

Normandy, 6 June 1944

D-DAY



EDITOR'S NOTE: This article has been abstracted and edited from material taken from two official United States Army historical studies and from one official historical manuscript: CROSS-CHANNEL ATTACK, by Gordon A. Harrison (OCMH, 1951); OMAHA BEACH-HEAD, 6 JUNE - 13 JUNE 1944 (American Forces in Action Series, 1945); and AIRBORNE OPERATIONS, Chapters I through IX, by Major James A. Huston (OCMH, nd). These sources have been used with the permission of the Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army.

OVERLORD, the cross-Channel attack that hit the German-occupied coast of Normandy between Caen and Cherbourg on 6 June 1944, was one of the last and by far the biggest of the series of amphibious operations by which the United States and the British Empire came to grips with the German-Italian-Japanese Axis in the course of World War II. But it was more than just another attack. It was the supreme effort of the Western Allies in Europe — the consummation of the grand design to defeat Germany by striking directly at the heart of Hitler's Reich.

It had taken the U.S. and British planners many months to settle on the 50 miles of coast in Western Normandy, from the Vire Estuary to the Orne, as the assault area for securing a lodgment. The area was near good, relatively undamaged ports in southern and southwestern England, and was within range of fighter planes operating from English bases; the major French ports of Cherbourg and le Havre were within striking distance; and air attacks on railways and river bridges might be able to isolate the region behind the assault area from the main enemy centers of supply and reinforcement to the east.

The Allied forces in the Normandy operation were under the overall command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower. The ground forces, which comprised the British Second and the U.S. First Armies, were commanded by General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery. The plan called for the Allied ground forces to assault in three main areas with an initial strength of six reinforced infantry and three airborne divisions (see Map 1).

On the left, the British Second Army was to attack with three divisions on three landing beaches. A brigade of the British 6th Airborne Division was to be dropped behind the beach defenses to secure vital bridges over the Orne River between Caen and the sea. The Second Army's objectives for D-Day included Bayeux, Caen, and Cabourg.

The U.S. First Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley, was responsible for the other two assault areas. The U.S. VII Corps, on the right, was to land one division — the U.S. 4th Infantry Division — just north of the Vire Estuary on UTAH Beach. In the early morning hours of D-Day, four to five hours before the assault from the sea, the U.S. 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions were to be dropped inland from UTAH Beach

We have concentrated our attention on the airborne and amphibious landings that took place in the U.S. sector on 6 June 1944, and then primarily on the infantry actions. We deeply regret that space limitations prevent us from telling also of the British landings on the same day, and of the magnificent support rendered by the Allied naval and air forces to the infantrymen before and after their landings. We feel that any U.S. Infantryman who landed in Normandy on that day 40 years ago would acknowledge his debt to that support.

in an area southeast and west of St. Mere Eglise, where their mission was to capture the crossings of the Merderet River, secure the line of the Douve River as a barrier to the south, and assist the landings of the 4th Division. By the end of D-Day, VII Corps was expected to control the area east of Merderet from just south of Montebourg to the Douve.

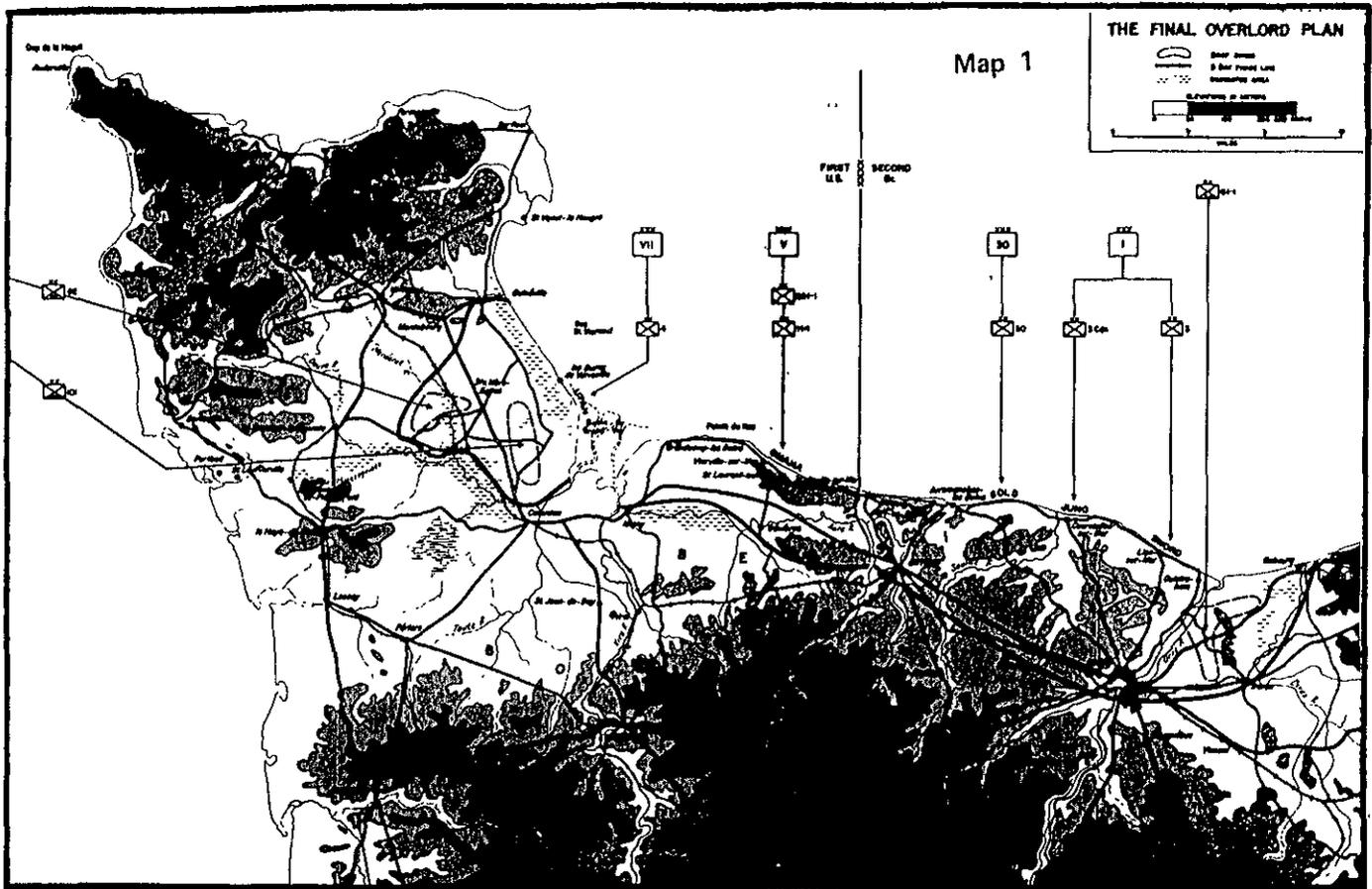
Between the other assault areas, the U.S. V Corps was to attack over a 7,000-yard stretch of beach known as OMAHA. Its mission was to secure a beachhead in the area between Port-en-Bessin and the Vire River, from which its forces would push southward toward Caumont and St. Lo, conforming with the advance of the British Second Army. Its initial assault force (Force "O") was made up of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division reinforced to include four infantry regiments with strong attachments of artillery, armor, and engineers, as well as attachments of engineers and service units for movement to the beach. The Division's chief components were its own 16th and 18th Regimental Combat Teams, the 116th Regimental Combat Team and the 115th Infantry Regiment attached from the U.S. 29th Infantry Division, and the Provisional Ranger Force of two battalions (the 2d and the 5th). Force "O" numbered 34,142 men and 3,306 vehicles.

