

Collier's

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THE 100 Hours BY W. B. COURTNEY RADIOED FROM LONDON



Navy Beachmaster Command Post, above, issued all orders to ships lying offshore on what to send in next

A desperate period of crisis when American courage turned a Normandy beachhead into a European invasion front is described by Collier's war correspondent

GENERAL MONTGOMERY later said we had "held on by an eyelid." For nearly a hundred hours, from a U. S. Navy vessel close inshore off Normandy, I watched how American boys clawed and battled that "eyelid" into a good fist- and foothold; I had a grandstand view of what must forever be valued gloriously in American military annals.

Imagine what it would have meant if, from a roof in Boston, you had watched the Battle of Bunker Hill; or from a window on Brooklyn Heights, you had seen Washington's escape from Long Island; from a treetop in Pennsylvania, had witnessed the clash of the Blue and the Gray over Gettysburg's fields. This was such an incomparable and solemn opportunity.

The scenario for this drama was written a long time ago. It was written on the night of September 13th and the morning of September 14th in the year 1814 on board a British man-o'-war, off Baltimore, Maryland, by a young attorney named Francis Scott Key.

It is being acted by young and true Americans of a complexity of races that Key could not reasonably have foreseen and on a scale that neither he nor any other man of his time could have conceived. Only the valor of these Americans would have been no surprise to the author of our national anthem. Their blood gave new meaning to every word and verse of his message. Before this "dawn's early light," 130 years after Key's adventure, we, too, had our night of anxiety—a night of great sounds in the air and over the horizon and of grave apprehensions for the morrow.

Like him, we kept vigil at the ship's rail to see what the "morning's first beam" would disclose. Through weeks of ugly anticipations and wild conjectures, G.I.s and Tommies alike had steeled themselves for a vicious reception. The Luftwaffe, we told one another as we waited, was saving up for the invasion and would hurl their all upon us—including radio-controlled glider bombs, dive bombs and heaven only knew what.

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A young engineer, packing the Army's new, deadly flame thrower, makes ready to hit the beaches of Normandy

Perils of the Imagination

So likewise would scores of E- and U-boats shower huge rockets upon us. Mines embedded in the sea would be released by electric switches and leap to the surface and blow our whole fleet to kingdom come. You heard various means by which these things would be accomplished, none agreeable. Poison or fire gas or both would drench us. We were instructed how to shuck our life belts and swim under flaming surfaces. I shall always believe that the highest expression of courage in this invasion was the finding of strength enough in one's legs to walk aboard the vessels that were to carry us across to the expected perils.

But save for one sharp plane attack and some distant surface firing, the night failed to live up to our dreads. The sun came out, strong and burning, as we ran past Cape Barfleur and entered the Bay of the Seine. Many of the kids turned away from the railings and stretched out on the deck, taking off their shoes and opening their shirts to the warmth.

The wits told one another this was like a side. An officer's megaphoned voice came to us above the wind and the booming gunfire: "Send all your small craft ashore immediately to pick up casualties."

There was a pause that iced the mood of every man aboard. Gone completely now was the pleasure-cruise nonsense.

Our bridge asked: "Shall we send troops in with them?"

"Hell, no!" came the quick retort. "We haven't got all the first bunch ashore yet. There's no room for yours. It's a madhouse in there."

At once, the beach took on a shocking malignity. The truth was the Germans had sprung no secret weapons, no fantastic surprises, but their orthodox defenses had been murderously skillful, their water and shore obstacles in design, profusion, setting and concealment had been fiendishly clever. To sneer at the defenders of this beach, to poke fun at their Atlantic Wall, to tell less than the whole truth of their bravery would only belittle the American, British and Canadian boys who died in defeating them.

An Awareness to Death

Abruptly we understood the spurts of flame on shore and cliff, the swift eruptions of dirty yellow sand and the geysers of surf, the figures running bent over, and the cracklings and shouts. Often in war, your sense of smell has prescience, and the odor of death precedes decay. Mixed with the acridity of burning oil and wood and the fumes of explosives, there was something indefinably loathsome in the air.

I stared through my binoculars at some limp, dark bundles lying a little away from the main activities. In my first casual examination of the beach I had assumed they were

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part of the debris of defensive obstacles. But they were bodies—American bodies.

