

THE BEACHHEAD

This is the classic story of a classic assault. Kenneth Crawford, NEWSWEEK war correspondent, not only hit the Bay of the Seine beach with a very expendable first invasion wave; what was vastly more important, he came out alive—and on schedule—with the story. NEWSWEEK presents it proudly as the first complete and coherent account of the vital first blow:

1-Assault Team

With American forces in France on D Day—We were 32 drenched, seasick American soldiers, two placid Coast Guardsmen, and one shivering war correspondent in a pitching landing barge a few hundred yards off the Normandy coast. This was it—H Hour, D Day; 6:30 a.m., June 6, 1944. We were one of the first wave of assault teams in what promised to be the first successful cross-Channel invasion for centuries.

No bookmaker would have given these 32 assorted experts in killing better than an even chance of living through the next hour, much less the next day. In a vague way they knew this, but they were not impressed. In one breath they called themselves “The Suicide Wave” and in the next they talked about what a hell of a time they were going to have after the war.

“Guess the folks back home are pretty excited about this,” said a voice from the back of the barge as we turned for the final run into the beach where German machine guns, German artillery, and German mines were presumed to be waiting.

“Hear they’re doing a lot of praying,” said another in a deprecating way.

Nobody answered. Silence seemed to assent to the foolishness of prayer. I had noticed, however, that chaplains worked overtime holding well-attended services, confessionals, and private conferences just before take-off from our mother ship.

“The good thing about seasickness,” somebody suggested, “is that you don’t care if you live or die.”

“To Hell With the Rules”: Packs were being fastened. There was a stream of curses as straps soaked with sea water refused to come buckled. Six inches of bilge, compounded of sea water and vomit, sloshed forward and aft. Ahead clearly visible in the dank morning light was the 500-yard-wide beach we had studied so often in reconnaissance photographs. To reach their first cover these boys would have to traverse about 25 yards of water, starting at waist depth, and then the width of the beach, now shrouded by artillery fire and aerial bombardment. Their first objective would be the retaining wall along the dunes flanking the beach.



Under-surf obstacles like these (photographed at low tide before the invasion by an RAF reconnaissance plane) proved totally inadequate to stop the flow of Allied assault

They expected to fight for the wall when they reached it, and bayonets were fixed for the ordeal.

One of my boatmates proffered a bag of hand grenades.

“Can’t use them,” I shouted. “War correspondent. Rule against it.”

“To hell with the rules,” he said. “You got to have something if you haven’t got a gun.”

“Wouldn’t know how to pull the pin,” I answered.

He gave me a look that seemed to combine pity with disgust.

“Remember what you’ve been learning for the last three years,” said Capt. Robert Crisson in an easy Birmingham voice. “Don’t run in water or you’ll just wear yourself out. When you hit the beach, run for that wall and let ’em have it. Get some toeholds along that side planking.”

Hating Mr. Higgins: In another half minute the ramp would be down, exposing our barge to fire from the wall or dunes. Glancing over the port side of the barge I saw one control boat lying on her side with the crew clinging to the slimy hull. One wounded man kept losing his hold and slipping. His mates snatched him back. Just beyond the control boat, a tank barge was hit amidships and started sinking fast.

Even then there was time for a kid called Red, who was more green than red after holding his head in a bucket throughout the entire trip, to offer up an American wisecrack:

“That son of a bitch Higgins,” he said. “He hasn’t got nothing to be proud of about inventing this boat.”

2-Onto the Beach

“Down ramp!” shouted the coxswain from the elevated stern.

Down it came with a clank and splash. Ahead—and it seemed at that moment miles off—stretched the sea wall. At Crisson’s insistence we had all daubed our faces with Commando black. I charged out with the rest, trying to look fierce and desperate, only to step into a shellhole and submerge myself in the Channel. Luckily my gear was too wet and stinking to put on so I was light enough to come up.



U. S. Signal Corps Photo

The quick and the dead: They pour ashore in full battle kit . . .



U. S. Signal Corps Radiotelephoto from Acme

. . . and some fall, never to rise again, at the very edge of the water

The soldiers were well out of the water, carrying packs, guns, heavy mortar parts, and radio equipment, by the time I made the beach. They crouched low and ran apelike. We had been told to expect booby traps and antipersonnel mines on the beach, machine-gun fire from the dunes, and probably artillery fire from behind them. Strangely, there were no mines and no machine guns. Only artillery fire, and that directed against the boats.