The follow-up force for OMAHA Beach (Force "B"), scheduled to arrive off the beach after noon on D-Day, numbered 25,117 men and 4,429 vehicles. It included the remainder of the 29th Infantry Division — its own 175th Infantry Regiment — and the 26th Regimental Combat Team, which was attached from the 1st Division.

The loading plans of the two forces were designed to fit an operation that was to develop from an assault by one reinforced division into an attack by two divisions abreast.

The organizational structure of the assault units was modified to give them a careful balance of striking power and mobility so that they could develop a weight behind their initial attack. It was hoped that this weight would not only crumble the enemy defenses but would carry the assaulting troops far enough inland that follow-up troops could be put ashore behind them to consolidate and then to exploit the beachhead.

While the basic divisional structure remained unchanged, the rifle companies were organized in assault teams with special equipment to deal with fortified posi-



tions. Thus, the platoons of the assault companies were split into two assault sections apiece, each with 29 men and 1 officer, the size being determined by the capacity of an LCVP (landing craft, vehicle and personnel).

The two assault platoons in each company included rifle teams, a wire-cutting team, a bazooka team, a flame-throwing team, a BAR (Browning automatic rifle) team, a 60mm mortar team, and a demolition team. The third platoon was similarly organized except that it had an 81mm instead of a 60mm mortar and a heavy machinegun instead of a BAR. After the assault, each platoon was to be reorganized into a normal rifle platoon with two rifle squads and a weapons squad.

The infantry assault troops were to be stripped to the barest combat essentials, but they were to have a mailed fist: a tank battalion attached to each of the assault regiments would lead the attack. A portion of the tanks was to be carried in on LCTs (landing craft, tanks) to touch down approximately with the first infantry wave. Another portion of tanks, modified for amphibious operation, was to be launched about 5,000 to 6,000 yards offshore to swim in ahead of the assault waves. (These were M-4 medium tanks equipped with detachable canvas "bloomers" — accordion-pleated screens which when raised were capable of floating the 32-ton tanks by displacement. They had a duplex drive — twin propellers for swimming and the normal track drive for overland movement. From the duplex drive came their common name, "DDs.")

The tanks were not to be used as an armored force but as close support artillery. (No plans were made to use the tanks in exploitation from the beaches.) Although tanks

were not the ideal assault artillery, they seemed the best available. Only armored guns had a chance of surviving on the beaches. Tests indicated that the tanks' main guns — 75mm or 76mm — could be used effectively to neutralize or destroy concrete pillboxes by firing into the embrasures. This would enable the infantry to get close to the pillboxes in their way and destroy them with flame throwers or demolitions.

Following closely the beaching of the first tank companies, the leading infantry waves would touch down, clear the beaches, and cover the landing of engineer demolition teams. The task of the engineers — to cut and mark gaps through the belts of shore obstacles before these were covered by the rising tide — would be one of the most critical in the operation, and its successful accomplishment would demand meticulous adherence to the time schedule. The engineers were to work with special naval demolition units and would have the assistance of tankdozers landed at the same time.

The succeeding assault waves were to consist mostly of infantry and additional engineers. The first artillery units were to come in about an hour and a half after the first landings. The debarkation of heavy vehicles across the beaches was to start about three hours after H-Hour. By that time the assaulting infantry was expected to have the beach exits cleared and to have fought their way well inland. (An assault landing plan is shown in the accompanying diagram.)

AIRBORNE ASSAULT

The first actions of all the U.S. airborne units in Nor-

LANDING DIAGRAM, OMAHA BEACH (SECTOR OF 116th RCT)



	EASY GREEN	DOG RED	DOG WHITE	DOG GREEN
H-5			 Co C (DD) 743 Tk Bn	 Co B (DD) 743 Tk Bn
H HOUR	 Co A 743 Tk Bn	 Co A 743 Tk Bn		
H+01	 Co E 116 Inf	 Co F 116 Inf	 Co G 116 Inf	 Co A 116 Inf
H+03	 146 Engr CT	 146 Engr CT Demolitions Control Boat	 146 Engr CT	 146 Engr CT Co C 2d Ranger Bn
H+30				
H+40	 112 Engr Bn			
H+50	 Co L 116 Inf	 Co I 116 Inf	 Co K 116 Inf	
H+57				
H+60			 HQ & HQ Co 116 Inf	
H+65				 5th Ranger Bn
H+70	 149 Engr Beach Bn	 112 Engr Bn	 Alt HQ & HQ Co 116 Inf	
H+90			 58 FA Bn Armd	
H+100			 6th Engr Sp Brig	
H+110				
H+120				
H+150				
H+180 to H+215				
H+225				

I LCI M LCM A LCA ◇ DD Tank
T LCT V LCVP D DUKW

Note: Plan as of 11 May

mandy on D-Day were attempts by small groups of men to carry out, in the fog of the battlefield, their own small portions of the assigned plan. There could be little overall direction from above.

Things began to go wrong almost as soon as the formations arrived over the French coast. Bursts of antiaircraft fire brought a natural response on the part of the pilots — evasive action — although it was contrary to instructions. Formations loosened, and then cloud banks caused further scattering. Soon, all semblance of a formation was lost. Only four or five serials held together long enough to drop their paratroopers onto the proper drop zones in an orderly fashion.

The scattering of aircraft resulted in a scattering of the airborne units on the ground. Units from the 101st Airborne Division began dropping in a wide area southeast of St. Mere Eglise about 0130, 6 June. They were so badly scattered that assembling the paratroopers was almost out of the question.

