

# **D-Day: The Invasion of Normandy**



## **Primary Source Document Packet**

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## Document One: D-Day Background Information

### **D-Day Background Information**

#### **Europe in 1944**

In 1944 most of Western Europe was under Axis control, including France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. Germany conquered France in 1940, forcing an unconditional surrender. In 1942 they began preparations against any future invasions of the French Coast. The coast became known as the Atlantic Wall, which included many coastal barriers to help the Germans push an invading army back into the English Channel.

#### **German Defenses**

The German Army fortified the French Coast for the Allied invasion by creating a line of defenses that was intended to stop the Allied invasion on the beaches. By 1944 the German Army was engaged with the Russians on the Eastern front and the Americans and British in Italy. Field Marshall Rommel felt that if the Germans were going to stop an Allied invasion of France it would have to be on the beaches. To do this the German Army placed a mass of obstacles in the channel to disrupt an enemy landing. The most common types of obstacles were hedgehogs, tetrahedra, stakes, and Belgian gates, many of them mined. Further inland, large stakes with mines were placed in fields to interfere with airborne landings.

#### **Allied Planning**

The Allied invasion of Normandy was a massive operation, having taken two years to plan. It required the coordination of Allied countries and multiple branches of their armed forces. The Allies had certain criteria in mind for the landing site. They were looking for specific strategic points that would enable the operation to succeed. The beach had to be:

- near undamaged ports in South and Southwestern England.
- in the range of Allied fighter planes making runs from bases in England.
- near ports and airstrips that could be taken shortly after the invasion to assist in getting supplies ashore.
- situated so that air attacks on railways and bridges could isolate the invasion area, not allowing the Germans to supply and reinforce their troops.

Based on the above criteria, the Allied planners chose a 50-mile stretch of beach along the Normandy coastline on and east of the Contentin peninsula. U.S., British, and Canadian Forces made the invasion on 5 beaches along the coast (See map). The U.S. invaded the western beaches, code-named Omaha and Utah, while the British attacked two eastern beaches, Gold and Sword with the Canadians in between at Juno. Hours before the invasion both the U.S. and British armies dropped airborne divisions behind the invasion beaches to disrupt communication and supply lines and secure strategic areas.

## **The Invasion**

The invasion was scheduled for 5 June 1944, but was delayed until 6 June because of poor weather. At midnight on the 6 June, American and British paratroopers were dropped into France. The weather and poor visibility caused many of the paratroopers to be scattered, however, they were still able to reach many of their objectives. H-Hour for the amphibious troops was 0630. Preceding this was a half hour air and naval bombardment of the coastal defenses. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of the bombardment was reduced due to poor visibility.

After the naval and air bombardment, the amphibious troops assaulted the five beaches. Navy and Coast Guard boatmen piloted the landing craft toward the beaches. The infantry landed in various landing craft up and down the Normandy coast and found varying levels of resistance. As the troops landed they began the long and difficult process of establishing beachheads in France.

## **The 1<sup>st</sup> Division**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Division, landed on Omaha beach as part of Force "O", consisting of 34,000 men and 3,000 vehicles. Omaha beach was the most heavily fortified of the five beaches with the Germans well entrenched in the cliffs overlooking the beach. The combat engineers landed first to create gaps in the obstacles. Unfortunately, many were cut down by German fire before they could detonate their charges or disarm the many explosives placed in the channel. The engineers suffered 41% casualties during this first day.

The infantry and vehicles followed the engineers, but because so few gaps were made in the defenses the infantry soldiers and tanks had a very difficult time getting ashore. The landing craft often had to let the men off in deep water forcing them to wade through great distances of water to reach the beach. Unable to reach shore, many tanks and vehicles were lost in the channel. All of this was in the face of intense machine gun and artillery fire. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division took Omaha Beach at the cost of 3,000 casualties\*.

Overall the Allies invaded and secured five beachheads that day at the cost of approximately 10,000 casualties. However, this provided the Allies with the foothold they needed to begin the campaign against Nazi-held Europe.

\*The term casualty is generally misunderstood as killed in action, however, the number includes those killed, wounded, and missing in action.

**Document Two: Tribune Writer Tell of Scene on Invasion Eve****TRIBUNE WRITER  
TELLS OF SCENE  
ON INVASION EVE****Giant Array of Arms  
Backs up Attack.**

*[The following dispatch was written by a Tribune correspondent only a few hours before the allied invasion of Europe began. Altho not released by censorship until "H-hour" had passed, it gives an intimate picture of the vast preparations for attack as witnessed by a war correspondent who saw the invasions of North Africa, Sicily, and Italy.]*

BY JOHN THOMPSON.

[Chicago Tribune Press Service.]

AT AN INVASION PORT, somewhere in England, June 6. - Thousands of soldiers of the American army are pouring down the quaysides onto landing craft or waiting their turn as we sit here watching the beginning of the greatest invasion ever attempted.

Spread before us lie hundreds of warships, loaded transports, and landing craft of all kinds awaiting orders. Other ships attached to this force already have moved to the assembly area.

What we still can see is staggering. Yet it is only a part of one force and our force is only one phase of the entire operation. In almost every port in the United Kingdom scores of similar scenes are involving American, British, and other allied troops.

