

Infantry In Action



D-DAY: Forty Years Plus One

Major General Albert H. Smith, Jr.
United States Army (Retired)

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is a selective condensation of the two-hour Operation OVERLORD lecture that General Smith has presented to officer advanced course classes at various service schools. It focuses on the

16th Infantry Regiment's assault on Omaha Beach. The lecture itself also covers the plans and preparations the higher Allied headquarters made for the operation, plus the fighting on D-Day in the other assault landing areas

My subject matter may be forty years old, but I believe its lessons are applicable to today's Army, because small unit actions have not changed that much. Individuals, squads, platoons, and companies can emulate their World War II counterparts in training to overcome enemy defenses. The qualities of small unit leadership are still current. Initiative and good old American ingenuity remain strong weapons to use against a determined enemy. And while the overall D-Day story was told in this magazine in its May-June 1984 issue, I believe the story needs to be told again, particularly from a more personal viewpoint and with stress on the magnificent role U.S. infantrymen played in getting ashore in France on 6 June 1944 and in staying there.

I was a 25-year old captain on that day, serving as executive officer of the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division. The battalion commander was Major Ed Driscoll.

The 16th Infantry, commanded by Colonel George Taylor, was one of the division's two assault regiments scheduled to land at daybreak on 6 June 1944 on Omaha Beach. The other regiment was the 116th Infantry from the 29th Infantry Division, attached to the 1st Division for the assault.

In June 1944 the 16th Infantry was a combat hardened outfit. It had trained in England and Scotland between August and October 1942 and had been sent to the Mediterranean area, where it had taken part in two invasions

and three campaigns — first in northwest Africa and then in Sicily.

The division had returned to England in December 1943. There, during the next five months, it took part in a tough training program and in a series of invasion rehearsals to sharpen its fighting spirit. By early June, the division was ready for what lay ahead.

The 29th Infantry Division was also well trained. It had been in England since the fall of 1942 and had been subjected to a broad range of hard training, including several realistic landing exercises. But it had not been in combat, and its soldiers had not heard a shot fired in anger.

Across the English Channel, meanwhile, in the German defensive scheme of things, so-called static divisions (with no motor transportation) were charged with the coastal defense mission and with defending the fortified ports. Many of the soldiers assigned to these static divisions were Russians, Poles, and other former enemy soldiers who had chosen to serve with the German Army rather than go to prisoner-of-war camps. These were mixed with older German soldiers, many of whom had survived bitter fighting on the Russian front.

The mobile German infantry units and the panzer divisions were another story. Their ranks were filled with battle-wise veterans and fanatic storm troopers.

Those of us who had faced the Afrika Corps in Tunisia were well aware of the individual German soldier's fighting ability and tenacity. As we were to discover again in

Normandy, the German soldiers were still full of fight and had most of the tools they needed to give us a hard time.

Fortunately for us, there was not the same unity of command on the German side as there was on ours. Our commanders knew much of what the Germans were doing in Normandy — our intelligence people, having broken the German Ultra code system, could read communications that passed between the various levels of command. But the German intelligence organization by this time was in shambles, and German commanders were essentially in the dark concerning our plans, dispositions, and capabilities.

On 7 May 1944 the 1st Division was sent to “concentration camps” in the south of England near the harbors from which its units would embark for Normandy. These were referred to as “holding areas” by our higher headquarters, but they were really austere tent camps surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by theater-level military police units.

On 3 June the situation changed for the better when the 16th Infantry’s battalions embarked on three transports — the *Samuel Chase*, the *Henrico*, and the *Empire Anvil*. My battalion, together with the regimental headquarters, was aboard the *Chase*, an exceptionally clean ship manned by U.S. Coast Guard personnel and filled with the kind of stateside food we had missed so much during the preceding months.

For the first time we were briefed on our exact assault roles. An excellent sand table had been prepared to show all the details of the Normandy coast, and most of the German defensive positions were pinpointed for us.