Glider landings began at 0400 with little more promise of success, what with numerous crash landings and landings in enemy-dominated areas. One of the casualties in the early morning glider landings was the division's assistant commander, who was killed. (Additional elements of the division that could not be included in the initial lift went in by glider between 2000 and 2100 that evening, but again there were numerous crash landings and landings in German-held areas.)

Elements of the 4th Infantry Division, driving inland from UTAH Beach, contacted the 3d Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry (101st Airborne Division) at 1215, but the 101st was still far from being under unified control. As of 2400, for example, 50 percent of the airborne echelon had been accounted for: There had been no word from the 501st Parachute Infantry other than from its 3d Battalion, and it had assembled only 120 officers and men; the 502d Parachute Infantry was holding a series of strong points generally north of St. German de Varreville with about 500 men; the 506th Parachute Infantry had some 350 men at Culeville, with no word from its 3d Battalion; and some 85 men of the 377th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, with one gun, were with the 502d Infantry. Eleven of the twelve 75mm pack howitzers of the 377th, together with their crews, were lost completely.

The situation with the 82d Airborne Division was even more precarious. It met more determined opposition in the early stages, and it suffered more seriously also from scattered drops that left two of its regiments unable to assemble in sufficient force to carry out their missions.

(In fact, the division's dispersion had been so broad that even two days later, on the morning of 8 June, it was reported that the division had only 2,100 effectives under unified control. Contact had been established with only one battalion of the 508th Parachute Infantry and half a battalion of the 507th that had dropped west of the Merderet River.)

The division's 505th Parachute Infantry, however, probably had the best drop in the whole operation. Its troop carrier planes had also been scattered, but many of

their pilots were able to circle back — a dangerous undertaking when several serials were following closely and when formations had been broken — and find the drop zone that pathfinders had clearly marked. Under orders to use only knives, bayonets, and grenades so that any enemy fire could be spotted in the darkness, about a quarter of the men of the 3d Battalion rapidly assembled and moved in to capture St. Mere Eglise before dark. Other members of the regiment reinforced the troops holding the town during the morning. It was the only one of the division's initial missions to be carried out according to plan.

Some gliders had landed in the early morning shortly after the parachute drops, and others were scheduled for the evening. The glider landings, too, were somewhat scattered, but their principal hazards were the small fields enclosed by hedgerows and enemy fire.

Late in the afternoon of D-Day, a task force belonging to the division and consisting of a company of tanks and 90 glider infantrymen arrived by sea to support the 82d. The task force commander was concerned not only with getting the tanks through to the division but also with clearing an area that contained certain designated glider landing zones. These were to be used at dusk by gliders bringing in artillery units.

But the task force could not drive from the area the German defenders, who were in considerable strength and well concealed. On schedule at 2100, about 60 gliders came in low over the area and cut loose for landings. The Germans reacted with intense automatic weapon fire, and many of the gliders crashed while others came down within the German lines. Casualties were heavy. The remnants of the glider force was collected by the task force and formed into a makeshift defense for the night.

Yet in spite of their widespread landings, the airborne troops were able to win their major objectives. German patrols sent to liquidate the invaders became involved in fighting in every direction. There were no U.S. battalion concentrations against which an effective counterattack might be launched. All this confusion did not fit into the German plans for defense; it had no place in German anti-airborne doctrine.

Small groups of paratroopers and glidermen fought their way toward their assembly areas. One group, for example, was reported to have dropped 20 miles behind its objective, but the men worked their way back and destroyed two light tanks on the way. The effect of all this action was a very real contribution to the rapid reduction of the defenses on UTAH Beach and to the establishment of a deep beachhead line.

UTAH BEACH

Even as the airborne soldiers were fighting inland from UTAH Beach, the invasion fleet was bringing the main body of the American assault forces to the shores of Normandy. H-Hour for the U.S. beaches was 0630.

The huge convoys, under a constant umbrella of

fighter squadrons, made the voyage unmolested by the Germans either by air or by sea. The naval task force that carried the UTAH Beach assault forces dropped anchor in its transport area at about 0230; the OMAHA Beach assault force reached its transport area about 20 minutes later. The assault troops began unloading into the LCVPs that would take them to the beaches.

German coastal defenses began sporadic firing at 0535, only 15 minutes before the pre-invasion Allied naval bombardment began. Projectiles from the Allied warships thundered over the heads of the troops making the final run in to shore until a few minutes before their landing craft reached the shore. Beach drenching was then taken up by the close support craft.

The 4th Division had planned to land in a column of regiments on a two-battalion front of about 2,000 yards. The 8th Infantry Regiment, with the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry Regiment attached, was to lead; it was to be followed by the remainder of the 22d Infantry, and then by the 12th Infantry Regiment. The 359th Infantry Regiment from the U.S. 90th Infantry Division, the first follow-up division at UTAH Beach, was attached to the 4th Division to begin landing on D-Day. It was to serve initially as the division's reserve.

In May, German activity had been observed on the St. Marcouf Islands flanking UTAH Beach on the north. It was therefore decided to land detachments of the 4th and 24th Cavalry Squadrons two hours before H-Hour to clean out what was suspected to be either a German observation post or a minefield control point.

The 4th Division had little difficulty getting ashore. The cavalry detachments (132 men) found the St. Marcouf Islands unoccupied though heavily mined. From mines and a concentration of German artillery fire that hit the islands in the afternoon, the cavalry units lost two men killed and seventeen wounded.

The small landing crafts (LCVPs) carrying the first waves of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 8th Infantry, were launched in relatively sheltered water and had no serious trouble with the wind and surf. At H-Hour there was no

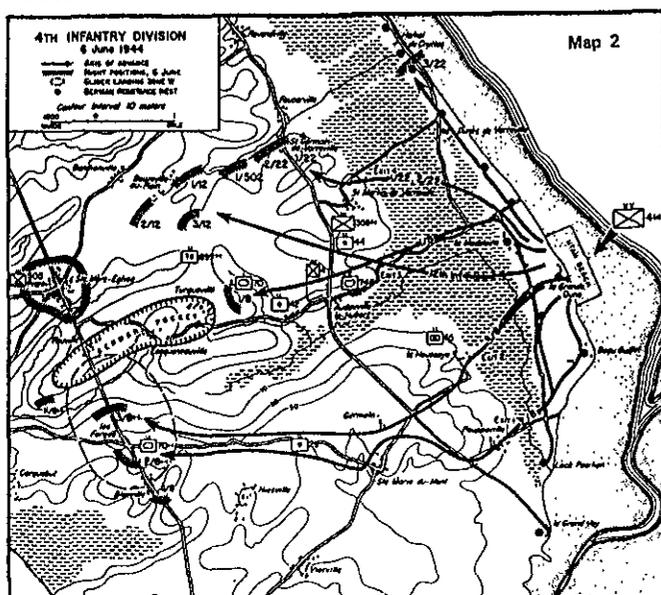
enemy opposition. The 32 DD tanks that were supposed to land in the first wave were delayed by the loss of a control vessel that struck a mine. All but four of these tanks, which were lost when the LCT carrying them hit a mine, were beached about fifteen minutes late. But, as it turned out, the assault troops had no immediate need for them.

