

3 » TO THE FAR SHORE

The overture

Over the last few days of May and the first of June, vast columns of men and vehicles began to stream south into the assembly areas – the ‘sausages’, as they were known, because of their shapes on the map – where the invaders were briefed and equipped before being loaded aboard the fleet. The trucks and tanks rolled through towns and villages that, to the disappointment of some, paid little heed to their passing, so accustomed had the inhabitants become to mass military movements. Although the coastal areas had supposedly been sealed off to all but local residents, in reality so many exemptions had been granted for weddings, funerals and compassionate cases that the routine of life was very little changed.

Whole divisions of the follow-up waves had been temporarily transferred from training to man the assembly areas, to feed and cosset the assault forces to the utmost extent that the circumstances allowed. The men, crowded into the tiered bunks in the huge tented camps, were issued with seasickness pills and lifejackets, new gas-protective battledress and ODs – which everybody detested because of their extra weight and smell. Each soldier was given a leaflet about getting on with French civilians which urged him to say nothing about 1940 and not to buy up everything in sight at extravagant prices: ‘Thanks to jokes about “Gay Paree” etc., there is a fairly widespread belief that the French are a gay, frivolous people with no morals and few convictions. This is especially not true at the present time.’ More pragmatically, in the

'sausages' men were issued with their ammunition and grenades, satchel and pole charges. They worked obsessively to the very last minute upon the waterproofing of their vehicles, conscious of the horror of stalling with a flooded engine under fire in the surf. The plethora of food, fruit and American cigarettes that was thrust upon them made LAC Norman Phillips of the RAF advance party for Omaha feel 'as if we were being fattened like Christmas turkeys'. Despite the stringent security precautions which kept the men confined once they had entered the assembly areas, many young British soldiers slipped under the wire for a last glimpse of the pub, the village or their own families. Corporal 'Topper' Brown of 5th RTR escaped from his camp near Felixstowe, stripped the unit flashes off his battledress, and travelled all the way home to Tonbridge in Kent.

The tannoy systems in the camps were seldom silent by day or night as groups of men were mustered, loaded into trucks, and driven through meticulously signposted streets to numbered docks where they joined their transports. The concentration and loading operations rank high among the staff achievements of OVERLORD. For once there was little need to motivate men to attend to their tasks: they understood that their lives depended on doing so. Dock officers later commented adversely upon the casual behaviour of the follow-up waves in contrast to that of the troops who embarked for D-Day.

Aboard the ships, each man sought to create his tiny island of privacy amid the mass of humanity crowded below decks. Officers struggled with last-minute loading problems. Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Hastings of the 6th Green Howards was enraged when an officious trade union official counted the lifeboats on his battalion's transport, declared that there were insufficient, and insisted that one vital landing craft should be left behind to make room for an extra lifeboat. The unit's chaplain, Captain Henry Lovegrove, conducted a service from the ship's bridge which men crowded onto the foc'sle to hear. Lovegrove was uncommonly respected as a padre, but he had lost some credibility during a

rehearsal at sea off Hayling Island several weeks earlier, when he took as his text for morning service 'The hour is now come . . .', which many men took to mean that the padre had been chosen to break it to them that they were on their way to France. In the vast anchorages off the south coast in the first days of June, many ships looked curiously unmilitary, with sailors' drying laundry draped along the rails and strung among the upperworks. A REME driver, passionately proud of his vehicle, expostulated furiously with an East End crane driver swinging his workshop's trucks into the hold of a transport, crushing wings and fenders against the hatch. 'You'll be f--ing lucky if that's the worst that happens to your lot over there!' said the docker succinctly, continuing as before.

One of Montgomery's few undoubted errors of judgement during the mounting of OVERLORD was his support for a landing on 5 June despite the adverse weather forecast. Given the difficulties much less severe weather caused on the 6th, there is little doubt that a landing on the previous day would have found itself in deep trouble. For all the scorn that Montgomery later heaped upon Eisenhower's qualities as a military commander, at no single period did the Supreme Commander distinguish himself more than by his judgement and decision during the D-Day launching conferences of 3-4 June. Having unhesitatingly overridden Montgomery to postpone for the 5th, at 9.45 p.m. on the 4th Eisenhower equally firmly brushed aside Leigh-Mallory and ignored Tedder's uncertainty to confirm the decision to go for the 6th: 'I'm quite positive we must give the order,' he said, 'I don't like it, but there it is . . . I don't see how we can possibly do anything else.'¹

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The postponement much increased the mental strain and physical pressure on the men crowded in the ships. They played cards incessantly, chatted quietly, in many cases simply lay silent on their bunks, gazing up at the bulkheads. Private James Gimbart and a cluster of other RAOC men of 50th Division brewed up on a little primus stove perched atop the vast stack of ammunition

cases loaded on their LST. Brigadier-General Norman 'Dutch' Cota assembled his staff of the advanced headquarters group of 29th Division, of which he was deputy commander, in the aft wardroom of the USS *Carroll*. An officer of legendary forcefulness, somewhat old for his rank at 51, Cota could claim exceptional expertise in amphibious operations. He had taken part in the TORCH landings and subsequently served with Lord Mountbatten's Combined Operations HQ. Now, he addressed his team for the last time:

This is different from any other exercises that you've had so far. The little discrepancies that we tried to correct on Slapton Sands are going to be magnified and are going to give way to incidents that you might at first view as chaotic. The air and naval bombardment are reassuring. But you're going to find confusion. The landing craft aren't going in on schedule, and people are going to be landed in the wrong place. Some won't be landed at all. The enemy will try, and will have some success, in preventing our gaining 'lodgement'. But we must improvise, carry on, not lose our heads.²

Cota and his men were to land on Omaha. On all the ships, officers and NCOs pored over the maps and photographs of their landing areas that they had at last been ordered to strip from the sealed packages: it remains one of the minor miracles of OVERLORD that although hundreds of men and women had been involved in making and printing them, there was no security leak. On every ship, some or most passengers were seasick. Apart from the assault troops, there was an extraordinary ragbag of men from all manner of units aboard the invasion fleet. On many of the transports crewed by the merchant navy, there were specially-trained civilian aircraft recognition teams from the Royal Observer Corps. The Sicilian landings had been marred by the alarming quantity of Allied aircraft shot down by reckless ships' gun crews. Now, at the AA positions, men stood in their helmets and flash capes drinking interminable mugs of 'kye' – cocoa – and peering out fascinated at the shadowy shapes of the great fleet around them in the darkness.

While the soldiers below were more sombrely preoccupied by the task that awaited them on the morrow, most of the sailors felt a strong, conscious sense of pride that they were taking part in the greatest amphibious operation of all time.

One of the most curious spectators of the great invasion fleet's movement to France was an airman named Eric Crofts, seated in a caravan mounted on a turntable on a clifftop in south Devon. Crofts manned one of the RAF's centimetric radar posts, and all spring he and his colleagues had intently scanned the progress of the invasion rehearsals on their screen. Now he arrived on watch a little before midnight on 5 June to find the duty crew clustered round the set: 'Large convoys of ships were creeping southward to the top of the radar screen, and small groups were coming from left to right to join the tail. Off to the east, beyond Portland, other convoys were on the move. Desperate for the relief of seeing everything pass from our range, our interest was seized later that long night by aircraft away to the east, circling but moving slowly away from us. Each dot was in a hazy cloud. We guessed, as others joined or left the group, that they were dropping metal strips of "Window" to simulate an invasion fleet heading for the Pas de Calais. It was an anti-climax at last to see our tube empty, yet sobering to know that so many men in the ships were heading for a hell ahead of them.'³ The Germans, partly as a result of their own failures of technology, but chiefly because of damage caused by Allied bombing, possessed no sets on the Channel coast capable of showing such an accurate picture that night.

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On the later afternoon of 5 June, when the men of the seaborne assault divisions had already been at sea for many hours – in some cases for days – Private Fayette Richardson of the 82nd Airborne Division was still in camp in England. He was lying on his bunk with his hands clasped behind his head, gazing up at the white-washed ceiling and trying to exorcize from his mind the nagging beat of Tommy Dorsey's *What Is This Thing Called Love?* that had

echoed out of the recreation hut every evening for weeks as the men walked to chow. A short, wiry 20-year-old from a small town near Buffalo, New York, Richardson had left home at 17 to drive an old jalopy to the west coast. He was in Seattle when Pearl Harbor was bombed, and enlisted at once 'because everybody else was'.⁴ Like so many others, he wanted to be a pilot and was dismayed to be rejected for poor eyesight. Instead, he joined the Airborne and shipped to Northern Ireland with the 508th Regiment. There he volunteered to become a pathfinder, a decision he did not regret, because his group lived a far more independent and relaxed life than the rifle companies, spared KP and guard duties, free to come and go pretty much as they pleased after completing their special training in handling the Eureka beacon. Now, in his hut in Nottinghamshire, he stood among the rest of the team joking self-consciously with each other as they struggled to stow a mountain of personal equipment about their bodies. A 32-pound radar set was strapped below the reserve parachute on his stomach; fragmentation grenades were hooked on his harness; gammon bombs and a phosphorus grenade, chocolate D rations, fighting knife, water-bottle, anti-tank mine, a morphia syrette and an armed forces paperback edition of *Oliver Twist* were stowed about his body. Richardson, as platoon guinea pig for a morphia demonstration a few weeks earlier, had plunged the tiny needle into his leg and fallen promptly asleep, to dream in brilliant colours of sailing boats against a sunset sky, green tropical islands, flowers, rainbows.

On top of all the kit, the New Yorker was expected to carry a rifle. He decided to leave this and make do with a .45 pistol strapped to his high paratroop boot, where he could reach it easily. The pressure of the pistol belt, the tightly laced boots and equipment made him feel oddly secure, as if he was wearing armour. When the trucks came for them, the paratroopers tottered forward, floundering like men in diving suits, boosted aboard by the cooks and maintenance men who were being left behind. When the shouted messages of good luck faded away, the men in the

back of the truck sat silent, scarcely able to recognize each other beneath the layer of burnt cork on their faces. Then they lay beside the fuselage of an olive-drab Dakota in the summer evening silence for almost an hour, drinking coffee and posing for an army photographer. Richardson found himself wanting to stay close to his own friends, reluctant to be alone. They were no longer excited, merely tense and thoughtful. Soon after darkness fell, they were airborne.

Jammed together in the belly of the plane, they could only talk to their neighbours by yelling over the noise of the aircraft, could see out of the windows only by squirming round inside their great clumsy burdens. Lamareux, alongside Richardson, nudged him and pointed down to the moonlight shining on the water. It seemed to the paratrooper to be frozen in smooth, unmoving ripples. The crew chief clambered down the aircraft to the rear and pulled off the door. Richardson saw a flash of light in the sky outside and understood, after a moment of puzzlement, that it was anti-aircraft fire. Then, on the shouted command, they pulled themselves clumsily to their feet and hooked static lines to the overhead cable. Now they could see streams of flashing lights coming up from the ground, making a harmless popping noise around them, like Roman candles being hosed into the sky. Each soldier felt the pressure of the man behind leaning into his pack. Then the green light came, and they began the familiar rush to the door in the paratroop one-step shuffle that they had practised so many times, at last pivoting abruptly before they hurled themselves into the slipstream and the sudden silence that followed.

At the moment 'Rich' Richardson jumped over the fields of the Cotentin soon after 1.30 a.m., thousands of other Allied paratroopers were already on the ground ahead of him. Men of the British 6th Airborne Division seized the bridges over the Caen Canal and across the Orne at Ranville a few minutes after midnight. The American 101st Division began to drop at 1.30 a.m., the 82nd following at 2.30, and the bulk of the 6th Airborne – 4,800 parachutists – shortly before 1.00 a.m. A total of 8,000 British and

16,000 American airborne troops were to land by parachute and glider. The drops were marred by the poor performance of many of the Allied Dakota pilots who, by a combination of unsteady navigation and extravagant reaction to German flak, released their parachutists with near-criminal carelessness. Over both the British and American zones that night, extraordinary and undignified scenes took place in some aircraft, with paratroopers cursing the pilots as they were thrown to the floor by the frenzied weaving of their planes, officers and NCOs demanding – in several recorded instances, at gunpoint – that the airmen should resume their course and proceed with the drop rather than abort. The loss of only 30 Allied transport aircraft proved that the flak was not severe.

The glider pilots, by contrast, performed miracles of determination to crash their frail craft on their objectives, above all making possible the seizure of the British bridges after brief battles. 71 of the 196 glider pilots who landed east of the Orne on D-Day became casualties; among the Americans the proportion was even higher. The costly battle to gain the Merville Battery by the British 9th Para was a fine feat of arms, rendered anti-climactic by the discovery that the casemates mounted only 75 mm guns with slight capacity to harass the beaches. The inability of air photographs to distinguish the weapons mounted in many bunkers and casemates was a chronic problem for the planners before 6 June, and the suppression of positions such as the Merville Battery was a vital piece of insurance. The bulk of 6th Airborne struggled through the darkness and the first hours of daylight to concentrate its units, dispose of German patrols and strongpoints and create a firm perimeter east of the Orne from which to resist the powerful counter-attacks that would inevitably follow.

The American 82nd and 101st Airborne suffered even more seriously than the British from scattered dropping, and with far more deadly consequences amid the swamps and floods of the Cotentin, which drowned hundreds of men before they could even escape their harnesses. The 82nd gained one of its principal object-

ives, the village of St Mère Eglise, and fought to retain it against fierce German pressure. But it proved impossible immediately to secure the causeways across the Merderet. The airborne operations of D-Day emphasized painfully for the Allies the cost and difficulty inseparable from massed drops even before paratroopers could engage the enemy, and the limitations of lightly-armed formations without armoured support. Thousands of young Americans found themselves struggling, alone or with little clusters of other lonely figures, to find a path through the hedges and swamps to a rendezvous many miles from where they had been so mistakenly 'given the green'. It was a remarkable tribute to the 82nd and the 101st that while thousands of the men found themselves miles from their units and their objectives that night, they engaged the Germans wherever they encountered them. The great achievement of the American airborne forces on 6 June was to bring confusion and uncertainty to the Germans across the whole breadth of the Cherbourg peninsula.

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Private Richardson felt a moment of pain on the inside of his thighs from his harness as the canopy jerked open, and his head and neck were jerked so sharply that he suffered a brief headache. Then he was floating rapidly down towards an orchard amid a rattle of fire from the ground. He let go the front risers of his parachute, just missed a tree, and slammed into the ground. Ears ringing, he grabbed his pistol and used his spare hand to struggle out of his harness. Then he walked cautiously towards the sound of the little metal crickets that American soldiers were snapping all over the Cotentin that night as a recognition signal. Through the darkness other men moved in to join them. They struggled to free one of the group whose parachute was caught in the top of a tree, and at last cut him down. Then they counted heads. Around half the team – including almost all the men equipped with beacon lights to back up the radar sets – were missing. These had jumped last and landed beyond a road on which the Germans were already

audible, driving hither and thither searching for parachutists. Lamareux, the lead radar operator, switched on his beacon. To Richardson's chagrin, having lugged his own set so far with such sweat, he was now obliged to watch the other man pull the internal detonator to destroy it – only one set was necessary. Then the Americans dispersed hastily across the field. The one remaining tripod-mounted light was switched on. The other men pointed their torches towards the sky. Not many minutes had passed before somebody shouted, 'Here they come!' They saw a new sparkle of anti-aircraft fire, moving closer and closer to them as the planes approached and local guns opened up. Then, as the first parachutes became dimly visible against the sky, the pathfinders below broke into muted but ecstatic cheers.

