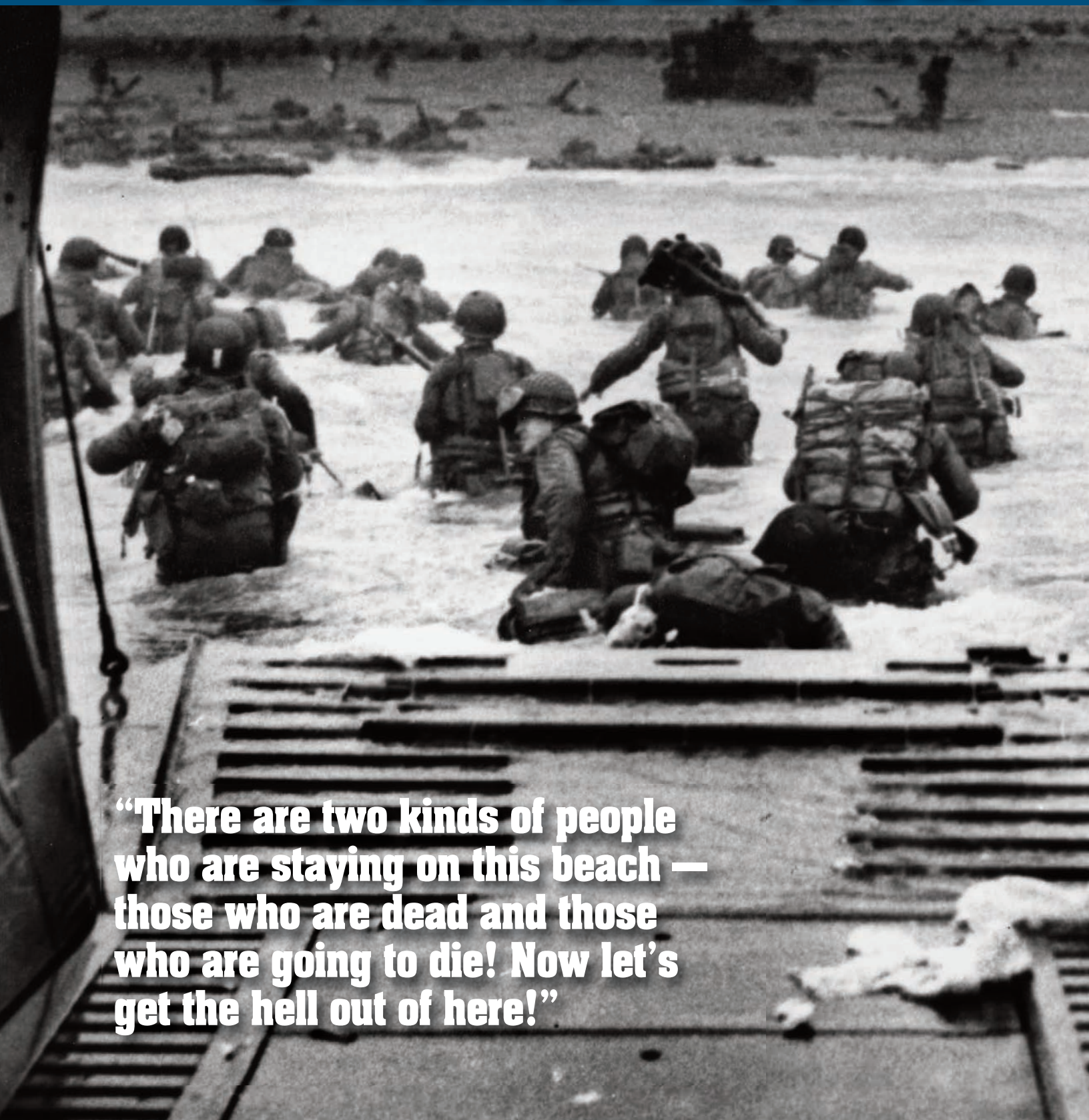
Warfare History Network Presents:

The Battle for Omaha Beach



"There are two kinds of people who are staying on this beach — those who are dead and those who are going to die! Now let's get the hell out of here!"

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Planning Overlord

COSSAC STAFF, UNDER LT. GEN. FREDERICK E. MORGAN, STUDIED EVERY ASPECT OF A CROSS-CHANNEL INVASION OF THE CONTINENT, AND EVENTUALLY CHOSE NORMANDY.

By Michael D. Hull

The project seemed remote then, given the vulnerability of Great Britain as she stood alone against the Axis powers, but it was never considered impossible. That year, even while the island nation was preoccupied with its own defense after the fall of France and the Low Countries, the British Defense Ministry created the Combined Operations organization to devise hit-and-run Commando raids on German-held coasts. Eighteen months later, when Lord Louis Mountbatten took over the organization's helm, Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered him to "plan for the offensive." Yet the second front envisioned by Britain, an invasion of continental Europe, became a far more tenable proposal after the Soviet Union, followed by America, joined in the struggle against Nazism.

Meeting at Casablanca on January 14-24, 1943, Churchill, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff agreed to appoint a joint staff to draw up a blueprint for such an invasion, designated Operation Roundup. Named to head this staff was British Lt. Gen. Frederick E. Morgan, an artillery

ABOVE: Shown conferencing on February 1, 194NN4, the senior commanders of Operation Overlord are, seated left to right, Deputy Supreme Commander Sir Arthur Tedder, Supreme Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Allied ground commander Bernard L. Montgomery. Standing, left to right, are U.S. First Army commander Omar N. Bradley, naval commander Bertram Ramsay, air commander Trafford Leigh-Mallory, and chief of staff WalterBedell-Smith.

Chief of staff to COSSAC from April to December 1943, Lt. Gen. Frederick E. Morgan began the long buildup to Operation Overlord.

officer and BEF veteran of both world wars. He was appointed chief of staff to the supreme Allied commander (COSSAC), although the supreme commander himself had not yet been chosen. Morgan was given an Anglo-American staff, with U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Ray Barker as his deputy. The COSSAC team set up headquarters at the Norfolk House office block in London's elegant St. James's Square. American officers assigned there found amusement in pointing out that the original Norfolk House had been the birthplace of King George III, whose military exploits were less than successful in the War of Independence.

COSSAC's brief was threefold: to prepare plans for a diversion against the Pas de Calais (the French name of the Dover Strait) and encourage the Germans to concentrate their defenses in the wrong place; to plan for a sudden cross-Channel attack (Operation Rankin) to relieve Russia or exploit a possible collapse in German morale; and, most important, to "prepare plans for a full-scale assault against the continent in 1944 as early as possible." Operation Roundup was now dubbed Operation Overlord.

For six months in 1943, the COSSAC planners studied the European coastlines and the character of the Allied and German forces that might be joined in battle. It was during this period that the question of where to land was decided, a decision that would remain a closely guarded secret until the moment when the 5,333-ship Allied armada was sighted from the Normandy shore early on Tuesday, June 6, 1944.

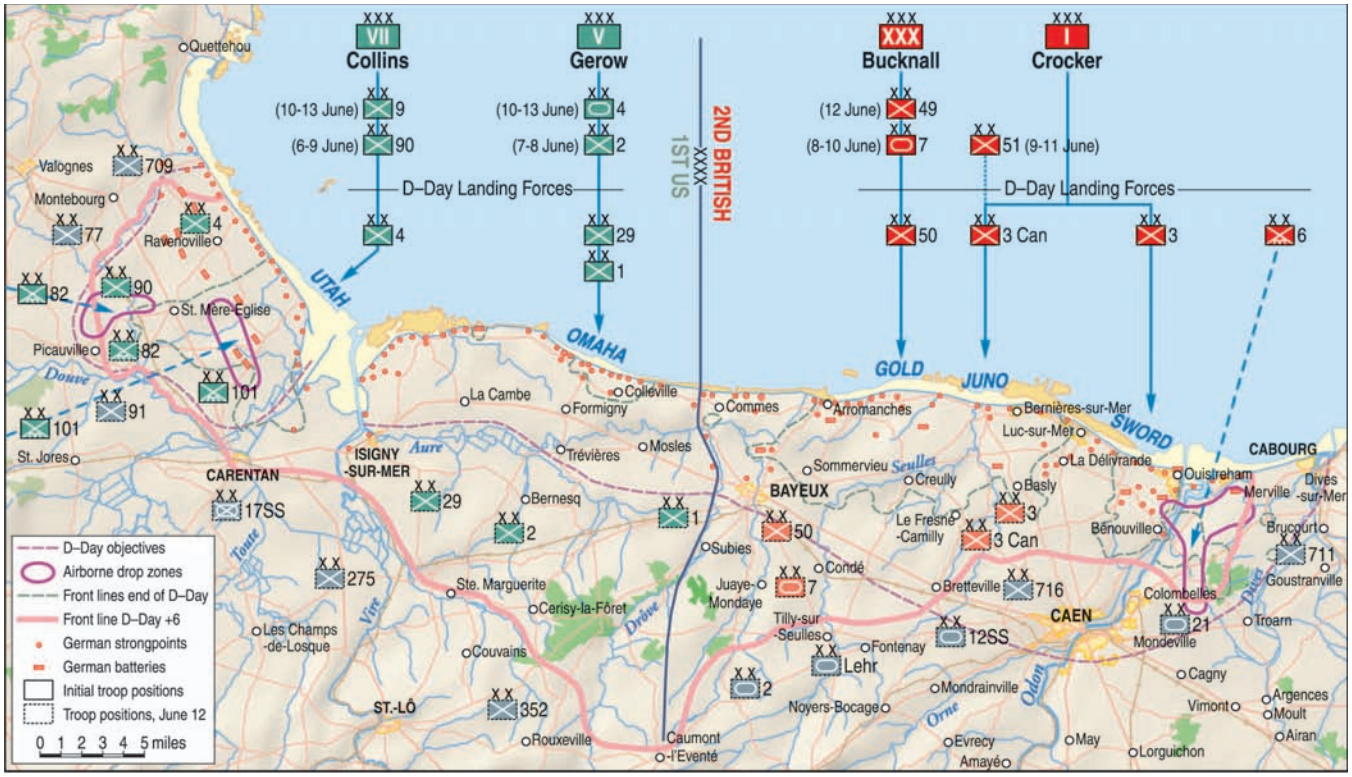
Everything was examined, dissected, and analyzed at Norfolk House: German defenses, suitable beaches, tides, weather patterns, inland terrain, usable ports, and the maximum ranges from English bases for fighter planes supporting ground operations.

A host of other details, large and small, were studied: beach reconnaissance, amphibious tanks, artificial (Mulberry) harbors, the provision of wine to chaplains in landing craft, and even the issuing of condoms to the assaulting infantry (to keep seawater out of rifle muzzles). Morgan and his dedicated staff worked tirelessly on planning the largest and most complex invasion ever attempted. The naval operation orders alone filled a three-inch stack of foolscap paper.

