival. Even though he was captured and escaped three times, his perseverance saved his life! When asked about what is still on his mind about the War and about what comments he would give to readers of the article? Without hesitation, Mr. Sylvester exclaimed, “avoid war at all costs!” He stated that “most people cannot imagine the destruction to the human body when shot or blown apart by shrapnel. The pain and suffering are unforgettable.



Today, Mr. Sylvester is truly enjoying retirement. He is “captivated” by the town’s beautiful landscaping, the ocean, the Intracoastal, and the gorgeous homes in the town. Mr. Sylvester and Maris agrees that having come from NY City and Long Island that Highland Beach is safe and has nearly no crimes.” It is perfect for them.

Mr. Sylvester has certainly paid his dues and can enjoy the views, the walks on A1A, the serenity of the town and lectures that he and Maris attend at Florida Atlantic University (FAU). Mr. Sylvester has received his wish to sleep in until 8:00 A.M. daily. Mr. Sylvester is a kind and gentle man who certainly deserves a “sharp salute!”