Hundreds of Americans who jumped that night found themselves plunged into action immediately they reached the ground, or were shot dead before they did so. After that brief moment of euphoria when the first wave over Richardson's landing zone jumped as planned, they were dismayed to see the second wave approach their signal on the same course, then drone on past the desperately flashing lights without dropping a single man. Only one plane came close to them. Flames were pouring from its starboard engine and the pilot was revving desperately as he lost height; the windows were clearly visible three or four hundred feet above them. A pathfinder sobbed desperately: 'Those are our guys.' Then the plane disappeared over the horizon and there was silence in the field again. The stillness persisted, for the expected third wave of aircraft never came. Instead of a powerful paratroop unit at the assembly point, there were only a few dozen men.

Richardson decided that the moment had come to make good his lack of a weapon. He picked up a machine-gun from the bundle attached to a collapsed parachute. Then another man ran over and said curtly, 'That's our gun.' They argued for a few moments. Richardson lost. His own company was among those which had failed to arrive, so he simply joined the nearest group of men

digging slit trenches. When he had made his own foxhole, he dropped into it and fell asleep.

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The German sluggishness in responding to the first Allied movements of D-Day has passed into the legend of the war. Montgomery had told his commanders: 'By dusk on D-1 day the enemy will be certain that the NEPTUNE [or OVERLORD] area is to be assaulted in strength . . .'⁵ Yet the astounding truth remains that even in the early hours of 6 June, the Germans were still in a condition of bewildered uncertainty. The German navy had failed to station patrols in the Channel because of its conviction that the weather was unfit for an invasion. Fifteenth Army's interception of the known BBC codeword for the French Resistance to begin their D-Day tasks was ignored. It is doubtful whether SHAEF would ever have agreed to the transmission of the BBC message on the night of 5 June, given the overwhelming probability that its significance was already compromised somewhere in France, had it not seemed inevitable that the invasion fleet would by that hour be detected.

The failures of the German navy and air force were obviously central to the defenders' lack of warning of the invasion. They had not even noticed the concentration of minesweepers operating off the Normandy coast at last light on 5 June. The lack of action following interception of the BBC message is more comprehensible, for it must be considered against the background of repeated false alarms all that spring, which had exasperated and wearied the coastal units. Neither the Germans nor SHAEF had ever taken the French Resistance entirely seriously, regarding it as a nuisance force rather than a central feature of Allied military operations. It is also important to notice that the message to the Resistance gave no hint of *where* the invasion was to take place. There was some discussion within Allied Special Forces HQ and SOE about the possibility of mobilizing only relevant sections of the Resistance, in order to reduce the possibility of bitter reprisals and long delays

before liberation came to groups far from the front. But it was quickly agreed that, on grounds of security, it was vital to mobilize all *résistants* to avoid giving any clues to the Germans as to the whereabouts of the point of assault. There have been suggestions in some recent books⁶ that, properly used, the BBC message could have told OKW that the Allies were going to Normandy. This notion is unfounded.

But the absence from headquarters of so many vital senior German commanders was a misfortune of critical importance. The whereabouts of General Edgar Feuchtinger of 21st Panzer have never been confirmed, but it was widely believed by his own men that he was *incommunicado* with a female friend. Rommel, of course, was in Germany, and Dollman of Seventh Army at the Rennes war games. On the night of 5 June, exploiting Rommel's absence, his Chief of Staff, General Hans Speidel, invited several of his fellow anti-Hitler conspirators to join him for drinks at the chateau at La Roche Guyon. It was here, after they had all dined together, that Speidel was telephoned by Fifteenth Army headquarters at Tourcoing and informed of the intercepted BBC message. Fifteenth Army had been placed on alert. A staff officer telephoned von Rundstedt's headquarters for a decision on whether Seventh Army should also be alerted. It was decided that it should not. Von Rundstedt's staff confined themselves to a general warning to all units that the BBC message might presage a widespread outbreak of terrorist sabotage.

Seventh Army was finally alerted at 1.35 a.m. Half an hour earlier, General Marcks had called out his own LXXXIV Corps, in the wake of the reported paratroop landings. The confusion was compounded by the Allied drop of thousands of dummies and six uncommonly brave SAS soldiers to divert the defenders inland. The discovery of the dummies doubled the Germans' uncertainty about a possible bluff. General Max Pemsel, Dollman's Chief of Staff, telephoned Rommel's headquarters and spoke to Speidel repeatedly during the night, insisting that a major Allied operation was taking place. At 3.00 a.m., von Rundstedt's headquarters

reported to OKW that large-scale air landings were under way. At 4.00 a.m., General Kraiss of 352nd Division sent a regiment on bicycles in pursuit of paratroopers at a location where in reality only dummies had landed. At 6.00 a.m., Blumentritt from von Rundstedt's headquarters told OKW that a major invasion appeared to be taking place, and asked for the release of the armoured reserve, I SS Panzer Corps outside Paris. With Hitler asleep, the request was denied. It was not finally granted until ten hours later. At 6.15 a.m., Pemsel told Speidel of the opening of a massive naval bombardment and air assault on the coastal defences. At 6.45 a.m., Pemsel telephoned Fifteenth Army and told them that his forces expected to be able to cope with the situation from their own resources. Von Salmuth, Commander-in-Chief of Fifteenth Army, thereupon went to bed. So did Speidel and most of the staff at La Roche Guyon. It was after 10.30 a.m., over an hour after Allied radio had formally announced the coming of the invasion, when Rommel left his home in Herrlingen to drive headlong for his headquarters. It was almost 12 hours before he reached La Roche Guyon.

It was an impressive tribute to the success of the Allied deception plans that every key German commander greeted the news of operations in Normandy as evidence of *an* invasion, not of *the* invasion. Rommel's personal presence and energy might have galvanized the local formations to react with vigour. Most recent writers⁷ have suggested that it would have availed the Germans nothing to wake Hitler in order to obtain authorization for the release of the OKW armoured reserves, because Allied air power would have prevented their movement in daylight on 6 June. This is patently untrue, since other formations, including 21st Panzer, were able to drive to the battlefield, albeit with some difficulty. The fighter-bombers and naval guns would certainly have hit hard at any German concentration of armour around the beachhead. But on 6 June forward air control and gunnery direction were not operating efficiently. The balance of probability remains that the Allies could have gained their beachhead against any German

reaction on D-Day. But the early release of the armour would have made matters incomparably more dangerous for them. It was fortunate that the senior staff officers of all the major German formations behaved with a lassitude that verged upon utter incompetence.

Some subordinate German commanders, such as General Richter of 716th Division, responded more forcefully to the spectacle of enemy paratroopers dropping around them. Richter directed a battalion of infantry with an anti-tank gun and self-propelled artillery support towards Bénouville to recapture the Orne and Caen Canal bridges in the early hours of the morning. But when their leading light tank was knocked out by a British PIAT and the paratroopers opened heavy fire on the counter-attacking force, the Germans contented themselves with occupying Bénouville and exchanging fire with the British. 716th Division's operations were conducted with nothing like the determination that could have been expected from a top-class formation.

'You could see that the Germans were really frightened because they started being so nasty,' said Nicole Ferté,⁸ one of the local inhabitants of Hérouville, three miles south of the Orne bridge. 'They had always been so courteous in the past.' Mademoiselle Ferté, the 20-year-old daughter of a local garage owner, had lain on the floor during the bombing, sheltering her eight-year-old sister and listening spellbound to the sound of the glider tugs and transport aircraft overhead before midnight. Suddenly there was a knock at their door, and the local teacher stood outside. A wounded British soldier was in the school. Could Nicole come and interpret? Together they hurried back down the road and, in a mixture of half-remembered English, French, and even German, began to talk to the airborne soldier, lying in great pain with a broken leg. They had just given him tea when German soldiers burst in. The civilians were busquely sent to their homes, the British soldier taken away. Most of the local inhabitants hastily fled from the village, but the Fertés stayed through a week when the fighting raged to within a few hundred yards of their door,

'because we were certain that liberation must come at any moment. The only other people who stayed were the girls who had been sleeping with Germans.' After a week, the Germans abruptly ordered all the remaining occupants to leave Hérouville, and they endured many weeks of fear and privation before they saw the village again.

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At 21st Panzer's headquarters, although two companies of infantry exercising north of Caen reported the British glider landings immediately, in the absence of General Feuchtinger and his senior staff officer the only action that could be taken was the immediate removal of divisional headquarters to its operational location. Corporal Werner Kortenhaus, wireless operator in one of the division's 127 Mk IV tanks, was out on picket with two other men when they heard the massive air activity overhead – the sound of aircraft descending, and then climbing once more as the glider tugs loosed their tows. As the panzer crew approached their platoon harbour in the darkness, they could see the shadows of men already clambering over the tanks, preparing to move off. While his own crew hastily unloaded their drill rounds and filled the turret with armour-piercing ammunition, Kortenhaus ran to the house of the Frenchwoman who did their laundry to collect their clean clothes. By 2.00 a.m., the crews were in the tanks and ready to move. Yet it was 8.00 a.m. before the 1st Tank Battalion under Captain von Gottberg began to roll north from its harbour up the long, straight road north to Caen. The 2nd Battalion under Major Vierzig did not start to move until 9.00 a.m., although that officer had held his tanks on standby since 2.20 a.m. No order had been given to them and for this failure responsibility must be shared between Speidel and Feuchtinger, who at the very least displayed an astounding lack of initiative when he arrived at his headquarters some time between 6.00 and 7.00 a.m.

Lieutenant Rudolf Schaaf, commanding a self-propelled battery of the 1716th Artillery, was telephoned at 3.00 a.m. and ordered to

take his guns to join the counter-attack against the British airborne bridgehead. Yet he had driven only a few miles across country when he received a radio message recalling them to their original positions. It was clear by dawn that the seaborne menace would have to be met by every infantryman and gun that the defenders possessed.

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Shortly before H-Hour, Allied bombers struck the station at Caen and soon afterwards fighter-bombers began to strafe German installations and barracks. A loudspeaker vehicle toured the streets, ordering civilians to stay in their houses. Throughout the day there were intermittent Allied air attacks. By mid-morning the first truckloads of British prisoners were being driven through the streets. The first of more than 80 ruthless executions of French civilians alleged to have assisted the invaders were taking place at the barracks. Early reports of the airborne landings and the fleet offshore were as confused as those reaching German headquarters. The overwhelming sensation among the French was terror that a landing might fail. The memory of Dieppe, the possibility that all the suffering, destruction and death might be in vain, hung heavy over Caen and all Normandy that morning and through the days that followed. A local historian described the events of the dawn of D-Day: 'Thus Caen, like other towns in Normandy, passed the night of 6-7 June in fire and blood, while elsewhere in France they celebrated the invasion by drinking champagne and dancing to the gramophone.'⁹

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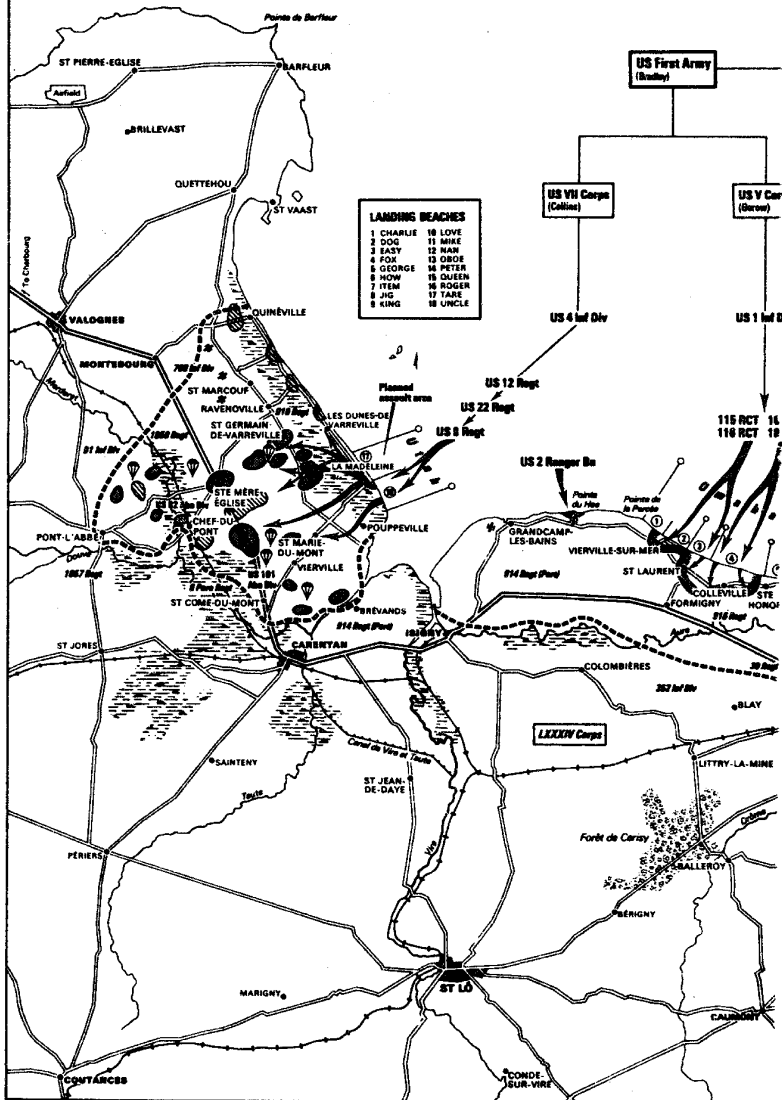
Before dawn, the invasion coast was lit by flares and flashes as the naval guns pounded the defences, explosions of every hue rippling up and down the shoreline as hundreds of launches and landing craft scuttled amid the dim silhouettes of the battleships and cruisers, transports and rocket ships a few miles out to sea. No

man who saw it ever forgot either the spectacle of the vast invasion fleet crowding the Channel at first light on the morning of D-Day, or the roar of the guns rolling across the sea, or the tearing rasp of the rocket batteries firing over the heads of the men in the landing craft. Nine battleships, 23 cruisers, 104 destroyers and 71 corvettes dominated the 6,483-strong assembly of converted liners, merchantmen and tank landing craft now shaking out into their positions a few miles offshore. 4,000 landing ships – craft and barges of all sizes – would carry the troops ashore. Alongside the transports, overburdened men clambered clumsily down the scrambling nets into the pitching assault craft below. For many, this was among the most alarming experiences of the day. Thousands of men tossing upon the swell strained to make their eyes focus through binoculars upon the coastline ahead. Captain Hendrie Bruce of the Royal Artillery wrote in his notebook: ‘The villages of La Breche and Lion-sur-Mer are smothered with bursts, and enormous dirty clouds of smoke and brick dust rise from the target area and drift out to sea, completely obscuring our target for a time and enveloping many craft in a veritable “fog of war”.’¹⁰ Gunnery observation was to be one of the least satisfactory aspects of the landings, with scores of ships compelled to waste ammunition on harassing objectives selected from the map, for lack of targets pinpointed by forward observers. As the first waves of landing craft headed for the shore, the guns lifted their barrage precisely according to the time schedule. As a result, with so many craft running minutes late, the German defences enjoyed a precious pause before the first infantry hit the beaches.