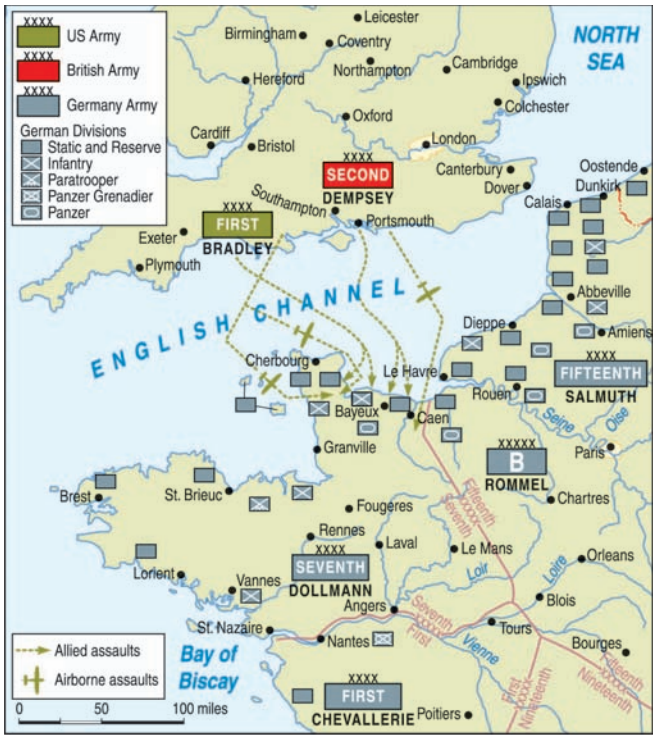
Along the coast of Europe from Norway to the Bay of Biscay, military logic narrowed the choice of landing area to two locations: the district of Calais, with the shortest shipping route from England, and the Normandy coast between Le Havre and Cherbourg. The American planners favored Calais, although it was the most strongly defended part of the whole coast, because it offered a more direct route toward Germany. The British pushed for Normandy because its defenses were weaker; because its broad, firm beaches could support thousands of men and vehicles; and because it could be cut off from the rest of Europe by bombing the bridges over the Seine and Loire Rivers.

Eventually, the COSSAC staffers agreed to recommend Normandy, and their plan was approved by Churchill, FDR, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the Quebec summit conference in August 1943. It was also agreed that the supreme commander would be American, and that his deputy and his ground, naval, and air commanders-in-chief would be British. May 1944 was fixed as the target date for Operation Overlord, although the resources allotted to COSSAC were so slender—"pitiful," as General Morgan called them—that a suggestion was made that a cross-Channel assault would be impossible before 1945.

Severe Allied shipping losses from Nazi U-boats in the Battle of the Atlantic had left a serious shortage of ocean-going ships, but it was a critical lack of landing craft that particularly hamstrung COSSAC. Britain had pressed boat builders, small boat yards, and even fur-



Two British, two American, and one Canadian infantry division would land on the beaches between Caen and the Cherbourg Peninsula on D-day.



niture companies into turning out landing craft, but far more were needed. The situation was aggravated by Admiral Ernest J. King, the U.S. Navy chief of staff, and General George C. Marshall, U.S. Army chief of staff, who believed that sending more landing craft to Europe would encourage the British to indulge in peripheral Mediterranean adventures.

Eventually, at the demand of General Dwight D. "Ike" Eisenhower, who had been appointed supreme commander, landing craft were gathered in from various theaters of operation. But there were still not enough, so the invasion was postponed until early June 1944 to allow for another month's production of the vital boats.

When Ike and his ground forces commander, British General Bernard L. Montgomery, saw the details of the COSSAC plan for the first time, they declared that the landing area was too narrow and the first assault troops too few. General Morgan had thought so himself, but had been following strictures laid down by the British and U.S. governments. Eventually, Eisenhower extended the original plan, with five infantry divisions—two British, two American, and one Canadian—landing across a 60-mile stretch of French coast from the River Dives near Caen to the eastern side of the Cherbourg Peninsula.

General Morgan and his staff ultimately deserved the lion's share of the credit for the success of Operation Overlord, in which the three Allied armies gained a foothold in continental Europe with losses much lower than had been projected. □

The Battle for Easy Red & Fox Green

AMID BULLETS AND SHELLS, BLOOD AND DEATH, THE MEN OF THE 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION HELPED TURN THE TIDE AT NORMANDY.

By Flint Whitlock

Forming the very tip of the Allied spearhead that thrust onto the heavily fortified Omaha beachhead at Normandy was the U.S. 1st Infantry Division's 16th Infantry Regiment. On D-day, the men proved that, when everything began to go terribly wrong, there was no substitute for the courage of the individual combat soldier. It seemed almost too much to ask of a mortal man.

In addition to his weapon, ammunition, grenades, rations, and 50 pounds of equipment, each man carried a small flyer signed by the Supreme Commander reiterating the importance of his mission: "You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you."

A pitiful, ragged line of tiny landing craft, each crammed to the gunwales with some 30 to 40 seasick, shivering, soaking-wet soldiers, was heading toward one of the most heavily defended coastlines on earth.

They were riding into hell, their mission to crack Hitler's vaunted "Atlantic Wall," reputed to be impenetrable, along the northern coast of France. Nazi Germany had held a tight grip on the Continent ever since

In *We'll Never Forget,* by artist John Paul Strain, soldiers of the 1st Infantry Division's 16th Regiment forge ahead under a hail of German fire at Omaha Beach.

France fell in June 1940, and the British Expeditionary Force subsequently was pushed into the English Channel at the French port of Dunkirk. It was June 6, 1944, and it was payback time.

The troops in this first wave, known as Force O, were the 16th Infantry Regimental Combat Team of Maj. Gen. Clarence R. Huebner's 1st Infantry Division—the Big Red One—which had already seen plenty of combat in North Africa and on Sicily. Attached to the 1st for most of the first day of this operation, known as "Overlord," was the 116th Infantry Regimental Combat Team of Maj. Gen. Charles Gerhardt's 29th Infantry Division—a well-trained division that had not yet experienced combat. The 16th, commanded by Colonel George A. Taylor, was scheduled to land on "Easy Red" and "Fox Green" beaches, two sections of a five-mile-long beachhead code-named "Omaha"; the 116th's assigned sectors, just to the west of the 16th's, were designated "Dog Green," "Dog White," and "Dog Red."

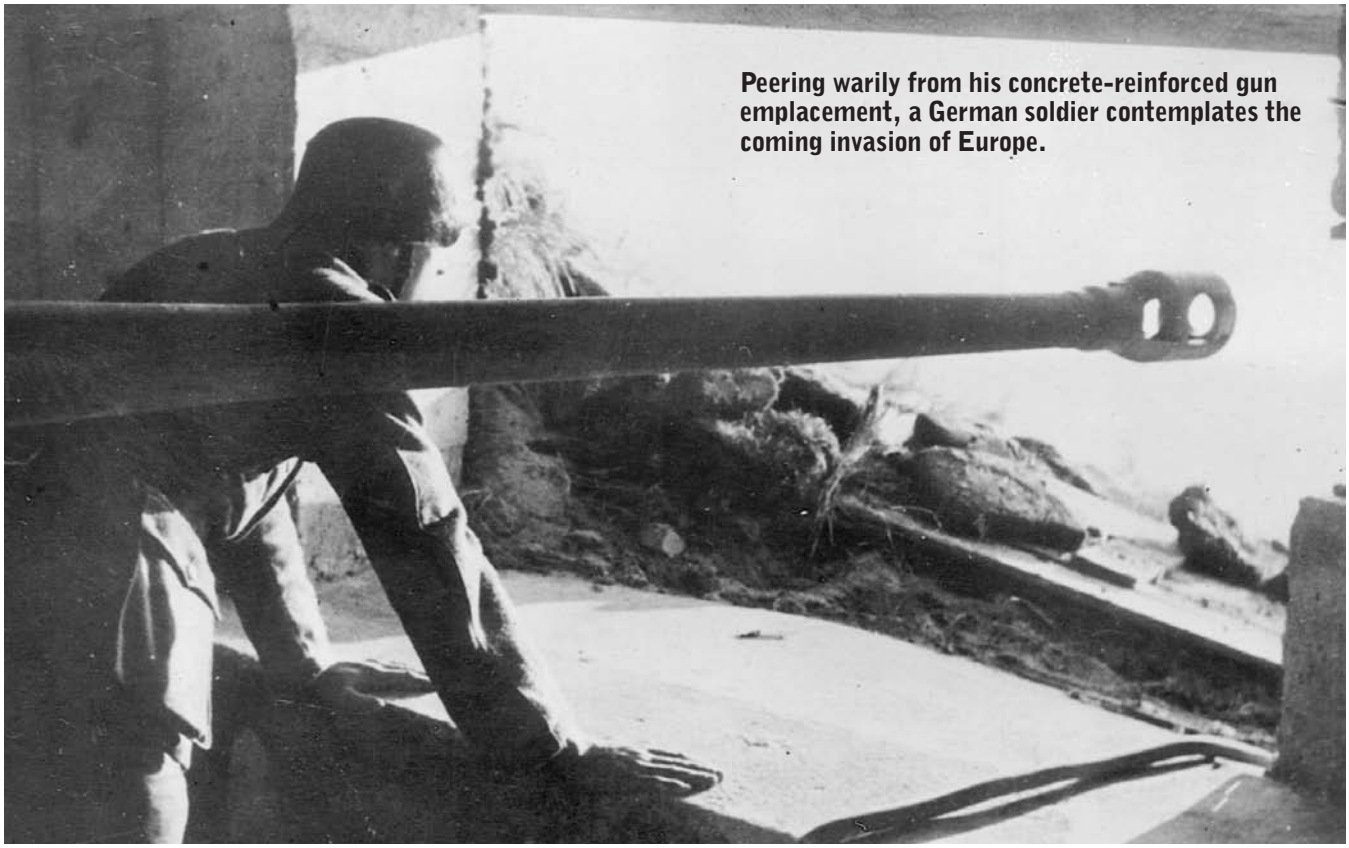
Four attack transports—the USS *Samuel Chase*, USS *Henrico*, USS *Dorothea M. Dix,* and HMS *Empire Anvil*—had carried the 1st Infantry Division to a rendezvous point (dubbed "Piccadilly Circus") in the middle of the English Channel. From there the assault troops transferred into smaller landing craft for the long run into shore. Companies E and F of the 16th Regiment's 2nd Battalion were scheduled to hit Easy Red Beach a minute after the 32 amphibious Sherman tanks from A Company, 741st Tank Battalion reached shore at H-hour, 0630 hours. At the same moment, on Fox Green, the easternmost sector of Omaha Beach, Companies I and L would swarm ashore. The troops on Easy Red would be reinforced a half-hour later by the arrival of Companies G and H, while Fox Green would be backed up by Companies K and M. About an hour later, Lt. Col. Herbert C. Hicks, Jr.'s 2nd Battalion would hit the shore, followed by the four companies of Lt. Col. Edmund F. Driscoll's 1st Battalion and the guns of Lt. Col. George W. Gibbs' 7th Field Artillery Battalion. Next would come Force B, Colonel George A. Smith, Jr.'s 18th Infantry Regiment and the attached 115th RCT from the 29th. In the early afternoon, Colonel John F.R. Seitz's 26th Infantry Regiment would come ashore at Easy Red and Fox Green. That was the precisely timed, well-rehearsed plan but, as anyone who has ever been in combat will testify, the battle rarely sticks to the script.

In the predawn darkness aboard HMS *Empire Anvil*, 21-year-old Private Steve Kellman, a rifleman in L Company, 16th Infantry, felt the crushing weight of the moment: "In the hours before the invasion, while we were below decks, a buddy of mine, Bill Lanaghan—he was as young as I was—said to me, 'Steve, I'm scared.' And I said, 'I'm scared, too.'"