**It's Beyond Superlatives.**

To those of us who have taken part in or observed as correspondents the invasion of North Africa the campaign in Tunisia, or the invasions of Sicily, and Italy, the

scope of this operation is beyond superlatives. In months of covering the allied armies' preparations for their task on this island we have gained some knowledge of the forces used.

But the last few days in our loading areas and ports have demonstrated how hard the allies will hit when they throw their full weight against Hitler's fortified shores.

This time no boys are being sent to do a man's job. There appears to be no underestimation of the enemy's potential. With the experience of the Mediterranean campaigns behind them, the allies are going against the Germans with our heaviest power, best weapons, and smartest tactics.

**Ships Loaded with Vehicles.**

For miles back into the hinterlands the roads have been lined with trucks and other mechanized equipment. But now those vehicles are safely stowed aboard ship. But if the roads are relatively empty now, their abutting areas bulge with supplies and ammunition carefully camouflaged and dispersed. Other areas contain assembly camps.

Previously we often heard combat troops speak bitterly of their fellows in service of supply. But now the fighting men have nothing but praise for the way the static troops set up and ran these marshalling areas for the men who will lead the assault.

Those men are standing in long lines waiting to board the transports. Sometimes they laugh and joke in typical American fashion. More often their faces are stern in full knowledge of their hard task. But this time, as Maj. Paul Gale of Lynn, Mass., who had been thru the Mediterranean campaigns, said they are better trained and equipped than any of our troops.

**British Defenses Rusting.**

They make an incongruous sight

in their camouflaged helmets and their bodies bulky with equipment against a background of rusting anti-invasion defenses which Britain hastily erected in 1940 when she feared the Germans would cross the channel.

One by one each soldier walked thru the checking tent where his name was balanced against each ship's manifest. Then they went on to the floating docks where British and American sailors loaded them aboard.

*[Among the troops on one invasion ship was Sgt. John Connors of 7714 Morgana st., Chicago. According to an Associated Press dispatch, he said; "I wish this tub would get going. Let's get it over with and knock their teeth out. That's the way we feel and you can tell the folks back home that our morale was never better."]*

At a near-by port long lines of trucks, jeeps, ambulances, guns, and armor moved slowly but ahead of schedule, despite a shift in the tides.

**Soldiers Wear New Jackets.**

Their officers were pleased, too, with the new combat jackets the soldiers wear instead of the old web equipment and cumbersome pack. These jackets, which slip over the regulation field jackets, are buckled across the front and contain pockets which distribute the soldier's heavy load and make it much easier to carry.

Warplanes roar overhead in constant thunder on the way to and from Europe. Hundreds of small craft dart about the harbor while along shore is the clatter of engines and winches.

And still long lines of battle-clad American soldiers come down the quaysides, loaded with explosives to blast thru any defenses which may escape our terrific air and sea bombardment.

**Document Three: Doughboys Get The Glory For Allies' Success****DOUGHBOYS GET  
THE GLORY FOR  
ALLIES' SUCCESS*****Foot Soldiers' Valor  
Won Beachheads.***

By John Thompson.

[Chicago Tribune Press Service.]

WITH U.S. FORCES IN FRANCE, June 7 [Delayed], - There were thousands of gallant men on the beaches of France which this task force seized yesterday. And when you think of the invasion of Europe in big headlines and it all seems so magnificent, remember some of these thousands.

In particular, remember the gallant 800 riflemen and the score of assault engineers who first hit the beaches in our sector and helped make the invasion possible.

We laid on one of history's greatest concentrations of naval gunfire and heavy bombing attacks, but it still remained for the doughboys to charge ashore with rifles against the rows of beach obstacles and machine gun nests atop a steep cliff overlooking the beach area.

**The Living Get Priority.**

Many of them of course, will never tell the story. They lie in long lines along the beaches awaiting burial-details, for at the moment the living have priority and the masses of guns, mechanized equipment, ammunition, and rations go forward.

After the naval barrage yesterday morning, our first assault boats made their run in from the big transports. In the first boats were special engineers laden with demolition charges to be used in blowing gaps in the rows

of beach obstacles.

These were lines of upright wooden logs with slanting timbers lashed to them to trip up our flatbottom barges. There were massive steel contraptions topped with mines.

**Off to a Bad Start.**

But before we had embarked our colonel had told us a truism: "If anything can go wrong in battle, it will go more wrong in an amphibious landing, which is the toughest military offensive operation."

He was right. Whether because of the haze, defense machine gun fire, or inexperience, the boats grounded on the wrong sections of the beach. Some lowered their ramps immediately in front of strong points. Even the engineers were helpless.

They started lashing their demolitions to the obstacles, but machine gun fire cut them down before the charges could be exploded. Then came the infantry in waves, many of them also hitting the wrong beach sections. As the soldiers plowed ashore thru neck high water and surf, the hidden Germans enjoyed a machine gunners paradise.

**On and On They Drive.**

But this was power, sheer power, with which we were to crack Hitler's fortress, and men kept coming while the naval guns blasted enemy artillery in pillboxes many feet thick. And from well camouflaged positions which had long been emplaced in the beach approaches German 88's laid their fire directly on the beach. But still our troops kept coming on tho the beaches were in shambles and sunken landing barges dotted the sea.

