

On The Beach ©

This article will be a comprehensive overview of the 11 American and 2 German temporary cemeteries established during the Normandy Campaign. The Graves Registration Company's basic function was to establish cemeteries, collect the dead and oversee the identification and burial of the dead. They were to also catalog all personal possessions found on the deceased.

The Company consisted of Headquarters, 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Platoons. The Headquarters Platoon contained the same number of men as Platoons 1 to 4 but performed a different function. Headquarters Platoon had two officers, the Company Commander and the Executive Officer, who was a Civil Engineer and was responsible for plotting and laying out the cemeteries. The Executive Officer had two Technical Sergeants under him serving as draftsman. The rest of the Headquarters Platoon consisted of medics, clerks, cooks, mechanics and drivers.

A Platoon consisted of one officer and 25 enlisted men and was broken into Platoon Headquarters and 1st, 2nd and 3rd sections. Platoon Headquarters contained a Lieutenant, the Platoon leader and a Staff Sergeant assistant Platoon leader, a clerk and 3 medics attached from Company Headquarters. The Staff Sergeant was responsible for verifying all records of burial from his squads and submitting them to Company Headquarters.

Each section contained a collecting squad and an evacuation squad. The collecting squad had a squad leader and 2 enlisted men whose job was to recover bodies from the battlefield and recover personal effects. They would then take the dead and their personal effects to the collecting point. The collecting point was run by the evacuation squad.

The evacuation squad contained a squad leader, attached Staff Sergeant Medic, 2 truck drivers and a clerk. The evacuation squad leader and medic would establish identification and try to determine the cause of death. The clerk's job was to list and dispose of the personal effects properly, sending it to Company Headquarters.¹

Each of the four Platoons was attached to a Division for the invasion of Normandy. In the case of the 607th, the 1st Platoon was not assigned to a division due to losses suffered in Exercise Tiger. The 2nd Platoon was attached to the Fifth Engineer Special Brigade; 3rd Platoon to the Sixth Engineer Special Brigade both on Omaha Beach and the 4th Platoon was attached to the First Engineer Special Brigade that came ashore on Utah Beach. Some of the companies held back a Platoon in reserve such as the 606th which kept the 4th Platoon with Company Headquarters at the start of the invasion.

The original plan was for the Beach Battalion Groups under the Engineer Special Brigades to establish collecting points. The dead would be transported to the cemeteries established by the 607th 2nd and 3rd Platoons on D +3, 9 June. The planned location of the two cemeteries was near Cricqueville and St. Honorine.²

At 1530 hours 6 June 1944 the 3rd Platoon of the 607th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company landed on Omaha Beach in Normandy. The Platoon consisted of First Lieutenant Robert E. Berry and 25 Enlisted men. They were attached to the Sixth Engineer Special Brigade and were the first Graves Registration troops to arrive in Normandy.³ Due to the nature of the fighting when the 3rd Platoon arrived on the beach the dead lay where they fell on the beach or were floating amongst the wreckage of the first waves of the invasion. The Platoon did not receive any help from the Beach Battalions who were still working to clear the beach exits. They did receive assistance from 309th Quartermaster Railhead Company and the 3168th Quartermaster Service Company as well as German POWs.⁴ The other problem was that both Cricqueville and Sainte Honorine, the original locations for the cemeteries, were still occupied by the enemy.

They quickly set up a collecting point to start processing the dead that were located in front of Dog Green Beach. 3rd Platoon of the 607th opened the 2nd American Cemetery in Normandy. This was on Omaha Beach, 7 June 1944.⁵ The Cemetery was located just to the west of the Vierville Draw Exit 1 on the far edge of Dog Green.

The cemetery was established in the area of the largest amount of casualties, where Companies A and B and D of the 29th Infantry's 116th Infantry Regiment had landed on D-Day. Co A was the boys from Bedford, and they left 85 men dead on the beach. Co B of the 116th lost 54 men on Omaha Beach, Co D 33 men. ⁶ Between these two companies 172 men were buried on the beach, over one third of the 457 men buried there between 7 June and 9 June.⁷

Trenches were dug by bulldozer with one dog tag left with the dead with the other dog tag attached to a simple wooden stake. The Cemetery at Omaha Beach had not been planned but due to the high number of casualties and for reasons of sanitation the burials could not wait. Another factor was one of morale. The Army didn't want incoming troops to see scores of dead Americans on the beach.