Then, at about 3 or 3:30 that morning, an officer gave the order and Kellman and Lanaghan and the nearly 200 men in L Company began to climb awkwardly over the gunwales of their transport and descend the unsteady "scramble nets," just as they had done in training so many times before. "The nets were flapping against the side of the vessel, and the little landing craft were bouncing up and down," said Kellman. "It was critical that you tried to get into the landing craft when it was on the rise because there was a gap—the nets didn't quite reach and you had to jump down. That was something we hadn't practiced before. We had practiced going down the nets, but the sea was calm. This was a whole new experience."

Staff Sergeant Harley A. Reynolds was on USS *Samuel Chase* with the rest of B Company, 16th Infantry. "When it came time to load into assault boats," he noted, "we had to climb down cargo nets and drop into the boat. The water was rough from a storm; some men were injured when they dropped in…. We left the *Chase* for the last time and went in single file to our rendezvous area, following the little light on the stern of the craft ahead of us. The light would disappear, then reappear as we rose and fell with the waves. I thought several times we would crash into the craft ahead as we came up on them and would have to back off. I could see the trail of phosphorus the craft was leaving behind and I thought that the Germans must be able to see it, too, and pinpoint us…."

The heavy-set, bearded Ernest Hemingway, writing an article on the invasion for *Collier's* magazine, was in an LCVP with members of a company of the 16th Infantry. He wrote, "As the boat rose to a sea, the green water turned white and came slamming in over the men, the guns, and the cases of explosives. Ahead you could see the coast of France. The gray booms and derrick-forested bulks of the attack transports were behind now, and, over all the sea, boats were crawling forward toward France. As the LCVP rose to the crest of a wave, you saw the line of low, silhouetted cruisers and the two big battlewagons [the battleships *Texas* and *Arkansas*] lying broadside to the



Peering warily from his concrete-reinforced gun emplacement, a German soldier contemplates the coming invasion of Europe.

shore. You saw the heat-bright flashes of their guns and the brown smoke that pushed out against the wind and then blew away."

"We circled in our landing craft for what seemed like an eternity," recalled Kellman. "The battleships opened up, and the bombers were going over. Every once in a while, I looked over the side, and I could see the smoke and the fire, and I thought to myself, 'We're pounding the hell out of them and there isn't going to be much opposition.' As we got in closer, we passed some yellow life rafts and I had the impression that they must have been from a plane that went down, or maybe they were from the amphibious tanks that might have sunk; I don't know. These guys were floating in these rafts and, as we went by, they gave us the 'thumbs up' sign. We thought, '*they* don't seem very worried—what the hell do *we* have to be worried about?' But, as we got in closer, we could hear the machine-gun bullets hitting the sides of the vessel and the ramp in front."

"While in training, we were told of all the things that would be done in order," recalled Harley Reynolds. "But to see it all come together was mind-boggling. The size of it all was stunning. We were trained to keep our heads down until time to unload but, … I felt it better to know what was going on around us. I looked over and ahead many times and what I saw was terrifying."

What Reynolds saw was a heavily fortified, enemy-held beachhead that had barely been touched by Allied bombs and shells. The tremendous air and naval bombardment ("drenching fire," the Allied planners had called it) that the troops had been assured of in their briefings and rehearsals would blow gaps in the minefields and beach obstacles, turn the pillboxes and casemates into dust, and annihilate the defenders who were thought to be only low-grade troops unfit for duty on more active fronts had not materialized.

The bombers, flying above low overcast, had released their bombs too far inland, causing casualties only among Norman cows. The Navy, fearful of hitting the disembarking infantry, also overshot the target. Underwater demolition experts had gone in early to blow gaps in the obstacles and mark safe paths to the beach, but most of them were either dead, wounded, or had lost all their specialized equipment in the rough surf. All but five of the 32 amphibious Sherman tanks, which were supposed to have reached Easy Red and Fox Green before the infantry, had sunk, carrying their crewmen to their deaths. Even specially fitted landing craft carrying an arsenal of rockets close to shore missed everything. There was not so much as a single bomb crater on the beach in which to hide, and the German gunners were all alert and zeroed in on the

narrow strip of beach. The largest and most carefully planned and rehearsed invasion in the history of warfare was on the verge of disaster—and the troops had not even reached land.

Even if a hot reception awaited them, the men in the small landing craft known as LCVPs or Higgins boats could not wait to reach the shore. Most of the men had been unable to sleep all night, June 5-6, 1944, thanks to preinvasion jitters. The troops in the first wave had eaten breakfast shortly after midnight, then were loaded from their transports in the middle of the English Channel into the pitching craft. The last vestiges of a storm that had delayed the invasion by a day were still passing through the assembly area, and the sea was extremely rough. The run-in to shore was a long one; it would take most of the boats three to four hours. Those three to four hours were unremitting misery to the troops on whom the success of the greatest amphibious assault ever mounted depended. Not only were the little boats rocked up and down on the big waves, but they were also pitched side to side. It was, one of the men commented, "like being trapped on a never-ending roller-coaster ride." Another described it as "like being inside a washing machine."

The heavily laden men tried to maintain their balance on the slick decks, only to be thrown into the men in front, back, or on either side of them. Great waves came out of the predawn darkness and smashed into the flat bows of the boats, sending cascades of icy sea water onto the helpless soldiers, who were now wading in their own vomit as well as that of their comrades. "We had been issued a puke bag for seasickness but, as it turned out, one wasn't enough," remembered Pfc. Roger Brugger, K Company, 16th Infantry. "After the LCVPs were lowered, we kept going around in circles, rendezvousing. By this time, everyone in the boat had used their bag and were throwing up on the deck of the boat."

For many of the men in the rocking, bouncing, jolting boats, seasickness overrode their fear of death or injury. Signal Corps cinematographer Walter Halloran recalled, "I don't think that fear was a recognizable element. We were so seasick, our only thought was, 'We've got to get off this boat.'"

"It was literally a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea," said one 1st Engineer Combat Battalion officer. "We all agreed we'd rather face the devil."

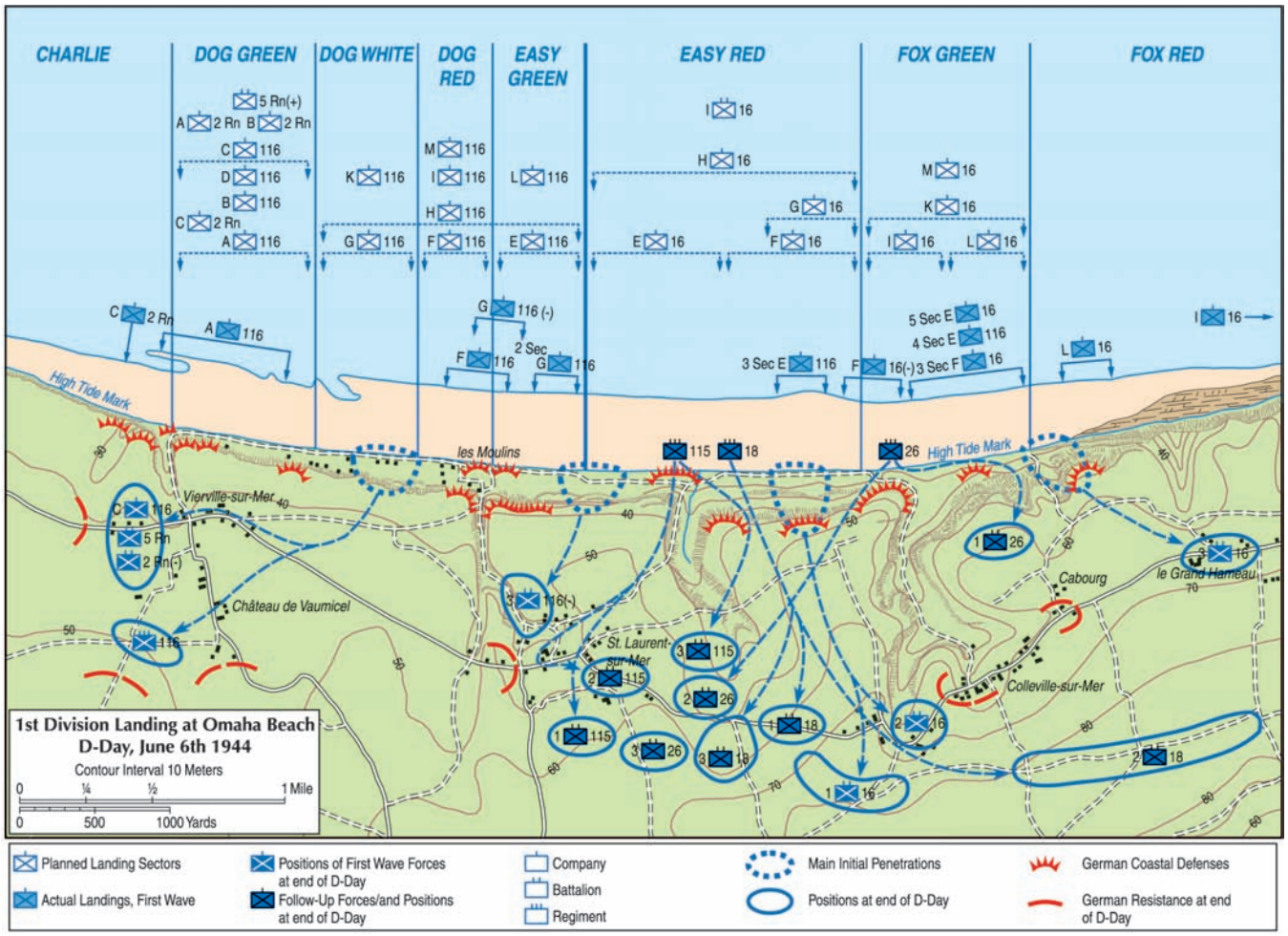
The Germans had done an outstanding job of fortifying the northern coast of France from enemy attack. From Cherbourg to Calais, the entire coastline was a gigantic steel-and-concrete nightmare for the attackers. Virtually every foot of ground was covered by direct- and indirect-fire weapons—rifles, machine guns, mortars, 105mm guns, and the dreaded 88s. Likely invasion beaches were studded with underwater and beach obstacles designed to rip the bellies out of landing craft or blow them to bits with mines.

Mines, too, were profligate under the beach sands and backed by thickets of barbed wire. Beyond the wire were concrete foxholes, elaborate trench systems, and concrete bunkers and gun emplacements sited to scythe down any invaders with enfilading crossfire. And all that was before the tall bluffs that rose above the beachhead and had their own interconnected series of defensive positions and strongpoints. The entire enterprise was under one of Germany's most able commanders, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who, above almost everyone else in the German High Command, was a genius at waging successful war even when outnumbered.

"IT WAS JUST A SLOW, METHODICAL MARCH WITH ABSOLUTELY NO COVER UP TO THE ENEMY'S COMMANDING POSITIONS."

On January 15, 1944, Rommel had become commander of Army Group B, whose area of responsibility included the coast of northern France. In this role, he was also commander of the 7th and 15th Armies, but with severe limitations on his operational capabilities. Rommel had been working the troops to exhaustion for five months to improve on Hitler's Atlantic Wall—including the installation of over four million mines between Cherbourg and Calais—for he sensed the great invasion was imminent. Despite the improvements, Rommel feared it would not be enough.

While the physical aspect of the defense was impressive, the manpower was lacking. Many of Germany's finest soldiers were no longer available for the defense of the Reich; they had been killed or maimed during nearly five years of fighting at such places as El Alamein, Sicily, Monte Cassino, Crete, Leningrad, Stalingrad, and a thousand other battlefields. With the



In the opening moments of the D-day landings, 1st Division Troops hit Omaha Beach along with the attached 116th Regiment of the 29th Division.

