

Nearing 100, veteran who survived D-Day honors a friend who didn't

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On the cusp of 100, veteran who survived D-Day honors a friend who didn't

Charles Norman Shay of the Penobscot Nation was a 19-year-old medic when he landed on Omaha Beach 80 years ago and found his mortally wounded friend.

By Dave Kindy

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World War II and D-Day veteran Charles Norman Shay, from Indian Island, Maine, salutes the grave of fellow soldier Edward Morozewicz at the Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, France, on May 1, 2019. (Virginia Mayo/AP)



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In 2019, an elderly man stood silently at the graveside of a soldier killed on D-Day, June 6, 1944. It had been 75 years since his friend, U.S. Army combat medic Pvt. Edward “Eddie” Morozewicz, was mortally wounded on Omaha Beach. With tears in his eyes, the World War II veteran sprinkled ashes over Morozewicz’s final resting place, next to thousands of other soldiers interred at Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, France.

The man spreading those ashes was Charles Norman Shay, also a combat medic during the Allied invasion of France with the 16th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division. Nearly eight decades earlier, he had comforted his friend as he died. Now Shay was fulfilling the wish of Morozewicz’s sister to have her remains intermingled with her brother’s.

“It was very emotional,” Shay, now 99 and living in Bretteville-l’Orgueilleuse, about 25 miles from Morozewicz’s grave in France, said in a recent interview.

Speaking via Zoom, Shay recalled what happened on that bloody beach 80 years ago. A member of Penobscot Nation in Maine, he was a 19-year-old medic with Fox Company when it came ashore in the first wave of the invasion. Most of the men in his landing craft were killed or wounded within minutes of hitting the beach.

Though trained in surgical procedures, Shay could only provide first aid to the scores of soldiers suffering bullet and shrapnel wounds. He had no medical instruments, so he tied tourniquets, applied bandages and gave morphine shots to ease the pain in broken and battered bodies.

“The sea was red with blood,” Shay remembered. “We had 30 men in our landing craft. Those in the front were killed or wounded as soon as the ramp went down.”

With bullets and shells flying everywhere, Shay realized men were drowning in the pounding surf, overloaded with heavy equipment and too severely wounded to help themselves. He ran back into the cold waves to rescue those soldiers. Shay doesn’t recall how many he saved, only that he had gained a kind of superhuman strength to pull them to safety.

“I kept going back in to get them,” he said. “I don’t know how I did it, because some of them were bigger than me. I guess it was adrenaline.”

Under heavy enemy fire, Shay looked for more suffering soldiers. On the beach, he came across a man lying in the sand. It was his friend Eddie, and he had been gravely wounded. Shay realized he was dying. Morozewicz knew it too. Shay consoled him and gave him morphine to reduce his agony. Then they said goodbye to each other.

“He’d been shot in the stomach and was bleeding inside,” Shay remembered. “There’s was nothing I could do except comfort him. He died in my arms.”

Both men were awarded Silver Stars for their bravery that day. Shay received his medal a month later from Major General Clarence Huebner, commander of the 1st Infantry Division. He often wondered about Eddie’s family. Did they know what happened to him?

“I never knew where he came from,” he said. “I knew him very well because I trained with him, but we never discussed home or things like this.”

For the rest of the war, Shay treated wounded soldiers across Europe until he was captured by the Germans in March 1945. He later served as a combat medic in the Korean War, this time with the U.S. Army’s 3rd Infantry Division, receiving a Bronze Star with two Oak Leaf Clusters for bravery. Shay then joined the U.S. Air Force and was part of a weather squadron that monitored the detonation of a hydrogen bomb on Bikini Atoll in 1954.

After military service, he took a job with International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, where he lived with his wife, Lilli, for many years. They later moved to Maine, and Lilli died soon afterward, in 2003. Shay moved to France in 2018 to live with a friend, Marie-Pascale

Legrand, who provides care for him.

Over the decades, Shay continued to think about Eddie's relatives. He tried searching for his friend's family, without luck.

Then, in 2014, Shay returned to Normandy for the first time for the 70th anniversary of D-Day. He found Eddie's grave and learned he was from Paterson, N.J. With that information, Shay contacted the First Division Museum, where a researcher tracked down Eddie's last living sibling.

Rose Morozewicz had been 16 when her brother died in Normandy. For more than 70 years, she wondered what happened to him. The only news the family received was a telegram stating he had been killed in action during the Allied invasion to liberate France. No other information was provided.

In 2016, Shay traveled to meet Rose, still living in New Jersey. He brought her a gift.

"I prepared a frame with his Silver Star and I gave it to his sister," he said. "She did not know what happened to him, and she was happy to know I was there to take care of him when he died."

Knowing Shay had comforted Eddie gave Rose the solace and closure she had longed for all those years, he said. The two became very close, calling each other adoptive brother and sister.

"That was the most important thing to my mom, knowing that Charles was there in my uncle's final moments," said Phil Weinpel, Rose's son. "Charles is a true hero."

When Rose died at 90 in 2018, she wanted to be reunited with her brother in France. Shay honored her final request the following year during a private ceremony.

"It was her wish that her ashes be spread on his grave in Normandy," he said.

Shay — who turns 100 on June 27 — will be one of the few remaining D-Day veterans to attend the 80th anniversary commemoration. The ceremony will be held not far from the Charles Shay Indian Memorial, honoring 175 Native Americans who fought at Omaha Beach and a bronze bust of Shay recognizing his bravery.

Shay will also visit the Normandy American Cemetery, where he plans to offer a heartfelt salute to his friend Eddie and fondly remember Eddie's sister, and Shay's adopted sister, Rose.

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