The plan for Operation *Neptune* — the amphibious assault phase of Operation *Overlord*, which was the overall plan for the invasion of northwest Europe — called for U.S. forces to land on Utah and Omaha Beaches and for British and Canadian units to land on Gold, Juno, and Sword Beaches. The U.S. 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were to drop inland from Utah Beach while the British 6th Airborne Division was to drop south of Sword Beach (see Map 1).

Simply put, OVERLORD strategy was to gain a toehold

in Normandy; then to build up forces and supplies in the lodgement area; and, finally, to break out of the lodgement area. The early capture of Cherbourg and the establishment of artificial harbors were essential to the operation.

The 16th Infantry Regiment’s plan called for its 2d and 3d Battalions to land on the Easy Red and Fox Green sectors of Omaha Beach respectively, and for its 1st Battalion to follow the 2d Battalion onto Easy Red. Colonel Taylor, our regimental commander, had the following to say about our assault: “The first six hours will be the toughest. That is the period during which we will be the weakest. But we’ve got to open the door. Somebody has to lead the way — and if we fail, well, then the troops behind us will do the job. They’ll just keep throwing stuff onto the beaches until something breaks.”

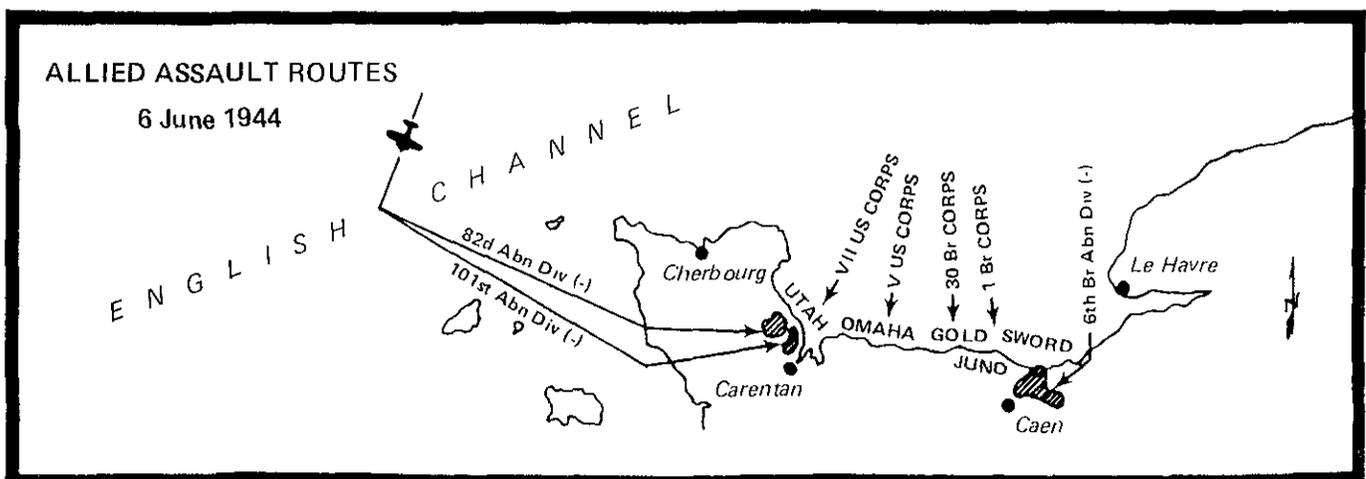
Omaha Beach was a three-mile, crescent-shaped sand beach backed by high and commanding bluffs that ranged in height from 100 to 170 feet. Rocky cliffs sealed off both ends of the beach. Landing at low tide, a soldier would have several hundred yards of rather firm footing before encountering a narrow strip of difficult soft sand leading to a seawall or shingle (loose stone) embankment. On the other side of the embankment he would find a beach road, beyond which was a swampy beach flat, several hundred yards deep, that reached to the base of the bluffs.

