

Chapter 10: D-Day to Ste Anne

Around midnight of June 3rd the landing ships moved from their mooring out into the bay. It was pitch black and the torrents of rain kept falling. Our thoughts were expressed that the invasion would be June 4th in retaliation to the evacuation of Dunkirk by the British. The channel became very choppy with high winds near gale strength making it impossible to cross the channel. Dawn appeared as daylight chased the night in an endless pursuit beyond the horizon. No letup of the storm that raged, tossing the ships to and fro like matchsticks. Briefing of the men on the ships continued until each man knew the plan and purpose of his mission. Each officer and non-com studied maps and the models of the terrain and the approaches to their objectives. It was now June 5th with no change in the weather. The Allied high command were together discussing the possibilities to go ahead with the invasion or postpone it till a more suitable time. The atmosphere in the conference room must have been very tense as each man gave his opinion to the Supreme Commander. To delay and settle for another appropriate time would make secrecy a lost cause. The two million men were ready and awaiting the outcome. As the weather reports kept coming in, a break would occur, on June the 6th when the winds and waters would become calm enough to cross the channel, General Eisenhower had to weigh the decision which would send the men into the greatest invasion in history. Taking all responsibility upon his shoulders, the invasion would take place at 0400 June 6, 1944.

Under the cover of darkness, the landing ships began to move out of the harbors. The 101st Airborne Division was already in the air and some men in gliders were being pulled to the target area inland from Utah Beach. The men in the ships were below deck resting until the time came for them to hit the beaches. Unknown to us or to the intelligence, the Germans moved a division of men near Omaha Beach for anti-invasion training.¹ The fighting at Omaha would be bloody and fierce. A pillbox² dominated the beach with mines buried from the water's edge to the base of the sand dune a hundred yards inland. Large obstacles and barbed wire were placed in the water to prevent the ships landing. Large mines were anchored between the obstacles adding danger for the assault troops to storm ashore.

Things were quiet on the ship when over the P.A. system the blaring of the Navy Chief repeating, "Now hear this, now hear this!" The order of the day from General Eisenhower." Each man was motionless as General Eisenhower began to speak. *"Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the allied expeditionary force, you are about to embark upon a 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 the 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 easy. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped*

¹ The 352nd Division, a regular formation, as opposed to the weaker coastal defense divisions that manned most of the coastal defenses, had been moved to Normandy, although only one battalion of that unit had actually reinforced the Omaha Beach defenses, and other units of the division were scattered across a wide area. D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, 113.

² Olexa refers to a single pillbox, which may have been what he confronted when his battalion landed late in the day, but the Germans had an elaborate network of bunkers, pillboxes, obstacles and minefields along the six-mile stretch of beach at Omaha.

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 total victory! Good Luck, and let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking. Thank you. General Dwight D. Eisenhower.”

The men continued to be silent, raising their hearts to God asking for courage to face the unknown and the fear of dying. Only a ‘Sovereign God’ can relieve us of the pressures of life in what we say and do and see. Men will die today as death thrusts his sickle savagely for he is no respecter of persons. Those who will fall mortally wounded will call “Mama! Mama!” for her caresses and assurances that all is well. But mama is not there with them, for they are grown men who will die and die alone. There will be others killed instantly, like yelling ‘bingo’ when the last winning number is called. This is the way to die, quick and easy. As for the survivors, they will move over the bodies of their comrades to seek safety and cover, bringing fire upon the enemy entrenched in the dunes. One must overcome the frightening sight of arms, legs, hands, feet and torsos of the dead scattered about the beach and water’s edge. The faster you move forward, the better. You must be alert to pick up movements, firing at the objects to save your life. You must overcome tenseness shock and hurts to push the enemy back, making it safe for others who are yet to land. This new chasm in life will demand in the dawns of our tomorrows the physical stamina and mental pressures that war brings, testing our endurance and strength once again. We must not be selfish in facing danger but ready to give our life that others may push on and succeed. The decisions to act and act quickly will save lives minimizing the danger which is everywhere. Courage and skill in battle will bring success in our undertakings, to bring peace to the world once again.