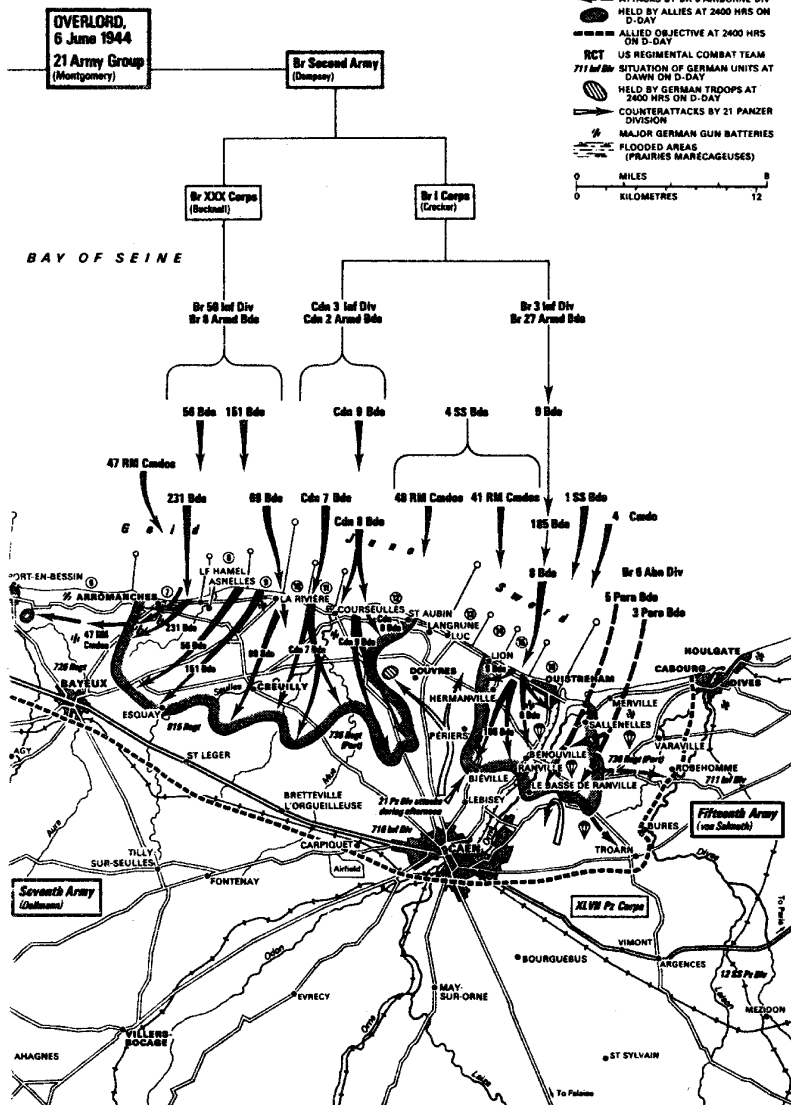
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Probably the first Allied vessel to be destroyed by the shore batteries was PC 1261, one of the American patrol craft leading landing craft towards Utah beach. Lieutenant Halsey Barrett was concentrating intently upon the task of holding a course of 236 degrees true when the quartermaster stepped down into the

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The Landings



chartroom and reported that the batteries ashore had just straddled the craft. Seconds later, just 58 minutes before H-Hour at 5.34 a.m., they were hit.

There was a crash – not terribly loud – a lunge – a crash of glass, a rumble of gear falling around the decks – an immediate, yes immediate, 50° list to starboard – all lights darkened and the dawn's early light coming through the pilot house door which had been blown open. The Executive Officer immediately said: 'That's it', with finality and threw down his chart pencil. I felt blood covering my face and a gash over my left eye around the eyebrow.¹¹

While most of the crew took to the liferafts as the craft turned turtle, Barrett and a cluster of others clung to the upturned hull, watching the great procession of landing craft driving on past them towards the shore.

A landing craft LCVP with thirty or so men aboard was blown a hundred feet in the air in pieces. Shore batteries flashed, splashes appeared sporadically around the bay. Planes were flying in reasonable formation over the beach. One transpired into a huge streaming flame and no trace of the plane remained. Aft of us an LCT lay belly skyward no trace of survivors around it. The USS battleship *Nevada* a mile off to the northwest of us was using her 14-inch guns rapidly and with huge gushes of black smoke and flame extending yards and yards from her broadside . . . There was a beautiful sunrise commencing . . . A small British ML picked up with difficulty one of our men shrieking for help while hanging on a marker buoy. His childish yells for help despite his life jacket and secure buoy was the only disgraceful and unmanly incident which I saw . . .¹²

Most men, even those who had suffered as savage a shock as the crew of PC 1261, felt reassured by the sense of the Allied armada's dominance of the sea. Barrett and the other survivors knew that

somebody would pick them up as soon as they had time to spare, as indeed they did. For the men of the British and American navies, there was an overwhelming sense of relief that they faced no sudden, devastating attack from the Luftwaffe as some, despite all the reassurance of the intelligence reports, had feared they might. 'We were all more or less expecting bombs, shells, blood etc.' wrote a British sailor on the corvette *Gentian*. 'Dive bombers were expected to be attacking continually, backed by high-level bombing. But no, nothing like that . . . Instead, a calm, peaceful scene . . . The Luftwaffe is obviously smashed.'¹³

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In England early that morning, only a few thousand people knew with certainty what was happening across the Channel, and only some thousands more guessed. *The Times* news pages were dominated by the latest reports from Italy, with the Fifth Army past Rome; there was a mention of Allied bombing of Calais and Boulogne. The daily weather bulletin recorded dull conditions in the Channel on 5 June, with a south-west wind becoming very strong in the middle of the day: 'Towards dusk the wind had dropped a little, and the sea was less choppy. The outlook was a little more favourable at nightfall.'

Outside Portsmouth, at 21st Army Group headquarters, Montgomery's Chief of Staff, Major-General Francis de Guingand, turned to Brigadier Bill Williams and recalled the beginning of other, desert battles. 'My God, I wish we had 9th Australian Division with us this morning, don't you?' he said wryly.¹⁴ Some of the British officers at SHAEF were taken aback to discover their American counterparts reporting for duty that morning wearing helmets and sidearms, an earnest of their identification with the men across the water. Brooke described in his diary how he walked in the sunshine of St James's Park: 'A most unreal day during which I felt as if I were in a trance entirely detached from the war.'¹⁵

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In his foxhole in the Cotentin, Private Richardson of the 82nd Airborne was woken by daylight, and the overhead roar of an Allied fighter-bomber. Hungry and thirsty, he munched a chocolate bar until the word came to move out. Richardson picked up a stray bazooka without enthusiasm, because he had only the barest idea of how to use it. Among a long file of men, all of them unknown to him, he began to march across the Norman fields, ignorant of where they were going. They reached a hedge by a road and halted, while at the front of the column two officers pored over a map and discussed which way to go. Suddenly everybody was signalled to lie flat. A car was approaching. They lay frozen as it approached. Richardson and the others could see the heads of its three German occupants passing the top of the ledge like targets in a shooting gallery. It seemed that no one would move against them, each American privately expecting another to be the first to act. Then one man stood up and emptied a burst of Browning automatic rifle fire at the car. It swerved off the road into a ditch, where somebody shouted, 'Finish 'em!' and tossed a grenade. But the Germans were already dead. One of them was Lieutenant-General Wilhelm Falley, commanding the German 91st Division, on his way back to his headquarters from the ill-fated war games in Rennes.

Like Richardson, many of the paratroopers had never seen a man killed before, least of all on a peaceful summer morning in the midst of the countryside. They found the experience rather shocking. Leaving the Germans where they had fallen, they marched on through the meadows and wild flowers, disturbed by nothing more intrusive than the buzzing insects. They encountered another group from the 508th, presiding over 30 German prisoners, arranged in ranks by the roadside as if for a parade. Most were Poles or oriental Russians. One American threw a scene about shooting them: 'The Japs killed my brother!' He was dissuaded at the time, but Richardson heard later that the whole group had been killed.

The New Yorker felt better now, because among the new group of paratroopers was one of his closest friends, a tall Oklahoman

named Earl Williams, the sergeant commanding 3 Platoon. They sat and talked about money. Williams had changed \$100 into francs before take-off. Richardson could not see the point of money at this stage, but Williams insisted upon giving him some. They lay in the grass chatting for what seemed a long time, conscious of the war only because of spasmodic shells falling a few hundred yards away. Finally they wrapped themselves in parachute silk, and once again fell asleep.

Richardson's experience was scarcely universal. While his group were making their way across country with little interference, many other American paratroopers were engaged in desperate battles around the causeways and hamlets of the eastern Cotentin, while the British 6th Airborne was already under fierce German pressure north-east of Caen. But the young New Yorker's story catches the dreamlike quality, the curious sense of detachment that so many men felt in those first hours after being wrenched from the peace of the English summer, and thrust onto an alien battlefield. As the days went by, the battlefield became the reality, until there came a time when they scarcely remembered that another world existed. For thousands of men, it was only when OVERLORD was behind them that they could grasp the magnitude of the events in which they had taken part. While the great drama was unfolding, it seemed a fantasy into which they had somehow slipped as spectators.

As they approached Sword beach, Lieutenant Charles Mundy's men did their best to dull their sensations with the rum rations which they had saved and bottled for three months in anticipation of this moment. They were still over a mile offshore, gazing like eager tourists towards the beach ahead, when a shell smashed through the side of their landing craft and the entire troop were ordered to close down in the tanks. Their Sherman minesweeping flails of 22nd Dragoon Guards were to lead the landing on the eastern flank. Mundy, a 31-year-old Londoner, was impressed to see that the shoreline ahead conformed precisely to the photographs that he and his men had studied so earnestly.

Some men reacted theatrically to their parts. A bugler of the East Yorkshire regiment sounded the General Salute as his landing craft passed the British command ship. Commander Angus MacKenzie, aboard the destroyer *Undaunted*, stood in his Highlander's bonnet playing the bagpipes from his bridge as the LCAs, crammed with seated infantry, ploughed by his ship towards the beach.

Private John Hein of the American 1st Division 'felt a little queasy. But I trusted this vast organization – everything was so organized, so programmed that there seemed little scope for individual fear.'¹⁶ Hein was born in Germany, the son of a Jewish doctor. He and his family fled in 1936, when he was 15, and adopted their new country with the enthusiasm that only immigrants can achieve. Now, as the former music student headed towards Omaha beach, he felt only intense pride to be wearing an American uniform.

Chaplain Henry Lovegrove of the Green Howards was relieved to find that he was experienced enough not to behave as he had when, in action for the first time in North Africa, he had scrambled panic-stricken under mortar fire, crying, 'Where's my helmet? Where's my helmet?' On 6 June, it was a vast reassurance to every soldier who had been in battle before to know that he was capable of doing what was asked of him. This was a consolation denied to many thousands of the men now crouched in the landing craft, bucketing towards the beaches with spray drenching themselves and their weapons.

The American beaches

Many of the defenders of Utah beach, the most westerly of the Allied landing zones just above the elbow of the Cotentin peninsula, were still helplessly stunned by the bombardment or demoral-

ized by the spectacle before them as the first landing craft closed in. In strongpoint W 5, at the very centre of the sea wall where the 4th Division was approaching, the men of 3 Company, 919th Regiment, had lain shaking, hands pressed to their ears as 360 Marauder medium bombers attacked their positions, followed by a naval bombardment which poured down explosives around them with remarkable accuracy, destroying all the position's 50 mm guns, its 75 mm anti-tank gun and many of its bunkers. An elderly mess orderly ran out as the shelling died down, shouting desperately to his commanding officer: 'Everything's wrecked! Everything's wrecked! We've got to surrender!'¹ The company commander, a 23-year-old veteran named Lieutenant Arthur Jahnke, who had won the Knight's Cross in Russia before his wounds caused him to be posted to France, pulled his garrison back into their positions. But he understood, with a sense of desperation, that he was now compelled to defend his sector of beach with only a single 88 mm gun, an old Renault tank turret dug into the sands, and a handful of machine-guns and mortars. Above all, he was shocked to gaze out at the vast armada offshore and perceive that they were attacking at low water. Every gun, every bunker had been sited to match Rommel's certain anticipation that 'the Amies' would come with the high tide.

Yet now the Germans in W 5 and its adjoining positions were bewildered to see armour, Sherman tanks, rising directly from the sea and opening fire upon them. In the Renault turret, Lance-Corporal Friedrich peered through his pebble spectacles and began firing long machine-gun bursts in the direction of the waterline. A few minutes later, a direct hit from an American 75 mm tank gun destroyed his weapon and shattered his leg. W 5's 88 mm gun, damaged in the bombing, fired one round before jamming permanently. Jahnke's other positions remained in action for only a few minutes before tank fire began to focus upon them. A sudden explosion buried him in sand. He collapsed into unconsciousness, and awoke to find himself staring up the rifle barrel of an American soldier. Together with the survivors of his company, he was

herded away towards imprisonment, suffering the final misery, a few moments later, of being wounded by a belated shell from the German battery inland which had been supporting his position.

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Although the current off Utah swept the American landing craft 2,000 yards south of the area designated by the plan, in every other respect VII Corps' operations conformed more nearly to the timetable than those of any other Allied formation that day. 28 of the 32 amphibious DD tanks launched reached the sands. At 6.30 a.m., the three regimental combat teams of 4th Division began to come ashore under very light enemy fire. The Germans had thought it most unlikely that Allied troops would land immediately in front of the wide flooded areas beyond the beach. The navigational error caused by the current had brought the men of 4th Division into the most lightly defended sector of the entire Normandy front. As the forward infantry mopped up beach defences, the engineers began to blow up beach obstacles under only sporadic artillery fire. Vehicles and follow-up units poured in as the Americans discovered one undefended beach exit across the inundations, and the 101st Airborne secured four others at the western end. Most of the lone defending regiment of the German 709th Division surrendered as soon as the Americans came to close quarters with them.

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Private Lindley Higgins waded through three feet of water to the shore in a manner that made his own invasion seem more farcical than lethal. He and other men of the 12th Regiment could hear only distant firing, but suddenly they were ordered to lie down among the organized chaos of vehicles and stores on the sand: "They're sending in artillery!" somebody shouted. As he hit the ground, Higgins felt himself being squeezed in half by an agonizing pressure at his waist. He yelled: "Aid man!" Then he saw that he had accidentally hit the release of his life jacket, which was inflating. Furious and embarrassed, he pulled his bayonet off his

rifle and hacked the life jacket into submission. Then, in long straggling files, his company began to move inland.

Almost all the Americans' difficulties on Utah that day began as they left the beach. The units dispatched northwards to secure the area where the 4th Division would have landed, but for the diversion caused by the current, ran into strong resistance. When 12th Regiment and other forces striking inland clambered over the high, sandy bank looking out over the sea and began to plunge through the flat, flooded fields behind the dunes, their movement became agonizingly slow.

Captain John McGirr of the 65th Armored Field Artillery was under orders to advance with the leading elements inland, and commence acting with the 101st Airborne as a forward observer at the earliest opportunity. But he found himself lying behind the sea wall for more than two hours while waiting for his infantry unit to move off; the monotony was relieved only by a fire in an ammunition truck hit by a stray shell which he helped to fight. The guns of his battery were already coming ashore before McGirr was off the beach.

To Higgins and his companions of Company L, struggling under their impossibly heavy loads of weapons and equipment, the swamps seemed endless. Shorter men found themselves stumbling into concealed ditches that almost drowned them, and from which they had to be painfully extracted. They waded between the white tapes laid ahead of them by the engineers, rifles held high above their heads to keep dry. Higgins was carrying an entire carton of Lucky Strikes in his invasion jacket, but by evening the only smoke he managed to salvage was in the pack in his helmet. They came upon a crashed glider with a jeep still trapped inside it, which the company commander ordered them to retrieve. They hacked at the fuselage until the jeep was almost free, when suddenly a senior officer appeared and furiously ordered them to leave the vehicle and continue their advance.

All along the line, time was already slipping. The chronic problem was to maintain momentum. Yet the landing of 23,000

men on Utah, at a cost of only 197 casualties on the first day, was an almost miraculous piece of good fortune and good judgement. It seemed all the more so in contrast with the events that were unfolding that morning a few miles to the east. While the 4th Division was streaming ashore with fewer casualties than in their last exercise on Slapton Sands, on Omaha beach, where two-thirds of the entire American D-Day effort was concentrated, the 1st and 29th Divisions were enduring ten times as many losses as the 4th's, and very many times their fear and confusion.

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Lieutenant Jahnke's company had been stunned and disorganized by the Utah bombardment, but the Germans manning the defences around Vierville and St Laurent had escaped almost totally unscathed. Attacking blind through cloud, the Liberator heavy bombing inevitably lacked precision. In their anxiety to avoid the risk of bombing short onto the approaching invasion fleet, the Allied aircraft poured hundreds of tons of high explosive onto the fields behind the forward defences. Here too, the Germans were defending the strongest natural positions facing the entire assault – hills and cliffs rising steeply up to 200 feet from the beach and the sea wall above it. Brigadier Williams's worst fears were confirmed. In addition to the regiment of the 716th Division defending the Omaha sector, there were strong elements of the much more formidable 352nd. The Americans below the bluffs faced by far the greatest concentration of German fire on the entire invasion front.