The beach exits were essentially deep north-south draws. There were also smaller north-south ravines that could provide some defilade protection from most of the German weapons.

The German defenses were expected to take full advantage of the bluffs, especially on the east and west sides of the draws. German flanking fire was possible against landing craft and the assault troops from emplacements that could not be seen directly from the north.

We knew that daylight on D-Day would last from 0600 to about 2200, some 16 hours of good visibility. We also knew that all of the landing areas might be affected by an easterly tide.

For the assault phase of the operation, each of our assault rifle companies had been organized into five assault



MAP 1

sections instead of its normal three rifle platoons and one weapons platoon. Each section — 1 officer and 29 soldiers — included rifle teams and wire-cutting, bazooka, flame-thrower, automatic rifle, 60mm mortar, and demolition teams. (During the landing and the subsequent attacks on German pillboxes and gun emplacements, this organization proved quite effective. The one planning mistake was the inclusion of the 70-pound flamethrowers, which never got across the beach. In fact, most of the men carrying them sank when the teams hit the water.)

On board the *Chase*, weapons were cleaned and the assault sections repeatedly inspected and briefed. Everything possible was done to ensure success.

Stormy weather on the 4th and 5th caused a 24-hour delay. We prepared to sail on 4 June but were soon back at anchor. Then, during the night of 5-6 June conditions improved, if only marginally, and we sailed for France. The sea was classed as moderate, with waves ranging from four to eight feet. Winds from the northwest were gusty, often up to 20 miles per hour.

Our sea passage from Weymouth harbor to the transport area 12 miles off Omaha Beach was routine and relatively smooth. After the evening meal and brief final meetings, most of us took to our bunks. Colonel Taylor stopped by our cabin — I was bunking with Ed Driscoll — to wish us good luck. No “pep talk” was needed.

I don't remember how long we slept, but Ed and I were awake at 0200 according to plan. After last-minute checks with the company commanders, we went to the mess at 0300 for breakfast. The menu was complete, and we could have anything we wanted. (I ate steak and eggs, with pancakes on the side.) The mess stewards were particularly kind and solicitous that morning, and I guess they were glad they would remain aboard.

Our troops were rail-loaded into LCVPs (landing craft, vehicle and personnel). Crossing a narrow gangplank into a waiting LCVP was a far better procedure than climbing down cargo nets. For the record, we hit the English Channel at about 0430.

An LCVP is certainly no sleek motor launch. I think of it as an oversized metal shoe box. The World War II LCVP was 45 feet long and 14 feet wide and held 30 infantrymen and their assault equipment. It had a steel ramp instead of a sharp bow. In our LCVP, we had 36 headquarters personnel.

With a speed of somewhere around five knots through four- to eight-foot waves, it would take our LCVP almost three hours to go from our transport area to the beach. This included the time needed for the various assembly maneuvers. An ordinary seaman was in charge of this shoe box. A dozen of these low-ranking skippers answered to a Navy lieutenant, who was responsible for maintaining us on the correct ship-to-shore course.

Our LCVP had not been in the water 10 minutes before we were soaking wet and cold. Most of us were also seasick. These miserable conditions persisted for the next 12 miles.

Finally, Omaha Beach and its bluffs were visible to

those of us in the front of the craft. There was some distant noise, but we were not aware of any heavy gunfire. Some smoke from the beach flat grasses reduced our visibility off Easy Red beach. At that time everything seemed to be going according to plan.

When we were about 500 yards offshore, though, I began to realize we were in trouble. Because of the numerous beach obstacles, we now had five LCVPs going in abreast and very close together. The intervals between the craft could be measured in inches rather than in the tens of yards our amphibious doctrine called for.

As its bottom scraped a sand bar, our LCVP shuddered to a stop. Almost simultaneously German machinegun fire hit the steel ramp. I yelled to the seaman not to drop the ramp and, for once, the Navy obeyed the Army. Then, as the German machinegunners swept down the line of landing craft, I called for the ramp to be dropped. All but two of us raced safely into waist-deep water; the last two men were hit before they could leave the craft.