Leading elements of the two assault battalions touched down about on time but almost 2,000 yards south of where they were supposed to land. The error was probably made partly because some of the landmarks had been obscured by the smoke and dust the naval bombardment had raised and partly because there was a southeast coastal current. In any case it turned out to be fortunate, since it brought troops in on beaches that were much less heavily defended than those designated in the plan.

Although the mislanding meant that the tasks assigned to each assault section could not be carried out as planned, the lack of serious enemy opposition permitted reconnaissances and speedy reorganizations for improvised maneuver. After company-sized task forces had reduced the very lightly defended field fortifications covering the two middle beach exits, both assault battalions began their advance across the flooded area.

The first infantry wave was followed by engineer and naval demolition parties to clear the underwater obstacles. Because there were fewer obstacles than expected, the original plan to blow fifty-foot gaps was abandoned in favor of clearing the entire beach on the first tide. The job was completed in an hour. Engineers then proceeded to their next task of blowing gaps and clearing minefields. Enemy opposition consisted only of intermittent shelling.

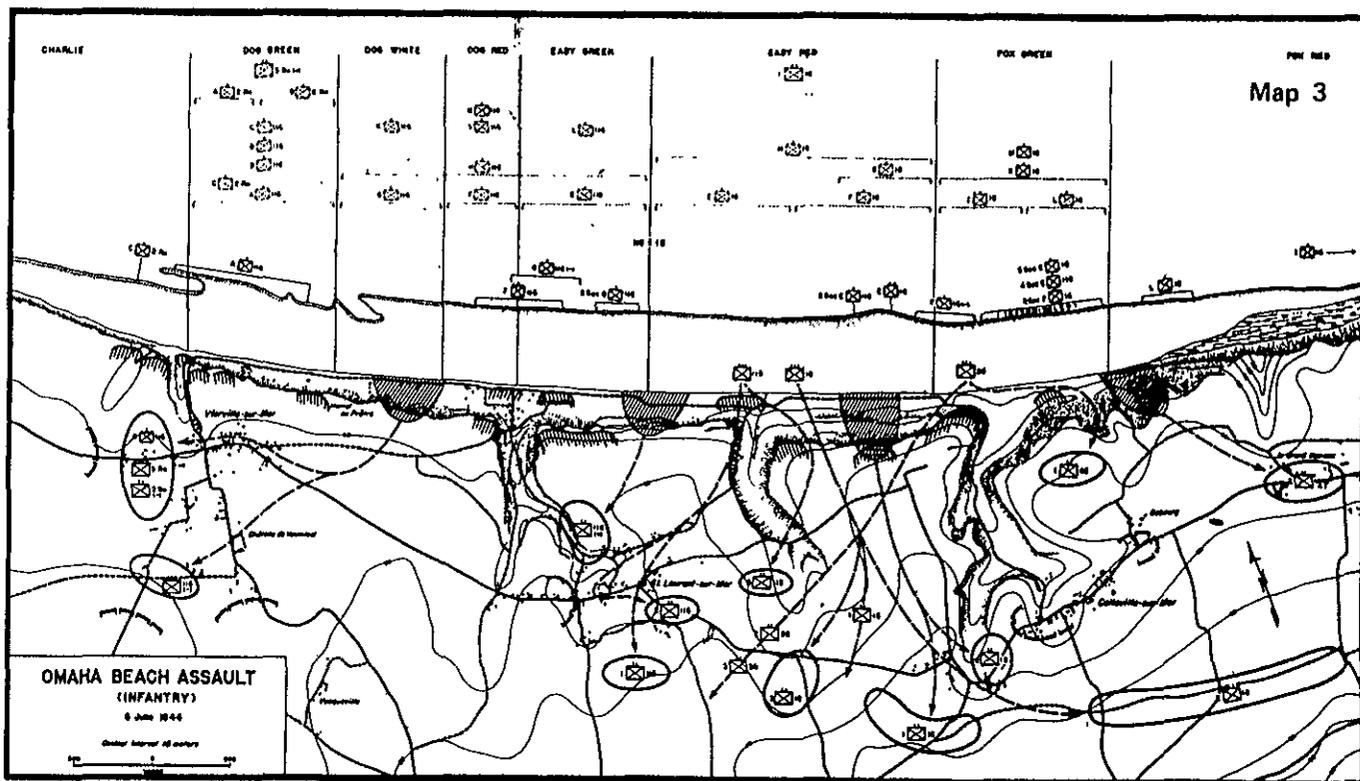
While engineers worked on the beach, the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, supported by tanks of the 70th Tank Battalion, and by the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, were landing and moving out. Well before H plus 3 hours the beach area had been cleared and landings were virtually routine, harassed only by sporadic enemy artillery fire (see Map 2).



OMAHA BEACH

The early success and extraordinarily small number of casualties on UTAH Beach contrasted sharply with the difficulties at OMAHA Beach during those first critical three hours. (In fact, throughout most of D-Day, the German 84th Corps and the German Seventh Army believed that the OMAHA assault had been stopped at the water's edge. It was late in the morning before General Bradley, aboard his command ship, could have contradicted that view and much longer before the Allied command could feel secure about the OMAHA beachhead.)

The 1st Infantry Division assaulted with two regiments abreast, the 116th Infantry on the right, the 16th Infantry on the left. Each regiment was supposed to land two battalion landing teams at H-Hour with their initial missions being to clear the beach defenses and to seize and secure



the portion of the beachhead maintenance line in their respective zones. The beachhead maintenance line roughly followed the ridge of high ground that paralleled the main coastal road and was in most places from two to three miles inland. From this line, the assault regiments, supported by the 18th Infantry landing after H plus 3 hours and the 26th Infantry landing on order of the corps commander, would punch out toward the D-Day phase line. Occupation of that phase line would mean securing a coastal strip five or six miles deep astride the Bayeux highway (see Map 3).