A little after 7.00 a.m., a 21-year-old farm boy from Metzingen named Lance-Corporal Hein Severloh had borrowed the binoculars of his battery commander, Lieutenant Frerking. He peered in fascination over the thick concrete parapet at the spectacle unfolding out to sea: 'The big one is still hove to, not moving . . . More ships coming up now . . .'² Severloh was one of the forward observation team of 1 Battery, 352 Artillery Regiment. When the alert was called, he and the others had driven hastily to the coast from

their billets in the battery position at Houteville. Now the gunners were reporting by field telephone, having suffered no hits from the bombing, 'perhaps they weren't really after us . . .' Severloh began his running commentary again: 'The big one's moving inshore . . . Landing craft on our left, off Vierville, making for the beach.' Sergeant Krone said: 'They must be crazy. Are they going to swim ashore? Right under our muzzles?' He was one of the 19 men of the 726th Grenadiers sharing position WN 62 – *Wilderstandsnesten*, 'resistance nest', 62 – with the gunner OP. The telephone buzzed from regimental HQ with an order to withhold fire until the enemy touched the shore. Severloh laid aside the glasses and took up his own position at an MG 42. Frerking began telephoning fire orders to his guns: 'Target Dora, all guns, range Four Eight Five Zero, basic direction Twenty Plus, impact fuse,' Now there was a long, violent pause, as the naval bombardment plastering the sand and scrub around the pillboxes reached a crescendo, deafening even men behind five feet of concrete. Yet although the blasts filled the bunkers with dust, shook fragments of masonry from the ceilings, fired the scrub along the hillside at intervals above the 6,000 yards of beach where the Americans were to land, the naval shelling did no more than the bombing to reduce the fighting power of the defences. These had been constructed to be almost immune to direct fire from the sea. Now, 47 minutes after it began, the bombardment lifted as a black smoke signal curled into the sky from the command ship. There was a brief moment of silence. The grey shoals of landing craft bumped through the four-foot waves breaking onto the shore. There was only one casualty thus far in WN 62 – an NCO wounded by a shrapnel splinter tearing through a firing slit. Then the first boat dropped its ramp a few yards short of the beach and the overburdened Americans within it began to pour forward, splashing into the surf. The Germans in WN 62 and every position along the Omaha front opened fire, their machine-guns traversing steadily to and fro across the waterline, arcs of fire interlocking, occasional

ricochets shrieking off the steel of the beach obstacles. Frerking called into his handset: 'Target Dora – Fire!'

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There is no more demanding task for infantry than to press home an attack across open ground under heavy fire, amid heavy casualties. The American assault on Omaha beach came as close as the experience of any western Allied soldiers in the Second World War to the kind of headlong encounters between flesh and fire that were a dreadful commonplace in the battles of 30 years before, and which were so grimly familiar on the eastern front. V Corps' plan for Omaha eschewed tactical subtleties, the use of British specialized armour, and any attempt to seize the five vital beach exits by manoeuvre. Instead, General Gerow committed his men to hurling themselves frontally against the most strongly defended areas in the assault zone. This was an act of *hubris* compounded by the collapse, amidst the rough weather, of all the elaborate timetables for the landing.

Whipped by a 10-knot north-westerly wind, the seas swamped at least 10 LCVPs during the run-in, drowning many of their infantry. The attempt to land artillery from amphibious DUKWs failed disastrously, and in all 26 guns from elements of five regiments were lost. The supporting rocket ships opened fire at extreme range from the shore, and most of their projectiles fell short, some landing among the assault craft. Under the impact of the waves, the flimsy canvas walls on most of the amphibious DD tanks collapsed immediately. A special kind of sacrificial heroism was demanded of the DD crews that morning when, by a serious error of judgement, 32 were launched 6,000 yards from the beach. Each one, as it dropped off the ramp of the landing craft, plunged like a stone to the bottom of the sea, leaving pitifully few survivors struggling in the swell. Yet the following crews drove on into the water undeterred by ghastly example. One commander – a certain Sergeant Sertell – insisted upon launching even after his canvas screen had been gashed open before he left the craft. Just five of

this wave of DDs reached the shore. The infantry were thus called upon to storm the beach without the benefit of vital supporting armour which was intended to shoot open the way ashore. Those tanks which reached Omaha did so behind, rather than ahead of, the leading wave of eight companies – 1,450 men in 36 landing craft.

Most of the young Americans plunging into the surf had been crouched in their landing craft for some three hours, having been transferred from the transports 12 miles out from the beach rather than the seven miles the British decided upon. Many had quickly thrown up their breakfasts, and then crouched miserably in the bucketing boats, drenched in spray, paddling in vomit, as darkness gave way to the first light of dawn. Each man was grotesquely heavily loaded with gas mask, grenades, half-pound blocks of TNT, pole or satchel charges, two bandoliers of rifle ammunition, rations and waterbottle – 68 pounds in total. Now, in an instant, they were compelled to rouse themselves from the cramped, crowded stagnation of the landing craft and stumble forward into the hail of machine-gun and mortar fire from the German defences, which killed and wounded many before they even reached dry ground. Others, still groggy with seasickness, their clothes and equipment stiff and matted with salt, desperately sought cover among the beach obstacles or lay paralysed amid the harvest of wreckage that quickly gathered on the shoreline. Early in the assault the beach was clogged with grounded and damaged landing craft, some hulks being swept broadside onto the German obstacles to create a logjam which the next wave could not pass. A flamethrower operator on one vessel suffered a direct hit on his weapon: the explosion catapulted his dying body into the sea, spewing blazing fuel over the decks. The landing craft caught fire and burnt for the next 18 hours, amid constant detonations from its 20 mm Oerlikon ammunition.

The plan demanded that 270 specially-trained demolition men would follow the lead infantry onto the beach and immediately begin to blow the German obstacles, clearing the way for the

great rolling succession of follow-up units before the tide covered the mines. 25,000 more men and 4,000 vehicles were due on Omaha with the second tide of the day. In the event, under the intense fire, which killed or wounded more than 40 per cent of the engineers, and the chaos of soldiers wounded or terrified behind the steel hedgehogs, only a handful of obstacles were exploded that morning. The path to the beach was forced open principally by the hulls of landing craft that rammed obstacles by accident or intent, often triggering the mines and adding more hulks to the debris on the waterline. Of 16 armoured bulldozers sent ashore, only six arrived and three of these were quickly destroyed. Among the infantry, command quickly approached collapse. Three-quarters of the 116th Regiment's radio sets were destroyed or rendered unworkable, and the unit's forward headquarters was effectively wiped out by a direct hit. Many men were confused to discover that they had been landed far from the sector for which they had been briefed and trained. Americans lay prone in the shallow water seeking cover, or dragged themselves painfully up the sand with wounds suffered before they were even out of the landing craft. Hundreds huddled beneath the sea wall at the head of the beach, seizing the only shelter Omaha offered that day, although some companies' survivors took 45 minutes to struggle even that far from the waterline. Hundreds of men were already dying or dead – there would be more than 2,000 casualties on the beach that day.

Among the living, an overwhelming paralysis set in. Much of what takes place on every battlefield is decided by example, men being driven to act in noble or ignoble fashion by the behaviour of those around them. On Omaha that morning, the inexperience of many American junior leaders made itself felt. The confused nature of the landings, with men landing by half-platoons often many yards from the boats carrying their own officers and comrades, destroyed unit cohesion. To the great majority of infantrymen looking for an example to follow out of the apparent collapse of

purpose on Omaha that morning, it seemed most prudent merely to seek what shelter they could, and cling to it.

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Aboard the cruiser *Augusta* offshore, General Bradley watched the events unfolding on the beaches frustrated by the paucity of communications. A steel command cabin had been built for him on deck, 20 feet by 10, the walls dominated by Michelin motoring maps of France, a few pin-ups and large-scale maps of Normandy. A row of clerks sat at typewriters along one wall, while Bradley and his personal staff clustered around the big plotting table in the centre. Much of that morning, however, the general was on the bridge, standing beside the Task Force commander, Admiral Kirk, watching through binoculars the distant smoke shrouding the shore, his ears plugged with cotton to muffle the blast of the *Augusta's* guns, his nose swathed in plaster over an embarrassing boil that had been troubling him for days. Photographers were kept away from First Army's commander on 6 June.

The day had begun with a series of minor alarms: the sight of the swell that they knew at once would imperil the DD tanks; the report of 15 E-boats putting out from Cherbourg, sinking the Norwegian destroyer *Svenner* before they were put to flight: 'As the morning lengthened,' Bradley wrote, 'my worries deepened over the alarming and fragmentary reports we picked up on the navy net. From those messages we could piece together only an incoherent account of sinkings, swampings, heavy enemy fire and chaos on the beaches. Though we could see it dimly through the haze and hear the echo of its guns, the battle belonged that morning to the thin, wet line of khaki that dragged itself ashore on the Channel coast of France.'³ By mid-morning the apparent collapse of the landing plan, both on and offshore, had plunged V Corps' staff into the deepest dismay. Colonel Benjamin Talley, cruising in a DUKW a few hundred yards from the beach to report directly to Gerow, told of LCTs milling around the smoke-shrouded sands 'like

a stampeding herd of cattle'. Bradley 'gained the impression that our forces had suffered an irreversible catastrophe'.⁴ A situation was unfolding that came nearer than any that day to matching the terrible fears of Churchill, Brooke and Eisenhower.

Ranger Mike Rehm of C Company, 5th Battalion, landed in Dog Green sector shortly after H-Hour with 10 men, two of whom were killed and three wounded in the first hundred yards between the sea and the base of the hill. Rehm huddled for shelter behind a knocked-out DD tank, finding himself beside a Ranger whom he did not recognize, smoking a cigar. Suddenly they discovered that the tank was not knocked out, for its engine sprang into life and it began to move. The two men ran hastily towards the sea wall. After a few paces Rehm glanced around and saw that his companion lay covered in blood from the waist down. He reached the wall alone. There he lay through the two hours which followed, amidst a huddle of infantry and other Rangers representing almost every unit on the beach that morning.

A, B and C Companies of 2nd Ranger Battalion had lain offshore awaiting a signal from their commanding officer, Colonel Rudder, to land and advance through the positions of the landing force on Pointe du Hoc, if this successfully gained its objectives. But even after delaying 15 minutes beyond the appointed radio rendezvous, the men tossing in the boats had heard nothing. They were obliged to assume that the Pointe du Hoc landing had failed. They were ordered in to the western flank of Omaha beach. One LCA struck a mine as it approached, blowing off the door of the craft, killing the seaman manning it and stunning the Ranger platoon commander. His 34 men floundered out of the sinking vessel and struck out for the shore. The next platoon commander, Lieutenant Brice, waded onto the beach and turned to shout 'Let's go!' to his men before falling dead in front of them. Meanwhile, A Company's craft had grounded 75 yards offshore, and many of its men died in the water under machine-gun fire. When Gerard Rotthof's mother heard that her son was to become a radioman, she said: 'Well at least he won't have to carry a rifle any more.' But now Rotthof lay

trapped on the beach beneath the weight of his 60-pound SCR 284 set, wounded by mortar fragments in the face and back. He received the last rites twice, but somehow survived terrible internal injuries. Only 35 men of A Company and 27 from B of the 2nd Rangers reached the sea wall, out of 130 who launched from the transports before dawn.

200 yards out from the beach, Lieutenant Sid Salomon and 1 Platoon of C Company still supposed that the whole thing looked a pushover: not a single shell or small-arms round had come close to them. Then the ramp dropped and they were exposed to the full fury of the defences. An immensely tall 31-year-old graduate of New York University who enlisted in March 1942, Salomon had ordered his men to go all-out for the cliff base, under no circumstances pausing for a casualty. Yet within seconds one of his sergeants, Oliver Reed, was hit and fell beneath the ramp. Salomon could not stop himself from seizing the wounded man and dragging him through the waist-high water to the beach. Some of the platoon overtook him as he floundered, and now he passed four already dead from a mortar burst. He himself fell hit in the shoulder. Convinced that he was finished, he called to his platoon sergeant, Bob Kennedy. Reaching into his field jacket, he said: 'I'm dead. Take the maps.' But then a machine-gun began to kick up sand in front of them, and Salomon found that he was not only alive, but could run. At the base of the cliff he counted nine survivors of his platoon, out of 30 who left the landing craft. His old sergeant, who had left the platoon on promotion, insisted upon joining them for the assault. Salomon had placed him last out of the boat to give him the best chance of making it. But Sergeant Goales was already among the dead. All told, some two-thirds of the company were casualties.

It was a tribute to the quality of the Rangers that despite losses on a scale that stopped many infantry units in their tracks on Omaha that morning, the survivors of C Company pressed on to climb the cliffs west of the beach with bayonets and toggle ropes, clearing German positions one by one in a succession of fierce

close-quarter actions with tommy guns and phosphorus grenades. Sergeant Julius Belcher charged headlong against one pillbox, tossed in a grenade and then shot down the garrison as they staggered out of the entrance. In their own area, they found later that they had killed some 60 Germans on 6 June. Yet they lacked the strength and the heavy weapons to press on westwards towards Pointe du Hoc. Towards the end of morning, Salomon stood in a captured German position, gazing down on the chaos below. 'I was of the opinion that the invasion had been a failure,' he said laconically.⁵ He reflected that it was going to be a long swim home.

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Corporal Bill Preston's DD crew of the 743rd Tank Battalion watched five of their unit's Shermans sink on launching offshore before it became obvious to the officer commanding their group of eight LCTs that the conditions were impossible. The remainder of the tanks were brought to within 250 yards of the beach before leaving the craft, very late. They glimpsed the cliffs shrouded in thick clouds of smoke as they ran in, then they were crawling out of the water among huddles of isolated infantrymen under intense small-arms fire. The tank commander, a Minnesotan farmer named Ted Geske, pressed the button to collapse their canvas screens, but nothing happened. He clambered out of the turret to do the job manually. At that moment, the waterproofing fell, and Geske was left cursing at his own vulnerability, perched on the hull in the midst of the battlefield. They saw that their tank was well to the right of its objective. They could see dead engineers floating beyond the beach obstacles, where so many wounded men also died as the tide came in over them. They later discovered to their dismay that they had run over one man, for they found his clothing jammed in their tracks. Then they saw the neighbouring platoon of Shermans brew up briskly one by one as an anti-tank gun caught them. Their battalion commander was hit in the shoulder as he stood on the sand, seeking to direct a tankdozer to clear a path for the armour through one of the beach exits.

It was obvious that something was very wrong. 21 of the unit's 51 tanks were destroyed on Omaha, and the neighbouring battalion fared even worse. Preston's crew simply took up position just above the high-water mark, and began to fire at such German positions as they could identify. These were not very many, for the tank fired only about a third of its ammunition before dusk. The 743rd remained on the beach for the next 12 hours.

Some unhappy men ended up on Omaha who should never have been there at all under such circumstances. Sergeant Andy Hertz, the Boston-bred son of a Dutch Jewish father and British mother, had been building airfields in England for almost two years with the 922nd Aviation Engineer Regiment when, somewhat to their bewilderment, he and his unit were issued with carbines, mines, bazookas and combat equipment, and loaded onto invasion transports to build airstrips in France. Aboard his liberty ship offshore, Hertz was in the galley listening to radio reports of the fall of Rome when the engineers were piped on deck. They saw the burning shore before them. A landing craft came alongside. Its skipper asked if the ship could provide any coffee, and announced that he could take in 90 men. A Ranger commanding officer sharing the ship with them declined to send his men ashore at that moment. The major responsible for the engineers shouted that they would go. Lacking assault training, they found the most frightening experience of the morning to be the descent of the scrambling nets into the pitching craft. Then, as they pulled away from the side, they saw their major waving farewell from the upper deck. He had decided to leave Hertz and the others to explore Omaha alone that day, and they never saw him again. An hour or so later, they struggled through five feet of water to the beach.