Our colonel had told his men, many of them veterans of North Africa, Tunisia, and Sicily, that

on them alone rested the final say as to whether this invasion would succeed. The colonel himself was the first man ashore from our small barge, which moved in immediately following the assault waves at 8:20 a.m.

We had tried once but had been driven off. Then we came again, dropping into neck high water and struggling in loose sand as more bullets splattered about us. Then we were on the beach, lying flat in the loose shale behind a tiny ridge, our only protection.

The dead and wounded sprawled on every side, while medical aid men, lying beside them tried to save the living.

**Rallies Men for New Push.**

We were completely at the mercy of the enemy, saved only by naval gunfire and the courage and ability of the soldiers who pressed inland on the flanks. As it was, the colonel had to scurry about reorganizing the men still pinned there and getting them ready for a new push.

He got his men off the beach and onto high ground where they could silence the machine guns and push inland. But thruout the day the Germans retained an advantage in artillery and made the beach a scene of horror and confusion.

But this was a power play, and altho boats were sunk at sea or as they beached, men and equipment somehow forged shoreward to reinforce our slim toehold. They turned it into a much stronger force which, with the aid of naval guns, silenced the more menacing batteries.

♦ Although not specifically stated, John Thompson came ashore with the headquarters of the 16th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division

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**Document Four: Tribune Writer Watches Yanks Win A Village**

# TRIBUNE WRITER WATCHES YANKS WIN A VILLAGE

## Wipe Out Sharpshooters in Drive Inland.

BY JOHN THOMPSON.

[Chicago Tribune Press Service.]

WITH AMERICAN TROOPS IN FRANCE, June 9, - While a steady stream of reinforcements continued to roll in over the bitterly won beachhead, troops in this sector drove inland, capturing several villages in the face of stiffening resistance.

Assault forces moved into high ground dominating the river while waves of allied bombers passed overhead, attacking targets. Allied air domination is so complete that air support is pleading with the ground troops to find them targets. Before noon nearly 600 prisoners, including some impressed Russians and Poles, were evacuated and more were coming back from the front.

After weathering the toughest amphibious landing ever attempted by American troops on this side of the Atlantic, the task force with which I landed slugged its way inland further enlarging the beachhead.

### Village Is Occupied.

Our advance teams pushed against Formigny, 20 miles south-

west of Ste. Mere-Eglise on the Caen-Carentan road and miles from where we hit the beach. This town was entered last night by the tired beachhead soldiers and this morning after bothersome sharpshooters had been eliminated, was fully occupied.

While our task force drove steadily inland we were still awaiting the inevitable German counter attack. No one here minimizes the enemy's strength nor his desire to fight.

For the first time in any landing against German held territory the allies have been without fear of his air threat during the daylight hours. Not a single German plane has appeared over the transport area in the channel or over the beachhead yesterday or today, altho last night several bombers attacked our fleet transports and warships and dropped a few bombs on the beachheads.

### Fighting Conditions "Horrible."

Outside of the initial resistance on the beaches, which provided fighting conditions as horrible as Americans have experienced, the enemy has so far confined his major effort to harassing the beaches with artillery fire from numerous batteries.

Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley came ashore today from his command ship to get a first hand picture of the conditions here, but yesterday the gallant men who took this beachhead and made possible the landing were on their own.

Now that we are inland some miles and holding a bridge, it may be possible to describe our fighting during these daylight hours when our mighty armada assembled

and disgorged its fleet of small craft toward the beaches.

### There WAS a wall here.

Row on row of formidable beach obstacles met the first waves of infantry. Machine gun fire supported by 88mm positions and pillboxes pinned them there behind a tiny shale ridge for hours. This I can attest, having, as the first correspondent in this group to touch France lain there with them while men fell on all sides. The Germans were ready for us, but not wholly ready.

The French men and women were more concerned at the moment with what the battle might do to their small farms and villages than with being freed from German domination.

Document Five: Letter from General EisenhowerSUPREME HEADQUARTERS  
ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE*5<sup>th</sup> June 1944*

Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

*Dwight D. Eisenhower*



### Document Six: Lt. John Spaulding Oral History

Lieutenant John Spaulding of E Company, 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division landed as part of the initial assault of Omaha Beach. His platoon was among the first to get off the beach that day. He received a Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest award for valor given by the US Army, for his actions. Below are excerpts from his 1945 oral history.

We loaded into LCVP's from larger ships at 0300. The companies were divided into sections, and each LCVP had 32 men, including a medic, plus two navy men....

We unloaded into the LCVP's in a very rough sea. It took us much longer to load than it had during the practice landings, because of the rough water. After entering the LCVP's we went an undetermined distance to a rendezvous point. Here the Navy crew took us around and around, getting us soaked to the skin. Many of the men got sick immediately and others got sick as we went in towards shore....

About 800-1,000 yards out we began to receive machine gun fire from the shore but it was not effective....

About 0630 we hit the line of departure; someone gave a signal and we swung into line. When we got about 200 yards offshore the boat halted and a member of the navy crew yelled for us to drop the ramp. S/Sgt. Fred A. Bisco and I kicked the ramp down. Shortly before this a navy man had mounted the machine gun on the rear of the LCVP and had started to return fire. We were now receiving not only MG fire, but also mortar and some artillery fire.