By now, you will have had news, in the quick, hard, large sense, of these beaches. But news is only what you know and feel at any given moment. History is the memory of news. Great days like this are timeless. Normandy has become as timeless as Pearl Harbor and Bataan and Chateau-Thierry. On Sunday, June 11th, little more than a hundred hours after H-Hour, General Montgomery, summing up the week, said that the "violence, power and speed of our assault carried us right over the beaches and some miles inland very quickly," except in one special case.

In the exception, a German field division had just been fetched up to one of the beaches where it was the Yanks' fortune to land. It was a good division.

"Very heavy fighting went on," continued General Montgomery, "on the American beach, swaying back and forward. On the evening of D-Day, at that particular beach sector, the leading troops were no more than a hundred yards inland, hanging on by their eyelids."

That particular beach sector is the one you are facing. Here were fought the hardest and grandest first 100 hours in the annals of the U. S. Military Forces, and from this ship you have a panoramic view of the beach and the battle fought here.

We can follow it—if the thought is not irreverent for this human experience—as a football game can be watched from the fifty-yard line.

The Bay of the Seine is about 60 miles wide, and is an arm of the English Channel, indenting the French coast to a depth of 20 miles. It is nearly as regular in shape as an oblong box with two ends and one side. The river Seine empties into its southeast corner at Le Havre. In the southwest corner at Isigny is the mouth of the river Vire. Cherbourg is not on the bay; it is on the English Channel, at the top of the Cotentin Peninsula, which forms the western end of the box.

The initial assault extended from the Orne roughly 40 miles westward to the Vire, then part way up toward Cherbourg. It was what soldiers call a "dive division front." There were Paratroopers, Airborne Combat Engineers, Royal Marines, Commandos, Rangers and many other specialists, in addition to the line units. By the time you read this, more than a million men, Allied and German, will be fighting on this front alone.

The American sectors were at acute right angles to one another on both sides of the corner of the bay split by the river Vire. Our beach is very gradual, the water shallow with enormous tides of twenty-five feet or more racing over the rocks and mud. The foreshore is duned, with high cliffs immediately beyond it. Occasionally the beach is wide enough for a road and a small one-street fishing or resort village. Access to the fertile countryside beyond is through ravines. It would be difficult to find a tougher place and a worse local climate for an assault.

The meticulousness of the over-all planning of this operation was demonstrated in the selection of the troops by Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery (based on the psychology of national and racial characteristics) for the two jobs involved—of holding and



Normandy, June 6, 1944

taking. The British, with their tenacity, were best suited to hold off the German Panzers toward the base of the peninsula; the impetuous Canadians to hustle in and worry the German center; the brisk Americans, with their addiction to speed and improvisation, to cope with flooding and similar desperate measures the Germans adopted to slow the dash to Cherbourg.

The blueprint for this invasion was the product of months of arduous work by the keenest brains of the Supreme Command. But there comes an hour when the most paper-perfect plans must be exposed to chance. That is H-Hour, when fighting begins and imponderables rule. That is when war comes down from genius to guts. Knowledge of this is why every commander, no matter how confident of the superiority of his plans and weapons, also wants superiority of numbers.

Sheer force redeems mishaps. Battle has many faces. Confusion is chief of these. If you think of invasion as a massed, stately, controlled forward movement of great ranks, you're wrong. Landing parties quickly break into numerous little gangs of men squirming through obstacles, darting in all directions to cover, infiltrating, getting lost or isolated, killing and being killed, getting behind the enemy but always trying to get off and away from those accursed beaches.

Much had gone according to plan, but many other things had unavoidably and unpredictably gone wrong. Each beach, remember, had many landing points, the outer ones perhaps miles away and with no information of how the others were faring, until consolidation was effected. Thus, at some points, there were heavy losses, and at others they were slight.

This chalk-white young assault engineer corporal, for instance, hit in legs and head, says he is the only survivor of his party. Their landing craft was destroyed by a direct mortar hit. Knocked unconscious, he doesn't know how long he was in the water or how he got ashore.

Spearhead of the Assault

The Combat Engineers were terrific. Their job was to go on the rising tide ahead of the assault troops, pluck out low inshore mines and obstacles, clear paths through the mines, barbed wire and similar obstacles. At this point, however, the scheme broke down. The combat teams following were racked on the obstructions, swamped by heavy seas, and the soldiers were mowed down by enfilading machine guns, 88s and mortars, as they tried to swim or wade in.