Not a man in our wave, so far as I know, was lost, but three shell bursts followed our barge as she pulled away from the beach. Others were hit. Our mother ship lost seven boats either from the artillery fire or the swamping. We missed our allotted place on the beach by about 800 yards because some of the boats were so water-logged that they couldn't complete the up-beach run.

Lt. Eldred Kron of the Coast Guard, commander of our group of boats, ordered, "Turn!" just in time. His own boat was so filled with water that she barely floated. He got her back to the mother ship by bailing.

Those Who Followed: I leaned against the sea wall and looked back over the beach. The second wave was just coming on. As far as I could see to the left and right they came—more slowly this time because they had seen the easy time we had. Too slowly. A shell from the battery of German 88s in a strong point beyond the upper end of the beach had got range. Just in front of me a shell burst in a cluster of seven men. Six crumpled, apparently dead. The seventh screamed in agonized amazement.

There still were no hospital corpsmen on the beach. When the 88s shifted their fire to another sector, I ran down to help

The Beachhead

the seventh man. He turned out to be a 200-pounder and beyond my strength to carry. At his suggestion we tried walking, with me as a prop. He had been hit in the arm and leg with shrapnel. Both were broken.

"What good am I going to be without an arm and leg?" he asked.

"Take it easy," I said. "You'll have your arm and your leg."

We must have fallen in a tangle six times before we regained the sea wall and safety. Later I saw him aboard the evacuation barge. He will have his arm and his leg, but they may not be much good.

3-Through the Wall

Now the 88s were raking the beach with murderous accuracy, picking out the largest clusters of men and the biggest boats. But casualties for this kind of an operation were relatively light. On our ship there were 150 wounded and a half-dozen dead that night. Other ships had similar quotas. In military terms, it was a cheap landing.

Once gathered together and feeling that the sea side of the wall was completely secure, I started exploring our beach—only one of several simultaneously established by the British, Canadians, and Americans between Le Havre and Cherbourg. Now the beach was swarming with men and vehicles. Two holes were blown in the sea wall by the businesslike Army Engineers, veterans of Sicily and Salerno.

One demolition blast was so close that it temporarily deafened me in one ear. The charges seemed big enough to demolish a skyscraper. Chunks of wall bounced off my helmet. Tank traps and other beach obstructions were similarly dealt with. Presently the traffic—trucks, tanks, jeeps, hospital wagons, were moving in a bumper-to-bumper cruise through two holes in the wall. Steel-mesh roadways were laid over the dunes.

Soldiers deployed inland according to prearranged plan. The battalion of which my battery was a part captured twenty German prisoners within an hour after landing. Red was feeling fine again. The prisoners were mostly bedraggled teenagers, frightened and sometimes wounded in the terrific preinvasion bombardment from the sea and air. They came out of their shelters willingly.

The General and the Shell: Presently I came upon a brigadier general, assistant commander of the division spearheading the attack. He was as wet as I and shivering even worse. He huddled against the wall at its higher point, wrapped in an Army blanket and sitting cross-legged, Indian-fashion. He had landed with the first wave—an innovation for brass. Two aides were trying to make his field radio work. It refused.

In front of the place he sat, engineers had erected a pretentious sign proclaim-

The Beachhead

ing this to be the General Headquarters of the beach.

"That's war for you," the general complained. "The field commanders don't know where in hell their own men are, to say nothing of the enemy. They give orders anyway. It's a good thing I was here early to get that wall blown."

I happen to know that the men who blew the wall had needed no orders. They came ashore knowing precisely where it was to be blown and carried the equipment to do it. Anyway it was nice to have a general on hand so early in the game. Particularly because he had dry cigarettes, having had the forethought to wrap them in a rubber receptacle ordinarily used for quite another purpose.

The general wondered what was going on in the little cluster of houses and barns across the meadow behind the dunes, about a mile away. I volunteered to take a look. As I stood on the dune looking, a captain called me a fool and ordered me down. He said I'd draw fire.