The 116th Infantry was responsible for capturing the Pointe du Hoc coastal battery. On the assumption that the six partially casemated 155mm guns would not be destroyed by pre-D-Day bombardment or by the heavy naval fire that would be directed on them just before H-Hour, the two Ranger battalions had been attached to the 116th Infantry with the special H-Hour mission of taking out the guns.

Perhaps the most important job assigned to the first assault waves was the reduction of the enemy positions defending the roads leading from the beach inland. The gently sloping sand of OMAHA Beach was backed by an embankment of loose stones, or shingle, as much as fifteen yards wide in places. In the Vierville sector the shingle piled up against a part-masonry, part-wood sea wall. On the rest of the beach there was no wall, but the shingle lay against a sand embankment, or dune line. Both the shingle and the dune line were impassable to vehicles.

Behind the beach were scrub-covered bluffs 100 to 170 feet high of varying steepness, and these merged east and west with the cliffs that marked the extremities of the 7,000-yard crescent beach. The bluffs were cut by five

draws. Unimproved roads ran through four of these draws, one connecting with the main coastal highway at Vierville-sur-Mer, two at St. Laurent, and one at Colleville. The fifth draw, northeast of Colleville, was steep and contained only a trail, but it was considered capable of development as a vehicle exit.

The plan assumed these exits would be open to traffic at least by H plus 2 hours when the heavy flow of vehicular reinforcements was scheduled to begin. The importance of the beach exits was, of course, as obvious to the Germans as to the Allies, and local coastal defenses were grouped to deny their use to the attackers. On the other hand, the 1st Division had precise information on the location of these defenses, and every effort was made to give the assaulting infantry the heavy fire support needed to knock them out.

At H minus 50 minutes, two companies of DD tanks from the 741st Tank Battalion destined for the 16th Infantry beaches were launched 6,000 yards offshore and almost immediately began to founder. Of the 32 tanks launched, only 5 reached shore, and 3 of those were beached by an LCT that could not lower its ramp at sea. These were the first of the casualties to the weather. There would be others.

The assaulting infantry was transferred from transports to LCVPs ten to eleven miles offshore. At least ten of the ferrying craft were swamped on the way in. More serious was the sinking of much of the artillery.

The attempt to ferry guns ashore in DUKWs through the heavy seas proved disastrous. All but one of the 105mm howitzers of the 111th Field Artillery Battalion were sunk; six of the 105mm howitzers belonging to the 7th Field Artillery Battalion suffered the same fate; five of the six howitzers of the 16th Infantry Cannon Com-

pany were swamped. In addition to these wholesale losses, the 58th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, whose guns were mounted on LCTs and had taken part in the initial beach drenching, lost three of its pieces when the craft carrying them hit mines. In short, the artillery that was planned to support the infantry attack, particularly during the advance inland, never reached the shore.

The weather contributed also to navigational difficulties. Mist mixed with the smoke and dust raised by the naval bombardment obscured landmarks on the coast; in addition, a lateral current of from two to three knots tended to carry the landing craft eastward of their touchdown points. Even so, the actual errors in landing were considerably less than those at UTAH Beach — in most cases they amounted to no more than a few hundred yards. But they proved much more serious for the tactical situation, partly because the errors were not constant, which caused the units to become scattered on their final approach.

Since the men had been briefed only for their particular areas, they were confused by the changed picture. The difficulties were compounded by the heavier enemy opposition, which had the effect of isolating boat sections only a few hundred yards apart. At first, this made the assembly and reorganization of the units for improvised missions almost impossible.

Naval gunfire had temporarily neutralized some of the enemy batteries and fortifications, but most of them were still able to fire at the incoming troops as soon as the bombardment was forced to lift. The 1st Division soldiers in the first LCVPs could hear machinegun bullets splatter against the steel ramps of their craft before they grounded. Debarking in water sometimes up to their necks, the troops on some sectors of the beach were met with a hail of bullets that drove some to seek shelter under the surf, others to scramble over the sides of the craft. Control of boat sections was thus often lost before the men even started in to the beach.

The troops, overladen with heavy clothing and equipment, waded slowly through the surf and through fire that increased as they approached the beach. Some stopped to rest or to seek shelter behind obstacles. Some lay at the water's edge and were able eventually to crawl in with the tide. But casualties generally were heavier among those who delayed in getting up onto the beach. Many of the wounded were drowned in the rising tide.

The first wave should have landed nine companies evenly spaced along the beach. Because of withering enemy fire and mislandings, however, the right wing all but disintegrated; two companies bunched in front of les Moulins, and the remainder (elements of four companies) clustered in the Colleville sector. One company was carried so far to the east that it landed an hour and a half late.

The two right flank companies — Company C, 2d Ranger Battalion and Company A, 116th Infantry — landed as scheduled in front of the Vierville draw. But one craft foundered and one was hit four times by mortar fire. Men from the remaining craft struggled to shore. In-

tense small arms fire took its toll of about two-thirds of Company A's soldiers and more than half of the Rangers before any reached the comparative shelter of the sea wall or the base of the cliff.

Of the 16 tanks scheduled to land in this sector just ahead of the infantry, only 8 survived enemy artillery fire to reach the shore. All were brought in on LCTs because 116th Infantry officers decided the sea was too rough to launch the DDs.

In the eastern part of the 116th Infantry zone, the initial landings had not gone much better. A 1,000-yard gap separated the troops who touched down there from the remnants of the two companies on the right. The two companies of tanks that landed first were brought in on LCTs without losses.

This initial success was not shared by the infantry. Only two of the three companies of the 2d Battalion, 116th Infantry, landed within the regimental zone. One of these companies lost a quarter of its men to enemy fire during the 45 minutes it took them to cross the beach to the protection of the shingle bank. The remainder had better luck in landing in front and just west of les Moulins where the bluff was obscured by smoke fires and where the enemy fire was sporadic and inaccurate. Even these men were somewhat disorganized, and the officers who survived with them were confused by the knowledge that they had landed east of their designated beaches.

The experience of the 16th Infantry on the left flank of the division duplicated that of the 116th, as scattered landings and heavy casualties left the first boat sections incapable of undertaking their primary assault missions.