One sadly torn outfit lay for hours on a seven-yard-wide beach, hiding behind rocks and debris. Fire came from Germans in caves in the bluffs, out of reach of big naval or air bombardment. To raise a finger was to invite sudden death, yet those kids returned the enemy's fire and gradually organized.

Some crept into plain view of the German marksmen and breached the barbed wire and marked the mines. Finally the remnants rushed half a dozen strong points and wiped them out.

Here is a Ranger from Indiana who actually got his hands on the top edge of the cliff before he was hit and forced to slide down. His mates, as many as were left, climbed to the top and captured the German

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position that was macerating the beach.

This second lieutenant from Texas has thigh and arm wounds, but the minute the medics finished with him, he came on deck to watch the shore. He points out a little defile where I can see two German pillboxes, one on each side.

"They nailed us to the beach right there, like you'd nail a coon's skin to the barn door," he said. "They knocked out our three tanks, but we hid under them and fired back a long time until some guys managed to crawl under the wire, up the cliffs, down a piece and come on 'em from behind. We were in the second boat. Nobody got out of the first boat.

The Germans held their fire until the ramp opened, and then picked 'em off. We jumped into the water in the shelter of that first boat and sneaked in. Some of us made it okay. Boy! I wish I was still in there!"

Innumerable situations of this sort were overcome by our Navy destroyers which threw shallow water caution to the winds, ran close in until they were sometimes actually bumping over sandbars, and turned themselves into intimate weapons of infantry co-operation, firing point-blank with their 5- and 3-inch guns into the small German holes in the precipices. That was this morning. It was made up of hundreds of such minor epics which could not have been written into the advance plans.

But now our attention is diverted for a while to the wounded being transferred from the small craft that wobble like empty bottles in the rough waves and bang hard into our side. It's ticklish business, but the crews manage it, with skill and tenderness.

Our G.I.s lean on the railing and stare down. The litter cases are swathed in blankets, soaked with spray, and the waterdrops bead pallid faces and closed eyes. Straps are slipped under the ends of the stretchers which are quickly hoisted, while guide ropes hold the small craft safely off the LST's side. The walking wounded come up ladders assisted from below, seized by ready hands from above. As each is brought over the rail, two of our soldiers take his arms around their shoulders and escort him inside to the dressing stations. They are very careful and solicitous, but they do not say anything to the wounded men. Afterward, they come quietly, pick their rifles and gear and return to the railings to look at the beach.

LSTs are equipped for mercy duty. There are bunks for hundreds of wounded, a fine operating room, and plasma, sulfas, penicillin and all the latest medical stores. Most of the litter cases are taken directly to the operating room below. The wardroom, where we ate and lounged on the journey over, is now a first-aid station where the less serious cases are cared for. The wounded are coming aboard fast. We soon have almost 100.

Every available space is lined with waiting litters. In the corridors, the minor casualties sit on chairs or lie on the floor, shivering in the blankets that are thrown over them. The sour odor of blood and sweat and wet filth hangs like a fog within the ship. Everyone of us who has the slightest knowledge or stomach for it is pressed into service. With knives, we cut off the torn, soaked uniforms and shoes and socks. We remove the temporary bandages, clean the wounds with dis-

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infectants, pick out stuck bits of clothing, sand, grass and sometimes metal.

Some of the kids are quiet; some talk incessantly. Many cry with rage because they have been taken from their units. One Ranger with a mortar-smashed knee says he's going back, and we can't stop him.

For two days and nights, our doctors get little sleep and less food because we have some bad cases, including amputations and chest and abdominal-cavity perforations. One of these is a German corporal. None died before we reached England.

Here was the answer to what makes good the spacious plans of master strategists—the raw flesh of unknown little men.

The Silence of Bravery

Like this Ranger private. A mortar shell had burst in his face. The shock was great, and he was not in pain when we got him. When we lifted the bandages, we found one of his eyes gone. The night before we landed, our doctor felt it necessary to tell him that his eye was gone. In the mass of bandages, we could see only his lips. He asked the doctor to repeat, as if he hadn't understood. Then his lips trembled violently, but he sucked the lower one in and bit it savagely and turned his head aside.

There is the young boy with the gaping thigh. It had been a slim, clean-lined, sturdy thigh. You could picture it in swimming trunks or basketball shorts. Now, you saw the cut muscles and nerves relaxed like spent elastic bands. He will always limp.