The beach bottom was firm under our feet, but the going was tough because of the surf and the heavy loads we were carrying. Our wet woolen clothing didn't help our mobility, either.

The closer we got to the beach line the more certain I became that the landing was a disaster. Dead and wounded from the first waves were everywhere. There was little or no firing from our troops. On the other hand, German machineguns, mortars, and artillery pieces were laying down some of the heaviest fire I had ever experienced.

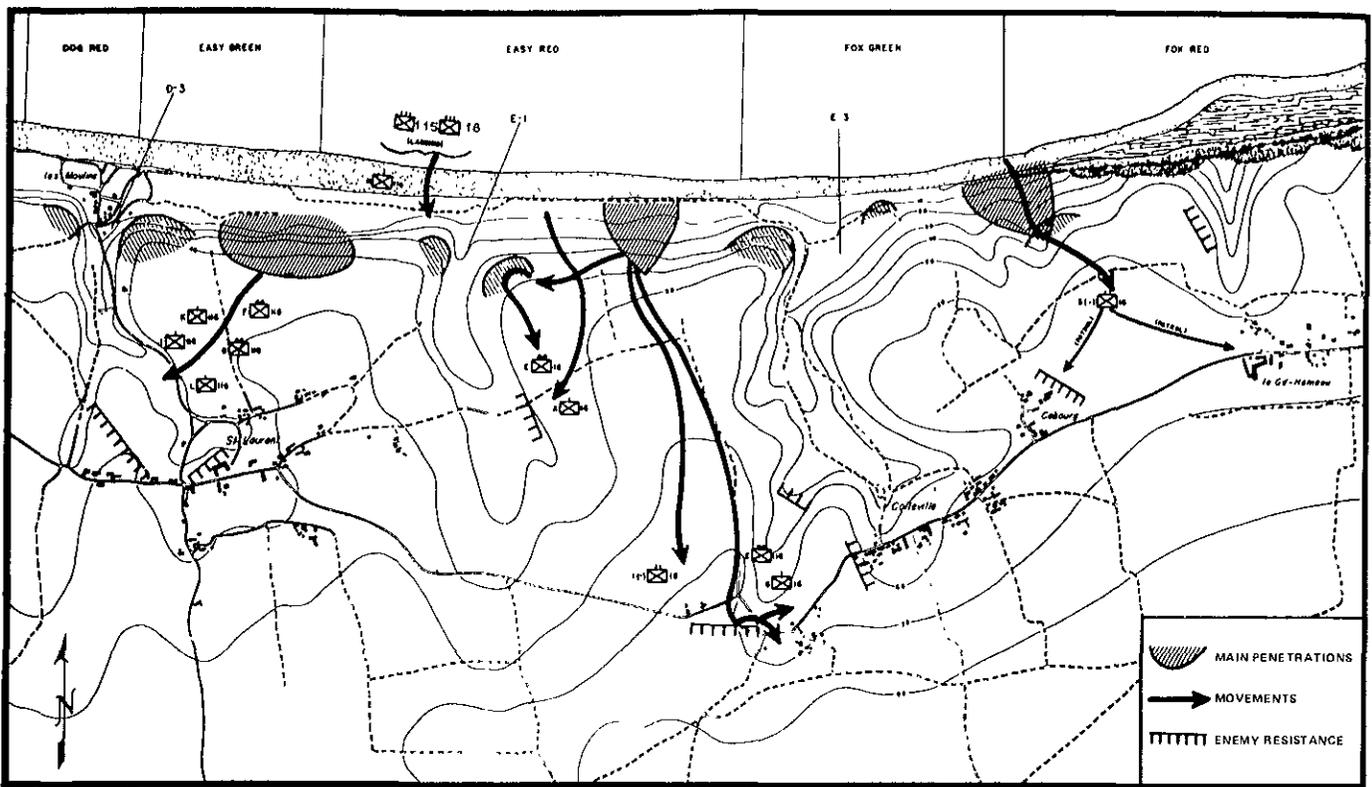
Unknown to us, regiments of the 352d Infantry Division (part of Rommel's reserve) were conducting anti-invasion maneuvers in the Omaha Beach area on 5-6 June. Their presence more than doubled the number of defenders our amphibious assault had to overcome.