Few men or vehicles seemed to be moving. Hertz met a very frightened young 18-year-old from the 29th Division who said that he was the only survivor of his squad. The man in front of Hertz, Sergeant Valducci, suddenly fell down, screaming: 'I'm shot!' A beachmaster ran to the group and demanded: 'Who are you people?' Engineers, they said. 'Sounds good,' he replied, 'we've got

wire to clear here. You got bangalores?' No, they said. They were aviation engineers. 'Who the hell sent you in?' They shrugged: 'Some sonofabitch.' And so they joined the clusters of stranded Americans on Omaha, lying behind such shelter as they could find through the hours that followed.⁶

Leading Aircraftsman Norman Phillips was one of a party of 158 British RAF personnel who were landed on Omaha: 'We could see a shambles ahead of us on the beach – burning tanks, jeeps, abandoned vehicles, a terrific crossfire.'⁷ The captain of their LCT ordered them to offload anyway. The first vehicles found themselves driving into eight feet of water. The men struggled to the shore and formed a human chain to assist the non-swimmers. They landed on a sandspit crowded with wounded soldiers who lacked any medical attention. The British officers organized their men into salvage parties to rescue all the equipment that they could, but most had lost everything. Two RAF men were seized and taken prisoner by nervous Americans who could not identify their uniforms. By nightfall, the air force party had lost eight killed, 35 wounded, and 28 of their 35 vehicles. It was 33 days before they were issued with fresh clothing, 108 days before their lost arms and ammunition were replaced.

The reports that reached V Corps and General Bradley from Omaha that morning were not merely gloomy, but at times almost panic-stricken. Bradley's personal aide and Admiral Kirk's gunnery officer cruised close inshore aboard a PT boat and returned soaked and grim. Bradley considered halting all landings on the eastern beach and diverting the follow-up waves to Utah. A monstrous traffic jam had developed off the beach. By a serious flaw in the timetable, soft-skinned vehicles were beginning to arrive to offload in the middle of the battle. Among many naval crews who displayed exemplary courage, there were others whose lack of experience and determination magnified the confusion. The sailors manning a huge rhino raft loaded with vehicles simply abandoned it, 700 yards out, and the drivers and cargo drifted out of control until the rising tide brought them ashore. The Rangers had devel-

oped an early scepticism about naval efficiency when the officer in charge of one of their landing craft rammed a breakwater before getting out of his English harbour, and the skipper of another spent the cross-Channel voyage prostrate with seasickness. Now, one group of Rangers found themselves left to bring their landing craft in to the beach unaided. Its crew simply took to their dinghy and deserted them. In contrast to these episodes, the sailors manning two LCTs with immense courage rammed the beach obstacles head-on, and remained in position using every gun to support the infantry in their plight.

Lieutenant-Colonel John Williamson, commanding the 2nd/18th Infantry of the 1st Division, led his men into their LCVPs soon after 8.00 a.m., more than an hour late. When some craft began to swamp as they circled waiting for word that the beach was clear, the crews of others sought to begin rescue operations. After some forceful urging from Williamson, the craft began their run-in. They approached the shore not in an orderly wave, line abreast, but in a column, a queue, jostling for position on the sands. 'The beach was loaded with men, tanks, DUKWs,' said Williamson. 'I was surprised that nobody had moved off.' Major Frank Colacicco, executive officer of the 3rd/18th, stood among his men on the deck of an LCI, watching the spectacle ashore in utter bewilderment: 'It was like a theatre. We could see it all, we knew that something was knocking the tanks out, but we kept asking, "Why don't they clear the beach? Why aren't our people getting off?'" When at last their own turn came to approach the sands, Colacicco's LCI struck an obstacle whose mine blew up. Some men were hurled into the water by the blast, others found themselves struggling in the surf moments later as the craft settled. At last someone on the beach got a lifeline out to them, and the soaking men dragged themselves ashore. The major was told that Brigadier Wyman, the assistant divisional commander, wanted to see him. He reached the command post after being knocked off his feet by a mortar blast. He was told to take over the objectives of the 1st/16th, and returned to his men lying below the sea wall to point out to them,

unanswerably: 'We can't stay here.' Slowly they began to work up the hillside, crawling over the immobile figures of men of the 116th Infantry: 'They were too green to know that the closer you are to the enemy, the better off you will be.' Colacicco tore a strip off one man he saw firing apparently recklessly along the hillside: 'Just settle down,' said the major soothingly. 'That's our men over there.' 'But sir, they have overcoats on,' insisted the soldier. Indeed they were German riflemen.

Yet although the defenders possessed the capability to maul the American landing on Omaha seriously, to impede and to disorganize it, they lacked the power to halt it absolutely. Despite the near-total destruction of the first wave of invaders landing on the western flank below Vierville, despite the casualties and the terror inflicted upon thousands of green troops, a great many men survived to reach the sea wall alive – enough, finally, to swamp the vastly outnumbered German defenders. General Marcks's LXXXIV Corps reserve, the 915th Regiment, had set off in pursuit of the mythical paratroop force of Allied dummies at 4.00 a.m. on 6 June. It was hours after the seaborne landing before the 915th could be reached by dispatch rider, regrouped, and brought back from the Carentan–Isigny area on foot and by commandeered vehicle. The defenders thus lacked any force capable of mounting a co-ordinated counter-attack either against the attackers of Omaha, or against the British threat to Bayeux, further east. At Omaha, the Americans found themselves facing Germans of the 352nd Division as well as the 716th – eight battalions instead of four. The defenders possessed the strength and determination to fight doggedly from fixed positions. But where the Americans, inch by inch, gained ground, they were able to keep it. The toeholds prised out of the heights above the beach that day by a few brave men of the Rangers, the 1st and 29th Divisions could never normally have been held against the quick local counter-attacks at which the German army excelled. But such movements did not develop. Like a trickling stream slipping between pebbles, a handful of courageous leaders and small groups of men found their way

around the German strongpoints covering the beach exits, and forced a path for the American army off Omaha beach. The Corps plan for the attack was a failure. But the men on the hillside, spurred by their own desperation, found their own means to gain the high ground.

The principal problem in almost every attack on every battlefield is to maintain momentum. Every instinct, especially among inexperienced soldiers, is to take cover under fire. Instinct is reinforced when the bodies of others who have failed to do so lie all around. It requires a considerable act of will to persuade limbs to act which have suddenly acquired an immobility of their own. Inexperienced troops find it notoriously difficult to assess the extent of resistance and risk. On some occasions this can be to their advantage – or rather, that of their commanders – because it leads them to perform acts that more seasoned soldiers would not be so foolhardy as to attempt. But on Omaha the 29th Division, in its first experience of combat, deprived in the first hours of many of its officers, dismayed by its losses and confused by its predicament, became dangerously paralysed. The veteran 1st Division, on its left, performed significantly better – indeed, most Americans later agreed that without ‘The Big Red One’ the battle would have been lost.

It was individuals, not divisions, who determined the outcome of the day. It is arguable that as early as mid-morning, when Bradley and Gerow were still receiving deeply gloomy reports from Omaha, the real situation was much more encouraging than the view of the beach from the ships led the commanders to believe. Barely two hours after H-Hour, when the formidable network of German wire and machine-guns was still blocking all movement up the five valleys offering vehicle access from the beach, small groups of Americans had already reached the high ground to threaten the German flanks. The survivors of the 2nd Rangers’ A and B Companies reached the sea wall at 7.45 a.m., and immediately began to work up the heights. Staff Sergeant William Courtney and Private First Class William Braher of A Company’s

1 Platoon were probably the first Americans to reach the top of the cliff, around 8.30 a.m. When the Rangers gained the summit, they were too few in number to achieve a decisive success, although they sent word to a company of the 116th Infantry below to follow them up, and one boat section did so. But in the next two hours, a succession of similar small-scale actions took place all along the Omaha front, driving vital wedges into the German defences. 23 men of E Company, 2/16th Infantry, under Lieutenant John Spalding gained the hill and began to attack the German strongpoint which covered the east side of the St Laurent exit from the rear. After two hours of dogged fighting within the network of pillboxes and communicating trenches, the Americans cornered an officer and 20 men and forced their surrender.

Brigadier-General Norman Cota and his 29th Division command group reached the beach at 7.30 a.m. with the 116th Regiment's headquarters. The general began to move among the bewildered tangle of infantrymen, Rangers, naval beach maintenance parties and gunner forward observers. He saw one man who attempted to move up the hill shot down. The soldier lay in front of the American positions crying: 'Medico, I'm hit!' repeatedly for several minutes. Then he moaned 'Mama' and cried for a few moments before he died. Two of the headquarters group were killed within three feet of Cota when he established his first command post, while his signaller was hurled 20 feet up the bluff by blast. But the fiery, inexhaustible brigadier began pushing officers, urging men, seeking routes by which to break the bloody deadlock by the sea wall.

Mike Rehm of the 5th Rangers had been huddled beneath the shingle bank for two hours or more with a group of men when Cota appeared. In one of his legendary encounters of the day, the general demanded to know who they were. Rangers, he was told. 'Then, godammit, if you're Rangers get up and lead the way!' exploded Cota.⁸ The men began to thrust four-foot lengths of bangalore torpedo beneath the wire ahead, locking them together until they could blow a gap. In front, the entire hillside was

wreathed in smoke from the blazing undergrowth. Coughing and choking, the Rangers realized that they could not run through it, but at last they pulled on their gas masks and groped forward. Some 35 men reached the metalled road at the top of the hill. Covered by 60 mm mortars firing at such short range that the tubes were almost vertical, they began to work slowly westwards. There were now Americans behind some of the most dangerous German positions covering the beach.

By 11.00 a.m., Vierville was in American hands. When Cota himself reached a house on the edge of the village, he found 70 men sheltering against the wall who shouted 'Sniper! Sniper!' as he approached. The brigadier impatiently ordered them to clear the way. They closed in on the German, who threw a stick grenade down the hill towards them before being killed seconds later. Cota began to move back down the draw towards the beach. He met one of his own staff officers, Major William Bretton, clutching a briefcase and looking exceedingly angry. 'Dammit, I can't get these people to move,' complained Bretton. Cota called a young infantry captain and told him to get his men going off the beach. Hesitantly, they began to obey. Then Cota spotted an abandoned bulldozer loaded with TNT, desperately needed to blow obstacles down the beach. He shouted to the men lying around it for a volunteer to drive the explosives to the engineers. At last a red-headed soldier stood up and said, 'I'll do it,' and climbed on the vehicle. Yard by yard, the beach was unsticking.⁹ At 1.30 p.m., Gerow signalled to Bradley: 'Troops formerly pinned down on beaches . . . advancing up heights behind beaches.'

The German strongpoints were being knocked out either by superbly vigorous gunfire from the destroyers steaming as close as 800 yards offshore, or by determined action from Rangers or infantry. Hein Severloh's battery had long since been reduced to firing single rounds in place of salvos, for several weeks earlier half its ammunition reserve had been moved further inland as an intended precautionary measure against a direct hit. Now the gunners had no means of bringing shells forward and the only

truck driver who attempted to do so was blown up on the journey by an Allied aircraft attack. By noon, Severloh himself had fired 12,000 rounds from his machine-gun, and was reduced to shooting tracer. This was helpful to his aim, for the gun's sights had been shot off by a stray bullet, but deadly in revealing his position to American spotters. WN 59 and 61 – the neighbouring 'resistance nests' – had fallen silent. WN 62 had no field of fire on its west side, where the invaders were already working up to the rear. When their battery had fired all its ammunition, the gunners blew up their pieces and retreated southwards on their horsedrawn limbers. Severloh and the men in the strongpoint decided that enough was enough. They ran crouching from the entrance and began to work their way up the hill towards the rear, and safety. Only Severloh and one signaller escaped alive.

All that afternoon, Brigadier Cota moved relentlessly up and down the hillside, urging on the men clambering in sluggish files through the minefields and over the bodies of the dead. There were still perilously few heavy weapons on the higher ground to support the infantry now beginning to fight through the first hedges and fields of the *bocage*. When he found a group of Rangers claiming to be pinned down beyond Vierville, Cota himself walked ahead of them across the open ground to demonstrate that a man could move and survive. Many soldiers who attempted to set this sort of example on 6 June and in the weeks that followed were killed instantly. But Cota lived and the Rangers moved forward. Although persistent shellfire was still falling on the beach behind them, most of the Germans defending the hillside were dead or captured, and their gunnery OPs had been destroyed, removing the batteries' vital eyes. Medical corpsmen were moving among the wounded, looking out for those who had died so that they might give their blankets to men who were still living, but shivering. One of Cota's staff marvelled at the spectacle of a group of engineers sitting on the sand eating their K rations, apparently oblivious of the dead and wounded all around them. A dog, which had evidently been the pet of one of the German strongpoints, fell

upon men of the 1st Division moving up the bluff with impressive enthusiasm, and had to be driven off with carbine fire. At 4.30 p.m., a staff officer of the 29th Division noted in his diary: 'Prayed for the fourth time today, asking God – "Why do these things have to be visited upon men?"' Brigadier Cota and his aide saw a soldier who appeared to be frozen with terror, praying on his knees in the scrub above the beach. But when they reached him, they saw that he was dead.¹⁰

On the high ground, Lieutenant-Colonel Williamson and the 2nd/18th had advanced to within a mile of their designated D-Day objectives. Like every American soldier above Omaha that day, he and his men were cursing the hedges of the *bocage*, which provided such perfect cover for snipers and were already inflicting interminable delays upon advancing units. Men sought cover whenever firing sounded nearby. Crossing a gap, the young soldier in front of Williamson was shot. The colonel put a Browning automatic rifle on top of the hedge and raked the area with fire. They moved onwards a little way without further casualties, then took up positions for the night just short of Colville. The Omaha beachhead had been secured. The Germans lacked the power and mobility to reverse the verdict of the afternoon. By nightfall, the Americans controlled a perimeter up to a mile deep beyond Omaha, while the 4th Division on Utah had linked up with General Maxwell Taylor and his men of the 82nd Airborne Division west of the causeways from the beach. Gerow of V Corps had not planned to establish his headquarters ashore until the following day. But Bradley, conscious of the urgent need to get a grip on the situation from the beach, told him to get his corps staff offloaded immediately. All the plans for a rapid supply build-up were to be sacrificed to the need to get more men onto the ground. 90 amphibious DUKWs, preloaded with ammunition, provided the vital minimum supply to sustain the forces ashore overnight. Some landing-craft crews, utterly exhausted, dropped their anchors when darkness fell. Naval officers in launches hastened among them, urging the crews back into motion. That night Montgomery discussed with Dempsey the

possibility of landing all further troops planned for Omaha on the British beaches. The suggestion was never pursued, but in view of the immensely dangerous gulf that such a change of plan would have exposed in the middle of the Allied line, it is a measure of the alarm surrounding the Omaha situation that it was ever discussed.

While the Utah landing had gone as nearly in accordance with planning as any commander could have expected, on Omaha the failures and errors of judgement by the staff had only been redeemed by the men on the sand. Many officers, including Brigadier Cota, believed that the American landings would have proved far easier had they been made in darkness, a possibility rejected by the navy and air force, who insisted upon the need for daylight to make best use of their bombardment power. Had elite infantry such as the Rangers led the way ashore before dawn, it is indeed likely that they would have been able to get off the beach and work in among the German positions with or without the bombardment. The events of D-Day emphasized the limited ability of high explosives to destroy strong defensive positions. But the follow-up waves and armour would have suffered immense problems attempting to get ashore under heavy fire before dawn. The timing of the landing was probably sound, although the troops could have profited immensely from continuing support fire until the moment they reached the beach, and from better gunnery forward observation thereafter. American naval reports spoke of the frustration of ships cruising silently offshore, unable to fire because of lack of identified targets.