Back on deck, you looked more humbly at the fighting on the beach. The Germans had been slugged back from the sea; in some places, barely to the brow of the cliffs, in others, a few hundred feet beyond. The situation had developed into what General Montgomery called the "eyelid hold."

The whole shore in front of the bluffs, spotted with fires and misted by smoke, was a chaos of wreckage and of endless reels of barbed wire and rows of light and heavy posts and other obstructions that must have taken years of the labor of hundreds of men to emplace. Only a few clear alleys were apparent. Here men were landing from the LCIs and moving quickly to the base of the cliffs. Jeeps and Ducks threaded gingerly through the tangle. Engineer demolition squads were touching off enemy mines, or setting their own explosives to blow up tough obstacles.

You could see helmets level with the sand, riflemen in foxholes protecting the workers and arrivals from snipers. Often the helmets would abruptly disappear like scared crabs. A few snipers and machine gunners near by had not yet been flushed. They would fire a couple of rounds or a burst and pull their weapons back, and it was difficult to discover their holes in that pockmarked land.

The mortars were the most perplexing. They had the beach range pat and fired from a little distance inland. They would fire only a few rounds, then before combat teams could find them, or Navy gun spotters get a fix on them, they were gone—swallowed into the earth or hedges, to turn up twenty minutes later, hundreds of yards away.

You watched a truck sheltering under the precipice at a wide part of the strand as it loaded up with wounded. It was hit and blew up. You saw figures tumble out and try to run, but fall, overtaken by the fire that caught the brush. Big, greasy, curiously perfect smoke rings drifted over trucks hit by the enemy. A landing craft, left high by the outgoing tide, was hit. A fat wad of fire-cored black smoke hovered briefly, then began to settle and blow slowly away.

Booby-Trapped Villas

There was a row of large-windowed little châteaux where the *bourgeoisie* of Gautier and Balzac used to spend their holidays. The gardens had precise flower beds. The engineers were in there exploding booby traps.

You learned to distinguish individual sounds such as the crisp exclamations of ri-

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fles, the doughy thud of demolitions, the snarls of mortars, the clacking of machine guns, like sticks being drawn swiftly along the fence pickets.

Standing well behind us, the Texas, the Augusta and other warships were pin-pointing German concrete strongholds at either end of the area, and you could see the business of the gun puff and the hit. Sometimes the shells would go directly over our heads. It has been said that they sound, in these circumstances, like express trains. Don't believe it. They sound like a string of slow freight cars loaded with jangling scrap iron which you are sure is going to fall on you.

Incredibly, on the nearest bluff to our left, bulldozers appeared in the evening and began to work. All next day was like a repeat run of the same film—low skies and rough seas but men and vehicles going stubbornly ashore, passing the wounded from the cliff and beach, coming out to the ships. In mid-afternoon our LSTs' side plates rattled from near-misses. They were shells from a heavy mortar, and whether it was bracketing us or some other target, we didn't wait to find out, but hauled anchor and high-tailed it seaward.

Just before dark, the Germans began to shell a cliff-top village. They must have caught some of our dumps because, from our new anchorage two miles away, we saw vast explosions, and the village burned long into the night. In the morning we came inshore again, and the houses were blackened and roofless.

All day we watched our men running from their landing craft to the cliff base, then plodding up the trails in the ravines in scattered, weaving, endless lines—moving forward, always moving forward. In the end, this beach-head was taken by our troops working their way around and coming on it from behind. It never fell to frontal attack.

Each night, hell rose from the depths and shattered into a million hot brilliant fragments over bay and beach. The Luftwaffe gambled under cover of darkness and thick clouds to give us real workouts. Allied planes, meanwhile, went inland and returned the German compliments.

We had the unique experience of watching two opposing air forces simultaneously at work on each other's ground forces. Rumblings and flare-ups beyond the shore contours gave proof that our lads were there. But the "bombs bursting in air and the rockets' red glare" right overhead were a different and most disagreeable matter.

In the "junior blitz" in London last winter I had seen the famous barrage with spent flak pattering on roofs and streets like a deluge of dry rain. The modern London defense is immeasurably stronger than it was in the original 1940 blitz. Yet recollection of it was midgeted by this inferno. When our ships' guns joined action, you just hung onto your ears and could not talk even by shouting.

The Germans struck. Gunfire swept in waves up and down the bay following them. Spray from bombs and flak splashes brushed your face and the impact of near-misses lifted your heels. A series of direct hits "walked" straight up the beach, and a few minutes later another train went in the opposite direction. The cliffs stood out like ghostly cameos. A balloon was hit and burned. Then another. Our jubilant gunners mistook them at first for planes.

