

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Omaha Beach, 6 June 1944

Lessons from Company C, 2d Ranger Battalion

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As the size of the United States Army decreases and the potential for regional conflicts around the world increases, U.S. soldiers can learn a lot by studying the initial combat actions of their predecessors in World War II. Despite overwhelming air, naval, and industrial might, U.S. infantrymen often found themselves outgunned and outnumbered as they closed with their enemies.

One such action was the experience of Company C, 2d Ranger Battalion, on D-Day, 6 June 1944, at Omaha Beach on the coast of Normandy. In accomplishing its mission despite seemingly impossible odds, this unit sets a standard for today's soldiers who are preparing for the first fight of the next conflict.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In preparing this article, I have depended heavily upon the recollections of the surviving men of Company C, as compiled and published in Czechoslovakia immediately after the war (Roughing It With Charlie, by Edwin M. Sorvisto, Novy Vsetisk, 1945). I also interviewed Ralph E. Goranson, who commanded the company in 1944—as I was privileged to do more recently, in 1991-1992.

Although not one of the three 2d Ranger Battalion companies to land at Pointe du Hoe in 1944, Company C will scale the cliffs there on 6 June 1994 as part of the 50th Anniversary D-Day commemoration.

Company C's mission was to clear enemy positions on Pointe de la Percee to prevent the Germans from placing enfilading fire eastward down Omaha Beach where the 29th Infantry Division would land. Upon accomplishing their mission, the Rangers were to move west, clearing enemy positions along the cliffs until they linked up with the rest of the 2d Ranger Battalion at Pointe du Hoe.

The amphibious assault plan called for the 16 Sherman tanks of Company B, 743d Tank Battalion, to land on Omaha Dog Green at 0625. As the tanks suppressed the local German positions, Company A, 116th Infantry, 29th Division, would land and seize the Vierville draw. The Ranger company would land six minutes behind Company A, 116th Infantry, on Omaha Dog Green, follow it up the Vierville draw, then attack west to their objective at Pointe de la Percee (Map 1).

As often happens in combat, however, the primary plan did not survive the first shot. The German defensive positions were hardly touched by the extensive bombardments before H-Hour, and the remaining supporting naval and air fires shifted inland as the landing craft approached the beach. Visibility was good, and no smoke obscured the fully

alert German gunners who poured accurate fires across the beach and 200 meters out to sea. Only eight of the tanks survived the swim to shore where they immediately came under accurate German artillery and antitank fire. Company A of the 116th Infantry lost one-third of its force on the way to the beach, and the remaining four boatloads were decimated at the water's edge. In one boat, all the soldiers fell to machine-gun fire before the first one could step off the ramp. Within minutes, the unit lost all its officers, most of its NCOs and almost 60 percent of its troops. The survivors sought cover behind German obstacles or among the bodies of their fallen comrades.

At 0645, assault landing craft (LCA) 418 and 1038, carrying the 68 Rangers of Company C, 2d Ranger Battalion, dropped their ramps into the surf off Omaha's Dog Green Beach. Within seconds, mortar and antitank rounds hit LCA 418, killing 12 men of 1st Platoon. German machineguns fired directly into LCA 1038 hitting 15 men of the 2d Platoon as they plunged into neck-deep water. Without pausing to reorganize, the Rangers moved out of the water and across 300 yards of open beach toward the Vierville causeway. Under mortar, antitank, machinegun, and rifle fire for

the entire distance, the company lost more than half of its men—19 killed and 18 wounded—by the time they reached the limited cover on the other side of the beach.

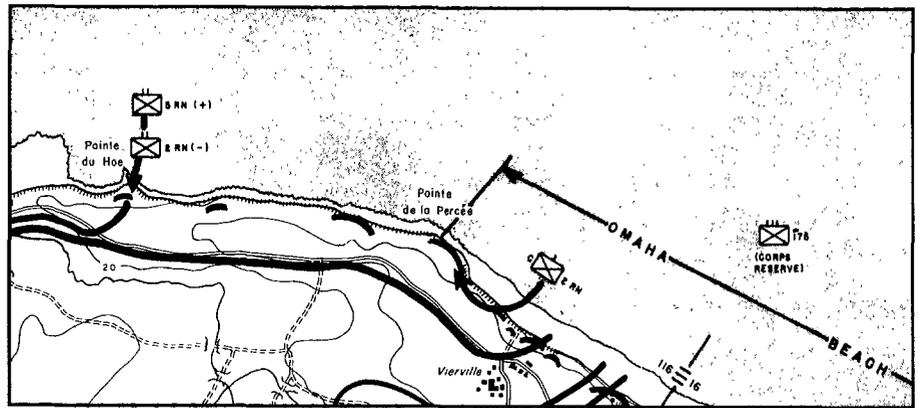
The Enemy and the Terrain

There were four draws through which vehicles could exit Omaha Beach, but the Vierville exit was the only one with a hard-surface road and therefore one of the most strongly defended points on the beach.