Somehow, Captain Hank Hangsterfer, the headquarters company commander, and I were able to get our half of the battalion headquarters across the soft sand and into the defilade afforded by the shingle embankment. I don't recall any casualties. Then, seeing some movement off the beach to our east, we began to move in that direction.

TEACHINGS

Enroute we ran into Brigadier General Willard Wyman, our assistant division commander, who had landed minutes earlier and was trying to organize the scattered forces. We had been taught at the Infantry School that a combination of fire and movement was the best way to advance against a dug-in enemy. But at this hour and in this situation — it was about 0800 — when General Wyman asked whether we were advancing by fire and movement I answered, “Yes, Sir. They're firing and we're moving.”

At 0950, General Wyman reported that there were too many vehicles on the beach and asked for more combat troops to be sent in immediately. Shortly thereafter, the 115th Infantry was sent in to reinforce the 116th, and the



MAP 2

18th Infantry was landed near one of the major exits and was ordered to pass through and take over the missions of the 16th.

As we now know, in the 2nd Battalion's sector, the assault sections of Companies E and F were badly scattered and intermingled with men from Company E, 116th Infantry, who had landed several thousand yards east of their designated beach. The initial casualties in these units were 50 percent or more. The lead echelon of the 16th Infantry's headquarters was wiped out, and the regimental executive officer and S-4 were among those killed on the beach that day (see Map 2).

Only two 2d Battalion units remained relatively intact as they crossed the beach and headed toward the slopes leading to Colleville. The 1st Section of Company E, led by Second Lieutenant John Spalding, blew a gap in the wire above the shingle, made its way past a stone beach-house, and then was held up by minefields at the base of the bluffs. It had lost only three men up to this point.

Landing at 0700, Company G, commanded by Captain Joe Dawson, crossed the beach and reached the embankment in good order. The company's machineguns, set up behind the rocks, found no targets until our LCVPs drew enemy fire. Then, as Company G's supporting weapons built up a base of fire, a few men from each assault section blew gaps in the extensive barbed wire obstacles beyond the shingle.

When Company G's advance elements reached the bluffs, they met Lieutenant Spalding's section. Dawson and Spalding agreed that Spalding's section would operate on Company G's right. Both units now began sending men

through the minefields. The path for Company G's soldiers led over the dead bodies of two soldiers from the first wave who had tried to get through the minefields.

Bothered more by the mines than by the German fire, Dawson and one of his sergeants went on ahead to scout out a small draw. Halfway up the slope an enemy machinegun forced the two to take cover. Dawson sent the sergeant back to bring up the company while he crawled toward the German position. Circling to his left, he got within 30 feet of the gun position before the Germans spotted him and tried to swing the gun around in his direction. But Dawson had time to throw several fragmentation grenades, which eliminated the crew. This opened the way up the draw for his company and for many other units of the division.

Meanwhile, Spalding's section was beginning to work its way up the bluffs, helped by covering fire from Company G. But in working its way past a German machinegun position, the section lost three more men. Eventually, the gun was captured, and the lone soldier in the position, who turned out to be Polish, told Spalding that 16 Germans were in some trenches behind the position. When Spalding and his men reached those trenches, though, the German soldiers were gone. Spalding turned west along the crest of the bluff, losing contact with Company G as that unit headed south.