Soviets pressing the Germans hard on the Eastern Front, what was left to defend Normandy were a few understrength, over-age, static regiments and battalions with only bicycles and horses for transport. Unknown to most of the Allied planners, a reconstituted motorized infantry division, the 352nd, had been brought up to reinforce the thinly spread 716th Coastal Defense Division in the Omaha Beach area. Marginally better manned and equipped than the 716th, the 352nd, recently mauled on the Eastern Front, was not considered a first-class fighting force; still it gave the Germans 10,000 more men at Normandy than the Allies thought were there.

Only the panzer divisions could be considered a real threat to the invasion, and these were kept well back from the coast by 67-year-old Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief, West, to prevent their being destroyed by Allied air superiority. Worse, Rommel did not have operational control of these panzer units; they could only be released for action upon personal authorization of Adolf Hitler, and Hitler was convinced the real invasion would come at Calais, not at Normandy. To compound the problems of the German units in Normandy, many of their commanders were absent from their posts on the crucial night of June 5-6, away at a map exercise in Rennes, 90 miles to the southwest or, in Rommel's case, off in Germany to plead directly with Hitler for more authority to conduct the defense of the coast in the manner he saw fit, and to visit his wife on her 50th birthday.

The first wave of landing craft—transporting the 2nd Battalion of the 16th Infantry Regiment—somehow managed to slip through most of the falling shells and sea obstacles to deposit the men close to shore, but the initial landing at Easy Red Beach was anything but easy. Because of a strong west-to-east current, nearly every boat was landed a half-mile or more east of where it was supposed to be. Men who had been carefully trained for months to recognize landmarks on shore now had no idea where they were. Officers and NCOs leading their men out of the boats were among the first hit; units were scrambled, cut off, lost. Leaderless, and

Imposing cliffs guard the now-quiet Omaha Beach in this modern view.

being subjected to a tremendous pounding, the seasick, shaken survivors waded ashore and headed for a thin strip of small, rounded rocks, known as "shingle," at the high-tide mark and huddled together, waiting to die.

On Fox Green Beach, things were as bad as on Easy Red. Five boat sections of F Company, 16th Infantry were scattered across a thousand yards of sand. Two sections of the company did manage to land close together in front of enemy positions, but were decimated by machine guns and mortars as they departed from their LCVPs. Six officers and half of the company became casualties in a matter of minutes. The remaining boat section of E Company, 16th Infantry reached the shore where water and sand were spouting in an endless flurry of artillery and mortar explosions.

Four boat sections of E Company, 116th Infantry also drifted into the area and experienced the same, terrible greeting. Men discarded their equipment in the water and scrambled for the safety of the shore, but it was no better than the sea. Minefields and machine guns were in front of the invaders, and a steadily encroaching tide was behind them. All around was death, destruction, carnage, and chaos. Among those who had somehow made it to the beach, there was a very real sense that no one was going to come out of this debacle alive.

Captain Ed Wozenski, commanding E Company, 16th Infantry, one of the first elements to land on Omaha Beach, recalled his unit's experiences: "MG [machine-gun] fire was rattling against the ramp as the boat grounded. For some reason, the ramp was not latched during any part of our trip, but the ramp would not go down. Four or five men battered at the ramp until it fell, and the men with it. The boats were hurriedly emptied—the men jumping into water shoulder deep, under intense MG and AT [antitank] fire. No sooner was the last man out than the boat received two direct hits from an AT gun, and was believed to have burned and blown up.

"Now all the men in the company could be seen wading ashore into the field of intense fire from the MGs, rifles, AT guns, and mortars. Due to the heavy sea, the strong cross current, and the loads that the men were carrying, no one could run. It was just a slow, methodical march with absolutely no cover up to the enemy's commanding positions. Many fell left and right, and the water reddened with their blood. A few men hit underwater mines of some sort and were blown out of the sea. The others staggered onto the obstacle-covered, yet completely exposed, beach. Here men, in sheer exhaustion, hit the beach only to rise and move forward through a tide runlet that threatened to sweep them off their feet. Men were falling on all sides, but the survivors still moved forward and eventually worked up to a pile of shale at the high-water mark. This offered momentary protection against the murderous fire of the close-in enemy guns, but his mortars were still raising hell."

Captain Joe Dawson's G Company, 16th Infantry approached Easy Red at about 0700. "When we landed, it was total chaos, because the first wave from … E Company and F Company had been virtually decimated. That was due to circumstances over which they had no control. In the first place, they were badly disorganized when they landed, whereas I was privileged to land intact with all of my men and my LCVP in the very point that I was supposed to land in…. I was the first man off my boat, or off of *all* our boats,

A soldier crouches for protection in the foreground while those in the distance scramble for cover as a German shell explodes on Omaha Beach.

followed by my communications sergeant and my company clerk. Unfortunately, my boat was hit with a direct hit, so the rest of my headquarters company was wiped out, as well as the [fire] control officer from the Navy, which was our communication, to give us support fire that was supposed to [neutralize] the village of Colleville, which was the objective that I was given...."

The situation was no better on the 116th Infantry's portion of Omaha Beach. In fact, it was, if anything, even worse. On Dog Green Beach, A Company of the 116th Infantry was being systematically slaughtered even before it reached shore. One LCA took four direct hits and blew apart. Men coming off LCVPs were torn to bits; others, leaping over the gunwales of their landing craft, were pulled under water by the weight of their packs and equipment, and drowned. Every officer in A Company, and most of the NCOs, became casualties. A small, 64-man company of Rangers, following A Company, was similarly decimated. They lost half their men; A Company lost two-thirds. And they had yet to fire a shot.

FARTHER WEST, RANGERS (ALSO ATTACHED TO THE 1st Division) were attempting to climb the sheer cliffs to get at the casemated battery of 155mm guns at Pointe du Hoc and were taking heavy casualties in the process. The Rangers would soon discover that the guns had been removed farther inland. However, they accomplished their mission and destroyed the guns.

Some of the soldiers could not handle the horror of the beachhead. One young 16th RCT soldier barely survived a near-miss from a German shell. "When that shell burst," he recalled, "I guess I panicked. I started crying. There was a ship to our right that had [run aground], and my buddies got me behind that ship, where I cried for what seemed like hours. I cried until tears would no longer come. Suddenly, I felt something. I can't explain it, but a feeling went through my body and I stopped crying and came to my senses." The soldier picked up his rifle and got back in the war.

At Easy Red and Fox Green, the leading companies of the 16th RCT were trapped on the beach. The only way to break out of the trap was for one man, or several, to risk their lives by crawling forward, armed with little more than wire cutters or Bangalore torpedoes—20-pound tubes packed with explosives—and expose themselves to enemy fire while they attempted to cut through the wire. Several brave men tried it; all were killed. Despite witnessing the suicidal nature of the mission, another soldier, Sergeant Phillip Streczyk of Wozenski's E Company, attempted the impossible. With practically every German weapon within range zeroing in on him, Streczyk made a mad dash for the wire through a hail of bullets, snipped it, then waved for the rest of the troops to follow him.

Although E Company had taken a tremendous pounding, one of its surviving platoon commanders, Lieutenant John N. Spaulding, a Kentuckian, gathered what few men he could find. Faced with furious rifle, machine-gun, mortar, and artillery fire, and confronted

by profuse minefields, Spaulding set off through the slim gap made by Streczyk in an attempt to crack the enemy positions to the east of a heavily defended exit off the beach designated "E-1." It was a pitiful, foolhardy attempt, a handful of sick, soaked, and scared soldiers throwing themselves at one of the most heavily defended places on earth. There was no way it could succeed. But somehow, incredibly, it did.

With Dawson's Company G providing covering fire, Spaulding and his men crept forward, leaving a path of death and destruction in their wake. As the regimental report said, "Of the 183 men [in E Company] that landed, 100 were dead, wounded, or missing." But the survivors, led by Spaulding, "reduced the strongpoint at [map coordinates] 678897, consisting of an anti-aircraft gun, four concrete shelters, two pillboxes, five machine guns, pillbox by pillbox to wipe out the strongpoint covering the east side of Exit E-1. Extremely stubborn resistance was encountered in this strongpoint with its maze of underground shelter trenches and dugouts. A close exchange of hand grenades and small-arms fire ensued until the 1st Platoon cornered approximately twenty Germans and an officer who, overpowered, surrendered…."

Now it was Dawson's turn to move out. "I felt the obligation to lead my men off, because the only way they were going to get off was to follow me; they wouldn't get off by themselves … We dropped over [the shingle] and got into this minefield. There was a body of a boy who had found the minefield and unfortunately also found the mine and destroyed himself, but he pointed the way for us to go across him, which we did. Sergeant Cleff and myself, and Pfc. Baldridge, another man in my company, started up the hill…. There was a path and it seemed to generally go in the right direction toward the crest of the hill, so I started up that way. About halfway there, I encountered Lieutenant Spaulding with a remnant of his platoon. I think he had two squads and a person in a third squad, and they were the only survivors that I knew of at that time in E Company. He joined us at that time and became part of us; my men were still back on the beach.

"I told Baldridge to go back and bring the men up. I said, 'They've got to get off the beach. Tell them to come up here with me.' Well, they started up, but I had gone on ahead. Just before you reach the crest of the ridge, it becomes almost vertical for about a 10-foot drop. There was a log there and I got behind the log to see if I could see my men coming up… . I could see a single file beginning to develop off of the beach coming on up when I heard a great deal of noise just above me and, sure enough, there was a machine-gun nest up there and they were giving us a lot of trouble. I was able to get within a few yards of them.... I lobbed a couple of grenades in there and silenced them and that opened the beach up. It was a miracle. It doesn't mean anything on my part. It was just one of those wacky things that happen, that I was on the right spot…."

While the boats in the initial waves drifted several thousand yards off course, the boats carrying I and L Companies, which were supposed to land on Fox Green at the same time E and F Companies were hitting Easy Red, were pulled more than a mile off course, almost landing on Gold Beach at Arromanches, in the British 50th Infantry Division sector. By the time the error could be corrected, Captain John R. Armellino's L Company had lost a boat that capsized two miles off shore and was more than a half-hour late; it would take over an hour more for Captain Kimball Richmond's I Company to reach land.

Originally scheduled to land in front of the E-3 draw, the L Company boats beached beyond the extreme eastern boundary of Fox Green, near the shelter of low cliffs that came down nearly to the water's edge. Organizing his company in the relative safety of the cliffs, Captain Armellino saw that his unit, although it had already lost nearly half its strength, was basically intact—the only one of eight companies in this initial wave able to operate as a unit.

One of those in Armellino's company was Private Steve Kellman: "We were trained, when you hit the beach, to never run in a straight line—you were supposed to zig-zag. When the ramp went down, some of the fellows just went straight as an arrow, and a lot of them were cut down that way. The coxswain on our boat got us right up on the beach—I don't think the water was as high as our knees. We had a tremendous advantage—we didn't have to wade; we could run. We just ran like hell to get up against that little sea wall. Once we got there, we were exhausted. Some of the guys in the boats behind us, where the coxswains didn't get them close enough, they had to hide behind those obstacles that were in the water, thinking that they were going to provide them with some cover, but that was deadly."

Armellino decided to push inland, toward the village of Le Grand Hameau. The only way up to the heights

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was a draw labeled on maps as "F-1," which was guarded by not one but two strongpoints, numbers 60 and 61.