7 June saw the arrival of the 2nd Platoon of the 606th Graves Registration Company attached to the 29th Infantry Division. The 1st and 3rd sections arrived between 1700 and 2300 hours and assisted the 3rd Platoon of the 607th with the burials on Omaha Beach. The 606th 2nd Platoon's 2nd section arrived 8 June at 0900 hours and the Platoon Headquarters at 1400 hours.

The 1st Platoon of the 606th attached to the 1st Infantry Division arrived on 8 June at 0950 hours on Omaha Beach and moved inland to establish collecting points with each regimental combat team of the 1st Infantry Division. The collecting points consisted of three men from the 606th and 11 men from the Service Company of each Regiment. They would perform that duty until they rejoined the Company on 14 July.

While the 3rd Platoon of the 607th and 2nd Platoon 606th continued with the task of burying the dead on the beach, 8 June also saw the arrival of the 607th 2nd Platoon who was attached to the Fifth Engineer Special Brigade.⁸ The 25 enlisted men were led by First Lieutenant Ernest J. Terry. The 2nd Platoon arrived on shore at 1145 hours and promptly moved up the bluffs overlooking Omaha Beach. There they established what was to become the first Permanent American Cemetery in France.

This Cemetery was named St. Laurent Number 1 and was established on the site that was to become the Normandy American Cemetery. This Cemetery was established as the first of two planned cemeteries. The Omaha Beach Cemetery was closed on 9 June. The 607th 3rd Platoon moved to the St. Laurent Cemetery No. 1 on 11 June to assist the 2nd Platoon.⁹

Following the closing of the Omaha Beach Cemetery the 606th 2nd Platoon moved to the La Cambe area and set up the planned Second Cemetery on 10 June and established collecting points with the 29th Infantry Division. These tasks were completed between the dates of 10 thru 15 June. Assisting them was a service Platoon consisting of 1 officer and 49 enlisted men. 14 June saw the 606th 2nd Platoon being relieved by the 2nd Platoon of the 608th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company now attached to the 29th Infantry Division taking over the La Cambe Cemetery.¹⁰ The 2nd Platoon of the 606th was then attached to the 2nd Armored Division. On 20 June the 608th 2nd Platoon was relieved by the 608th Company Headquarters and 1st Platoon. On 25 June the 608th 2nd Platoon began collections and evacuations with the 29th Infantry Division.¹¹

The third Platoon of the 606th was attached to the 2nd Infantry Division and on 12 June established a Division collecting point 2 miles north of Le Molay. The remaining two Platoons Headquarters and the 4th were moved to the Bernesq area on 14 June to search the V Corps area for isolated burials. The 3275 Quartermaster Service Company provided the location for the isolated burials.¹²

At the end of June 1944 in the V Corps sector here is a breakdown of the Graves Registration Companies and their locations. The three companies located in this sector are 606th, 607th & 608th. The 606th has the Headquarters and 4th Platoon located in the Bernesq area searching for isolated burials. 1st Platoon is attached to the 1st Infantry Division operating the collections point for the Division. The 2nd Platoon is attached to the 2nd Armored Division and is in reserve on 30 June. The 3rd Platoon is operating the collections points for the 2nd Infantry Division.

The 607th has the entire Company together at St. Laurent No. 1 except for the 4th Platoon. The reconstituted 1st Platoon and the Hq Platoon joined the other Platoons on 29 and 30 June respectively at St. Laurent No. 1.

The 608th Headquarters and 1st Platoon are located at the La Cambe Cemetery performing burials. The 2nd Platoon is running the 29th Infantry Divisions collecting points. The 3rd Platoon is operating the collecting points for the 3rd Armored Division, and the 4th Platoon is with the 30th Infantry Division operating collecting points.