Moving through the hedgerowed fields and wooded areas, Spalding's section came onto the rear of the German strongpoint guarding the large draw that led to the beach; it was marked E-1 on his map. Spalding's attack caught the defenders by surprise, and in two hours of confused fighting Spalding's men managed to neutralize the

strongpoint and take 21 prisoners in the process without losing a man.

By noon, Captain Dawson's Company G, now reinforced by Spalding's section and other 2d Battalion elements, had seized most of Colleville. That rapid, one-mile-deep penetration of the German defenses was the key to our ultimate D-Day success at Omaha Beach.

In the 3d Battalion's area, Company L landed on Fox Red instead of Fox Green at 0700, some 30 minutes behind schedule. (It was the only one of the division's eight rifle companies in the assault wave that would be ready to operate as a unit after crossing the beach.) The landing craft touched down just short of several rows of underwater obstacles, and the soldiers started wading ashore, crossing 200 yards of tidal flat under heavy German fire. This brought the company into the comparative safety of a vertical cliff, where the company's remaining leaders quickly reorganized the assault sections.

One of the company's assault sections never made it to shore because its landing craft had capsized in the heavy seas shortly after leaving the transport that had brought it to France. Other losses had reduced the company's strength to 123, but it began to push inland from the beach around the west end of the cliff. The company commander was hit and seriously wounded and Lieutenant Bob Cutler, the executive officer, assumed command.

The company's 2d Assault Section, led by Lieutenant Jimmie Monteith, was sent to push up a small draw and knock out pillboxes in a German strongpoint. The 3d Section advanced on Monteith's right, while the 5th Section followed. The 1st Section passed around the right flank and made contact with elements of the 116th Infantry. Together, these latter units assaulted another German strongpoint that had been delaying the advance inland.

The other three assault sections and the company head-

quarters pushed forward as planned. Light machineguns were used to cover the advance, and Lieutenant Monteith enlisted the support of two tanks. At the head of the draw, the 2d Section took up a hasty defensive position and covered the advance of the 5th Section and the company headquarters. Two open emplacements had been silenced by rifle and automatic rifle fire during the advance up the draw. The 3d Section came on line with the 2d, and the company set up a perimeter defense on the high ground.

When Captain Kim Richmond of Company I reached Fox Green beach at 0800, he found himself the senior commander present. The battalion commander and his headquarters elements had been landed far to the west and could not rejoin their troops until much later in the day.

Richmond began to reorganize the troops he could find on the beach and started them forward to join forces with Company L on the high ground, which they did shortly after 0900.

One young infantryman, a Private First Class Milander, contributed mightily without firing a shot. After Company L had fought its way off the beaches, Milander led a three-man reconnaissance patrol southwest to the fortified village of Cabourg. The threesome failed to return because, as we later learned, a platoon of German defenders quickly surrounded them. During the night, however, Milander somehow talked the Germans into surrendering and took them prisoner. Next morning, our troops who were holding the town of Colleville cheered three weary GIs bringing in 52 of Hitler's finest. They were also happy that Cabourg had fallen without a fight or another casualty.

At about 1300 a German force of about one platoon of soldiers supported by light mortars and machineguns attacked the left flank and rear of the 3d Battalion's perimeter. Lieutenant Monteith was killed while exposing



Under the cliffs — Fox Red — Omaha Beach — 6 June 1944.

himself to direct fire against the German force. (He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions that day.)

The German attack was beaten off, and shortly afterward, Captain Richmond sent a strong patrol to Hameau. Then he followed with the remainder of his force, which totaled 104 men — 70 from Company L and the others from Companies I, K, and M. German sniper and machinegun fire harassed the advance but did not slow its progress. The 100-man battalion secured Hameau — and the left flank of the Division Beachhead — by 1600 and successfully defended it through the night.