As daylight approached in the channel, the landing craft and assault boats loaded with troops headed for the beaches of France. It had stopped raining and the fog began to lift. On shore the Germans were awed at the sight of assault boats coming towards them out of the fog and mist. In the pillbox[es] on Omaha Beach I surmised that the men on guard were dismayed and dumfounded at the sight. The signal to alert the troops of the invasion was given. “*Achtung, Achtung*, man your defense positions, for we are being invaded.” The Germans were scurrying to meet this threat. They were told only last night that the invasion was impossible for a number of reasons. Out at sea the British and American battlewagons were making firing preparations to assist the landing forces. Precisely at 0400 the naval barrage began shelling the German positions on land. The German infantrymen were in positions waiting, ready to fire upon the invading troops as they left the assault boats. Everyone was tense, waiting for orders to fire as the assault boats neared the obstacles and barbed wire protecting the beaches. The allies were depending heavily on the tide to take them over these obstacles. German artillery and heavy mortar fire began falling, with the shells exploding at the water’s edge. As the assault boats reached the obstacles, some that were extra heavy hit the mines placed in the water, killing the men and throwing debris in every direction. Machine gun and rifle fire began taking its toll as the men hurried from each craft to seek safety. The shelling on the beaches were very intense as the

Germans tried to prevent the landings, and with the Americans shelling the German positions to minimize the casualties.

With the assault waves spaced at 15-minute intervals, the second wave of the boats attempted to beach, receiving heavy fire from the Germans. Most of the men died right at the water's edge and in the boats as the chattering of machine guns and rifle fire took a heavy toll of the lives. None of the Americans on Omaha Beach had advanced onto dry land. In the surf were bodies of the dead moving to and fro as the tide moved in. Some of the wounded near the water's edge were asking for help, but none was available. Others were drowning, unable to swim because of the wounds they had received. The Germans at this time were firing an artillery piece³ directly into the assault boats which was steaming in with the third wave to unload its cargo which was badly needed to help drive the Germans back. The men handling the 20 millimeters on the landing craft help to stop the deadly fire of the machine guns in the dunes. The L.C.T. hit two mines a hundred feet from the beach making large holes in the bottom and side, sinking the ship. Three tanks were able to leave the craft as the Germans concentrated the artillery piece in direct firing on the tank and artillery pieces still inside. The lead tank managed to leave the water's edge about 50 yards only to be disabled by land mines and a direct bazooka hit. The men were gunned down by machine gun fire as they attempted to escape. The other two tanks hit the underwater mines leaving the crews at the mercy of the Germans.⁴

The water of the channel was black with the oil from the ships that were destroyed. The fighting and blood bath continued, as other waves kept coming in to gain a foothold that was well defended. The British to our left on Gold Beach met light opposition advancing in land toward the city of Caen. The entire front of the invasion is about sixty miles long with the Allied air force picking selected targets and providing overhead cover to the troops attempting to land. Juno and Sword beaches north [actually east] of Omaha were progressing and moving toward their objectives. On Utah Beach the Americans were landing with no opposition and moving inland. Although some of the airborne men which landed during the night inland from Utah Beach had difficulty, they managed to seize and hold vital positions with less casualties than anticipated.⁵

³ Olexa again uses the singular here, but of course the Germans had several batteries of artillery firing from positions inland, as well as mortars and direct fire weapons in the beach emplacements.

⁴ It is not entirely clear what Olexa's source is for this account, since he would not have been able to observe the fate of the LCT and its occupants directly if hunkered down in an LCI. Incidents of this sort took place repeatedly during the landing, however, and the succeeding waves of landing craft piled up on each other and the surviving men struggled to advance.

⁵ The low casualties at Utah were the result of a mistake and good luck. Gen. Roosevelt and some of the first wave landed on the wrong beach, and one where the main German defense position had been destroyed by naval gunfire. The position that they were supposed to land in front of was still intact, and casualties would have been much higher had the landing been made there instead of being diverted on Roosevelt's orders. It would take several days for the Americans to clear out the coastal defenses in the Utah sector and shut down the German artillery in them, which began harassing fire on the landing beach later on D-Day. While Roosevelt was given full credit for the decision to relocate the landing, the commander of the 8th Regiment, Col James Van Fleet, may have initiated it. (Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994) 278-279.

See material on pp. 171-196