I reported to the general that his men were already visible in the village.

"I'll take a look myself," he said.

He mounted the dune, stood erect, and looked. I gave the captain what I hope was a withering glance. Shortly, though, there was a whine and we all hit the dirt. For a grandfather, the general turned out to be extremely agile. The captain had the bad taste to laugh raucously.

4-Weather or No

Most of the big German guns in the area seemed to have been knocked out by the early bombardment, but one gun continued to harass destroyers moving in close to give covering fire to the infantry as it advanced inland. One destroyer was sunk, but in such shallow water that it continued to fire its batteries. The single 88 continued to rake the beach all day despite being encircled by tanks and the infantry.

Worsening weather was a greater cause for concern than the gun. The waves got so high in the afternoon, as the tide started receding, that low vehicles were frequently swamped. Jeep loads of materials floated away. The invasion had been postponed for one day due to bad weather, but the second day was worse than the first. Invasion had to go on this time, weather or no.

Shortly before noon the unit commanders started turning up at headquarters with their reports. Lt. Col. C. Simmons of New York, a lanky man commanding one spearhead battalion, reported that he had made contact by signal with the paratroopers landed the night before H Hour in the geographical center of the Cherbourg Peninsula.

Everything was proceeding according to schedule despite the 88s and occasional mortar blasts on the beach and along the roads leading inland. At one

The Beachhead

point an 88 started fire in a small gasoline dump at the lower end of the beach. It spread to nearby trucks. The men who dashed out to fight the fire were pelted with further shots. That German gunner was earning his keep.

Home to Mother: Toward evening I consulted a Navy beachmaster, who had set up a traffic-control station near General Headquarters, about transportation back to the mother ship. He put me on a small personnel barge. It was carrying seven wounded, including my 200-pounder, back to the ship's sick bay.

I provided cigarettes and water. Mistaking me for a hospital corpsman, one of the boys complained bitterly about the service. He said he needed more blankets. My large friend asked me several times to see if the fingers of his broken arm were still there and, if so, to straighten them out. The 11 miles between the mother ship and the shore seemed even longer than it had that morning.

When I got back to the ship, the doctor shouted over the side: "So you got it, too."

"What makes you think that?" I asked. "I'm the only well man on this boat."

"Where'd you pick up all the blood?"

I'd forgotten that my Navy overall was bloody from my encounter with the big soldier. Several times during the day men wearing Red Cross arm bands had offered to rip off my clothes, dress my wounds, and slap tags on me.

Over good wardroom coffee that night and the next day we Monday-morning-quarterbacked the whole operation. Veterans aboard agreed that no major amphibious undertaking they had ever seen or heard of had gone off so nearly as planned in briefing rooms. The timing of artillery fire and the landings had been perfect. But for the perverseness of the elements, there hadn't been a hitch.

5-Plans and Secrets

I first heard the details of the plan of campaign, some of which will remain secret until revealed in action, on the afternoon of June 1. A group of war correspondents accredited to the Navy were transported to the headquarters of Rear Admiral Alan G. Kirk, Commander of the United States invasion task force. He told us the whole thing would be risky, no matter how carefully planned. Much depended upon the weather, but if D Day had to be postponed many more days, the tides would not be right again for about a month. A month's delay might eliminate all the elements of surprise. He was confident, he said, that once initial landings were made, all would go well.

Veteran: My ship turned out to be a onetime second-string luxury liner converted into a carrier of troops and landing craft. She had done service at Sicily

The Beachhead

and Salerno, as had most of her personnel. Her decks were loaded with landing craft of all descriptions.

Including Army personnel, which had trained with Coast Guardsmen, the ship's company included almost 2,000 officers and men. Combat teams included men of all services—experts in every branch of warfare. Between June 1 and June 6, they briefed every man on the ship. Everyone knew the over-all plan and his particular part in it.

The night I went aboard I reported to the executive officer. My orders permitted me to go ashore following the initial waves, with the Navy beachmaster.

"Why not go on first and see the whole show?" I was asked by an Army officer who said that he himself had been ordered to go later but would prefer to go first if he had his choice. "I have the chart right here. I'll put you down for boat 14."

"Good," I said. "Mighty kind of you. First it is."