We had come in at low tide and the obstacles were noticeable. They stuck out of the water and we could see teller-mines on many of them. No path had been cleared through them, so we followed a zigzag course in....

Because we were carrying so much equipment and because I was afraid that we were being landed in deep water, I told the men not to jump out until after I had tested the water. I jumped out of the boat slightly to the left of the ramp into water about waist deep. It was about 0645. Then the men began to follow me. We headed ashore and the small arms fire became noticeable. We saw other boats to our left, but nothing to the right. We were the right front line of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division....

Our first casualty came at the water's edge. Pvt. William C. Roper, rifleman, was hit in the foot by small arms fire just as he hit the beach. He kept trying to get his legging off, but couldn't reach the lacing, so I helped him get it off. Just after we got ashore one of my two BAR men was hit. Pfc. Virgil Tilley was hit in the right shoulder by a shell fragment, which drove a hunk of his shoulder out towards the back but did not come all the way through.

By this time I noticed a number of my men on the beach, all standing up and moving across the sand. They were too waterlogged to run, but they went as fast as they could. It looked as if they were walking in the face of a real strong wind. We moved on across the shale to a house, which was straight inland. The first place we stopped was at a demolished building;

there was some brush around. We were halted there by a minefield at the first slope...Down near the water's edge we ran into wire. S/Sgt. Curtis Colwell blew a hole in the wire with a bangalore. We picked our way through.

I tried to get E Co with my 536 radio. I took the 536 off my shoulder, worked the antenna out as I walked across and tried to get contact, but it didn't work. I looked down and saw the mouthpiece was shot away.... When we got up to the rubble by the demolished house we were built up as skirmishers and were returning what fire we could. Streczyk and Pfc. Richard J. Gallagher went forward to investigate the mine field. They decided that we couldn't cross it....

On our left we had by-passed a pillbox, from which MG fire was coming and mowing down F Co people a few hundred yards to our left. There was nothing we could do to help them. We could still see no one to the right and there was no one up to us on the left. We didn't know what had become of the rest of E Co. Back in the water boats were in flames. I saw a tank ashore about 0730-0745. After a couple of looks back we decided we wouldn't look back any more.

About this time Gallagher said to follow him up the defilade which was about 400 yards to the right of the pillbox. We were getting terrific small arms fire but few were hit. About this time we were nearly at the top of the hill. We returned fire but couldn't hit them....

When Gallagher found the way up I sent word back for my men to come up to the right... Sgt. Bisco kept saying: "Lieutenant watch out for the damn mines." They were the little box type mine and it seems that the place was infested with them, but I didn't see them. We lost no men coming through them, although H Co coming along the same trail a few hours later lost several men. The Lord was with us and we had an angel on each shoulder that trip.

Trying to get the machine gun above us Sgt. Blades fired his bazooka and missed. He was shot in the left arm almost immediately. Pfc. Curley, a rifleman, was shot down next. S/Sgt. Phelps, who had picked up Tilley's BAR on the beach, moved into position to fire and was hit in both legs. By this time practically all of my section had moved up. We decided to rush the machine gun about 15 yards away....As we rushed the lone German operating the gun threw up his hands and yelled "Kamerad". We would have killed him, but we needed prisoners for interrogating, so I ordered the men not to shoot him. He was Polish. He said that there were 16 Germans in the area: that they had been alerted that morning and were told to hold the beach.... He also said that he had not shot at Americans, although I had seen him hit three.

At this point Lt. Blue of G Co came up and contacted me. He had come up our trail. His company had landed in the second wave behind us. Just a few minutes later Capt. Dawson of G Co came along. We still saw no one on the right. Capt. Dawson asked me if I knew where E Co was and I told him I didn't know. He said that E Co was 500 yards to my right, but he was thinking in terms of where they were supposed to land; they were actually 500-800 yards to our left. I later found out that they had lost 121 men. Dawson said that he was going into Coleville and told us to go in to the right. He had about two sections. Said he just saw the battalion commander....

We were on top of the hill by 0900. Advanced cautiously. We were the first platoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> to hit the top. Now I ha[d] 21-22 men in my section....

**Document Seven: Oral History Excerpt Captain Joseph T. Dawson**

Captain Joseph T. Dawson landed with G Company, 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division during the assault on Omaha Beach.

Dawson's group of men were among the first to find their way off the beach. Dawson was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest award for valor from the US Army, for his actions on D-Day. Below are excerpts from his 1991 oral history:

I landed, and I was the first man off of my boat, or off of all of our boats, followed by my communication sergeant and my company clerk. Unfortunately, my boat was hit with a direct hit, so the rest of my headquarters company was wiped out as well as the little flight control officer from the navy, which was our communication, to give us the support fire that was supposed to give us the cover and the neutralizing of the little village of Colleville, which was the objective that I was given, assigned as my objective for the day....