In the 16th Infantry's zone, though, one soft spot was discovered. Four boat sections of the 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry, landing between the St. Laurent and Colleville exits, crossed the beach with only two casualties from enemy fire. The local defense of this sector of the beach was the Colleville strong point, which had been planned as three mutually supporting resistance nests. Of these, the fortified position atop the bluff midway between the two draws was seemingly unoccupied on D-Day. This apparent negligence on the part of the German defenders, which left the beach northwest of Colleville without an immediate defense, was balanced at first by the landing of so few men there. Except for those four boat sections of the 2d Battalion, the first wave of the 16th Infantry (Companies E and F) touched down immediately in front, or east, of the occupied fortifications of the Colleville strong point, where it was caught in machinegun fire as intense as that which decimated the 116th Infantry.

Many of the soldiers from Company E, hard hit and exhausted in their efforts to wade ashore, flopped on the sand and crawled in ahead of the tide; nearly half of them did not survive. Because most of the supporting DD tanks were swamped on their way in, and because the Germans immediately destroyed five of the company of medium tanks that were beached from LCTs, the 16th Infantry initially had only a third of its planned armor support. The tanks that were available went into action on the beach between the St. Laurent and Colleville exits.

The heavy losses and the disorganization of the first wave affected each succeeding wave through the morning of D-Day. The first serious effect was the inability of the engineers and the naval demolition parties to blow gaps in the beach obstacles as planned. Weather conditions also played a part in keeping the engineers from accomplishing their mission. Half the demolition teams were delayed in landing and only a third of them touched down on their appointed beaches. Since the rest were carried eastward by the coastal current, the 116th Infantry's zone received substantially less than the scheduled engineer support.

German fire also took a heavy toll of both men and equipment. Of 16 bulldozers, only 3 could be put into operation on the beach, and one of these could not maneuver freely because riflemen were using it as a shelter. Casualties to the engineers amounted to about 40 percent for the day and were certainly much higher for the first groups ashore.

In half an hour after H-Hour the tide, rising at the rate of about four feet an hour, had covered the obstacles to the extent that further clearance had become impossible. Remnants of the engineers, therefore, joined the infantry behind the shingle to wait for the next tide.

The second group of assault waves, consisting of five separately timed landings, was to complete the build-up of the two assault regiments by H plus 1 hour and to bring in the 81st Chemical Battalion; two combat engineer battalions whose principal task was to clear minefields for the advance inland; naval shore fire control parties; and advance elements of artillery, medical, and anti-aircraft units.

In the zone of the 116th Infantry, the remaining three companies of the 1st Battalion were scheduled to come in behind Company A on the right. On the left the heavy weapons company of the 2d Battalion was to land to complete that unit, and it was to be followed by the 3d Battalion.

The right flank, however, continued to suffer misfortune. Only scattered sections of the reinforcing units managed to land there, and they were hit by the same destructive fire that had virtually knocked Company A out of the battle. The battalion headquarters company, including the beachmaster for the 1st Battalion, landed at the base of the cliff west of the rifle companies and under enemy fire so severe that it was unable to move for most of the day. The heavy weapons company, scattered and hard hit on the approach, took two hours to assemble its survivors. It salvaged only three mortars, three machine-guns, and a few rounds of ammunition.

Only one company of the 1st Battalion survived as an organized group capable of pursuing its assault missions. This was Company C, which had landed 1,000 yards east of its planned beach and within the area of the bluffs covered by smoke from a brush fire. With few casualties and with its equipment virtually intact, the company waded in on a front of not more than 100 yards and reorganized in the shelter of the sea wall.

Next to land in the 116th zone were the Rangers. The

5th Ranger Battalion, together with two companies of the 2d Rangers, had waited offshore for news of the assault on Pointe du Hoe, which would determine whether they landed there or came in in the 116th Infantry's zone. The Pointe du Hoe assault, though, had been delayed 40 minutes by the eastward drift of the craft carrying the Rangers. Therefore, there was no news at all, and the Ranger reinforcements, concluding that the assault must have failed, proceeded with the alternate plan.

Accordingly, the 5th Ranger Battalion followed Company C, 116th Infantry, and shared its relatively easy landing. But the two companies of the 2d Ranger Battalion came in about where they were supposed to on the fire-swept right flank behind elements of Companies A and B, 116th Infantry. Only between a third and a half of the two 65-man companies survived to take shelter at the head of the beach.

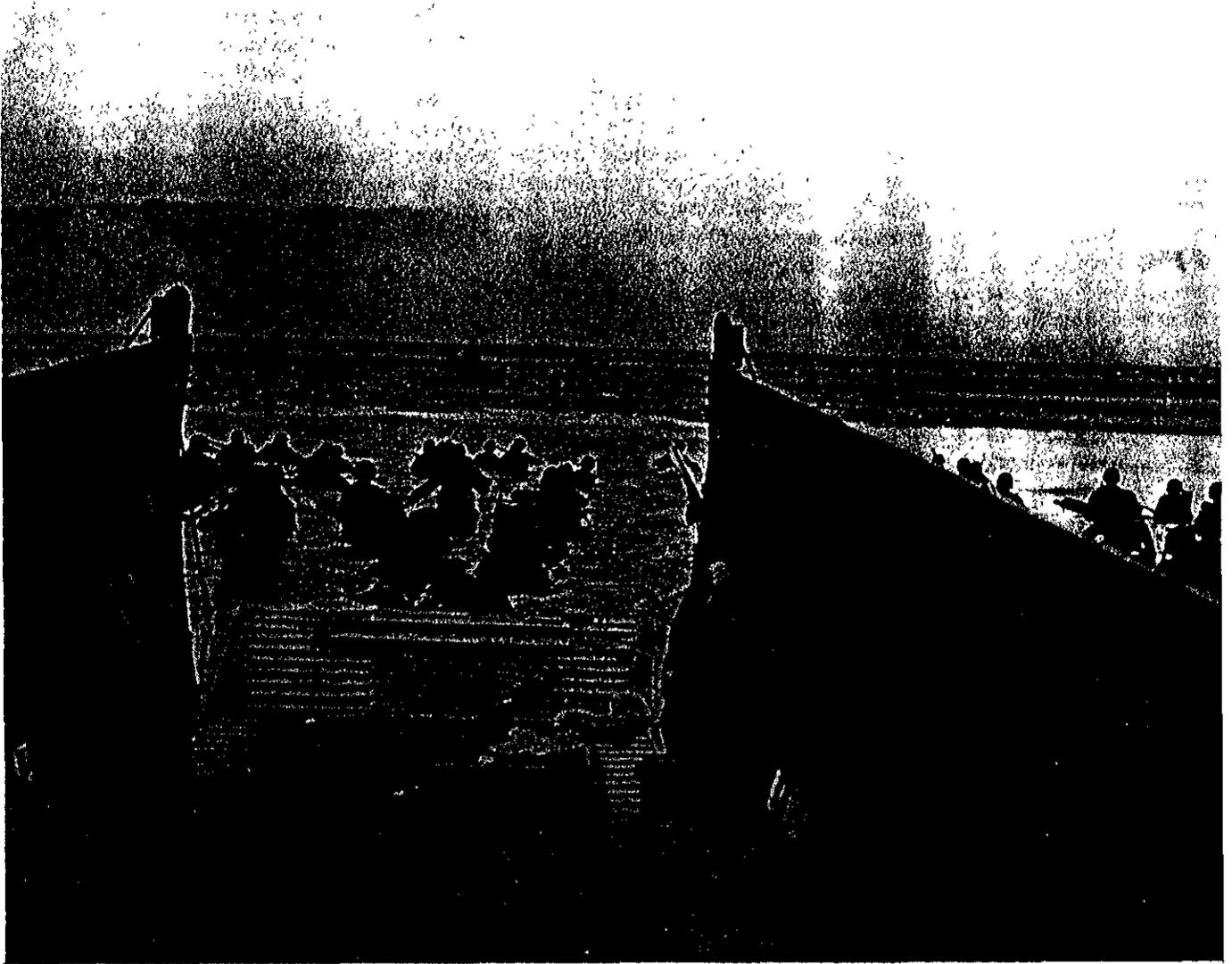
In the zone of the 2d Battalion, 116th Infantry, the second wave brought in the heavy weapons company and the battalion headquarters. Company H suffered such losses and disorganization that it could be of little immediate help in supplying mortar or machinegun support. The 2d Battalion commander, coming ashore near les Moulins, organized a few sections of Company F that had landed in the first wave and attempted an assault on the enemy positions in the draw. The attempt was unsuccessful, but in the meantime the 3d Battalion was landing bunched up astride the regimental boundary just east of les Moulins. Although it was somewhat disorganized by the intermingling of units, the battalion suffered little from German fire in crossing the beach.