In The Air

The operational plan for the Utah Beach Graves Registration Company landing also contained an airborne component. The 603rd Graves Registration Company had the 1st Platoon attached to the 4th Infantry Division; the 2nd Platoon attached to the 9th Infantry Division, the 3rd Platoon to the 90th Infantry Division and the 4th Platoon to the 82nd Airborne Division. The 4th Platoon sent one man in via glider on 6 June, Sergeant Elbert Legg. The 4th Platoon of the 607th was scheduled to come ashore on Utah Beach. They were attached to the 1st Engineer Special Brigade.¹³

Sergeant Legg came in by Glider with the 82nd Airborne Division's 407th Airborne Quartermaster Company at 2115 hours 6 June 1944, 5 ½ hours after the 607th 2nd Platoon came ashore at Omaha Beach. After landing Legg, started searching for a suitable spot to set up a collecting point. After choosing a field to set up a collecting point, Legg was approached by 1st Lieutenant Fraim and told that Fraim was the Graves Registration officer for the 82nd. Fraim was an officer in the 407th Airborne Quartermaster Company. He told Sergeant Legg to pick out a location for a cemetery. Legg said that he wasn't supposed to open a Cemetery but set up a collecting point to evacuate the bodies. Legg had no supplies to run the cemetery. Fraim agreed but stated that Legg should be prepared to start burying men if the need arose.¹⁴

Sergeant Legg selected a large open field to establish the collecting point before dark as it contained the bodies of dead paratroopers. More bodies arrived, and Lieutenant Fram told Legg to start laying out how the burials would be started. Legg walked to the northwest corner of the field and used his foot to make a hole in the ground and put a stake in, to mark the first grave at what would become known as the Blosville Cemetery. This was the first Cemetery in Normandy, located just west of the Les Forges Crossroads south of Ste. Mère-Eglise.

It was actually located in the town of Carquebut, but the Americans referred to it with the name of the largest local town. Sergeant Legg was told that local Frenchmen would be hired to dig the graves as Legg's Platoon hadn't arrived yet. Unbeknownst to Legg there had been a problem back in England with his Platoon and the two attached Platoons of the 3041st getting into their convoy. They would not arrive until the night of D+7 13 June.¹⁵

The morning of 7 June arrived, and the first burials in Normandy started. The first man buried by a Graves Registration Company was Private Scott L. Clair of the 82nd who had been killed on 6 June. 33 burials were performed the first day by Legg and his team of Frenchman. Legg had laid out a plot of 200 graves for the Americans and the next day started one for the Germans, as well. He had a slit trench dug in the corner of the field threw a shelter half over it, and this became his office until the balance of his Platoon arrived.¹⁶

The 4th Platoon from the 607th came ashore on Utah Beach on 7 June and the next morning started a cemetery in the Pouppeville area codenamed Macon. The Macon Cemetery was closed on 18 June, and the Platoon is then sent to Orglandes to open the first German Cemetery. The Orglandes Cemetery is opened on 18 June and would become one of two permanent German Cemeteries in Normandy.¹⁷

The 603rd 1st Platoon was scheduled to go ashore 6 June, but due to a malfunctioning ramp had to wait until the 7th to go in. They were scheduled to meet up with the 607th 4th Platoon but due to the delay had to scrap that plan. They stayed on the beach in the area of the 4th Infantry Division's Quartermaster.¹⁸ The Platoon leader

was 1st Lieutenant Harry Dubrov. The next day 8 June they started the 4th Infantry Division's Cemetery at St. Martin. The Cemetery was closed on 16 June, and they joined the 3rd Platoon running the first cemetery in Ste. Mère-Eglise.

The Cemetery at Hiesville was started for the same reason as the one at Omaha Beach, expediency. The 101st Airborne Division had located there Medical Company at Hiesville and needed to bury the bodies of the dead. The 101st was the only Invasion Division that was not assigned a Graves Registration Platoon. The 101st 426th Airborne Quartermaster Company was tasked with starting this cemetery.

There was a group of glider pilots in Hiesville awaiting an opportunity to get to Utah Beach and transportation back to England. They were enlisted in starting the cemetery. German POWs were used to dig the graves and the 426th and the Glider Pilots oversaw the burials and filled out the paperwork. The 607th 4th Platoon sent a detachment of men to Hiesville on 12 June to assist with the German burials, processing 97 Germans before returning to the Macon Cemetery on Utah Beach. The last burial at Hiesville was on 18 June.