Now, I felt the obligation to lead my men off [the beach]... There was a little minefield immediately behind the shingle or a shelf on a rock-coasted gravel. There's really not any sand on the beaches there in Normandy. It's an arkosic gravel of light, sharp-pointed material, but it washed up into a mound that gave them some little protection against the firing, but not a whole lot. But we dropped over that and got into this minefield. And there was a body of a boy who had found the minefield and unfortunately also found the mine and destroyed himself, but he pointed the way for us to go across him, which we did. And Sergeant Cleff and myself and Baldrige, another man in my company, started up the hill.

And as I can recall, I think the beach at Normandy was a very unusual beach in that it came down from a great height of over 250 yards in a sloped manner until it reached the beach water, but the whole defenses of the Germans were right on the crest of that overlooking the beach, except for the pillboxes that were encased within that whole area of the back of the beach.

I found this path....it seemed to generally go in the right direction toward the crest of the hill, and so I started up that way. And about half way there I encountered Lieutenant Spaulding with a remnant of his platoon. I think he had two squads and a person in a third squad, and they were the only survivors that I knew of at that time of E company. And he joined us at that time and became part of us. And my men were still on the beach.

I was up there pretty much alone, so I told Baldrige to go back and bring the men up. I said, "They've got to get off the beach. Tell them to come up here with me." Well they started up there, but I had gone on ahead. And just before you reach the crest of the ridge, it becomes almost vertical for about 10-foot drop. And there was a log there and I got behind the log to see if I could see my men coming up, and they were beginning to filter. I could see a single file beginning to develop off of the beach and coming on up when I heard a great deal of noise just above me and, sure enough, there was a machine gun nest up there and they were giving us a lot of trouble. And I was able to get within a few yards of them because they couldn't see me.

I was...in...because of the steep protection there of the crest of the ridge, and they were right



on the crest in a trench. I lobbed a couple of grenades in there and silenced them and, sure enough, that opened the beach up. It was a miracle. It doesn't mean anything on my part. It was just one of those wacky things that happen, that I was right on the spot between E1 and E2 or E3, I forget which it was.

[E1 and] E3 were the two exits that we had anticipated would be the exits off the beach. We didn't get them open until the next day. And the only place on which that whole beach was able to get off was through that point that we established. We had a firefight from there [the bluffs] on into the village of Colleville, but we were successful in being able to do it as a unit and my men did a superb job on getting there.

There was a calm over us. There was a calm and a mutual respect began to develop, and it was almost incredible. I felt it in every one of my men. We had casualties. We had lost men there on the beach. We had two or three suffered in this battle. And when we took our positions in the town, and we fought into it and I led my men in there, and the little village was dominated by a church with a steeple in it and from that steeple had been one of the forward observers of the Germans and they were directing artillery fire down on the beach. And I went in the church with two of my men, a sergeant and a private and we had a little encounter in there with the Germans. And I lost the private. The sergeant and I both were able to survive and we were able to neutralize the situation.

And as I left the building and started across the street from the church, there was a farmhouse in the typical French manner, the farmhouse was enclosed with an open courtyard but with the farm buildings making somewhat of a square. And it was there that the bulk of my men had congregated after we had taken the village.

And as I was going across the road, a sniper caught me with a bullet through my left knee and, it frightened me. And I was carrying a carbine, was the only time that I had a weapon other than my 45, but I had that and the bullet had gone through the stock, and the fragments, one of them lodged in my knee and the other came through the fleshy part of my right leg, which somewhat incapacitated me, but I didn't think anything about it at the time. But then I debouched my men into a defensive position around the town, and after there had been a little firefight [that] develop[ed] from the Germans that had shot at me down at the end of the street, they had the town completely in control. And this was about 3:30 in the afternoon.

But at 4:00 we were devastated with artillery barrage from the navy. It leveled the town, absolutely leveled it, and in doing so we suffered the worst casualties we had the whole day, not from the enemy but from our own navy. I was angered by it, angered beyond all measure because I thought it was disgraceful. And I was quite bitter about it and the general was very bitter about it until we brought the matter to the attention of the authorities and, sure enough, the navy's response was that the order called for the leveling of Colleville at H+60 minutes or as soon thereafter as visibility would permit.

Well the pall of battle was over us. And there was no vision and we had no communication because my control officer, fire officer, had been destroyed on the beach and so I had...[not] been able to identify myself until the barrage leveled us. And by that time I was frantically throwing up smoke bombs to alert them to the fact that we were in the town, but it was too late to prevent the barrage from occurring. But their contention was that the pall of battle had obscured their vision until 4:00 that afternoon, which was H+8 hours or H+10 hours. And they said that was when visibility permitted it....

Document Nine: Oral History Excerpt S/Sgt Walter D. Ehlers

Staff Sergeant Walter Ehlers, L Company, 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, landed on Omaha Beach, shortly after the first assault wave. Below is an account of his platoon's landing and fighting in the first days after the invasion. He received the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for valor, for actions on 9-10 June 1944.

I was on an LCI with the headquarters company, because they took us off as a platoon. And then we were out there, ...it was dark...following...the first wave... And we could see the ships were out there, most of them sitting off shore...quite a ways off shore, but you could see land...