In our area, meanwhile, we could see that our troops were advancing across the beach flat and up the slopes. Near the top of the bluffs on a small, flat, grassy knoll alongside a dirt road, I enjoyed the most pleasant five-minute break of my military career. And this is where I established our first command post that D-Day morning. I had the remnants of Company A under my control — only two of its assault sections were still operational — and I was using them both as CP and as flank security. I did not know where Ed Driscoll was, or even whether he was still alive. As it turned out, he was with the lead elements of Company C, closely following the 2d Battalion's advance toward Colleville. He also had taken Company B under his control.

Experience and instinct warned me of the threat posed by the German forces in St. Laurent. In the past, the Germans had always counterattacked after losing key terrain. An attack from the west now would hit our advancing forces in the flank and rear and would seriously jeopardize our still somewhat precarious position.

Accordingly, I ordered the acting commander of Company A to attack west toward St. Laurent with what was left of his company. If he encountered the enemy in strength, he was to go over to the defensive and be prepared to block any German counterattack that might come from the direction of St. Laurent.

After an advance of 600 to 800 yards, he did run into strong German fortifications that he could not overcome. He was forced to go on the defensive.

About this time a telephone line reached me from regimental headquarters, which was located at the base of the bluffs. When Colonel Taylor asked about our situation, and what he could do to help, I told him we could use tanks, and the sooner, the better. He promised to do everything possible because he, too, expected an early counter-attack.

From that point on, although I can recall some important events, my feel for their exact timing is gone.

Following the establishment of our first CP and the advance by Company A toward St. Laurent, we tested some German defenses south of the hedgerow just across the dirt road that ran by our location. Several rifle teams tried to advance across the hedgerow but received heavy small arms fire from three directions. Somewhat later, a helmet that was raised above the vegetation drew immediate sniper fire. It was not difficult for me to conclude that the

Germans were in some strength just to the south — in fact, right next door.

In the late afternoon, therefore, I was happy to see Lieutenant Colonel Joe Sisson and his 3d Battalion, 18th Infantry approach our location. It was great to know that reinforcements were at hand. I passed along what little I knew about the friendly and enemy dispositions.

Colonel Sisson deployed his two lead companies from east to west along our dirt road; the men fixed their bayonets, and they then charged south toward the hedgerow from which the German fire had been coming. That bayonet charge was made sometime around 1700, to the best of my recollection, and while the German fire was heavy at first it soon faded as the attacking companies moved farther south to other hedgerows and fields.

As darkness approached, we were all numb. It had been a long two days, with only a few hours of sleep the previous night. Maybe numb isn't the word — I felt like a zombie.

Curled up against a hedgerow, a lieutenant and I shared the warmth of his raincoat. Our clothes were still damp and the temperature had dropped into the 50s. But we knew the Allies had it made — that the German defenses had been breached. The loss of good buddies and the horrors of the day made sleep almost impossible. But to have survived was good fortune beyond belief.

EPILOGUE

By mid-June our 1st Division's advance had reached Caumont, some 23 miles inland from Omaha Beach.

A week later, the total number of Allied troops ashore was more than 600,000, and the number of vehicles that had been landed was almost 100,000. By then, two key requirements of the OVERLORD strategy had been fulfilled: we held a strong lodgement area in Normandy, and our build up was almost complete. All that remained was to penetrate the rest of the German defenses and to break out. That phase of the war started on 25 July and, by the end of August, the Allied forces were beyond Paris and well on their way to the German border.

For the Allied forces, the dash across France was the most exciting period of World War II in Europe. But I hope we shall always remember that our victory in Europe was made possible by those Allied soldiers who fought so hard and strenuously on and behind the Normandy beaches on 6 June 1944. That was the beginning of the end for Nazi Germany.



Major General Albert H. Smith, Jr., was commissioned a second lieutenant of Infantry in 1940 and participated in eight campaigns with the 1st Infantry Division in the European Theater in World War II. In addition to the D-Day invasion of Normandy, this service included the invasions of North Africa and Sicily. He served with the 1st Division again in Vietnam, as assistant division commander and as acting division commander.