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## **A lifetime later, a soldier returns to D-Day**

*94-year-old veteran to revisit site of Normandy invasion*

WEST BOYNTON — On June 6, 1944, Robert Herlitschek lay flat on the beach under withering German gunfire. But he couldn't stay put. The tide was coming in. Herlitschek's part in the invasion of Normandy didn't last long. Minutes after rising seas forced him further up on Omaha Beach, a bullet shattered his elbow. He boarded a hospital boat, returned to New Jersey and never went back. Since then, he's lived a lifetime, as an IRS auditor, a husband, a father, a widower. But now, at 94, Herlitschek knows he's running out of time, he says, and his new girlfriend, 80-year-old Betty Jacobson, has been pushing him to return to that beach.

They leave July 23 for France. "I wasn't that nervous, to tell you the truth," said Herlitschek, whose right arm shakes sometimes. He can't straighten it past 90 degrees. Herlitschek used to get seasick, which was an unfortunate quality for a man of the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, a group that landed on three beaches during World War II. Before Normandy there was Sicily, and North Africa before that. On D-Day morning, 68 years ago, Herlitschek wasn't sick. He wasn't afraid of death — he had faced it plenty of times already. Rather, like the 30 silent men around him, floating to shore, he was pensive. "Will I ever make it home?" he wondered. He puked for three days as he headed for his first beach landing in North Africa, where an injury saved his life for the first time. An infected thumb. Medics put his arm in a sling, and he stayed behind while several in his squad died attacking German tanks. But he helped take an important hill and was captured when the Germans took it back. U.S. planes liberated his prison ship, and in July 1943, he went to Sicily. It was there Herlitschek won a Bronze Star. His official citation notes: "Encountering a strong enemy force while on a reconnaissance mission, Private Herlitschek, on his own initiative, engaged the group and, despite heavy fire, captured a number of prisoners."

But it was the D-Day invasion Herlitschek thinks often about. He was among the first to crash ashore, just like Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan*. Herlitschek still remembers the features of the beach, the way it concealed him at low tide, the shrubs that hid him as he moved forward. How it felt to be shot. "It was numb, but it wasn't painful," he said. "My arm was like a wet towel." For better or worse, he says he wants "to bring back my memories of when I landed and the pillboxes that were shooting at us on the beach." Maybe, he says, he'll find his footprints in the sand.

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