...What was going through my mind is how could there be any resistance on the beach when you saw all those bombers and all those ships firing on that beach and everything.... Then the first wave landed.... When the assault boats came back and...said that they needed more troops on the beach immediately...[They] took us off and then rendezvoused and got about three or four boats together, and then we headed in to the beach. And when we were going in, there were ducks...amphibious trucks out there, and some of them were being swamped. And even some of the landing craft like the ones that we were in were bailing out because they'd gotten hit by shells....the water was rough....we headed in. [W]e thought we were going to come up to the beach and land, but we hit a sandbar, so the ramp goes down and we go out the front. As soon as we go out the front we land in the water, and it's up around my armpits, where some of our shorter guys, up around their necks.

...We had to be coming right in between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 116<sup>th</sup> ...when they called them, why, there was one on this side, one on this side. So they were kind of mixed up there on the beach. It was daylight...right after the first wave. And the first wave hadn't made it up to the hill yet.

They [G-Company] were way down to our left, though. He [Capt. Joe Dawson] was a lot further down. ...I landed...on the draw of the Easy Red. He landed to the left of it...

...I said, "Come on." ...The other leaders were yelling at their troops to get up and move out.... So we start rushing, and then...a beach commander...says that we'll stick to that path because it's been made by people who have already been up that far, clearing the mines. In other words, they'd stepped on mines. There were guys laying right and left of the path. We went up there...

...When we got to the barbed wire we had to stop. There... were bangalore torpedo men that had blown the previous wire, so we asked them if they'd blow this last role of wire for us. ...They did, and we got a guy up there. I rushed with my squad right on through that and we got up into the trenches. And once when we got in the trenches...we were able to overcome the Germans...

...On the night of the seventh or the eighth...[w]e were in on a hedgerow position...for the night, and it was probably close to 10:00, 11:00 at night, and we heard all of this screaming and yelling...the Germans had...infiltrated into the company area. And then...somebody in the company fired on it, but then they came running in our position, they ran right over where we were bedded down...we were kind of in a ditch so we'd be in a defila[d]ed area.... We didn't fire on them, because we knew that our troops were down there to the right and to the

left, and so if we fired on them we'd probably had a firefight all amongst ourselves....

...The company commander, sent down word that they wanted...a patrol sent after the Germans....I had to take a patrol out. ...I didn't...know where we were, but came to this road right off of the field where we were, and... followed this road. And it was hedgerows on both sides, and it's dark, and it's really dark when you get down in those rows...

...[W]e went down this road, and we were following them, and we could hear them... retreating back down the road, and so we followed them a ways....And we ran across a briefcase that one of them had dropped, and we picked it up and we took it with us. I told the squad, "I think we have gone far enough." So we went back...and we took the briefcase up to the company commander, and it contained a bunch of maps showing [the]...second and third line of defense from the German beach positions.

...On the ninth and tenth of June...we seemed to be hitting all the German positions right on the nose, and that's the two days for which I got the Medal of Honor.

Well the first thing that happened, we were attacking, we had one platoon over in one field - all the fields are surrounded by hedgerows - and we were in another field attacking. And I had the lead squad in that platoon, and ...the other platoon was being fired upon. As soon as they were being fired upon from the other hedgerow, and I knew...it was coming from up ahead of us, so I had my squad rush up to the hedgerow rather than be out in the field, because I've seen what happens when you get caught out in the field getting fired on from the hedgerows. It's very easy to get picked off.

So we got up into the hedgerow, and when I went up to the hedgerow - and I was ahead of the squad - and I heard these Germans on the other side, so I ran up on the hedgerow, and here's some patrol of Germans coming down there. ...I was shooting them ...from the hip... just going along there, and knocked off four of them there. And then I went up the hedgerow and there was a machine gun firing from a position out across at our people over there, and I attacked the machine gun nest, and I shot them all.

But then I had my men fix the bayonets, because when I looked I suddenly realized that...my clip had just changed, and I had to reload. And so I figured, well, if I ran out of ammunition when I was going up one of these things, what was I going to do? ...So we went on further, and we started attacking, and came up on another machine gun nest, and I knocked it out. And then we came up - and that was right out in front of an area of mortar section, and when I came up over the ridge ...and there was two mortars there, shooting...I ran up over the ridge with my bayonet fixed...and when the Germans saw... they left. They started running, and I had to shoot them...but thank goodness I didn't have to use my bayonet.

...Then the next day, on the tenth of June, we were on an attack again...and we got into an untenable position. Now, here we are in a hedgerow situation where we had Germans in front of us and there were Germans on the hedgerows on both sides of us.... The platoon leader wanted us to withdraw back to his hedgerow...so that we could...regroup the company and keep from getting all of our people killed. But there was no way that our guys were going to get back without getting picked off. So there was a mound there and I stood up on it, and me and the rifleman...were firing in a semi-circle around the area....

...We let the rest of the squad withdraw, and then we started going back. And as I got back almost to the hedgerow, right down the hedgerow probably about 50, 75 yards there w[ere] Germans putting in a machine gun position down there pointed out that way. And so as they were putting it in I knocked off the three of them that had that machine gun, and I got hit in the back at the same time and it spun me around. And I saw a German up in the hedgerow...I was at a gate-type situation. ...There was an open space there. So I was standing

right...in the middle of a hedgerow, except in the gate position. So I had a view of this hedgerow over here and... [the] other two areas there. ...I saw a German in the hedgerow...and I shot him from the hip, you know, because I didn't have my gun up here. And he fell out of the hedgerow, and I thought, gee, this looks like a John Wayne movie.