The Americans refused to employ British-designed specialized armour – tanks throwing flame and explosive charges, and flail mineclearers. These would certainly have made a significant impact on Omaha. But they were not a magic formula for success. Given the formidable weight of German firepower concentrated against the five critical beach exits, it is likely that much of the specialized armour would have been knocked out on the beach in the same fashion as so many gun Shermans, merely contributing

to the logjam of wreckage that did so much to hamper movement of vehicles and landing craft.

Chester Wilmot and others have seized upon the example of Omaha to demonstrate the supposed shortcomings of the American soldier.¹² In the weeks that followed, some American commanders, including Bradley, were to be seriously worried by the performance of some infantry units. On D-Day, there proved to be sufficient outstanding individual American soldiers and enough elite units such as the Rangers and Airborne to gain the day. Casualties on each of the Allied beaches, including Omaha, were almost exactly in proportion to the weight of unsuppressed enemy fire that the invaders met. The Americans suffered 4,649 casualties among their seaborne landing force to put ashore 55,000 men on D-Day. If the American line at midnight on 6 June was still tenuous, and fell some distance short of its planned objectives, V and VII Corps had achieved their vital strategic purposes merely by establishing themselves ashore.

It was on the British front on D-Day, where so much rested upon fast and ruthless progress inland from the beaches, that far more dramatic strategic hopes were at stake.

The British beaches

At 7.25 a.m., an hour after the Americans began landing on Omaha, the minesweeping flail tanks of the 22nd Dragoon Guards touched Sword beach at the eastern end of the Allied line, precisely on schedule. Lieutenant Charles Munday in *Leander I* drove ashore into the mortar and machine-gun fire with the hatch open as usual because of his haunting fear of fire. Some of the sappers disembarking with them were hit immediately. Corporal Charles Baldwin watched the same instant fate befall the engineers who

led his flail of the Westminster Dragoons: 'They were flung about as German machine-gun fire hit them, clutching various parts of their bodies, jolting like rag dolls, then sinking out of sight into the water. I often wondered if any of those unfortunate men survived the landing. Even slightly wounded, the weight of their equipment dragged them under.'¹

Mundy's column of five Shermans clattered forward out of the landing craft and took up echelon formation to begin flailing, thrashing the sand with their great probosces of chains, creeping forward astonishingly unscathed to the metalled road, where they switched off the equipment and began engaging the German defences with their 75 mm guns. Mundy could hear screams from defensive positions above the beach as a Crocodile flamethrower puffed its terrible jet of fire towards them. 34 of the 40 Sherman DD amphibious tanks launched against Sword also arrived as planned, ahead of the infantry, cleared the beach successfully and became heavily engaged in the dunes beyond. A few minutes later, the 20 landing craft carrying the first wave of the 1st South Lancashires and 2nd East Yorkshires dropped their ramps and launched the lead companies, followed 20 minutes later by the second wave. These point battalions suffered less severely crossing the beach than those which followed. The East Yorkshires immediately began moving off towards Ouistreham, with men of 4 and 10 Commandos. 41 Commando, which took heavy casualties in their landing, headed for Lion-sur-Mer. By 9.00 a.m. the South Lancashires were between one and one and a half miles inland, at Hermanville. Vehicles and supporting units were pouring ashore, clogging the beaches. From the outset, the Sword landing was a remarkable success. Lieutenant Arthur Heal, commanding the sapper platoon attached to the 1st Suffolks, was still congratulating himself on completing his first trip in a landing craft without feeling seasick when the order came, 'Ramp down! All out!' A few moments later, having passed through the infantry on the beach and regrouped for the battalion's advance to its objectives inland,

Heal was enjoying a moment of anticlimax and relief. There had been powerful rumours within the unit before D-Day that they would pay for the honour of leading the assault by accepting withering losses.

The British landing plan for each brigade front called for four LCTs carrying four DD tanks apiece to put these ashore at H-5 minutes, followed at H-Hour by four LCTs carrying the specialized armour – flails, Crocodiles, Petards and the like – with sapper groups to begin work on the obstacles. Behind them at H+7 came eight assault landing craft bearing the two leading infantry companies; at H+20 another eight LCAs followed with two more infantry companies, and at H+25 came two LCAs with the men of the beach group. At H+35 bulldozers and more specialized armour rolled ashore; at H+60 nine LCTs with self-propelled guns; at H+90 10 LCTs with a full squadron of tanks. The tenth wave, behind all these, carried more gunners and 21 amphibious DUKWs loaded with stores and ammunition. COSSAC had predicted the loss of 10 per cent of the landing craft, with a further 20 per cent damaged. In the event, the losses were less severe, but it was not remarkable that, with a landing plan of such complexity, in many places the schedule collapsed in the first half-hour and successive waves reached the shore helplessly entangled with each other – creating a great jumble of men, vehicles, landing craft and wreckage on the waterline.

Even on Sword, where the losses were slight in relation to the scale of the assault, some men paid a speedy price for the success of the 3rd Division. Two LCTs ran off course and rammed two DD tanks, which sank with merciless immediacy. The seizure of the La Brèche strongpoint covering the beach took three hours, during which troops coming ashore had to struggle through fierce fire. Some men reaching the beach in Queen White sector were touched to see a lone French girl struggling in the shallows to help wounded men out of the water. Shell and mortar fire from inland continued to harass the beach for most of 6 June and the days

which followed it. The South Lancashires, who bore the brunt of the La Brèche battle, lost 11 officers and 96 other ranks on D-Day; the East Yorkshires about the same.

Private Len Ainslie was an anti-tank gunner of the King's Regiment, which was to provide local defence for the beach area. A regular soldier who had been in the army since 1938, if Ainslie had had his way he would have landed by glider, for he had asked for a transfer to airborne forces. But his colonel refused to forward the request because Ainslie was a battalion bugler. Now, 100 yards offshore, his landing craft was struck amidships on the starboard side by a shell. Ainslie was appalled by the trail of devastation immediately in front of him. A big cook's head vanished, the company commander's batman lost his legs. A jumble of other broken bodies drifted amid the rush of water pouring through the side. A naval officer called abruptly: 'Come on, all out!' Men began to struggle over the side of the sinking hulk. Ainslie tried for a moment to help a young soldier, who remarked flatly as he lay, 'I can't do anything now, can I?' Then the officer shouted to Ainslie: 'Leave him.' Somebody ashore hurled them a line. The survivors swam and stumbled through the dead and the wounded in the water to the beach, where they saw the battalion's commanding officer killed a few minutes later. They were all soaking wet, their battledress and boots and equipment stiff with salt for days. But Ainslie and most of his comrades felt less a sense of shock than elation at their own achievement in survival, in having made it.

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Some of the fire falling upon Sword beach during the morning came from the four 150 mm self-propelled guns of 3 Battery, 1716th Artillery Regiment, firing from a position at Plumetot, 3,000 yards inland from the coast. After standing by since midnight, at dawn its commander, Lieutenant Rudolf Schaaf, walked forward a little way until he could see the great invasion fleet stretched out before him off the coast. He found the spectacle

impressive rather than frightening – it all seemed somehow detached from himself. ‘Well,’ he wondered thoughtfully, ‘what do we do now?’ Contact with the battery’s forward observer in a ‘resistance nest’ on the beach was lost soon after first light. Thereafter, the guns fired on predetermined DFs – Defensive Fire targets – measured many weeks before. Around mid-morning, Schaaf was suddenly ordered to take his guns immediately north to the coast, and counter-attack towards Lion-sur-Mer with infantry of the 3rd Battalion of 736th Regiment.

It was a pathetic episode. The first man of the battery to be killed was a taxi-driver from Leipzig who had been posted back to Germany several days earlier, but lingered in order to buy food and presents to take home. Now he died driving forward a truck loaded with ammunition. The German infantry were middle-aged men. They were strafed intermittently from the air as they advanced in open order down the gentle decline to the sea, and soon found themselves under fierce gun and small-arms fire. Schaaf’s guns, astonishingly, approached Lion intact at around 10.30 a.m., and the Germans watched British infantrymen scuttling for cover, lacking heavy weapons or tanks to deal with them. As they fired into the buildings over open sights, little clusters of invaders emerged with their hands up, and were hustled to the rear. But the weight of British fire rapidly overwhelmed the infantry. When the Germans at last despaired and began to pull back, only 20 men of the 3rd/736th remained with the guns when they reached the old battery position. They examined their prisoners, and were awed by their superb maps, food and equipment. Schaaf ordered them to be herded into a shell hole. In great agitation, a German-speaking British officer produced a copy of the Geneva Convention which he waved at the artilleryman, declaring forcefully that it was illegal to shoot them. ‘Nobody is going to be shot,’ said Schaaf brusquely. A few minutes later, he was telephoned by the excitable Major Hof, his battalion commander, and ordered to advance immediately to regimental HQ, two miles away on

Hill 61, and attempt to extricate them from heavy attack. Schaaf abandoned his prisoners in their shell hole, and departed south-eastwards.

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On Juno beach, a few miles west of Sword, the Canadians had also broken through the coastal crust, but at heavier cost. The local naval commanders delayed H-Hour from 7.35 to 7.45 a.m., and even then many craft were late. As a result, the fast incoming tide covered an offshore reef which it had been feared would prove a serious hazard, and the first units found themselves landing right in amid the German beach obstacles. As the landing craft went astern after unloading, the coxswains could do nothing to prevent themselves from becoming helplessly entangled in mines and twisted steel. 20 of the leading 24 vessels were lost or damaged, among a total of 90 out of 306 employed on Juno that morning. Close artillery support for all the British landings was to be provided by Royal Marines manning obsolete Centaur tanks mounting 95 mm howitzers, but these proved lethally unseaworthy in landing craft. Scores capsized and were lost. Only six of 40 intended to support the Canadians reached the shore. Most of the DD tanks made it, but arrived behind the leading infantry rather than in time to provide suppressive fire ahead of them. Tanks and infantry moved inland together, becoming entangled in heavy street fighting in Courseulles that lasted well into the afternoon. The capture of St Aubin took three hours. The enemy in Bernières, where the assault company landing below the village lost 50 per cent of its strength in 100 yards, fought hard until they were outflanked. But in accordance with the plan, the Canadian follow-up units passed through the assault troops still mopping up around the beaches, ignored the snipers, who continued in action until nightfall, and pressed on towards their objectives inland.

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The 50th Division attacking Gold, the most westerly of the three British beaches, ran into their first serious difficulty in front of the fortified German positions at Le Hamel. The 1st Hampshires and 1st Dorsets landed under furious fire from bunkers scarcely scarred by the bombardment, manned by Germans of 716th Division's 1st Battalion. The British supporting tanks arrived too late to give the infantry immediate support and, as on Juno, very few of the Royal Marine Centaurs arrived at all. Corporal Chris Portway, who landed with 231st Brigade HQ, was impressed above all by the sense of 'noise, noise, noise', the continuous roar of gunfire, much of it from the Allied bombardment ships. Major Dick Gosling, the artillery battery commander, who landed with the Hampshires' battalion headquarters, was pleasantly surprised in his first moments ashore to find that the beach 'was not the raging inferno some people had feared'. Then he saw ripples of sand being pitched up all around him, and heard a noise like a swarm of angry bees over his head – his first encounter with enemy fire in six years of soldiering. Nelson-Smith, the Hampshires' fire-eating CO, who had insisted upon leading his headquarters in with the first wave, called to the others to lie down. Gosling, hopeful that the colonel knew more than he did about what to do next, dutifully prostrated himself in a foot of water. Then they all sprang to their feet and began to run for the shelter of the dunes. A blast close at hand killed a man beside Gosling, and suddenly he found that he could not walk. A mortar fragment had struck him in the leg. Somehow he reached the dunes, where he found Nelson-Smith, also wounded. Gosling began desperately scraping a hole for his head with an entrenching tool. Most of the Hampshires' wireless sets had been knocked out by the blast in the midst of the headquarters group, and the gunner found his own set so hopelessly clogged with ships' morse and other units' communications that he was unable to send a single radio message that morning to his own guns offshore. A rifleman nearby craned his head briefly to look over the rim of the dune and immediately fell back dead. Gosling

looked up cautiously, and was astounded to glimpse a German only 10 yards away. He pulled out his revolver and fired a shot which discouraged the enemy soldier – no doubt as shocked as the gunner himself – from appearing again.

The sound of intense small-arms fire now seemed more distant. Gosling assumed that the Hampshires were making progress. He had been lying immobile for some time when he glimpsed the first of his own self-propelled guns coming ashore, led by his second-in-command, Vere Broke, standing proudly upright in his half-track. Gosling yelled: 'Vere – get your head down, you'll get shot!' Broke studiously tilted his helmet an inch forward on his head.

Gunner Charles Wilson, also of the 147th Field Regiment, spent most of the run-in to the beach seeking shelter from the devastating noise of four 25-pounders firing alongside each other in the landing craft. Wilson was stripped to vest, pants and gym shoes for the invasion, for he was one of a group detailed to tow ashore and release one of the huge 'roly-poly' mats over which the guns would drive up the beach:

We hit two mines going in [wrote Wilson] – bottle mines on stakes. They didn't stop us, although our ramp was damaged and an officer standing on it was killed. We grounded on a sandbank. The first man off was a commando sergeant in full kit. He disappeared like a stone into six feet of water. We grasped the ropes of the 'Roly Poly' and plunged down the ramp into the icy water. The mat was quite unmanageable in the rough water and dragged us away towards some mines. We let go the ropes and scrambled ashore. I lost my shoes and vest in the struggle, and had only my PT shorts. Somebody offered cigarettes but they were soaking wet. George in the Bren carrier was first vehicle off the LCT. It floated for a moment, drifted onto a mine and sank. George dived overboard and swam ashore. The battery command post half-track got off with me running behind. The beach was strewn with wreckage, a blazing tank, bundles of blankets and kit, bodies and bits of bodies. One bloke near me was blown in half by a shell and his lower

part collapsed in a bloody heap in the sand. The half-track stopped and I managed to struggle into my clothes.²

Major Gosling eventually managed to hobble down to a German pillbox on the beach, where he sat among other casualties waiting for evacuation. The occupants had clearly been disturbed over breakfast – coffee and sausage lay on the table, a picture of Hitler on the wall. Gosling found a letter from a French girl named Madeleine, obviously addressed to one of the garrison, promising to meet him on the evening of 6 June.

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It is only for commanders and historians that it is possible to say that a battle proved a great deal easier than expected, and that casualties were remarkably light. For the men taking part in the D-Day landings, there were moments of violent intensity and horror on the British beaches as shattering as anything that happened on Omaha. It would have availed them little to know that their experience was much less terrible in scale than that of the Americans, for in kind it was equally deadly. Three of the five landing craft bringing 47 Commando ashore struck mines. When the survivors who swam to the beach regrouped to begin their advance towards Port-en-Bessin, 46 men and almost every wireless set in the unit had been lost.

Most of the men of 73rd Field Company, Royal Engineers, shared a common sensation of relief on reaching a shore – even a hostile shore – after three days imprisoned on their landing craft. When the first of their LCTs lowered its ramp off Le Hamel, the leading Petard AVRE tank tipped forward into the water and jammed itself half in, half out. The craft swung slowly round with the tide until a mine exploded against its stern. With the bridge and engine badly damaged, and fire from the shore raking the crippled vessel, it lay helpless on the waterline until it could be unloaded at the next low tide at 1.00 p.m. Of the engineers aboard it, two were killed and several more wounded, including one young

officer who had somehow escaped from the debacle at Singapore in 1942. A second LCT hit a mine and began to settle 300 yards offshore. One section of men was rescued by an LCT leaving the beach which, to their fury, insisted upon carrying them back to England. Another group was threatened with the same fate but, after furious protests from its NCO in charge, had themselves trans-shipped to yet another craft heading into the beach. Captain James Smith and his team had been working desperately on the beach obstacles for almost an hour when he ran to his company commander to report progress, and was killed by machine-gun fire as he reached him. For any of those ignorant of war who believed that army engineers merely built roads or bridges, 6 June revealed how the sappers were required to bear the very brunt of the battle, and the price that they paid for doing so.

