

TO OLD TIMES

The ultimate tribute to the 'Greatest Generation' called 'The War'(an intimate history, 1941-5)is upon us. Soon to be a PBS series, it is now in book form and reintroduces those wonder-men: Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns. They collaborated on the Civil War series which was the highest-rated series in the history of public television. 'The War' shows WWII from the vantage point of those who did the fighting and dying. It tells the story of 40 individuals and showcases four towns: Luverne, Minnesota; Sacramento, California; Waterbury, Connecticut and ah yes, Mobile. Ward and Burns were badgered about the timing - it is said 1000 WWII veterans are dying each day-and so with respect and commitment they have completed their six-year odyssey. Plan is to highlight the series by a 'showing', question and answer program in each of the four towns. Vignettes have been shown in the Press Register for several days and Mobile had their 'showing' on the 8th of September, University of South Alabama to much acclaim.

In irony, so recently, I was reminded of those 'old times' in an article by Peggy Noonan(her Declarations Column)Wall Street Journal. As you may recall, Mrs Noonan was an assistant to President Reagan and one of his speech writers. Noonan tells of a hot-air balloon ride in Normandy, circa 1991 when air currents and other things aborted the flight and they landed rather roughly in a Normandy pasture as the 'gondola dragged, tipped and spilled us out. A half-dozen of us emerged laughing with relief'

"Suddenly, before us stood an old man with a cracked and weathered face. He was about 80, in rough work clothes, like a Life Magazine photo from 1938: 'French farmer hoes his field'. One of us spoke French and explained our situation. The farmer

asked, 'you are American' and we nodded, he gestured he would return and ran to his house. He did holding an ancient bottle of Calvados(French brandy distilled from Apple Cider)-covered with dust/dirt and appeared to have been saved a long time.....and he said he had not seen an American since the invasion, the Normandy invasion of June, 1944. And then he opened the bottle and poured glasses, and toasted: 'To old times'...and we felt awed and thought, 'lucky Yanks' that a wind had blown us to it "

I remember those 'old times' as an eighteen year old soldier landing on Omaha Beach, 16 June, 1944-some 10 days after the first troops stormed the beaches. I remember the flotsam, the burned-out vehicles, clothes, equipment and debris...and vividly the carved-out impressions in the overhanging cliffs. These were 'protection' for those inching up and it became, perhaps their eulogy, and I remember. We of our 'replacement packet' trudged from the LST, the Mulberry(portable dock)and up the pathway, laden with about 100 lbs, and thankful we did not have to fight our way up to the top.

Normandy of hedgerowed fields, over a million men were involved from invasion to breakout. We waited our call, saw an occasional farmer, tasted the hot fire of Calvados, heard the sounds of war ahead and saw an occasional German in repose, dead as maggots enjoyed the feast of wounds.

I remember in an orchard, a brief respite from the things of war-our Cavalry tank platoon-nearing Paris in chase of Germans...and arrival of our new officer, 2d Lt Roy Barnett. One of our enterprising Sergeants offered Barnett his canteen and a 'drink of wine'(it was really Calvados). Barnett took a swig and handed it back, saying, "Good wine, Sergeant." He impressed and turned out to be a real leader .

Those were the days, my friend.