He was probably about 100 yards [away]. And so he fell out, and I noticed my rifleman had got hit, and he called to me, so I went over and I got him and helped him back across the hedgerow. And...we couldn't carry his B[A]R at that time, so I went back and got it, and while they were firing on me, and came back across the hedgerow....

So when they got back to the company, and we had the medics dressing the wound on our rifleman, and they were about ready to take him away, and I said, "Well, sir," to the company commander, I said, "I've been wounded in the back." He said, "You have?" I said, "Yes." He turned me around, and saw this hole in the back of my pack, my trench shovel....

And this bullet looked like it came straight through me, you know, and out the back of my pack. And he said, "My God, you've been shot clear through, you should be dead!" I said, "No sir, I'm not dead. I just got hit in the back."

So they took off my pack, and of course the blood was already coming out of there, but they knew I got hit somewhere. So they raised up my shirt, and they saw where it hit my rib here, and it went into the pack, hit the bar of soap, and the bar of soap turned the bullet and it went straight out the shovel.

**Document Ten: I & R Platoon Diary June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944**

The Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division landed on Omaha Beach. Their objective was to move ashore and then scout the area ahead. The following is an excerpt from their platoon diary for D-day.

D-DayJune 6, 1944

In the pre-dawn darkness the I & R Platoon started climbing down the nets of the U.S.S. Henrico and the U.S.S. Chase into the waiting assault craft. Under a sky overcast with dark, heavy clouds the craft moved toward the shore of France. From the distance came the rumble of aerial bombardment, an occasional flash of a direct hit, the flicker of far away fires.

The choppy waters of the English Channel began to tell. Paper bags issued to each man filled as even the strongest stomachs succumbed. Men with taut nerves, set faces, talked of this and that, anything to keep their minds off the job that lay only minutes ahead...

On the assault craft debarking from the U.S.S. Henrico were two patrols of six and eight men whose mission following the landing was to infiltrate several miles ahead of the line companies to two prominent hills there to set up an Observation Post and by radio transmit information back to headquarters regarding the movements of the enemy...

At 7:10 (H-Hour plus 50) the first I & R landing craft struck bottom approximately two hundred yards off shore. The ramp went down and out the men went into an inferno of machine gun fire from the height above the beach, cross-fired so it seemed to cover every square foot, into mortar fire and artillery fire. Through the waist deep water men by the hundred waded beachward as the murderous fire cut them down. Those who reached the shore found sanctuary behind a ledge that screened off the small arms fire.

As far as the eye could see bodies were packed behind this ledge, men who were moaning with pain and those who would moan no more. The medics were everywhere dressing wounds and rescuing men which the incoming tide stretched out its lengthening tentacles to impound. To the left our planes were dive bombing an active pillbox as devastating machine gun fire still swept the water. Heavier equipment began to come in. Tanks remained submerged save for protruding cannon barrel.

Preinvasion briefing stated that the ground just ahead was crammed with mines. It was impossible to move forward until

there was at least one breach in the mine field. Behind the men the tide crept relentlessly onward. Artillery and mortar fire grew heavier. It seemed only a matter of time until all were annihilated and the invasion a dismal failure. Men lay there for what seemed like hours but actually could have been little over an hour. Troops still came onto the jammed beach, and others were swallowed up by the insatiable sea. Many unable to reach the shore because of wounds were rescued by those who left their ledge haven to reenter the arena of death...

At long last the engineers cleared a path through the mine field. A trickle of foot troops moved through the breach, past a demolished building toward the first hill. Platoon Leader Hill rallied the men of the I & R behind him and took off on a dead run for the mine field breach. A step off the cleared path would be fatal. In a matter of minutes the first troops through the mine field were silhouetted on the hill above the beach. One by one the machine gun nests were silenced. The trickle of troops through the white-tape marked breach through the mines swelled to a flood as the 26th Infantry regiment landed to support the 16th Infantry.

The I & R Platoon reached the first hill and dug in around Regimental Headquarters. For lack of communication equipment the scheduled patrols were cancelled. The landing had taken a heavy toll of the platoon. All of the three trained first scouts had been wounded or killed.

After reaching the first hill, the remainder of the afternoon was spent digging foxholes, making excursions back to the beach to reclaim valuable communications equipment. In the afternoon the I & R jeeps came ashore amid artillery fire which continued throughout the day. The jeeps landed in three feet of salt water... Under the cover of a hill the drivers began dewaterproofing their vehicles.

As the day wore on, the tide receded leaving behind a graveyard of humanity and equipment. "Mae West" life preservers lay everywhere, combat packs, rifles, ammunition, personal belongings were strewn all over the beach and adjacent area.

Darkness settled over Omaha Beach near Colleville-sur-Mer, France, bloodiest of the three beachheads established in Fortress Europe on the 6th of June, 1944. Out ahead of the Regimental Command Post, members of the I & R Platoon stood guard....

**Document Eleven: Letter from Captain Joseph T. Dawson**

Captain Joseph Dawson landed on Omaha Beach with the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. He led one of the first groups off the beach and up into the bluffs overlooking Omaha Beach. He was wounded later in the day as his company moved in to take the town of Colleville-sur-Mer. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army's second highest award for valor, for his actions. Below is a letter he wrote to his family after being treated and returning to his company in the field.