The cemetery at Ste. Mère-Eglise was opened on 10 June by the 603rd 3rd Platoon that came ashore on 8 June. Part of the Platoon went to St. Martin to assist the 1st Platoon and the remainder went to Ste. Mère-Eglise to find a location for the cemetery they were supposed to open. This was supposed to be a cemetery for the 90th Infantry Division's dead but would become the VII Corps Cemetery. They selected a field a few hundred yards to the east of the town cemetery and began laying it out. The first burials were started on 10 June in Plot B after the rest of the Platoon had rejoined them.¹⁹ The 2nd Platoon came ashore on June 8th and joined the 3rd Platoon at Ste. Mère-Eglise.²⁰

Realizing in the third week of June that the first Ste. Mère-Eglise Cemetery will not be large enough to continue burials a new site was selected for the next Corps Cemetery. The second cemetery at Ste. Mère-Eglise is opened just west of the village. The name of this cemetery is Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 2. This was opened on 24 June by the 603rd minus the 4th Platoon at Orglandes and part of the 3rd Platoon which is left behind to close up Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 1.²¹ Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 2, is closed on 29 December 1944.

13 June saw the arrival of Sergeant Legg's 4th Platoon late in the evening. Detachment A of the 3041st Graves Registration Company which consisted of the 1st and 2nd Platoons was scheduled to land with the 603rd Hq and 4th Platoons. The 603rd Hq Platoon joined the rest of the Company at Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 1 on June 14th. The 3041st 1st Platoon joined Legg and his 4th Platoon at Blosville. The 2nd Platoon's LCVP hit a mine and 3 men were killed, and one was listed as missing. The balance of the 26 men was wounded and evacuated back to England. The original Blosville Cemetery was closed on June 14th, and the new one is laid out in the same field with 80 more men were buried by the 603rd and the 3041st. The 603rd 4th Platoon is sent to Orglandes to work with the 607th 4th Platoon on 20 June.²²

At the end of June 1944 in the VII Corps Sector, here is the breakdown of the Graves Registration Companies. 603rd minus the 4th Platoon is at Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 2; The 4th Platoon of the 603rd and the 4th Platoon of the 607th are at the German Cemetery at Orglandes. The 1st Platoon of the 3041st is at Blosville. The 2nd Platoon of the 3041st has been lost when their LCVP hit a mine; the 3rd Platoon is in the England with the 35th Infantry Division and would come into Normandy during the first week of July. Hq and 4th Platoons will arrive in Normandy on 1 July from England rounding out the 3041st.

The last temporary Cemetery in Normandy is opened outside the village of Marigny on 31 July by the 603rd Graves Registration Company. This will be the last of the 11 Temporary Cemeteries opened in Normandy. Marigny will handle the casualties from the St. Lo Breakout. Marigny No. 1 and Marigny No. 2 are opened No. 1 for American dead and No. 2 for the German dead.²³

This article while focused on the Graves Registration Companies during the month of June 1944 will also cover three units during the month of July. The Hq Platoon and the 4th Platoon of the 3041st arrive at Blosville on 2 July. Due to the loss of the 2nd Platoon of the 3041st 14 enlisted men join as replacements on 13 July. On 14 July the 1st Platoon of the 3042nd Graves Registration Company is attached to the 3041st at Blosville, as well. Blosville Cemetery will become the largest American Cemetery in Normandy. Burials will continue there until late in 1947, just before the cemetery is closed.²⁴

One of the odd facts about this campaign was the assignments given to the 607th 4th Platoon drew during the campaign. The 4th Platoon was scheduled to go into Normandy with the Hq Platoon that arrived on 29 June. Due to the loss of most of the 1st Platoon during Exercise Tiger the 4th Platoon took the place of the 1st. They were the only Platoon given the task of disinterring three cemeteries during the campaign. First the 4th Platoon returned to the Cemetery on Utah Beach and disinterred and moved the bodies to Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 2 between 24 and 29 June. They returned to Orglandes on 1 July, but were then ordered to Hiesville where they disinter the entire cemetery between 2 and 4 July. On 5 July the 607th 4th Platoon disinters the 401 American dead at Blosville and moved them to the new part of the Cemetery. They also remove the 131 Germans buried at Blosville to Orglandes.²⁵ The dead at the Cemetery on Omaha Beach are disinterred on 12 and 13 July by the 607th 2nd Platoon and moved to St. Laurent No. 1.²⁶ During the last week of August, the dead at St. Martin are disinterred, then moved to Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 2 by the 610th 2nd Platoon led by 1st Lieutenant Leo M. Duffy.²⁷

The Cemeteries opened during the Normandy Campaign in order by date were 82nd Airborne Division Cemetery at Blosville selected the evening of 6 June and opened the morning of 7 June. 401 Americans are buried there when the Cemetery is closed on 14 June. They will be moved to the new Blosville Cemetery to Plots A and B 5 July 1944.

