

"D-Day was the longest day of our lives."



SANDY SUMMERS/DN

RETIRED LT. COL. SOLOMON HARRIS, 81, was recently hospitalized for post-traumatic stress disorder after watching Steven Spielberg's film "Saving Private Ryan." His company lost 96 percent of its 205 men on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day.

War rages on in veteran's memory

Film opens old wounds from combat nightmare

BY ADAM KLINKER
Staff writer

It was the longest day, the beginning of the end, the last beachhead.

D-Day, June 6, 1944, was a lot of things to a lot of people. To Solomon Harris, "it was living hell."

Harris, 81, makes no mistake about his involvement in the battle that would prove to be the beginning of the end to the bloodiest war in human history.

"I was there," Harris tells those who inquire about his black Army beret and his bag of history books.

Harris was passing through Lincoln on his way home to Illinois and said he had seen the movie "Saving Private Ryan" while vacationing in Portland, Ore.

Bruce Koehler, an assistant at the Cornerstone UMHE Church hostel program, 640 N. 16th St., said Harris showed up on Monday morning, looking for a quiet place to rest before continuing to his home in Decatur, Ill., via Amtrak.

"He's real talkative," Koehler said. "And he's picked up some survival skills somewhere."

Koehler said Harris has traveled through Lincoln and stayed at the Cornerstone hostel before.

"He'd mentioned he was a veteran, but I really haven't pushed him about his experiences," Koehler said.

Indeed, viewing "Saving Private Ryan" opened up many old wounds, Harris said. He

said he was hospitalized with post-traumatic stress disorder immediately after seeing Steven Spielberg's World War II epic.

"I cried," Harris said. "I'm not ashamed of it. I didn't see the actors; I saw the faces of my men."

And, similar to the movie's character, Pvt. James Ryan, Harris also lost his brothers in the war — all four.

He spent two weeks recovering and consulting with psychiatrists at Portland's Veterans Center Hospital.

Harris, who served as a lieutenant colonel in the 116th Regiment, 29th Division of the U.S. Army, was among the first to go ashore at Omaha Beach in Normandy, France.

His company was nearly wiped out in just 10 minutes, with 197 men killed or wounded — 96 percent of his force.

"We were supposed to be the expendables," Harris said. "We were supposed to be annihilated."

After the initial landing, just 20 of Harris' company members survived and made it to their destination — the 100-foot-high cliffs of Pointe du Hoc, a heavily fortified German stronghold overlooking the English Channel.

Though there was no heavy artillery at the point, as reported by military intelligence, Harris and his company helped clear several German machine gun bunkers.

"We must have missed one though, somehow," Harris said.

As Harris stood overlooking the bloody affair on the beach below, a machine gun opened fire, killing the man standing in front of him. One bullet passed through that man and lodged in the base of Harris's spine, he said.

"The war was over for me," he said.

He spent the next two years in a hospital recovering from his injury. He was given a medical discharge in 1946 and retired as a nine-year army veteran.

In watching "Saving Private Ryan," Harris

said he saw a lot of truth in Spielberg's artistry. He was especially moved by scenes in the first 45 minutes, a vivid rendition of the D-Day landing.

In one scene, a soldier drops his gun and picks up his severed arm, calmly surveying the carnage around him. In another scene, young troops search for cover behind steel beach obstacles, screaming and crying.

"Stuff like that happened," Harris said. "It changed us. You saw guys drop, you saw guys blown to pieces. The water was blood-red that morning."

Following the movie, Harris said, there

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SOLOMON HARRIS
World War II veteran

was a large group of reporters and cameras waiting for him and other veterans at the showing in Portland.

At that point, Harris said, he broke down. "I was in no shape to talk," he said. "It literally put me down to my knees."

A team of medical corpsmen from the Veterans Center Hospital was there to help distraught veterans. Harris said they helped ward off the press.

Harris was taken away to the Veterans Center, where he underwent counseling and therapy.

"It couldn't have hit him any harder," said Deborah Richter, a team leader from the Veterans Center. "But he's very genuine — he's a very amazing man."

Unlike the fictional Pvt. Ryan character played by Matt Damon in the movie, Harris lost four brothers, not three.

Harris said two of his brothers in the Navy perished in the attack on Pearl Harbor when the battleship USS Arizona was torpedoed by Japanese airplanes.

Another brother in the Marine Corps died

at Guadalcanal, part of the Solomon Islands, in the Pacific war theater, Harris said.

Still another was killed in action at the Battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines.

"I couldn't believe it," he said. "We just lost a lot of good, good guys."

Before his experiences at Omaha Beach, Harris had seen action in the invasions of Sicily and Italy in 1943. But he said nothing could prepare him for what he saw in France.

"D-Day was the longest day of our lives. It seemed like the day went on and on and on — and never stopped," he said.

Since D-Day, Harris said, he has gained a better understanding of the ugly side of humanity — the same side featured in "Saving Private Ryan."

Despite his difficulty in viewing the movie, Harris said the film was necessary and should be significant in the lives of people today.

"We need things like that to wake people up," Harris said. "When they see something like this, they'll see a lot more about what life can be; the horror of it all."

As opposed to early World War II films made largely to bolster morale in the United States, "Saving Private Ryan" has a brutal reality that brings out more of a sense of the tribulations faced by the soldiers who fought, Harris said.

He said it should be required viewing for political leaders who may one day be faced with a decision to engage America in another war of momentous proportions.

Today, Harris said, he shies away from guns and conflict altogether.

"I don't even hunt anymore," he said.

But he remains proud in his feeling that the United States did the right thing in World War II.

He said he hopes the brutality as well as the history in the movie will touch future generations.

"One thing I'd say about the men who fought in that war — they fought with honor, and people should remember."