But Kellman would not make it up the draw. "On the beach, it was like all hell had broken loose," said Kellman. "There was noise and smoke and dead bodies all over the place. We found we were not on the right beach.... As we were working our way to the right beach, an artillery or mortar round must have landed 15 feet away and the fellow that was in front of me and I both got flipped over backwards by the concussion. Then I started to crawl, and I got against the sea wall. I knew we had to move, and I used my rifle like a crutch to stand up. I got to a standing position and then fell down. I didn't know what was wrong—I didn't feel any pain; it was like a numbness. I tried standing again, and I fell down again. I pulled up my trouser leg, and I could see blood. I was so scared. I took off my leggings and sprinkled sulfa powder on the wound and wrapped a bandage around it.

"As the succeeding waves came in, I gave my rifle to one fellow and gave my grenades to another, so I was without anything. Then our company executive officer, Lieutenant [Robert] Cutler, came along and said, 'Come on—we're moving out.' I said, 'I can't.' He looked at me and said, 'Kellman, I didn't think I was going to have any trouble with you.' I said, 'I can't walk, sir.' He said, 'What's the matter?' I showed him my leg, and he said, 'Oh, okay. I'll have an aid man come by.'

"The guy who had been flipped over in front of me by the shell had also been hit in the leg, and we laid there and talked while we waited for the aid man. The shells kept coming in. After the concussion of one of them, I kind of sat up and asked him, 'How're you doing?' But he had been hit again and was dead."

Now it was the turn of Captain Anthony Prucnal's K Company to arrive at Fox Green Beach. Originally intended to be the 2nd Battalion's reserve company at Fox Green, they were thrust into an assault role after I Company had drifted too far east. A member of the company, Pfc. Roger Brugger, recalled, "As we approached the beach, the shells were dropping in the water and machine-gun bullets were whizzing over our heads. Sergeant Robey [the squad leader] told the coxswain to run our boat right up on the beach and not let us off in four or five feet of water. He did, and we got off on dry land. I remember thinking as I ran from the boat with the bullets tearing up the sand on

LEFT: Sergeant Harley Reynolds, Company B, 16th Regiment. RIGHT: Captain Joe Dawson is decorated by General Eisenhower.

either side of me, 'This is like a war movie.' After we got to the shale wall, I looked back at the boat we had just left when an 88mm artillery shell hit it in the engine compartment and it blew up. I watched another boat come in and, as the guys came running to the wall, one guy got a direct hit with a mortar shell, and all I could see of him were three hunks of his body flying through the air. We were all sick and scared from the pounding and the ride. When we tried to throw up, there wasn't anything left. The tide was coming in and the beach was getting smaller."

K Company's six boats came under heavy enemy fire, and two were blown up by mines. The officer corps was decimated in minutes. As Prucnal and his XO, First Lt. Frederick L. Brandt, were attempting to organize the remnants of the company, a shell screamed in and mortally wounded Brandt. Coming to his aid, Prucnal was killed by another shell. A platoon commander, Lieutenant James L. Robinson, attempted to rally the company only to fall dead at the hands of a sniper. Another lieutenant, Alexander H. Zbylut, was wounded while struggling ashore. Taking command of the rapidly dwindling unit, Lieutenant Leo A. Stumbaugh organized a patrol of what was left of the first and second assault sections, dashed through a blaze of enemy fire, and forced Germans holding a defensive position to withdraw. The right flank of the German line holding Omaha Beach was slowly, almost imperceptibly, beginning to crumble.

First Lieutenant Karl E. Wolf, a West Point graduate from Wethersfield, Connecticut, assigned to Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 16th Infantry, recalled, "For a while, we had to dig in or lay on the beach because of enemy fire. The beach was fairly steep for

about 20 to 30 yards, and at the top there was a little berm that afforded us a little protection." Although somewhat sheltered, Wolf found that he had crawled into a nightmare. "While laying there, I noticed the soldier near me was lying on his back, and his whole leg was split open to the bone. He was in shock, but there was nothing I could do except keep pulling him up as the water rose. Nearby was half a body, the lower half having been blown away."

More units piled up on shore. Radioman Al Alvarez, with the 7th Field Artillery Battalion supporting the 16th RCT, recalled, "After what seemed like hours, we finally left the comparative safety of these beach obstacles. Then, crawling and dragging, we emerged and hid behind a mounded row of pebbles, sort of a berm lined with hundreds of soldiers. Eddie King went back into the surf to pull in wounded, drowning soldiers, and then pointed to his head where blood trickled down his face. There in the center of his helmet was a bullet hole where a round had gone through his helmet, dead center! I had the task of sticking my hand in his helmet and feeling mush, but it was only his hair soaked in blood. It turned out to be only a crease. But then a medic was called over and sat down with his back to the enemy and bandaged Eddie, but was struck in the back. Both of us tried bandaging him and called other medics, but he died."

It seemed that every German gun within range of Omaha Beach was firing as fast and as furiously as it could at the incoming landing craft, at the men struggling to get ashore, and at those who had already found a temporary respite on the round rocks of the shingle behind the low sea wall. Boats were torn apart by direct hits; those men too badly wounded to extricate themselves from the surf were drowned by the rising tide; and those taking cover behind obstacles were slaughtered by the unceasing storm of artillery shells and mortar bombs.

The cries of the wounded rose above the awful din, and men who tried to assist the dying and injured were themselves killed or wounded. Some of the best-trained soldiers in the world became casualties before they could even get a glimpse of the enemy. As the German fire reached a thundering crescendo, there seemed to be no possible hope for the 1st Infantry Division to establish a beachhead, let alone move inland and take its objectives. The 16th Infantry Regiment, like the 116th to its right, had been halted dead in its tracks, and annihilation seemed to be the inevitable outcome.

War correspondent Don Whitehead noted, "The invasion on Omaha Beach was a dead standstill! The battle was being fought at the water's edge! I lay on the beach wanting to burrow into the gravel. And I thought: 'This time we have failed! God, we have failed! Nothing has moved from this beach and soon, over that bluff, will come the Germans. They'll come swarming down on us….'"

But the Germans did not come swarming down. The 16th's firebrand commander, Colonel George A. Taylor, was now ashore and began inspiring and rallying the troops. Seeing men huddled where they could find the barest shred of safety, Taylor was filled with rage,

"THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE STAYING ON THIS BEACH—THOSE WHO ARE DEAD AND THOSE WHO ARE GOING TO DIE! NOW LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!"

both at the enemy and at his own cowering men. Technician John E. Bistrica, a member of C Company, 16th Infantry, clearly remembered one of the most heralded moments of World War II, perhaps the single moment that turned the tide for the American assault on Omaha Beach: "Colonel Taylor came in after the assault waves. He was roaming up and down along the beach. He yelled, 'There are two kinds of people who are staying on this beach—those who are dead and those who are going to die! Now let's get the hell out of here!'

"I says, 'Well, somebody finally got this thing organized. I guess we're going to move out now.' So we started up the draw."

From their places of safety, men who had been paralyzed with fear slowly began to emerge. Many of them, to be sure, were killed or wounded the moment they showed themselves to the enemy. But a handful of courageous captains and lieutenants and sergeants and corporals turned to the frightened men next to them and issued a brief, no-nonsense order: "Follow me." And the men followed.

Don Whitehead wrote, "There were many heroes on Omaha Beach that bloody day, but none of greater stature than [Assistant 1st Division Commander

Willard G.] Wyman and Taylor. They formed the core of the steadying influence that slowly began to weld the 1st Division's broken spearhead into a fighting force under the muzzles of enemy guns. It's one thing to organize an attack while safely behind the lines—and quite another to do the same job under the direct fire of the enemy."

John B. Ellery, a platoon sergeant in the 16th RCT, witnessed firsthand several examples of leadership. "I [saw] a captain and two lieutenants who demonstrated courage beyond belief as they struggled to bring order to the chaos around them; they managed to get some of the men organized and moving forward up the hill. One of the lieutenants was hit and seemed to have a broken arm … but he led a small group of six or seven to the top. It looked as though he got hit again on the way. Another lieutenant carried one of his wounded men about 30 meters before getting hit himself. When you talk about combat leadership at Normandy, I don't see how the credit can go to anyone other than the company-grade officers and senior NCOs who led the way. We sometimes forget that you can manufacture weapons and you can purchase ammunition, but you can't buy valor, and you can't pull heroes off an assembly line."

A soldier crouches for protection in the foreground while those in the distance scramble for cover as a German shell explodes on Omaha Beach.

While a seemingly unending deluge of bullets and red-hot, jagged shell fragments continued to rain down on the men lying on the beach, Sergeant Harley Reynolds, in B Company's sector, looked up. "I could see a narrow pond ahead with marsh grass. Between us and the pond was the wire strung on the roadbed and beyond that a three-strand wire fence with a trip wire only on the front of it."

A soldier with a bangalore torpedo managed to slip it under the barbed wire and blew a gap, then was shot and killed. Without hesitating, Reynolds and his men flew through the break in the wire and into a flooded antitank ditch beyond. "I was the first across the pond and, as I paused to take off the life preserver, I looked back to see how the men were doing. I heard my name called and looked to see Dale Heap, about halfway across the pond. Dale was gunner on one of the machine guns and the platoon comedian. He had been shot through his upper arm—a good flesh wound. He was holding his one arm above his head and pointing his gun tripod at it, saying, 'See, I didn't drop the tripod.' Always the comedian, he was actually laughing. He kept yelling, 'Stateside! Stateside!' He handed the tripod to his assistant gunner, the first ammo carrier took the gun, and we had a battlefield promotion right there in the middle of the pond. Dale waved goodbye and headed back to the beach. He made it stateside, and that was the last we heard from him."

At 0830 hours, a Navy beachmaster managed to signal the fleet that no more landing craft were to come ashore—there simply was no room for them, and no room for the men and vehicles they carried. At this time, there were some 50 LCTs and LCIs circling offshore, looking in vain for some place to deposit their cargo. Their skippers could see landing craft from the previous waves foundering, sinking, burning, or hung up on obstacles, with the sea around them being ripped by tremendous explosions. There appeared to be no safe passages.

The situation would remain almost unchanged for

two more hours. Seeing the infantry being subjected to continual pounding, the Navy determined that its firepower, which had been less than effective thus far, must be brought to bear at close range against enemy targets, even if it meant risking the ships and their crews. A flotilla of destroyers moved close to shore and began hammering German positions.

Almost imperceptibly, and despite the best efforts of the German gunners, the thickets of barbed wire, and the innumerable minefields, the surviving invaders gradually began to chip small fissures in Hitler's Atlantic Wall. Pillboxes and trenches were being swept away by the hot breath of the Navy's guns. The pinned-down American infantrymen were pinned down no longer. As German fire slackened, through the barbed wire and minefields the Yanks slithered, like an inexorable, olive-drab swarm of angry, heavily armed insects, bent on overcoming all obstacles in their path.

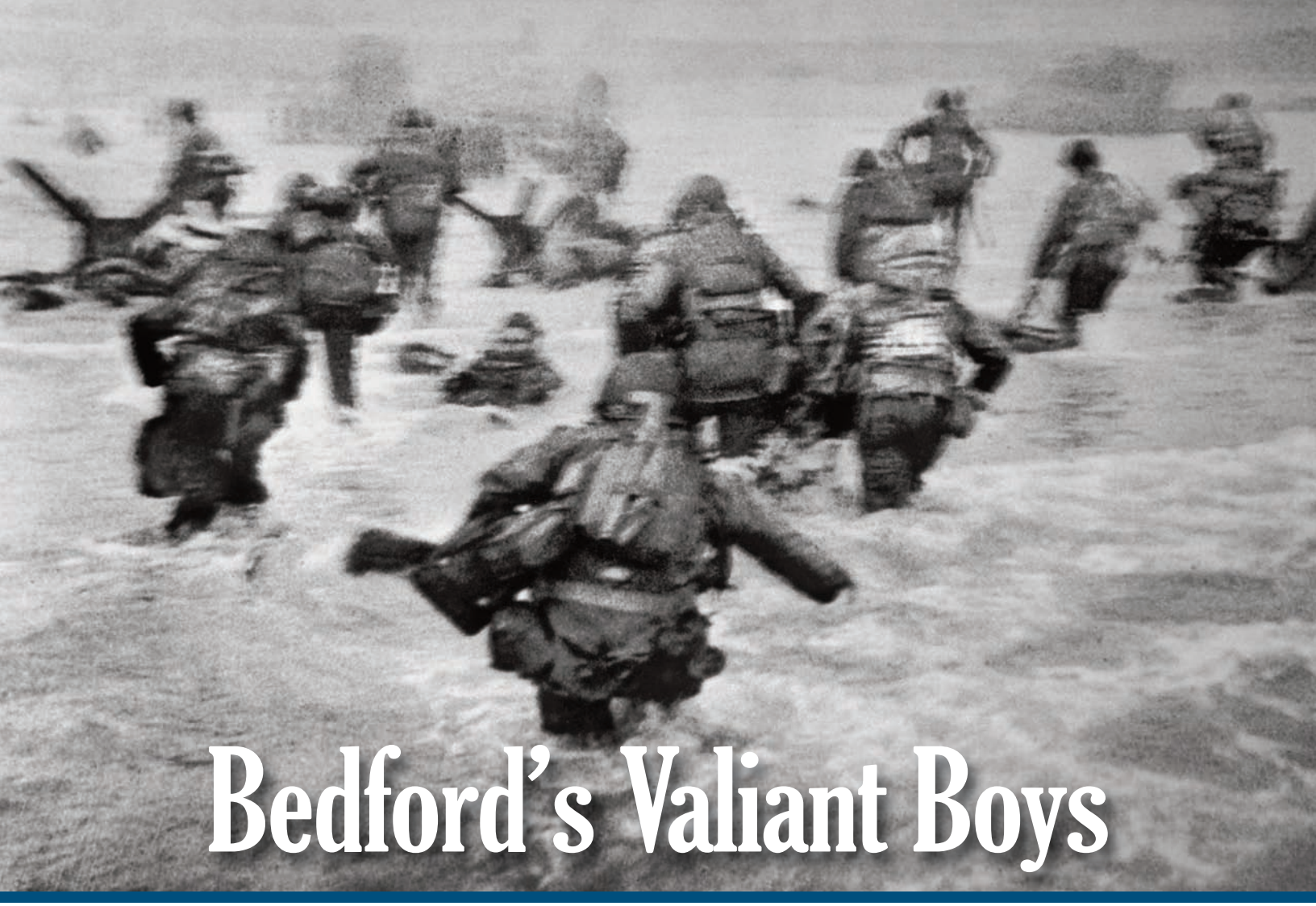
The Germans manning the fortifications, their ears and noses bleeding from the concussions of the direct hits and near misses, and their throats choking from concrete dust and cordite, began scrambling out the steel rear doors in hopes of making it to the top of the bluffs and safety, only to be cut down in the midst of their escape attempts. The tide of battle had turned.

June 6, 1944, especially at Omaha Beach, had been a bloody affair—worse than even the most pessimistic soldiers had feared. The human cost of the operation was very high, although the exact number of casualties may never be known. Some 291 landing craft had been lost on D-day, and numerous destroyers, LCTs, LCIs, and amphibious DUKWs had been sunk.

In the 1st Infantry Division, it is estimated that 18 officers and 168 enlisted men had been killed or died of wounds on D-day; 7 officers and 351 men were missing; and 45 officers and 575 men were wounded in action. Elements of the 29th Infantry Division, attached to the 1st, had also suffered grievously, with 328 men killed or dead of wounds, 281 wounded, and 134 listed as missing in action.

Yet, many thousands more had stormed ashore over the bodies of their fallen comrades, braved the intense fire, crawled through the minefields, lobbed grenades into pillbox embrasures, battled with defenders in their trenches, and reached the top of the bluffs by early afternoon. Those who were killed on Normandy's chilly shore had not died in vain; Hitler's vaunted Atlantic Wall, a defensive fortification that had taken Germany years and many billions of Reichsmarks to construct, had been cracked wide open by the invaders in the span of a morning.

The first day of the Battle of Normandy had gone to the Allies, due in large measure to the selfless courage of the men of the 1st Infantry Division and the attached 29th. Nearly a year of hard fighting still lay ahead, and many of the men who survived D-day would not live to celebrate the victory. But the Allies were back on the Continent to stay, and there would be no turning back now. □



Bedford's Valiant Boys

THE SMALL TOWN OF BEDFORD, VIRGINIA, SACRIFICED MANY OF ITS SONS AT OMAHA BEACH ON D-DAY.

By Don Haines

When twin brothers Roy and Ray Stevens of Bedford, Virginia, joined Company A, First Battalion, 116th Infantry of the 29th Infantry Division in 1938, they could not know that their decision would completely destroy their dream of one day owning a farm together.

Joining the hometown National Guard unit simply meant they would be receiving $30 per month from the U.S. government for playing soldier one night a week and two weeks every summer. Times were hard in the small farming community of Bedford, population 3,000, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal had not yet lifted them out of the Great Depression. It was possible that they could be called to active duty, but they did not think much about it. Besides, if that happened at least they would go together, which is exactly what happened on February 18, 1941, as the Bedford Boys found themselves on a train headed for Fort Meade, Maryland.

The 29th was activated initially for 12 months, but

Photographer Robert Capa accompanied assault troops during the first wave on Omaha Beach. He snapped numerous photos but an overeager technician ruined all but of few of the frames. This surviving image of the D-Day landings depicts American soldiers rushing forward through heavy surf while under German fire.

Five of the Bedford Boys, left to right, Ray Nance, Ray Stevens, Roy Stevens, Captain Taylor Fellers, and Sergeant John Wilkes posed for photos during happy times before June 6, 1944. Wilkes was photographed with his wife Bettie. Ray Stevens, Fellers, and Wilkes were among the 19 Bedford Boys killed on D-Day. Nance, the last survivor of the Bedford Boys, died in 2009.

Captain Taylor Fellers, commanding officer of Company A, knew the 12-month period was not set in stone. The world was an increasingly dangerous place, and he thought the Bedford Boys had best be ready for anything. He was determined that Company A would be the equal of any, and he was equally determined that his boys not be ridiculed by the Regular Army guys who generally looked down their noses at National Guardsmen, not seeing them as real soldiers.

Patriotism played a part in Ray Nance joining the guard in 1933, but the tobacco farmer admitted that $30 a month was also an enticement. "That was cash money." Nance had been sent to Richmond for officer training and was a second lieutenant when Company A was activated. He knew all the Bedford Boys and felt keenly his responsibility to them. The 29th was known as the Blue and Gray Division, composed of men from Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, and soon after his arrival at Fort Meade, Nance would have men he did not know assigned to his platoon. He was determined that these new men would blend well, and he took a personal interest in them also. Nance knew that Taylor Fellers was very strict, and he was equally determined not to let him down.

Master Sergeant John Wilkes, a big bear of a man, had proven himself an able soldier and rose quickly to company first sergeant. Wilkes demanded instant obedience and tolerated no slackers. But underneath, his young wife Bettie knew, he was sensitive and passionate. During his time stateside Bettie vowed to be with John as much as possible, a vow she kept, even traveling to Florida with other wives when the 29th was on maneuvers.

Earl Newcomb had learned to cook in a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp, so when he joined Company A in 1934 it seemed a natural transition to mess sergeant. Earl had made a vow, too. Get hot food to the soldiers of Company A whenever possible.

Allen Huddleston had been a soda jerk at one of two Bedford drug stores before joining Company A, just before they left for Fort Meade. "I knew the draft was coming, so I thought if I was going to war, I'd rather go with people I knew."

At Fort Meade the Bedford Boys got a taste of what real soldiering was all about. They could soon strip their M1 Garand rifles blindfolded, and those who did not know soon learned about military etiquette or else they would be facing an Article 15, two hours of extra duty. They went on maneuvers twice, to North Carolina and Florida, where they used new radios and motorized vehicles while learning how to attack an enemy. Also at Fort Meade they learned about the advantages of central heating and running water, something most Bedford Boys had never had.

While the longest pass was two days, and Bedford was seven hours away, the boys would find a way to get there and spend some time with family, wives, and girlfriends. If they could not get home, the home folks, especially wives, would find a way to get to them.

By the summer of 1941, boredom began to settle in and grousing began. If there was no war, why did they have to be away from home? What was this Army stuff all about anyway? Come December 7, 1941, they would find out.

On that day, the 29th was in North Carolina, alternately cursing the ice and then the mud. Roy Stevens remembered how Pearl Harbor changed attitudes. "I didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was, but I was mad. We'd slug back a beer and vow to whip 'em good and still be home for Christmas."

On that day, the 12-month enlistments became for the duration.

For the next 10 months the Bedford Boys and their comrades in the 29th trained, and at day's end the con-

TOP: The Bedford Boys arrived at Fort Meade, Maryland, in February 1940 and underwent arduous training. These soldiers are participating in close-order drill in preparation for deployment to Europe. MIDDLE: A two-man bazooka team takes aim at a distant target during training exercises on a British beach in October 1943. The 29th Infantry Division underwent extensive training in preparation for D-Day. BOTTOM: General Dwight D. Eisenhower (center) addresses soldiers of the 116th Regiment, 29th Division during training exercises on February 4, 1944. Eisenhower is flanked by Major General Charles Gerhardt (left), commander of the 29th Division, and Major General Leonard Gerow (right), commander of the U.S. Army's V Corps.

versation would always get around to what part they would play in this war. Not everyone was so eager. Sergeant Earl Parker had just found out his wife was pregnant with their first child. Parker was in no hurry to leave the United States.

An old axiom says that it takes the Army a while to move, but then it moves fast. In September 1942, the 29th found itself on the way to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. Now they knew they were on the way to Europe. While they wanted to slap the Japs, the Germans would have to do. Now the Bedford Boys wondered—how long?

Security was tight at Camp Kilmer, and try as they might the Bedford wives who wanted one last glimpse of their husbands found it very difficult. Somehow, Ray Stevens wrangled a pass to Washington, D.C., to visit his buddy's sister. It was here that Ray for the first time declared that if he went to war he would not come back.

Come September 26, 1942, the men of the 29th were bound for Europe either aboard the *Queen Mary* or the *Queen Elizabeth,* luxury liners in civilian life but now pressed into service as military transports. They were amazed at the Spartan-like existence on these once opulent vessels, but, of course, they were carrying 7,000 men each plus crew.

Company A did not even reach England before the men got a taste of what it was like to see death up close.

The *Queen Mary* was under orders to stop for nothing and could not pick up survivors when she collided with one of the escort ships, the light cruiser HMS *Curacoa,* splitting her completely in two. Allen Huddleston remembered the horror. "I was lying on my bunk when I felt a slight thud. I looked out a porthole, just in time to see half a ship sinking. We didn't even slow down."

The men of the 29th were shocked to see hundreds of sailors drowning with no effort to rescue them. The *Curacoa* incident was hushed up. Officers and men were told to say nothing, and they obeyed.

The 29th Division arrived in England on a cold, rainy day and reached quarters at Tidworth Barracks on October 4, 1942. It was a freezing place heated by two pot-bellied stoves that were extinguished at lights out. Their straw mattresses soon produced a scabies epidemic. After they finished scratching, Company A began 20 months of extensive training, a record unmatched by any other infantry unit.

At this time the 29th commander was Maj. Gen. Leonard Gerow, a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute who knew the West Pointers back in Washington had many doubts about the mostly National Guard soldiers in his command. Gerow was adamant about his boys measuring up, and those who could not would be reassigned.

Taylor Fellers understood what Gerow was trying to do: weed out the guys who could not hack it. Lugging around a 100-pound barracks bag was too much for some, not to mention running 100 yards in combat boots in 12 seconds. Nor could they do 35 push-ups, 10 chin-ups, sprint through an obstacle course, then follow that with deadly accurate fire from a .45-caliber automatic, an M1 rifle, or a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle). They were not less brave, just less physically able. But Roy Stevens points out, "Some were transferred because of exceptional stamina, to Ranger and Airborne units, and some were sent to Officer Candidate School."

The winter of 1942-1943 was the coldest on record in England, but the training never slackened. Twenty-five-mile marches in large overcoats were routine. "You'd have icicles on the outside and be sweating like crazy on the inside," remembered one veteran.

The following spring the Bedford Boys were camping out on the hated moors. "You couldn't stay dry," said Allen Huddleston. "One time we had to set up our pup tents in a driving rain. Captain Fellers kicked a bunch of them down because they were not in perfect alignment. Guys were still in them."

Roy Stevens knew Taylor Fellers better than anyone, especially the good time guy under the tough exterior. "Sometimes, on a long march I'd go up and walk beside him and start talking about the good days back home. I could really get him going. Of course this was always out of earshot."

After a year and a half in England, the men of the 29th were anxious to get on with the job and go home. Once a traveling evangelist had a huge sign on his tent that read: Where will you spend eternity! A GI had scrawled underneath it: In England!

Not all of the 29th's soldiers were anxious to leave England. There had been some transfers in from the 1st Division who had experienced combat in North Africa. They had had a taste of battle and were not eager to repeat the experience. Bedford Boy Earl Parker, who had just become the father of a beautiful baby girl named Danny, declared he would gladly stay in England if it kept him from assaulting a beach.

In July 1943, a spit-and-polish West Pointer named Charles H. Gerhardt replaced Gerow as commander of the 29th. Along with his fearsome reputation came the information that he had little regard for National Guardsmen. He then shocked everyone by granting three-day passes. It was the lull before the storm.

Gerhardt had waited 20 years for this opportunity, and he was not going to blow it. The honeymoon lasted a few weeks, and then Uncle Charley began to crack the whip. He announced that everyone, enlisted and officer alike, would henceforth shave clean every day, in cold water if necessary. All vehicles would be polished and as spotless as uniforms. And—Uncle Charley's biggest hang-up—chin straps would be fastened at all times. He also had a problem with familiarity. If someone got too close, he would bark, "That's far enough."

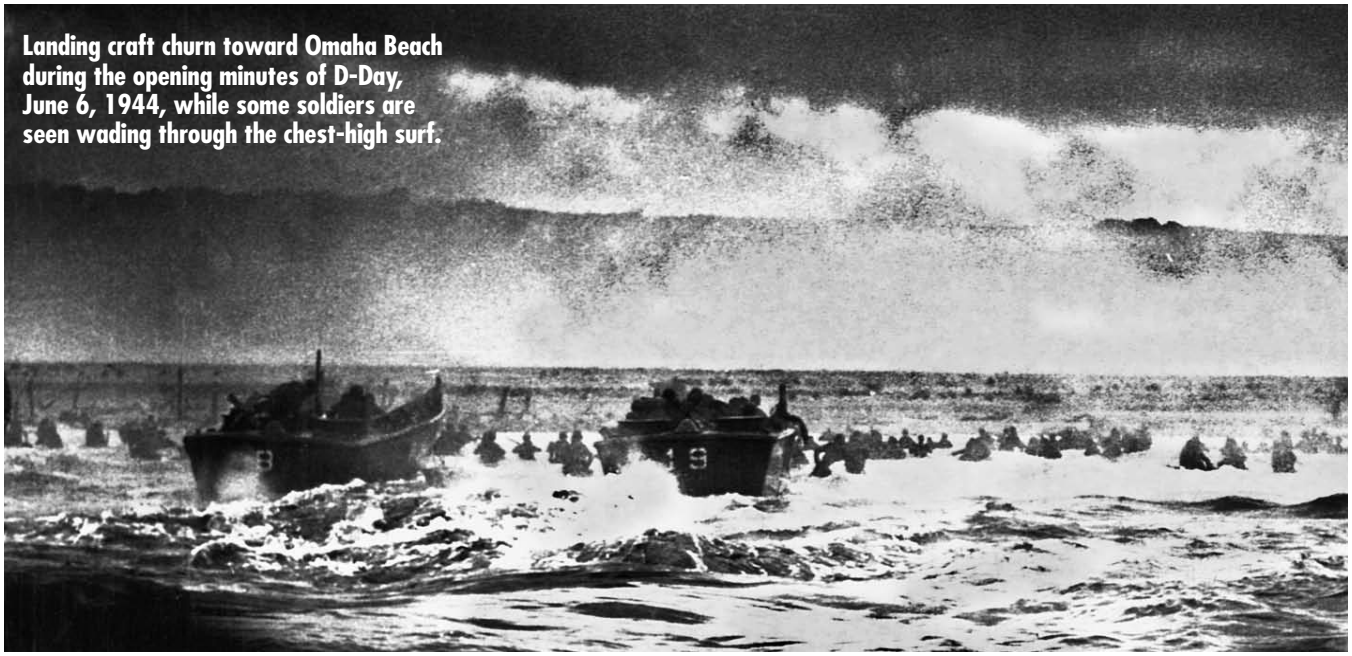
Gerhardt was hated by many, but he did not care. He had already been informed that the 29th would spearhead the greatest land invasion in history, and he would not fail. It was this attitude that undoubtedly brought victory but would identify Uncle Charley as the general with three divisions, one in the field, one in the hospital, and one in the cemetery.

To give his men the feeling that they were special, he came up with an inspiring battle cry, "Twenty Nine, Let's Go!" Before World War II was over, other units who had tired of Gerhardt's battle cry would reply, "Twenty Nine Go Ahead!"

In September 1943, Taylor Fellers told Ray Nance that Company A would probably be chosen as part of a spearhead that would assault the coast of France. Everything was hush-hush, but most caught on as soon as they began training to land on heavily defended beaches. The troops got a little nervous when everyone from Uncle Charley on down had to take swimming lessons, but not everyone learned how to swim.

The closer Fellers got to D-Day, the less confident he became. He listened with doubting ears as the planners said the landing would be a snap. Heavy bombers would take out the enemy pillboxes and in so doing would create ready-made foxholes on the beach. Demolition experts would destroy all of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's carefully placed mines and other defenses. The battleship USS *Texas* would obliterate whatever the bombers missed, and Sherman tanks adorned with special flotation devices would hit the beach with the infantry and give covering fire.

Fellers listened and doubted even more. It would take



Landing craft churn toward Omaha Beach during the opening minutes of D-Day, June 6, 1944, while some soldiers are seen wading through the chest-high surf.

a minor miracle for everything to go as planned. At one meeting, though only a captain, he spoke up. "Sir, I could take one BAR and hold that beach." He got no reply. As he and Ray Nance left the meeting, Fellers said, "We'll all be killed, Ray."

The 116th Infantry Regiment, of which Company A was a part, would be assaulting a beach code-named Omaha. The troops were already being referred to as the suicide wave.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, had originally scheduled Overlord for June 5, but bad weather postponed the landing until June 6, 1944. The weather was better, but there was considerable cloud cover and the English Channel was choppy.

Fellers's opinion was shared by a number of other soldiers. Some higher ranking officers believed the landing should be at night, which would provide an element of surprise. One officer who had served in the Pacific even questioned the landing craft to be used. The LCAs (landing craft assault) would come to a stop when they hit the beach. Landing craft with treads, which would continue as they hit land, would be better and give more protection. He was essentially told to mind his own business. The first wave would hit the beach at 6:30 AM.

As D-Day approached, the already anxious men of Company A had their anxiety increased when Fellers came down with a bad sinus infection and was hospitalized. However, when they lined up to board the transport SS *Empire Javelin,* Fellers was there. "I trained with you, and I've come to die with you if that's what it takes."

Roy Stevens remembered, "It lifted our spirits to have our leader back."

Charles Gerhardt was standing on the dock as the men of the 29th boarded. "Are you ready, men?"

A Bedford Boy named Bedford Hoback, who was on the same LCA as his brother Raymond, said: "Yes sir, we're sure ready."

The transport moved into the English Channel, and Roy and Ray Stevens stood at the rail with Earl Parker, who took a photo of his daughter out of his pocket and said, "If I could see her just once, I wouldn't mind dying."

Twelve miles from Omaha Beach, the troops stepped off the transport and into their LCAs. Roy was on a separate craft from Ray and still bothered by Ray's feeling of impending death. Roy had refused to shake his brother's hand on the ship because he knew Ray saw it as their final contact. "I'll shake your hand later, up at the crossroads above the beach sometime later this morning."

Ray offered his hand again, and again Roy refused. As he sat hunkered down in LCA 911, Roy looked over at 20-year-old VMI graduate, Lieutenant Edward Gearing, a born leader, so young, yet so competent.

In LCA 910, English Sub-Lieutenant Jimmy Green stood beside Taylor Fellers. Green could not help but feel that the 60 pounds each 29th Division soldier was carrying would be too much weight in deep water. Suddenly, Green winced as the stern of 910 collided with 911. There did not appear to be any damage, but a short time later his stoker said 910 was taking on water. Green

This aerial image of Omaha Beach on D-Day shows troops of the U.S. 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions struggling to reach cover and eventually advance against German fortifications. The situation on Omaha Beach remained in doubt for some time, and General Omar Bradley, commander of American invasion forces, considered evacuating the troops.

decided to go ahead, depending on the pumps to keep them afloat. His orders were to get these men to Omaha by 6:30 AM.

As they headed inland they did not know the Allied bombers had missed most of their targets. Because of cloud cover, the pilots had dropped their bombs far inland, killing some French civilians and cows, but few Germans. There would be no ready-made foxholes.

To make matters worse, many of the DD (duplex drive) Sherman tanks, their flotation devices inadequate in the choppy water, would flounder and sink without reaching Omaha Beach. Captain Fellers knew what this meant, but when asked by Jimmy Green if the LCAs could go in without the tanks, he replied, "Yes, we must get there on time."

Years later Roy Stevens was asked if a kind of Murphy's Law could be applied to D-Day. He replied, "Yes, battles never go as planned."

At 6 AM, Ray Nance, who was scheduled to land at 7:30, peered through a slot in his LCA, remembering to keep his head down. His job would be to set up a command post, so when radioman and Bedford Boy John Clifton told him the antenna was broken on the radio, Nance told him to keep it and they would repair it on the beach.

In LCA 911, Roy Stevens said a prayer for himself and his comrades, most of whom were so seasick they did not care whether they lived or died. Then, suddenly, their craft began to sink beneath them. They tried bailing with helmets but it was too little, too late, and soon everybody was in the water. Stevens could barely swim and his 60 pounds began to drag him under. Luckily, Bedford Boy Clyde Powers was a good swimmer and kept Stevens from drowning.

While bobbing in the water, they heard their radio operator yell that he was drowning. They looked around, and he was gone. Lieutenant Gearing saved a couple of men by cutting their packs off. Their situation seemed hopeless until Jimmy Green, passing them in LCA 911, told them to hang on and he would pick them up on his way back. Hearing this, Gearing told Roy Stevens he was in charge and to keep talking and make sure the men stayed together.

With that, Gearing started swimming toward the beach. The men in the water said they knew Stevens would keep them alive because he was concerned about his brother. Jimmy Green kept his promise, and soon those who had survived the sinking were back aboard the *Empire Javelin*. They would return to England for rest and refitting and then be sent back to France.

LCA 910 touched down on time 30 yards from shore. Taylor Fellers thanked Jimmy Green for getting them in. Fellers had asked Green to give him some cov-

ering fire when they got in the water, saying, "My men are National Guard troops and have never been in combat."

As much as Green wanted to honor the request, he could not. The water was just too rough. Green watched as Fellers and his men, who included brothers Raymond and Bedford Hoback, walked through the water with their weapons held high. Upon reaching the beach, they lay prone 50 yards from their objective, the D-1 Vierville draw. As they stood to run to their objective, the Germans opened up. Within seconds, Taylor Fellers, husband, son, brother and leader of men, along with the 29 others in his LCA lay dead.

The LCA carrying Master Sergeant John Wilkes experienced the same withering fire, but he and some of his men miraculously made it to the beach. The last they saw of him, Wilkes was firing his M1 at a German emplacement. He would be found later, a bullet through his forehead. Bettie's sensitive, passionate man would not be coming home. Nor would Earl Parker, the Bedford Boy who said he would gladly die if he could see his daughter just one time. His body was never found.

Lieutenant Ray Nance remembered that when his LCA got to the beach the ramp would not go down. "Get it down!" he screamed, knowing the Germans would be keying on the craft. Finally, the ramp went down and Nance plowed straight ahead. When he looked back, no one was behind him. The Germans had annihilated most of his men in an instant. As he got closer to the beach he saw the body of Bedford Hoback. Then he saw the bodies of two more Bedford Boys. Nance was shocked by the carnage. He had trained these good men and seen them grow as soldiers.

"I felt responsible for them, every last one," he recalled. "They were the finest soldiers I ever saw."

Then Nance collected himself. He had a job to do. He started to crawl toward a cliff, the only available cover. Suddenly, a machine gun bullet tore away part of his heel and blood spurted. It was then that Nance had the first of two D-Day experiences he would never forget.

"Just as I was about to give up hope I looked up in the sky, which had a rosy appearance," he recalled. "A warm feeling came over me, and I knew I was going to live.

"An immaculately dressed Navy corpsman leaned over me and began dressing my wound," Nance said of his second experience. "He gave me a shot of morphine, said this is worse than Salerno, good luck to you."

Then he was gone.

When Ray Nance told this story, people told him he was hallucinating. No one could look that good after coming in on an LCA. But Nance had his bandaged foot to prove his story. Today he feels that the Navy corpsman was heaven sent.

Later, a Sergeant came by and carried Nance to an aid station. "He put me down and I noticed what looked like a pie plate," said Nance. "I started to put my hand on it. The Sergeant shouted, "Don't touch it!" Nance had nearly put his hand on a German mine.

There was another angel of mercy on Omaha that day. His name was Cecil Breeden, Company A's medic. He was credited with saving many lives and would continue to do so all the way to Germany. Breeden never got a scratch. Many thought the Iowan deserved the Medal of Honor.

Roy Stevens was intent on finding his brother. The first thing he and Clyde Powers, who also had a brother in another LCA, did was visit the cemetery. Stevens walked to the part of the cemetery with graves of soldiers whose names began with S. He scraped some mud from a dog tag hanging from a cross and saw that it belonged to his twin brother, Ray. At the same time Powers found his brother, Jack.

Finally, Stevens said, "Come on Clyde, let's get the men who did this." As Roy Stevens left the cemetery, one thought came to mind: Why didn't I shake his hand? As things turned, out the Powers and Stevens families would have one son return from war. The Hoback family had lost both sons.

In all, 19 Bedford Boys died on June 6, 1944. Three would be killed later. No other community in the United States suffered such a loss. Only 10 percent of Company A survived the landing without being killed or wounded. They truly were the suicide wave.

Roy Stevens vowed to kill one German for each of his buddies. On June 13, he volunteered to lead a patrol, then regretted his decision. "At that moment I looked in the bottom of my foxhole and saw the face of Jesus Christ. He said, "go ahead, you'll come back."

Stevens survived the patrol. "I'd come back just like he said I would. Right then and there I prayed and made a deal with God: 'If you let me get home, I'll be your servant.'"

Men react differently to tragedy. Clyde Powers mourned while Roy Stevens wanted revenge. He went on other dangerous patrols and even volunteered to take messages to artillery units. Word got around that

LEFT: A few of the wounded soldiers evacuated from the Normandy beaches head back to the safety of Britain aboard a U.S. Coast Guard vessel. RIGHT: The bodies of American soldiers killed in action at Omaha Beach are lined up for eventual return to Britain. On Omaha Beach alone, approximately 2,500 American soldiers were killed or wounded. Most of the casualties occurred during the opening minutes of the landings.

he had a death wish, which led to a reprimand from his commanding officer. "You take it easy, it's going to take all of us to win this."

Roy Stevens's combat time came to an end on June 30, when an antipersonnel mine shredded him with ball bearings. While lying in sick bay, he noticed he was next to men deemed too far gone. He grabbed the smock of a passing nurse.

"I'm not here to die, I just need a little help," Roy begged.

The nurse replied, "If you let go of me I'll see what I can do." Surgery saved Stevens's life, and he was flown to a hospital in England on July 30. While in the hospital he wrote a poem about Ray and included it in a letter to his mother. He titled it "Twin Brother Farewell."

I'll never forget that morning,
It was the 6th of June
I said farwell to brother, didn't think it would be so soon.
I had prayed for out future, that wonderful place called home.
But a sinner's prayer wasn't answered, now I'll have to go there alone.
Oh brother, I think of you, all through the sleepless night,
Dear Lord, he took you from me, and I can't believe it was right,
This world is so unfriendly, to kill is now a sin, to walk that long narrow road, it can't be done without him.
Dear Mother, I know your worries, this is an awful fight,
To lose my only twin brother, and suffer the rest of my life.
Now fellows take my warning, believe it from start to end,
If you ever have a twin brother, don't go to battle with him.

This poem hung for years on the kitchen wall of Roy Stevens's Bedford home.

Bedford Boy Allen Huddleston missed the D-Day landing due to a broken ankle suffered in training. He rejoined Company A on August 28 and recognized no one.

"My first day somebody asked me if I knew Joe Parker," said Huddleston. "I said yes. He said, 'Well he was killed yesterday.'"

Like the Hoback family, the Parker family lost two sons. It might be considered a stroke of luck that younger brother Billy, serving in another unit, became a POW. Perhaps it saved his life. Huddleston never saw the Company A mess sergeant, but Newcomb kept his promise to his buddies to serve hot food whenever possible.

Huddleston was wounded in the shoulder on September 30, 1944. He still remembers the cumbersome brace he wore for several months. "I asked if they could just put a cast on it, but they said they needed to know if the wound began bleeding."

When families back in Bedford got news of the D-Day landing, they huddled around their radios. They had no way of knowing whether their men had been involved in the landing because mail was heavily censored. However, they suspected this was the reason

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that Company A had been in England for such a long time.

News of the invasion filled them with renewed vigor. Wives and mothers who had rolled thousands of bandages rolled even more, filled with the hope that their sons and husbands would soon be home. They could not know that 19 of the Bedford Boys already lay in foreign graves or floated lifelessly off the coast of France.

On July 4, 1944, the *Bedford Bulletin* reported that Company A had been commended for its actions on D-Day, but still no news about individual Bedford boys had arrived. About this time, letters written to a number of the men came back as undeliverable.

Bettie Wilkes would be the first to get some news, a month after D-Day, and it was much less than official. She was standing on a street corner when called to by a woman across the street.

"Bettie, did you hear about John?" Then the woman crossed the street. "He was killed."

Bettie rushed home in a state of shock. Family members tried to convince her that surely the government would have told her if anything had happened. Bettie never revealed the name of the bearer of bad tidings.

Another letter followed to the Fellers family that Taylor had been killed, but still no word came from the Army. According to Bedford resident Helen Stevens, "It was like waiting for an earthquake."

On July 17, Elizabeth Teass, the 21-year-old Western Union operator at Green's drugstore, reported for work as usual. She switched on her teletype machine and sounded a bell heard in Roanoke 25 miles away. She typed the words, GOOD MORNING. GO AHEAD. BEDFORD. Words came chattering back. GOOD MORNING. GO AHEAD. ROANOKE. WE HAVE CASUALTIES.

Teass watched as one telegram, then two, then three came through. She waited for the teletype to stop, but it did not, not for a long time. Teass was in shock. Why so many? But she knew her job. The families must be the first to know.

Elizabeth Teass was somewhat embittered because some have suggested she handed out the telegrams willy-nilly for delivery. "Mr. Frank Thomas, an employee of the drug store, usually delivered telegrams in town, so he took some," she remembered. "But some of the families lived outside town. Mr. Carder, the undertaker, delivered one of these. Sheriff Jim Marshall took one, and so did Doctor Rucker. Then Mr. Roy Israel, who operated the town taxi service, told me not to hand out any more, that he would deliver the rest. Each telegram that was delivered had to have a verification of delivery slip come back. Bedford was one quiet little town. Everyone's heart was broken."

Roy Stevens may have said it best. "A veil of tears hung over Bedford."

There could not possibly be a more appropriate place for the National D-Day Memorial, which was dedicated on June 6, 2001. Of the 35 Bedford Boys who went away to war, 13 came home. Roy Stevens played an active role in the establishment of the D-Day Memorial. He returned to Omaha Beach for the 50th anniversary of the landing in 1994. He died in 2007.

Ray Nance was proud of the fact that he reestablished Company A in 1948. He thought it would be a good morale booster, and the young men of Bedford flocked to join. Company A went to war again in 2004 in Afghanistan. This time everyone came home. Ray Nance died in 2009.

Allen Huddleston is a widower and still subscribes to the magazine, *The Twenty Niner.* He operated a photo shop and is now a talented painter. Others give Huddleston credit for writing the inscription on a monument dedicated in the town in 1954. But he modestly says that it was a group effort.

One question that has been debated is why Company A was chosen for the first wave against Omaha Beach. General Gerhardt explained it this way when he came to Bedford to dedicate the 1954 memorial: "Why was the 116th Infantry picked for that particular job? Because they showed the characteristics necessary on that particular day. Who were these boys? The record of the 29th goes back to 1620, through the regimental history of Virginia troops, and their record has been unequaled. Those boys were the descendants of those who fought with Jackson, Lee, and Stuart."

But perhaps there is a simpler explanation: that the commanders knew the type of soldiers they were sending would carry out their orders, no matter what; that though they feared the dragon, they would not hesitate to march into its mouth if that was their mission. Nothing typifies this better than Taylor Fellers's reply to Jimmy Green:

"Yes, we must get there on time." □

Don Haines is a retired registered nurse and Cold War Army veteran whose work has appeared in WWII History *and many other publications.*