The flail tanks of the Westminster Dragoons were modified to wade rather than to swim the last yards to the beach. As they tipped over the LCT ramps, the drivers saw the view through their periscopes turn dark green, then progressively lighten until the sky appeared once more and water poured off the hulls as they crawled up the shore. Captain Roger Bell halted for a moment to check his position below La Rivière. His crew watched three sappers from a neighbouring AVRE Churchill clambering out onto its hull. Then there was a massive explosion, hurling sappers and fragments of tank into the air all around them and a sledgehammer thump on their own tank. For a moment they believed that they themselves had been hit by a shell, until Captain Bell reported that the engine of the exploding Churchill had struck them. They saw another tank explode. Corporal Charlie Baldwin in the co-driver's seat spotted the flash of the German gun and called over the intercom: 'Eighty-eight-pillbox-eleven o'clock.' They traversed rapidly and fired. 'Missed,' said Baldwin laconically. Jimmy Smith, the gunner, fired again and once more they assumed a miss. Bell said that they must press on anyway. They only learned later that they had destroyed the German gun. For all the attention focused since D-Day upon the role of the specialized armour, it is striking

to notice that, on the beaches, the 'funnies' performing as conventional gun tanks made a markedly greater impact on the course of the battle than they did by using their engineer equipment, although this was obviously also valuable.

They began flailing at the high-water mark, and continued until they reached clear ground, where Bell pulled the pin on the green smoke canister to signal to the infantry that a lane was open. It fell on the floor of the turret, and they gasped and cursed amid the choking fumes until it could be retrieved and tossed out. Bell fought through the days that followed with his hair, face and moustache dyed a brilliant green. They drove on towards Crépon, Baldwin suddenly glimpsing three Germans cowering in a shell-hole in the road. As they passed, the tank track slipped sideways into it and, over the roar of the engine, the Englishman caught the sound of the terrible screams beneath them. At their rendezvous in an orchard, they had just begun to boil a kettle when a bullet smacked against the hull beside them. They leapt quickly back into the tank and scanned the scenery. Like so many Allied soldiers in the weeks that followed, they decided that the shot could only have come from a church tower overlooking them. They worked high explosive rounds up and down the building until they were convinced that nothing inside it could have survived. Then the tanks moved on.

The 6th Green Howards, landing 1,000 yards eastwards below the German strongpoint at La Rivière, suffered the common run of small comedies, tragedies and moments of heroism. When the LCA carrying the battalion HQ group grounded, its stern at once began to swing round towards a mined obstacle. The CO, Robin Hastings, sat on the ramp and dropped his feet cautiously into the water to explore the depth. Hitting bottom when he was only ankle-deep, the colonel paddled ashore. This was not an absurd precaution. Sergeant Hill of 16 Platoon, who had survived the entire North African and Sicilian campaigns, jumped from the ramp of another LCA into a deep shellhole, from which he could not extricate himself before the vessel ran over him.

Sergeant-Major Stan Hollis reached the beach feeling a little foolish, for he was already suffering a self-inflicted wound from a bad burn on the hand. He had carelessly seized the barrel of the bren gun with which he had been firing over the side of the craft as they closed in. His D Company advanced only a few hundred yards inland before they began to take casualties from a position to the right of the road. Major Lofthouse, the company commander, pointed it out to Hollis: 'There's a pillbox in there, sergeant-major!' Without hesitating, Hollis sprang to his feet and ran 30 yards to the German position, spraying sten-gun fire as he went, until he reached the weapon slit, where he thrust in the barrel and hosed the interior with fire. Then he climbed on the roof, pulled the pin from a grenade, and leaned over to drop it through the slit. Not content with this, he began to advance alone along the communicating trench to the next pillbox. Its garrison hastily emerged and began to surrender. Hollis returned with 25 prisoners.

The sergeant-major, who performed a succession of feats of this kind in the weeks that followed, was later awarded the Victoria Cross. Every unit in every war needs a handful of men willing to commit acts of sacrificial courage to enable it to gain its objectives, and it is the nature of these that few who carry them out survive. But Hollis did, and lived to keep a Yorkshire pub after the war. Lieutenant-Colonel Hastings described him as a simple, straightforward Yorkshireman keen on horse-racing: 'He was absolutely personally dedicated to winning the war – one of the few men I ever met who felt like that.'

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Austin Baker, wireless operator in an armoured recovery vehicle of the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards, was in an LCT which struck a mine as it manoeuvred inshore, among infantry wading up to their necks in the sea. Baker was hurled forward by the concussion, smashing a tooth on the turret hatch rim, but he managed hastily to close down the lid. The sailor directing the ramp lowering was hurled bodily into the air, and as the leading scout car drove off it

was immediately knocked out by a shell. The others drove quickly off the beach, joining a procession of vehicles moving forwards between grassy banks and the skull and crossbones warnings, ACHTUNG MINEN, that were among the most familiar landmarks of every German battlefield. The village of Ver-sur-Mer had been considerably damaged in the bombardment, but a little cluster of French civilians emerged from the ruins to cheer and throw flowers. After losing their way for a time, Baker and his crew reached the inevitable orchard rendezvous. Among the other crews of the squadron, they began to exchange their excited stories of the landing while they drank tea and shared bully beef and biscuits with the crew of their wrecked landing craft, who had followed them ashore. Two tank commanders had already been killed by small-arms fire during the clearing of La Rivière. Two tanks had been swamped on the beach and a third disabled by a mine. A troop commander of B Squadron had met a self-propelled gun almost immediately after landing, and been beaten into action by the German's shot. This took off his leg, killed his operator and wounded the rest of the crew.

Yet nothing could dampen the exhilaration of those who had survived, sitting as wondering sightseers on ground that over four long years had attained for them the alien and mysterious status of the dark side of the moon. Corporal Portway of 231st Brigade thought that 'once ashore, it all seemed better organised than most exercises'. By 10.30 a.m., the British Second Army had landed fifteen infantry battalions, seven commandos, seven tank regiments, two engineer assault regiments, nine field artillery regiments and detachments of scores of supporting units. There had been setbacks, local failures, severe casualties to certain units, poor performance by some specialist equipment. Yet overall, the plan had succeeded stunningly well. Almost everywhere along the British line, the German coastal positions had been rolled up. It now remained to press forward to complete the second phase of the D-Day operation, to exploit German shock and surprise, ruthlessly to seize the vital ground inland.

Inland

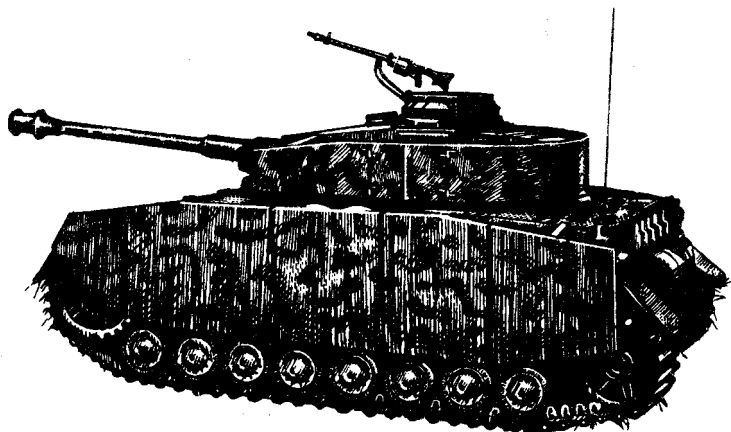
Hitler's appointments for the morning of 6 June were not altered by the news of the Allied landings. He himself was in the Berghof at Berchtesgaden. OKW's Chief of Operations, Jodl, was in the little Reichchancellerie. For their usual midday conference that day, both men, along with their principal staff officers, were compelled to drive for an hour to Klessheim Castle, where they were officially receiving a Hungarian state visit. In a room beside the great entrance hall of the castle, Hitler was briefed on the first reports of the invasion. He approached the map of France on the wall, gazed at it for a moment, chuckled and declared in unusually broad Austrian tones: 'So, we're off.'¹ Then, after a few moments' further conversation with Jodl, he departed to meet the new Hungarian Prime Minister. A junior officer from Jodl's staff was dispatched to von Rundstedt to emphasize that there must be vigorous local counter-attacks against the beachhead.

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Corporal Werner Kortenhaus and the rest of his company of 21st Panzer had begun to move up the Falaise–Caen road at 8.00 a.m. They were deeply unhappy, for the road ran perfectly straight and open. Moving in column in broad daylight, they felt utterly vulnerable – as indeed they were. The company was frequently halted to allow other units to speed past them. On the distant horizon, they glimpsed the smoke of the battlefield. Just south of Caen, they spotted an odd little tableau of two British soldiers standing alone in the corn by the road with their hands up, almost certainly men of 6th Airborne who had been dropped hopelessly wide. The panzers had no time to take prisoners, and hastened on. Then they learned that three companies of the regiment had been ordered to

swing north-west, to move against the seaborne landings. They themselves were to head up the east bank of the Orne to engage the British airborne troops. As they moved forward, they were repeatedly compelled to pull in by the roadside and scramble beneath their tanks as Allied aircraft roared low overhead. They suffered their first casualty, a very young, half-trained replacement named Rammelkampf, who was killed by a machine-gun bullet from a strafing Typhoon. It remains one of the minor mysteries of D-Day that throughout their long drive up the road to the battlefield that morning, even after the lifting of the cloud that hampered air operations for part of the morning, 21st Panzer suffered little material damage from Allied fighter-bombers. Yet Kortenhaus and his comrades cursed the absence of the Luftwaffe as they watched the enemy overfly them with impunity. Where, they asked, were the thousands of German aircraft that they had been promised would be in the sky to support them on 'The Day'?

All that morning and well into the afternoon, 21st Panzer's powerful armoured regiments – 127 Mk IV tanks and 40 assault guns – moved northwards, hampered by checks, delays and changes of orders imposed more as a result of failures of intelligence and the indecision of their own command than by Allied interference. Feuchtinger was impatient to move against the 6th Airborne bridgehead, but was frustrated by the British possession of the only bridge north of Caen by which his troops could cross the Orne. His panzergrenadiers were thus obliged to move through the city itself. The 2nd Battalion of 22nd Panzer Regiment, 40 tanks strong, with which Kortenhaus was driving, was already approaching the paratroopers' perimeter when it was halted by orders from General Marcks at LXXXIV Corps. Marcks believed this to be a wasteful use of armour. One company only, the 4th, was left to support operations east of the Orne. The remainder were diverted to join the counter-attack west of Caen. The 1st Battalion, 80 tanks under Captain von Gottberg, was making its best speed to the start-line near Lebisey, where the regimental commander, Colonel von Oppeln-Bronikowski, was already waiting with General Marcks.



The Panzer IV was the most numerous-produced German tank of the war, equipping half the German tank units in Normandy. By 1944, it was obsolescent, but in its upgunned version – which the Allies called the Mk IV Special – was still a formidable enough opponent. Weighing 25 tons and moving at up to 25 mph, it carried 80 mm of frontal armour and 30 mm of side armour. Its 75-mm KwK 40 gun could penetrate 99 mm of armour at 100 yards, 92 mm at 500 yards, 84 mm at 1,000 yards. The ‘skirts’ shown surrounding the hull in this version were designed to absorb the impact of hollow-charge projectiles, but all German armoured units in Normandy were exasperated by the manner in which these were torn off during movements among the dense hedges and orchards.

The corps commander had driven in person to oversee the battle. It was around 4.30 in the afternoon before this, the first major German armoured counter-attack upon OVERLORD, was ready to jump off against the British 3rd Division.

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At 11.00 a.m. on the morning of 6 June, the three infantry battalions of Brigadier K. Pearce Smith’s 185th Brigade were assembled exactly as planned near the village of Hermanville, ready to

begin one of the most vital British movements of the day – the advance to and seizure of Caen. The 2nd King's Own Shropshire Light Infantry, who were to lead the advance on the tanks of the Staffordshire Yeomanry, had landed in better order than they did in most exercises. They warmed themselves with self-heating cocoa in an orchard near Lion, and with satisfaction discarded their first sets of maps covering the beach area, turning now to the ones covering the ground ahead, marked, like those of all the invading force, with every known German position. They marched down the road into Hermanville amid the cheers of excited local civilians, and the encouraging spectacle of clusters of German prisoners being herded in the opposite direction. Yet already the brigadier and his unit commanders were deeply concerned by the non-appearance of the tanks that were to provide vital mobility and fire support. The Staffordshires had become embroiled in the vast traffic jam on Sword beach, which was to create critical delays for the next phase of the assault. The strong onshore winds had caused an unprecedentedly high tide. Instead of a normal width of 30 yards of sand, that morning the incoming mass of armour and soft-skinned vehicles was attempting to manoeuvre towards the beach exits across a mere 30 feet of beach. The Staffordshires found themselves immobile for an hour before they could even reach the road. Thereafter, their progress was agonizingly slow, nose to tail on the narrow road bordered on either side by uncleared minefields. It is arguable that, if there was a serious flaw in all the Allied landing schedules, it lay in allowing too many non-essential vehicles to clog the path inland in the first hours. Inevitably, among the wreckage and under continuing German shelling, the beach-masters were unable to direct the unloading operations with precision. All along the Normandy shore by the later stages of that morning, the difficulties of getting the spearhead units off the beaches and on their way inland were snowballing into serious delays for the follow-up brigades coming ashore. There was a lull, a period of reorganization, when men were brewing up at their rendezvous, locating their units and checking vehicles and

equipment, from which the momentum of the advance never recovered that day. Lieutenant-Colonel F. J. Maurice, commanding the 2nd KSLI, bicycled back to the beach to investigate the plight of the Staffordshires, then pedalled forward once more to report to Brigadier Smith at Hermanville. 185th Brigade was ordered to start its move towards Caen on foot, to be followed by the tanks as speedily as possible. It was now noon.

Meanwhile ahead of them, 8th Brigade was attempting to clear the way by destroying the two key German strongpoints, 'Morris' and 'Hillman'. 'Morris's' 65-strong garrison surrendered to B Company of the 1st Suffolks at 1.00 p.m. after a heavy bombardment. But when the battalion's A Company then attempted to seize 'Hillman', a network of strongpoints some 600 by 400 yards, they were met by furious fire which caused heavy casualties. The covering wire was breached, but the infantry could not get through under the intense machine-gun fire. A tank of the Staffordshires which sought to silence the position could make no impact with its 75 mm gun. Arthur Heal, the sapper officer attached to the Suffolks, recalled afterwards that the tanks declined to mount a direct assault unless the mines had been cleared in their path. The attackers possessed no heavy artillery support, for the gunnery forward observer had been killed earlier. Heal and a lance-corporal named Bolton crawled forward under cover of smoke, each clutching a mine detector. When the sapper found the first mine, scrabbling bare-handed to uncover it, he could not recognize any known German pattern. After gazing at it apprehensively for a few moments, he pulled it out and identified an aged British Mark II, booty from Dunkirk. He returned to report that there was no threat to the tanks, and late that evening the Suffolks, led by two squadrons of Shermans, successfully closed on 'Hillman' and stormed the position, using 30-pound Beehive charges to blow open the bunkers. In Chester Wilmot's account of this battle, he is severely critical of the Suffolks for their sluggishness in taking a position that it was vital to seize quickly, at almost any cost. The battalion lost only seven killed that day. More recently, Carlo

D'Este has argued that it was the fault of the planners, rather than of the infantry, who failed to assess the seriousness of the threat 'Hillman' represented. But there also seem to be grounds for believing that the tanks were reluctant to force the issue. Whatever the cause, the delay in seizing the position enabled its defenders to inflict 150 casualties on the 1st Norfolks as they advanced southwards past 'Hillman', following the KSLI towards Caen. The stubbornness of a handful of positions behind the coast was remorselessly reducing the strength of the British push inland.