Finally a plane was hit. A patch of cloud seemed to ignite, and the burning plane spiraled out of it and down to the sea. A second and a third were caught, but the Germans still buzzed around. Scores of searchlights gave the bottom of the solid clouds the color of damp plaster, and you seemed enclosed under a ceiling that was held up by the countless flaming spears of tracers and rockets.

A couple of miles away, a whole ship suddenly began to glow in pulsing incandescence, like a fiery skeleton in an old-fashioned Fourth of July set piece. We thought it might be illumination from burning oil on the water, but it remained a mystery, for our interest shifted to a German plane that fell on the water, sizzled and twisted and sparkled there like a pin wheel.

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You gave up trying to sleep against the persistence of the ship's alarm klaxon. I shared a tiny cabin with three young ensigns, Fred Beattie of Warwick, New York; Bert Tunnell of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; and John Young of Raleigh, North Carolina. Between attacks, dead-fagged from long hours, they tried to snatch a wink, taking off their shoes, nothing else. Young even wore his helmet. No sooner had they dropped off than "General Quarters" went again. Three sleep-doped youngsters landed in the middle of the floor together, all three trying to pull on the same one shoe, all three getting stuck in the door as they dashed out together. You followed them and felt they were pretty wonderful and that America was pretty wonderful having their like.

One impression that will always endure of those hours off bloody Normandy is how seldom we saw a smile or heard a laugh.

I remember only two small breaks in the general somberness that hushed us from the moment that first control boat came alongside. One concerned the hunger for news. There we were making news—and wondering about it. War's eternal irony: The closer you are to the fighting, the less you know what it's all about and how it's going.

Our ship's radio facilities were engaged in official business, but whenever possible the sailors would pick up news broadcasts. They piped these through the public-address system. The first attempt, on D-Day, was a flop—minutes of teeth-grinding shrieks, at the end of which an invisible sailor's voice announced disgustedly, "Interference by courtesy of that ——— Hitler."

Circumstances for the next attempt seemed more promising. But whatever the cause, instead of news there blared out through the decks and bay, amid the racket of naval guns and shore firing, a female voice chanting instructions and numbers for musical setting-up exercises. The men dressed and waiting for battle really howled.

The other laugh came incongruously in the wardroom dressing station. We had wounded boys on each of the three dining tables. Everybody was helping. The ship's chief engineer, the assistant chief and a couple of ensigns joined in. Old regular Navy hands up from the ranks knew this first-aid stuff.

One was the kind of seagoing character you read about in naval fiction and sometimes actually meet in the Navy—powerful, square-rigged, keg-fisted, belligerent-looking, but secretly lamblike. He happened to have a lot of big wrenches and other engine-room tools with him and he laid these on a chair beside the table as he attended one boy. The soldier fortunately was not badly hurt—a superficial wound in his sitdown—but he was dazed by blast, shock and immersion. He could not see his wound or know how bad it was, but he turned his head to look up and say, "Thanks, Doc."

"I'm not the doc, son," the honest salt explained. "I'm the engineer."

At that instant, the boy's eyes fell upon the formidable chairful of tools. "Good God!" he said, and fainted dead away.

When Victory Becomes a Fact

There is a moment when a beachhead becomes a front. It is an elusive moment. It is a moment for which your heart is a more credible witness than your mind. You can't always spot it with your finger on the map in the Commanding General's headquarters.

Perhaps our Supreme Command would not consider this a beachhead until Cherbourg and Caen were taken, and maybe other great events had occurred elsewhere. We didn't know. All we knew as we left the beach to speed our wounded back to England was a feeling in our hearts that the "eyelid" had become a hard, firm grip on the enemy's hair. It had become a front.

The last thing on the beach I had seen as we sailed away in the dusk was a huge Sherman tank moving inland. On its side was painted the Stars and Stripes. In the Bay of the Seine that night, the flag of the Texas sud-

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denly was illuminated by a flaming salvo from her batteries.

Neither greater victories nor brief defeats, distance nor the passing of years, neither confusions of history nor treacheries of politics, can ever rob the luster of those supreme hours of American valor. It was because of the American boys on that particular beach—youngsters whose racial origins Francis Scott Key in his limited day might not have even been able to guess.

THE END

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