*June 16, 1944*

*An apple orchard in*

*Normandy*

*My dearest family:*

You must forgive me for not writing a detailed letter to you before now because there were certain things that occurred to prevent me from gathering my thoughts together long enough to inscribe them. However, my V-mail should have provided you with the dope that all is well, which of course, is the main thing. My slight incapacitation is now coming along nicely and offers no presentable difficulty, so I am once more with my men and my heart is happy. One never realizes the utter loneliness of separation until he has had the privilege of living and being part of the finest group of men on the face of the earth. The platitudes of those who spend their lives recording the deeds of courageous men are in truth the expression of the artisans of literary word binding compared to those thoughts that can never be put into words by the men who see and live the intimate relationship of mutual sufferers in this greatest of ordeals. What I'm trying to say is that justice can never be properly accorded to the magnificent fortitude and heroism of the fine American soldier and man. He is without peer and these past few days have implanted in the hearts of all a realization of the true greatness of these men. I say this because I've had an honour never to be equaled in being a part of a group that will ever stand as a symbol of greatness to all who witnesses or know how they measured up to the supreme test without faltering or wavering. I cannot say more for my heart forbears it, but God is my Witness that the men of my company lived, fought and died in true glory.

The story of our coming to France has been told a thousand times over by all the newsmen of the world and tales of individual heroism are recorded for all to read and become inspired. But none surpassed either in deed or in action "my" men. I shall not be able to give in detail all that did transpire, but with restrained licence of censorship you can judge for yourselves just how we met and overcame our enemies. Tarawa

and all the other terrible beachheads of this war have nothing on the murderous hell that descended upon us as we touched the shores of France. All the many weapons of war seemed to be concentrated on that naked, exposed bit of sand and the miracle of it all was the fact that I still cannot tell just how I crossed it or how my men managed--but we did! Though many fell as we moved through this storm of steel, they didn't falter an instant, but we came on without stopping. I shall never forget how on reaching a point several hundred yards from the water's edge, a point where a very small bit of protection was afforded by a bit of a mound of gravel. There was a sergeant laying there and two men and seeming refusing to advance. I exhorted them strongly to follow me and looking back over my shoulder I saw them still remaining on the ground. I returned a few steps and again shouted to them to come along when I suddenly realized that they would never move again. It only made me realize how much more it was necessary for me to go on forward.

My company pressed on, however, and only pausing a few seconds to get their breath stormed the heights commanding the beach and with this successful assault we were able to secure the beach for the other units to come ashore. Throughout that day and night and the next day we were constantly busy and at times were engaged literally eye to eye with the jerries. All I can say is we were able to stand on our own and hold our ground against his constant attacks.

I took a short leave to get a piece of adhesive tape for my knees, and the darned medics kept me on a Cook's tour for about five days before I was able to elude them and return home. Now after three days with the constant shelling and firing all along here I am once more restored to a good nervous state. Nothing is more nerve-racking than being attended by a bunch of solicitous nurses and doctors, though, seriously, they are the unsung heroes of this war and their marvelous work of caring for the wounded and suffering is something without parallel. They were simply magnificent.

All of which brings me down to the present and here amid the apple trees of this bit of France, with the symphony of war encompassing me I have found peace of heart and soul never before attained in all my life for here I am with the bravest, finest, grandest bunch of men that God ever breathed life into. Before it's all over you will know that this is true and that this company is my life.

*God bless you one and all,*

*Joe*

**Document Twelve: Letter from Colonel Mason to Admiral Hall**

Colonel S.B. Mason was Chief of Staff for the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division during the Normandy invasion. Below is a letter he sent to the Eleventh Amphibious Force, which assisted the infantry in the landings at Omaha Beach.

Headquarters 1st US Infantry Division  
APO #1, U.S. Army

8 July 1944

Rear Admiral John L. Hall, Commander  
Eleventh Amphibious Force  
United States Navy

Dear Admiral Hall,

Col. Gibb (G-3) and I made an inspection trip of the OMAHA beaches on the afternoon of July 6 with the intention of studying the defenses the Germans had there. Needless to say, on that date, it looked far different than it did on June 6. That was undoubtedly a strong defensive position. Manned as it was it should have been impregnable. But there was one element of the attack which they could not parry. Of course it is my own opinion, for what it is worth, but I am now firmly convinced that our supporting Naval fires got us in; that without that gun fire we positively would not have crossed those beaches.

In Oran we fortunately did not need Naval fires. In Gela we needed and received same, especially to keep us on position in the face of a counter-attack which came in prior to our assembling our fire power on shore. This Normandy beach was different in that we were met on the beach. I looked over the destruction of German pillboxes, fortified houses and gun positions, and in all cases it was apparent that Naval guns had worked on them.

I still think "One" and "One One" make a good team. More than ever I am in a position to appreciate your support, and if we ever have to do another of these jobs, we will all hope for the good fortune of being teamed with 11th Amphib for planning and execution.

General Huebner concurs in the above and joins me in best regards to you and your staff.

Respectfully,

S.B. Mason  
Chief of Staff