Meanwhile the KSLI had been pressing on alone down the road to Caen, fighting a brisk battle for possession of Hill 61, whence Major Hof had telephoned Schaaf and asked him to bring his self-propelled guns to the aid of regimental HQ. Schaaf duly advanced across the cornfields. He saw the heads of the Shropshires peering at him over the standing corn, rapidly disappearing again when he opened fire. But by now, a squadron of the Staffordshire's Sher-mans had caught up. When Schaaf spotted these, he determined that for self-propelled guns to engage tanks was beyond the call of duty. He beat a hasty retreat. When he next found a telephone line and tried to contact regimental HQ, an English voice – presumably one of the victorious KSLI – answered the call.

The Shropshires approached Biéville later in the afternoon, having fought a succession of tough little battles against moderate German opposition. They encouraged strong enemy fire from the village. 'The civilians refused to evacuate themselves,' one of their company commanders, Captain Robert Rylands, wrote later, 'and at that early stage we were too soft-hearted to shell their homes – a proceeding which might have facilitated our advance considerably.' W Company's commander, Major Slatter, was hit in the shoulder by a sniper, but walked decisively forward to the house from which the shot had come and lobbed a grenade through its window before returning, grinning broadly, to have his wound dressed. The battalion now attacked from the flanks, sending one company forward east of the village, another west. After a fierce firefight in which they suffered heavy casualties, the Shropshires'

leading Y Company approached the commanding feature of Lebisey wood. They were told that there was little more opposition ahead. They were just three miles short of Caen.

Yet it was here that the KSLI first met panzergrenadiers of 21st Panzer Division, and here, late on the evening of 6 June, that Allied hopes of reaching Caen finally vanished. Y Company's advance was stopped in its tracks, the company commander killed. At 6.00 p.m., the battalion halted under fierce German fire and the rear companies dug in for the night. Under cover of darkness, Y Company disengaged and retired into the battalion position. 'We were not unpleased with ourselves,' wrote Captain Rylands of W Company,² and indeed, at a cost of 113 men killed and wounded, their achievement had been remarkable. But a single infantry battalion with limited tank and artillery support had not the slightest hope of generating sufficient violence to gain a foothold in Caen.

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From the outset, the British 3rd Division's objectives for D-Day were the most ambitious, and their achievement would have had the most far-reaching consequences. 6th Airborne, east of the Orne, was expected to gain and hold a perimeter. This it did with immense courage and determination, for in addition to the static German units in their area, they found themselves facing heavy counter-attacks from elements of the 125th and 192nd panzergrenadiers of 21st Panzer. West of the Orne, however, lay the road to Caen, where, above all, Montgomery had demanded dash and determination from his commanders to carry them to the city. The first of 3rd Division's three brigades, the 8th, expended much of its strength and energy in the early operations beyond the beaches, the seizure of 'Morris' and 'Hillman', and the securing of Hermanville, Coleville and Ouistreham. Among 185th Brigade, which was to play such a critical role in the dash for Caen, the KSLI's advance has already been described. The 1st Norfolks and 2nd Warwicks began to move south only at around 3.00 p.m., on the left of the KSLI, and the Norfolks were severely mauled in their movement

past 'Hillman'. By nightfall on 6 June, they were between Beuville and Bénouville. 9th Brigade, in reserve, came ashore and assembled too slowly to be sent immediately forward with the 185th. By the time they were ready to move Rennie, their divisional commander, concluded that the most urgent priority was to reinforce the bridges across the Orne and Caen canal, which were under heavy German pressure. It is no great exaggeration to say that the sole determined thrust made by 3rd Division against Caen that day was that of the KSLI, with energetic support from the self-propelled guns of 7th Field Regiment RA, and some tanks of the Staffordshire Yeomanry.

The obvious absentees from this roll-call of British units are the remaining units of 27th Armoured Brigade. Each independent armoured brigade contained 190 Shermans and 33 light tanks, giving it a greater tank striking power than many German armoured divisions. It was never realistic to imagine that the British infantry battalions could march through Caen on their feet on the same day they had landed. The only possibility of dramatic success lay in a concentrated, racing armoured thrust by 27th Brigade. Crocker had written before D-Day: 'As soon as the beach defences have been penetrated, not a moment must be lost in beginning the advance inland. Armour should be used boldly from the start.'³ Yet two-thirds of 27th Brigade's strength – the tanks of the 13/18th Royal Hussars and the 1st East Riding Yeomanry – were too deeply entangled in the fighting on the beaches and immediately inland to be available for the movement south. The entire burden of the push for Caen therefore lay with the Staffordshire Yeomanry, whose tanks were rapidly dispersed to support British infantry in difficulty against objectives inland. The unit concentrated only towards evening, in the face of the sudden threat from 21st Panzer. If it is true that the British plan underestimated the difficulty of overcoming 'Hillman', and failed to take sufficient account of the known presence of panzergrenadier elements north of Caen; neither of these factors alone explains the failure to reach the city. Had the KSLI, by some miracle, reached Caen on D-Day with their

few supporting tanks, they would have been crushed within hours by 21st Panzer. There was nothing like enough hitting power in the vanguard of 3rd Division to occupy and organize the defence of a city against strong enemy armour, especially with 12th SS Panzer Division already on its way to reinforce. Once any hope had vanished of spearheading the British advance with strong tank forces, any British infantry who somehow made their way forward must have been pushed back with crippling loss. It is possible to criticize the lack of drive by Rennie and his brigade commanders, and a certain loss of urgency by some units after the landing. But the failure to gain Caen on D-Day was chiefly the fault of over-optimism and sloppy thinking by the planners, together with the immense difficulty of organizing a major all-arms attack in the wake of an amphibious landing.

The last important action on the British left on 6 June was the battle against 21st Panzer's armoured thrust, an action which went entirely the way of the invaders. General Marcks, on his hill above Leбіsey, told 22nd Panzer Regiment's commander: 'Oppeln, if you don't succeed in throwing the British into the sea, we shall have lost the war.'⁴ The armoured officer, a former Olympic equestrian champion, saluted and mounted his vehicle. Marcks himself drove forward from the startline with the command group of 1st/192nd Panzergrenadiers. The tanks raced north towards the sea across the open ground, driving headlong into the gap between the British and Canadian perimeters.

British troops reported several tank formations advancing towards their positions. The Germans recoiled westwards on meeting fierce fire. When at last they encountered the heavily-gunned Sherman Fireflies of the Staffordshires on Hill 61, the consequences for the Germans were devastating. 13 tanks were immediately destroyed. Only a handful of 21st Panzer's tanks and infantry reached the surviving strongpoints of the 716th Division around Lion-sur-Mer. By a dramatic coincidence, only minutes after they did so, the fly-in began of 250 gliders of 6th Airborne Division to a landing zone eastwards, around St Aubin, near the Orne bridge.

This was too much for the Germans. 21st Panzer was a sound enough formation, but lacked the ruthless driving force of an SS armoured division. Arguing that the glider landings threatened them with encirclement, they withdrew up the hill towards Caen. By nightfall, they were strongly emplaced around the city with the support of their 24 88 mm guns. But they had lost 70 of the 124 tanks with which they had begun the day. For all the dash with which Marcks and von Oppeln urged 22nd Panzer Regiment into action, its belated attack had been pushed home without determination or subtlety. A gesture had been made, no more.

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The leading elements of the Canadian assault force on the right of the British 3rd Division almost reached Carpiquet on the evening of D-Day. Two troops of the 1st Hussars, leaving their infantry far behind, pressed on through Bretteville along the Bayeux–Caen road until they found their loneliness too alarming and turned back. They were two miles ahead of the rest of their formation. The Canadians suffered the universal problems of congestion on their beaches, and the need to fight hard to clear isolated strongpoints. But by the night of D-Day, they had established themselves strongly up to five miles inland. Upon the Canadians, in the days that followed, would fall the principal weight of 12th SS Panzer, perhaps the most formidable of all the German units now on their way to Normandy. Having set out from Lisieux, 65 miles from Caen, late in the afternoon, its leading elements were across the Odon, south of Caen, by nightfall, and moving to take up position on the left of 21st Panzer.

50th Division, moving inland from Gold beach, had fought a succession of hard battles against elements of the 352nd Division. By evening, troops of the British 151st Brigade had reached the Bayeux–Caen road, and tanks of the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards were reporting little in front of them. Though the 50th was also short of most of its D-Day objectives, it was solidly established in the Norman hedges and fields, with only limited German forces on its

front. Among fields and villages all along the coast, British and American soldiers were settling into positions for the night, mopping up stragglers, herding prisoners to the rear, pausing for the first time to absorb their surroundings. Private John Price of the 2nd Ox & Bucks was one of the men who had landed by glider to join the 6th Airborne that evening. His aircraft bucked and bumped across a field until it came to a stop in high-standing corn within reach of the sea. Price jumped down from the fuselage, and was at once confronted by three ineffectual-looking Germans, who rose at his feet and put up their hands. One had thick pebble glasses, the others looked very young and frightened. He felt somehow disappointed. These men did not look in the least like specimens of the master race. He handed them over to a nearby group of Devonshires, and walked away towards the Orne bridge in search of his own unit, past a dead German lying alone at a crossroads, and a frightened-looking French family craning out of a cottage window.

Private Len Ainslie of the 5th King's had been one of thousands of awed spectators of the airborne landing. He, and the others who had been compelled to swim the last yards to the beach, were now dug in around their anti-tank guns, seeking to dry their boots. Just beyond their position near Hermanville, they found the body of a large German officer. The platoon sergeant said off-handedly: 'Just get him out of the way,' and having had no previous dealings with corpses, they threw him over a nearby hedge. One man had already been injured seeking to clean his gun. It exploded beside his face, blackening and scorching him. As darkness came, all of them began to curse the plague of mosquitoes. It was the first time that he and many other men had set foot on foreign soil. They found it very strange.

James Phillips, one of the American crew of an LCVP which had been shuttling men to and from the fleet off Utah beach all day, was chiefly preoccupied by exhaustion and hunger. Most of the landing craft ran out of rations on D-Day, and their crews had to survive by scrounging and begging from bigger ships. A British

on, the weather and chronic collisions gave them little respite for many weeks.

Private John Hein of the American 1st Division was deeply impressed to find himself bivouacked for the night in the very orchard, by a crossroads above St Laurent-sur-Mer, where he had been briefed to expect to be. Following an afternoon of alarming shelling on Omaha, he moved up the dirt track through the village with his unit, and at last begun to dig in around the divisional CP. The darkness was interrupted by German bombing activity and some shelling of the beach. Hein reassured himself by digging his own foxhole next door to that of the chaplain, where he felt that nothing very serious could happen to him. Whatever acute alarm the events on Omaha had caused to his commanders, Private Hein felt that the plan had worked out pretty well in the end.

Other men endured a much more disturbed night. Major Frank Colacicco of the 3rd/18th Infantry was in the battalion command post when it suffered a sudden night attack by the Germans, in the course of which he was taken prisoner. After a few minutes, he managed to take advantage of the confusion to leap a gully and make his escape. Back among his unit's riflemen, he began to move among them, urging the confused soldiers to bring down fire on the Germans. After 45 minutes the enemy withdrew, taking some American prisoners with them. Some manner of quiet returned to the positions.

The German battalion commander of the 3rd/716th infantry told Lieutenant Schaaf that he had been told to pull back to Caen with his 30 or so surviving men. Without orders since the fall of his regimental headquarters, Schaaf decided to do likewise. Driving south-eastwards, he lost one gun, which threw a track and became bogged down in a ditch. The drive continued without incident, until he glimpsed ahead a crude roadblock of farm implements manned by British soldiers. He ordered his men to take off their helmets, and laid a tarpaulin over the side of the hull to conceal the German black cross. As they roared past the roadblock, they could see that the British had identified them but were too sur-

prised to intervene. They saw no more troops of any nationality until three miles on, at the outskirts of Caen, where they encountered German infantry. A stream of stragglers and survivors, men and vehicles, were making their way back into the perimeter from the coast. When Schaaf reported to the divisional artillery headquarters, he was told that his was the only battery, among 11 in the regiment, to make contact since morning. They pressed him for information about the situation forward, about which there was still terrible confusion. Then he was ordered to take up position near Épron, just north of the city. They remained in action there until, weeks later, ceaseless use had reduced their guns to wrecks.

Along 60 miles of front, men lay over their weapons peering out into the darkness lit up by occasional flares and tracer, then slept the sleep of utter exhaustion in their foxholes or ruined cottages. Some soldiers of the British and American airborne divisions were still probing warily through the darkness miles from their own lines, wading streams and swamps on the long march from their ill-aimed dropping points. A few thousand men lay dead, others wounded in the field dressing stations or positions from which they could not be evacuated. There were already Allied stragglers and deserters, who had slipped away from their units, skulking in villages the length of the invasion coast.

In England and America, the newspapers were being printed. *The Times* for 7 June carried the headlines: 'The Great Assault going well; Allies several miles inland; Battle for town of Caen; Mass attacks by airborne troops'. A leading article proclaimed: 'Four years after the rescue at Dunkirk of that gallant defeated army without which as a nucleus the forces of liberation could never have been rebuilt, the United Nations returned today with power to the soil of France.' D-Day provoked *The Times*, along with many politicians, to a breathless torrent of verbosity. On the Letters page, a Mr R. B. D. Blakeney reminded readers that William the Conqueror had embarked for England from Dives. The *Daily Express*, characteristically, plunged into sensation: there were tales of Allied

paratroopers treacherously shot in mid-air, of the glider pilot who cried as he shot up a German staff car: 'Remember Dunkirk when you drove me off!' There was a photograph of a triumphant glider pilot carrying a German helmet with the words HE'S DEAD chalked upon it.

Corporal Adolf Hohenstein of the 276th Infantry Division, billeted at Bayonne, many miles from the battlefield, wrote in his diary: 'A beautiful day. In the evening we hear the long-expected but still surprising news that the invasion has come. The civilians will have to pay the most dearly, and the French around here have suddenly become very quiet. They will become even quieter when this country has been devastated by Allied bombs and German shells, when they experience the full horror of war.'⁵

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No disappointment or setback could mask the absolute Allied triumph of establishing themselves ashore on D-Day. But the failure to gain Caen was a substantial strategic misfortune. Bradley wrote: 'In subsequent days, after I had had an opportunity to study Dempsey's D-Day operation, I was keenly disappointed.'⁶ There is overwhelming evidence that with greater drive and energy Second Army could have 'staked out claims' deeper inland on 6 June. But with 21st Panzer solidly established around Caen, it is impossible to believe that the British could have reached the city without running into deep trouble. The German coastal defenders may not have been the cream of the Wehrmacht, but they fought extraordinarily well in many places, given their isolation, the poverty of their manpower and the paucity of their equipment. Too little credit has been granted to German garrisons for their struggle with the best that the Allies could throw against them. They achieved all that Rommel could reasonably have expected – a delaying action which deprived the British advance of the momentum that it needed to reach Caen. The city was only a realistic objective for Dempsey's army if the coastal crust crumbled immediately the Allies landed. It did not. Whatever the sluggish-

ness of some British units, Bradley was to discover ample difficulties of this kind among his own divisions in the days to come.

The Allied command of the air was plainly decisive on 6 June: 'The Anglo-American air forces did more than facilitate the historic invasion,' wrote the American official historians, 'they made it possible.'⁷ The Luftwaffe put less than a hundred fighters into the sky on D-Day, and mounted only 22 sorties against shipping late that evening. Given the difficulties that the invaders suffered against the Atlantic Wall, it is difficult to imagine that they could have pierced it at all had their assault been subject to serious air attack. As it was, they were ashore. But they were still gasping to regain breath after the vast strain of getting there.