At the end of the first hour, the 116th Infantry had at least a nucleus of force that could be organized for an attack against the German defenders. Most hopeful was the situation roughly in the center of the regimental zone just west of les Moulins where enemy fire masked by smoke was light and ineffective, and where shortly after 0730, by great good fortune, the regimental command group came ashore.

The experience of the 16th Infantry's later waves was similar to that of the 116th. Losses were lighter, but the confusion and intermingling of units on the beaches became more serious. The two remaining companies of the 2d Battalion (Companies G and H), followed by the 1st Battalion, landed about where it was supposed to, due north of Colleville. The 3d Battalion completed its landing on the left shortly after 0800. Its headquarters, though, landed to the west and could not join its troops for several hours.

The 16th Infantry suffered another misfortune when the regimental executive officer, coming in with the first section of the headquarters, was killed, along with 35 of his men. The regimental commander did not arrive until 0815 with the second headquarters section.

Command was one of the gravest problems faced by the assault units, not only because officer casualties were high and the mislanding of command groups had left many units leaderless, but also because of the extreme difficulties of communication. For example, three-



This LCVP has grounded some distance out and the men are wading toward the long stretch of open sands. These troops are believed to be members of the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, landing about 0730 when the tide was through the lower obstacles.

fourths of the 116th Infantry's radios were destroyed or rendered useless. (Carrying heavy communication equipment through the surf under enemy fire was a formidable task that took many lives. Five men of the 16th Infantry were decorated for their heroic work in struggling ashore with vital radios and wire, despite serious wounds. One received a posthumous award of the Medal of Honor for his intrepid efforts in recovering two radios and other equipment while suffering two severe wounds. On his third trip into the fire-swept surf he was killed.)

Furthermore, in the confusion caused by the mixing of units, which were under heavy fire in some places, their men huddled along the shingle embankment or sea wall and were generally shaken by the first few minutes of severe action. It would have been impossible for any commander to exercise control over more than a small group of men on a relatively narrow sector of the front.

In these first few hours on OMAHA Beach, the overall OVERLORD operation faced its gravest crisis. Deprived of the expected air support by the weather conditions and

preceded by a generally ineffective beach drenching, the 1st Division had gone in against the one sector of the Normandy coast that had anything like the kind of cordon defense that the German defenders counted on to hold and smash the Allied invaders on the beaches.

Instead of attacking in the sector of one regiment of an overextended static German division as expected, the 1st Division's soldiers hit on the front of a full attack infantry division. The presence of that division in the coastal zone had been missed by Allied intelligence, even though it had been in place for almost three months.

But even as early and discouraging reports regarding the progress on OMAHA Beach flowed back to General Bradley's command ship, the crisis was bit by bit dissolving. Among the groups of scared, tired riflemen huddled along the beach were a few bold leaders — officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates — on whose individual backs the big responsibility at the moment lay.

They began by example and exhortation to prod the men to get up, leave such poor shelter as they had found,

and walk or crawl across the beach flat and up the hills where the Germans were dug in. From the larger perspective, the combined weight of the Allied arms began to wear down the defenders.

Movement off the beach, in consequence, at first took place between the exits. It began before 0800 in a number of independent actions by groups of men, never of more than company size and often much smaller. Some of the attacks had tank fire support; others were aided by the action of several destroyers that came within a few hundred yards of the beach and delivered direct fire wherever they could observe German activity.

Certainly the first troops to move inland were the Ranger companies at Pointe du Hoe, though their action was independent of the main landing force at OMAHA Beach and was, in fact, part of the fire support plan rather than of the assault plan itself.

Forty minutes later, the three companies of the 2d Ranger Battalion made landfall under close-in supporting fires from two destroyers. The destroyers' fire was particularly effective during the first moments of the assault when it forced the German defenders to take cover while the Rangers scaled the cliff with ropes and ladders. In fact, German fire remained light after the Rangers reached the top of the cliff and began moving inland in groups of three or four across a desert cratered by concentrated aerial and naval bombardment. In disparate and confused actions the Rangers speedily carried out their primary mission. Patrols found the 155mm gun emplacements deserted. The guns themselves were discovered farther inland in a camouflaged field position. Curiously enough, they were unmanned and unguarded, and the handful of Rangers who stumbled on them were able to destroy them easily.

Thus far, the Rangers, despite 30 to 40 casualties in the



Troops from the 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, move inland to attack their objectives.

landings, had not had a hard fight. Their difficulties began later in the day with the first of a series of German counterattacks that would keep them in a state of siege for two days, reducing their combat effectives to about 90.