Omaha Beach opened during the afternoon of 7 June and is closed 9 June. 457 American and Allied dead are buried there, and then disinterred and moved to St. Laurent No. 1 between 12 and 13 July 1944.²⁸

The Macon Cemetery on Utah Beach is opened on 7 June and buries 272 American, 5 Allied and 91 German dead. The Cemetery is closed on 18 June, and the dead are moved to Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 2 on 24 June.²⁹

St. Martin Cemetery is opened on 8 June and buries 264 Americans, 3 Allied and 189 German dead. The cemetery is closed on 16 June, and the dead are moved to Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 2 during the last week of August.³⁰

Hiesville is opened on 8 June by the 101st Airborne Division and Glider Pilots from various units. 249 American and 188 German dead are buried there. The cemetery is closed 18 June, and the dead moved to Blosville Cemetery on 5 July 1944.³¹

St. Laurent No. 1 which is opened on 8 June will see the burials of 3,643 American, 83 Allied and 1293 German dead are buried there.³² The cemetery will be closed to burials on 14 August. The site of St. Laurent No. 1 will become the permanent Normandy American Cemetery.

La Cambe Cemetery is opened on 10 June and buries 4,227 American, and 1,616 German dead.³³ The cemetery is closed for burials on 16 August. The La Cambe Cemetery site will become one of the two Permanent German Cemeteries in Normandy.

Blosville Cemetery is opened on 15 June for burials in a new configuration. There will be a total of 5,826 burials here before the cemetery closes at the end of 1947.³⁴

The German Cemetery at Orglandes is opened on 18 June and will see the burial of 6,074 German dead as a temporary cemetery. This along with La Cambe becomes a Permanent German Cemetery.³⁵

Ste. Mère-Eglise No. 2 is opened on 24 June and buries 4,109 American and 30 Allied dead. The Cemetery is closed to burials late December 1944.³⁶

Marigny Number 1 is opened on 31 July 1944 and buried 3,043 American and 52 Allied dead. The Cemetery is closed for burials October of 1944 but will burial isolated burials through 1945. Marigny Number 2 is designated a German Cemetery and buried 1,553 dead as of May 1945.³⁷

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¹ Field Manual TB 10-630-2 pg. 11

² Quartermaster Supply in the European Theater of Operations in World War II Volume VII Graves Registration by Eudora Ramsay Richardson and Sherman Allan pg. 30

³ Operations Report 607th Graves Registration Company

⁴ QMC Historical Studies The Graves Registration Service in World War II by Edward Steere Q.M.C. Historical Studies No. 21 pg. 103

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Compiled from Co A 116th Inf Morning Reports and Weekly Reports of Burial Form QM From No. 2

⁷ Operations Report 607th Graves Registration Company

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Operations Report 606th Graves Registration Company

¹¹ S-3 Journal 2nd Platoon, 608th Graves Registration Company

¹² Operations Report 606th Graves Registration Company

¹³ 603rd QM Graves Registration Company 1943-1945 by Ronald A. Milton pages 30-39

¹⁴ Crosses At Normandy by Colonel Elbert Legg

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Operations Report 607th Graves Registration Company

¹⁸ 603rd QM Graves Registration Company 1943-1945 by Ronald A. Milton pg 32

¹⁹ Ibid pages 35-36

²⁰ 603rd Graves Registration Company Report of Quartermaster Activities 15 July 1944

²¹ Ibid pg 40

²² 603rd Graves Registration Company Report of Quartermaster Activities 15 July 1944

²³ Ibid pg 41

²⁴ 3041st Company Morning Report 2 July 1944

²⁵ Operations Report 607th Graves Registration Company

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Author interview with Leo M. Duffy May 7, 2010

²⁸ Operations Report 607th Graves Registration Company

²⁹ First United States Army Report of Operations 23 February - 8 May 1945 Annexes 9-14 Appendix 27

³⁰ 603rd Graves Registration Company Report of Quartermaster Activities 15 July 1944

³¹ 603rd Graves Registration Company Report of Quartermaster Activities 15 July 1944

³² First United States Army Report of Operations 23 February - 8 May 1945 Annexes 9-14 Appendix 27

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Compiled from Graves Registration Weekly Report of Burials 1944-1945

³⁵ First United States Army Report of Operations 23 February - 8 May 1945 Annexes 9-14 Appendix 27

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid