

# D-DAY, FIRSHAND

**Survivors of the Allied invasion recall the fear and exhilaration of 60 years ago**

**D. M. GIANGRECO and KATHRYN MOORE**

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"The movie 'Saving Private Ryan' captured the intensity of the battle but think of those first 19 minutes actually lasting four hours."

— Chief Petty Officer Jerry Markham, who landed on Omaha Beach

Sixty years ago today, 170,000 Allied troops penetrated the German defenses at Normandy, France, in the greatest amphibious invasion ever mounted: D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Some 3.6 million Allied soldiers, sailors and airmen assembled in England for the sole purpose of destroying the Nazi tyranny of Adolf Hitler which had engulfed nearly all of Europe. Defending Hitler's "Atlantic Wall" were 850,000 German troops, including nine of the dreaded panzer (armored) divisions.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme Allied commander, described the Allied invasion force as "a great human spring, coiled for the moment when its energy would be released and it would vault the English Channel." War and the inexorable passage of time have taken many of these men from us, but the survivors of that remarkable enterprise remember well the fear and exhilaration, terror and even humor of the day that sealed the fate of Nazi Germany.

Throughout the ports, staging areas and airfields of Britain, the forces pondered what awaited them.

Staff Sgt. Charles Klein was thankful that his 5th Ranger Battalion "had a good chaplain" and still recalls the spiritual message he gave before the Rangers disembarked: "Tomorrow is a big day. We're going to engage the enemy this time and all the games are over. And all your praying will be over, too. Tomorrow, I do all the praying. If I

catch anybody kneeling down on the beach and praying within reach of my foot, he's going to get a boot from me."

The main Allied force was to approach the coast at night during a break in the seasonally bad weather, then launch a dawn attack. Paratroopers in transport aircraft streaming over the invasion fleet to make the initial assault found that "the full moon lit up everything," said Sgt. Tom McCarthy from the 82nd Airborne Division.

"As we flew over, I looked down and I saw the armada in the Channel. There were ships and ships and ships. You thought about how big it was, and reality began to sink in. As the mainland began to show up, it appeared like a dark spot against the horizon."

"The unfortunate thing was that full moon," McCarthy said. "When we jumped, it was like daylight. I said some Hail Marys, some SOB's, some more Hail Marys and hoped that ground showed up pretty soon. I looked right down at two guys banging away at me and one of them put a crease across my left temple. I don't know whether he scared me or made me mad, but I knew I was all right. I got out of the chute, moved into the high grass just in time. They came searching for me, and I let them search. When they got about 10 feet away, I fed them a grenade."

Paratroopers and Germans frequently bumped into each other in the dark, and survival often depended on who got off the first shot.

A small group from the 101st Airborne Division was walking a country road when something caught Pvt. Bill True's eye: "I glanced out into the field, and a German soldier was just aiming his pistol at one of the guys up the line. That was the first time I had a really clear picture of what I was shooting at. There was the enemy. Thinking about it later, I was impressed with how good my training had been because it was the most automatic thing to bring my rifle to my shoulder — taking the safety off as I brought it up — and squeezing the trigger as calmly as on a firing range."

After a sharp firefight, Cpl. Wally Parr of the British 6th Airborne Division ran into, not more Germans, but frightened French civilians.

"We started to go past a house when we heard a noise," said Parr. "We walked over, looked and found a woman with two children. We said,

'Go inside. Go inside. Liberation.' The mother never said a word but just stared up at me."

Parr feared that a grenade could be flung into their midst at any moment. "I was shouting 'Liberation. Go inside. Allez. Allez.' Then I reached in my pocket, and the older of the two children took a bar of chocolate."

While confused fighting raged around the scattered parachute drops, invasion ships churned steadily toward the coast. "The Channel was very angry that day," recalled Klein. There were maybe 50 yards between crests so a vessel would be riding up one steep wave and plunging down into the valley of another.

Karl Wolf of the 1st Infantry Division found that, "An awful lot of people, including myself, became seasick. Someone handed me Dramamine tablets, saying these would help my seasickness. I took three, which was a mistake. Later, after we landed, I was leading a group of men. There was machine gun fire going across. We stopped for a while because we were pinned down and, next thing I knew, I woke up to find someone shaking my leg. I realized I had fallen asleep because of the Dramamine. It was rather humorous afterwards but not at the time."

Naval Combat Demolition Units tasked with destroying rows of deadly beach obstacles were the first to reach shore, and bore the full fury of the German defense.

"The movie 'Saving Private Ryan' captured the intensity of the battle but think of those first 19 minutes actually lasting four hours," said Chief Petty Officer Jerry Markham, who landed on Omaha Beach. "Waves of soldiers continually arrived, and this hampered our job. We were able to finally load a portion of these obstacles with explosives but couldn't blow them because the soldiers coming in were hiding behind them. I told these guys to get the hell out of there. But by the time we got this bunch out, another bunch would come and hide in them. So the obstacles were just a rabbit hutch.

"I didn't deliberately blow any obstacle with a guy behind it although I had to scare the hell out of a lot of them. When you crawled over, set off a red smoke bomb, and said, 'You've got two minutes to get your ass out of here or it's going to be blown out of here!' and then you started moving away real fast, he knew you weren't kidding and

moved, too. After a while, they seemed to know to stay away from us because we were drawing a lot of fire.”

First Sgt. Leonard Lomell of the 2nd Ranger Battalion was one of the men who scaled the nine-story cliffs at Pointe du Hoc. “My company, D Company, was assigned three gun emplacements to destroy. The Germans were up there cutting our ropes. They were dropping grenades on us and machine-gunning us. Riflemen from the flanks in the side of the cliff were shooting at us where they had open fields of fire. But still my men were successful.”

Relieving forces found that the 225 Rangers who landed that morning destroyed five long-range guns positioned back from the cliff, and had been whittled down to just 90 men in three days of continuous fighting.

Only four men in Sgt. Felix Branham's Virginia National Guard (29th Infantry Division) platoon were lost at Omaha Beach, but another nearby unit from Bedford, Va., had fully 190 of its 197 men killed or wounded in the first few minutes.

“We were maybe a couple hundred yards to the left of A Company from Bedford. Many of them never got out of the water. The bad part about being in a Guard unit was seeing guys die that I had grown up with, gone to school with. But when you saw them die, you knew there was nothing you could do to help them. It was a matter of survival — just get off the beach.

Klein is still haunted by one vivid memory of D-Day: “Down on the beach an LSI, a very large vessel, had grounded. They lowered the ladders. The men were just about to leave, but apparently the ship wasn't quite firm yet, so it took a little bit of time. Before the men started to disembark, a shell hit that ship and I have never seen anything go so quickly. It went up just like a charcoal fire. Poof! It was a mass of flames. We lost 200 men in an instant.”

Unlike the units in the bloody struggle at Omaha, Walter Bodlander's 4th Infantry Division came ashore on Utah Beach to the west and was able to move quickly inland. A recent Jewish immigrant who narrowly escaped Nazi Germany, Bodlander belonged to an intelligence unit, so prisoners were immediately brought to him. “Occasionally an interrogation was difficult, and one was forced to do something more creative. We had captured a lieutenant and two sergeants. I

interrogated them and they were really tough. They were convinced they were fighting for their fatherland and weren't giving anything."

Confident of receiving proper treatment from the Americans, the Germans were "relatively relaxed" and Bodlander became "very frustrated because I needed information." He finally took one of the sergeants away from the group. "I took my pistol and shot in the air. I put a guard there and made sure that this guy was out of sight. Then I went back to the lieutenant, and told him 'You're next,' and took him to another area. So he broke down and started talking. Once I had his information, it was easy to get more from the other sergeant."

Among the tens of thousands of troops piling ashore well into D-Day night were two Royal Air Force nurses who moved off quickly after coming ashore on the Canadian beach, Juno.

"We could see people moving in the dark," said Iris Bower, "and suddenly I heard a voice almost in my ear saying 'Where are you off to?' It was the beach master. I caught my voice and said, 'Number 50 Mobile Field Hospital, making our way to the assembly area.' He came right up to me. I was in my battle dress and tin hat with a pack on my back. He looked right at my face."

The battle-hardened Royal Engineer was stunned to see a woman on his beach. "All he said was 'Good God!' "

Once past the jumble of troops and equipment on Britain's Sword Beach, Lt. Geoffrey Parrott of the British 1st Commando Brigade discovered that the war took on a completely different character in the Norman countryside.

"There never did seem to be enough men to go around for anything," recalled Parrott. "One thing that struck me was the loneliness of it. You saw two people there, and two people 15 yards over there, and that was all. You thought, 'We're here practically alone.' The front line could be a very lonely and deserted place sometimes. You really relied on one another."

American casualties on D-Day numbered approximately 6,600 and, together with the invasion of the Mariana Islands in the Pacific about a week later on June 15, 1944, marked the beginning of the "casualty surge" that lasted through May 1945.

In this period, roughly 65,000 young American men — brothers, fathers, husbands, sons — were killed, wounded, injured or declared missing in combat each and every month with November, December and January's figures standing at 72,000, 88,000, and 79,000 respectively. Some 9,386 of them lie buried at Omaha Beach.

True of the 101st Airborne, who fought in Normandy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, found that, "In the heat of a battle, you don't mourn a fallen comrade. Years later is when you really feel it and really mourn buddies that died. Johnny Sepko was a little guy and one of the youngest guys in the company. To stand at his grave in Normandy and know that I've lived a full life and had children and grandchildren, but he'll always be a boy who died there."

"I think the best thing," said Wally Parr, "is if you can think of all those who made the supreme sacrifice, remember the real meaning of that. They gave away all of their tomorrows for our today."

*D.M. Giangreco and Kathryn Moore are the authors of "Eyewitness D-Day" by Barnes & Noble Books. Their previous works include "Dear Harry ... Truman's Mailroom, 1945-1953: The Truman Administration Through Correspondence With 'Everyday Americans.' "*