Apart from these Ranger movements, the principal areas of penetration inland were four, two in each regimental zone. Naval fire support played an important part, and engineers finally managed to bulldoze two gaps through the duneline on either side of the St. Laurent exit, fill an antitank ditch, and clear the minefields. The resistance east of this draw had already been neutralized by the 16th Infantry. At about 1130, the Germans in this last organized defense at the St. Laurent draw surrendered to the 2d Battalion, 18th Infantry, which had begun landing at about 1000. Thus, in a little over an hour, concerted bold action had wrought the most substantial improvement on the beach since H-Hour. Reinforcements were coming ashore, and most important of all a road was at last open to move vehicles inland.

In the meantime, the battles inland were already being joined. The troops who gained the top of the bluffs by mid-morning were scattered groups, a small percentage of the assault battalions, and these were incapable of carrying out the D-Day advances as planned. Their objectives at first were simply to reach the various battalion assembly areas. Because of their small numbers and because of the difficulty of control in the hedgerow country, their actions were fragmented; they completely lacked both armored and artillery support, so their movements could be, and constantly were, checked by small enemy prepared positions seldom held by as much as a company.

Under the circumstances, this scattered resistance by small enemy groups constituted in sum a considerable obstacle to the American advance. But the vast supporting Allied naval and air power was practically unopposed, and by dominating the battlefield, planes and naval guns smashed such German reserves as could be gathered for a counterthrust. This gave the fragmented V Corps infantrymen a chance to recover, rebuild, and again become a ground army superior in numbers and equipment to anything that the Germans could thereafter muster to meet them.

While V Corps units struggled to find secure defenses for the night in their shallow lodgment areas, VII Corps was pouring ashore almost unhindered. As the 8th Infantry battalions moved inland to their objectives they had only minor engagements with an enemy who, on the whole, showed little inclination to fight.

In the northern portion of the 4th Division zone, neither the 12th nor the 22d Infantry Regiment reached their D-Day objectives. The delays were caused not by enemy opposition but by the difficulties of moving up through the marshes. The 22d was halted in the general area from Hamel de Cruttes on the coast of St. Germain-de-Varreville. The 12th came up on the left of the 502d Parachute Infantry, which was holding the 101st Division's north flank near Beuzeville-au-Plain.

VII Corps had its weaknesses at the end of D-Day, but on the whole it was in a sound position, smaller than planned but better organized and stronger than might have been expected. Though still under intermittent enemy fire, UTAH Beach had been cleared and was prepared for the orderly reception of reinforcements. The 4th Division, virtually intact, was present in the beachhead, organized and equipped for offensive action. Its casualties for the day had been less than 200.

On the left, on OMAHA Beach, the situation was quite different. The main V Corps position at the end of the day was the narrow sector between St. Laurent and Colleville, a toehold on the enemy shore nowhere more than a mile and a half deep. All units lacked the vehicles, supplies, ammunition, artillery, and armored support they needed for further advance inland.

No artillery could be landed on OMAHA Beach during the morning. The elements of five battalions that beached in the afternoon all suffered heavy losses of equipment, including a total of 26 guns. Two antiaircraft gun battalions scheduled to arrive on D-Day could not come in until the following day. Only one artillery mission was fired on 6 June. V Corps losses for the day were about 2,000 killed;

wounded, and missing.

The outcome of the assault on OMAHA Beach was not clear at the end of D-Day. A shallow lodgment had been secured, 1,500 to 2,000 yards deep in the area of farthest advance near Colleville. Weak German forces were still holding out in remnants of the beach defenses, and their artillery fire could still harass any section of the landing area.

The unloading of vehicles and supplies had fallen far short of the D-Day schedule. Artillery and tank support for the infantry ashore was reduced by severe losses of equipment. Enemy troops had shown plenty of determination and fighting spirit; if the Germans could muster enough force to counterattack this beginning of a beachhead, they might imperil its existence.

Therefore, the action of the next few days would be decisive. For success, two things would be essential: an advance inland far enough to put the beach area out of artillery range and to secure maneuver room for further progress; and the organization of the beach for maximum landings of supply and reinforcement. The first phase of the effort was to carry forward the original plan and reach the D-Day objectives.

History records, of course, that eventually the D-Day objectives were attained; that the beaches were cleared and a steady stream of men, supplies, and equipment began flowing to the forward units; that the combined Allied armies pushed inexorably ahead despite the twin difficulties of the terrain and stubborn German defenders; and that finally the German defenses in Normandy collapsed and the Allied armies swept across France and reached the borders of Germany.

Once again — much as in 1969, the 25th anniversary of the Normandy landings — thousands of people will assemble on and near the Normandy beaches. Many who were present in 1969 — like Eisenhower, Bradley, Montgomery — will not be there in 1984. Time has taken its toll, not only from the ranks of the high ranking officers but from the ranks of the privates, sergeants, and captains who survived the landings and all of the subsequent fighting as well. In fact, there are not many in either category around these days.

Thousands of words will be uttered and millions more written about the events of 6 June 1944. Hundreds of tourist busses will bring the curious, the gawkers, the genuinely interested, the caring, the understanding. Their guides will tell them how at this spot so-and-so did this and that.

But not one speaker, not one guide will ever be able to recapture the magnificent human drama that was played out on those Normandy beaches and in the nearby fields in June 1944 by half-sick, desperate, frightened Allied infantrymen — the cutting edge of the greatest weapon of war ever forged by one nation or by a coalition of nations.

Many of those infantrymen died without ever seeing an enemy soldier. Some died without ever reaching shore, or at the water's edge itself. More died on the shingle of OMAHA Beach — so many, in fact, that at times the stones were stained by their life's blood. Scores of paratroopers and glidermen simply disappeared, their fate not known for many weeks.

Alone or in small groups, courageous infantrymen roused themselves and began fighting back. Those on OMAHA Beach stopped looking over their shoulders and braved the bluffs to take on the German defenders who had been shooting their units to pieces. Their airborne compatriots inland from UTAH Beach were already doing the same thing.

More infantrymen died, and many of them lie in the cemeteries that today dot the countryside of Normandy. Their graves will be visited by thousands on the anniversary of the day they died.

But do we really understand what happened in Normandy on that day 40 years ago? Will we ever understand what drove those infantrymen to do what they did? Probably not.

All we can do is to recount the events of that day for today's infantrymen in the hopes that when their time comes to form part of the United States Army's "cutting edge" they will not falter or stop, but will continue to fight — and to win. The infantrymen who died in Normandy on 6 June 1944 will expect nothing less. Only then will they know that the example they set that day, the ultimate sacrifice they made in the cause of freedom, was not in vain.