The German defenders included members of the 352d Infantry Division, built around a cadre of veterans with more than two years of combat experience fighting Russians. Although this unit was not the equal of a 1939-era German infantry division, it was one of the best in Normandy. The division had deployed from German training bases to St. Lo that winter and had manned the Omaha Beach defenses since early spring. Inexplicably, Allied intelligence had failed to detect the division's arrival at Omaha until just days before the invasion.

Roughly 100 of these resolute defenders, armed with antitank guns, mortars, infantry howitzers and machineguns, manned the Vierville *Stuetzpunkt* or strongpoint, which sat atop 90-foot bluffs overlooking the shoreline. The strongpoint consisted of six concrete pillboxes, trenches, dugouts, and tunnels surrounded by barbed wire and minefields covering extensive obstacle belts on the beach below (Map 2). Experienced German leaders had sited these positions within folds in the terrain from which they could place interlocking fires along the length of the beach, while protected from offshore Allied direct fires. The beach could also be swept by 88mm gun fires from Pointe de la Percee, hence the importance of Company C's mission.

Considering the piecemeal arrival of landing craft on this section of the beach and the lifting of U.S. supporting fires, the Germans actually enjoyed superiority in both numbers and firepower during the first critical hours of this fight. One of the few German vulnerabilities was found along the cliffs to the west of the

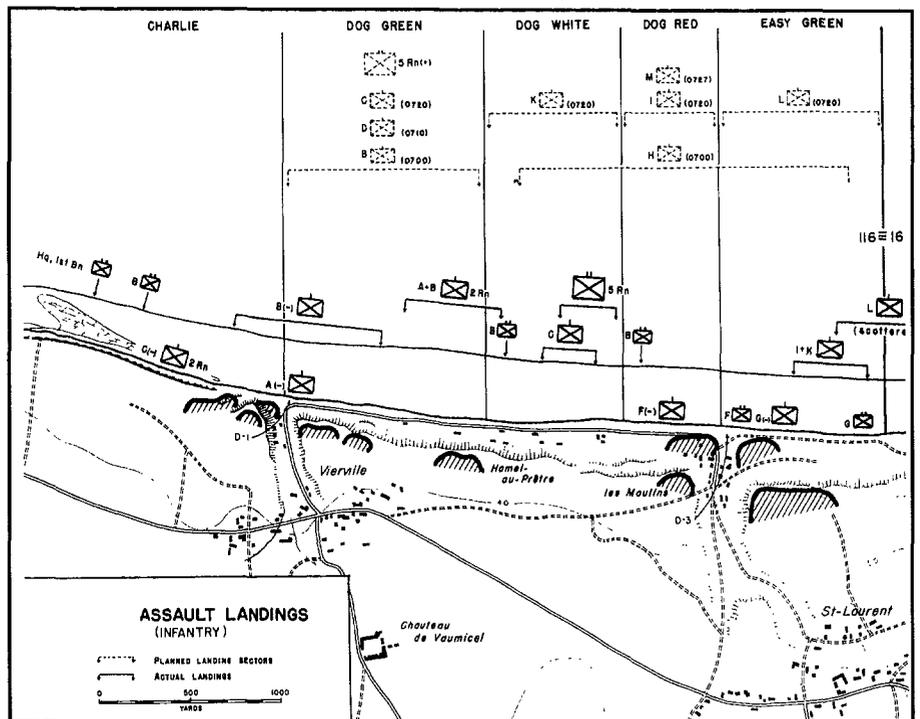


Map 1. The Mission

draw. Although the defenders had placed barbed wire and minefields along the top of these bluffs, most of their weapons were positioned to fire at the more obvious avenue of approach up the Vierville draw. Just as at Pointe du Hoe, the Germans never expected the Americans to attempt to scale 90-foot cliffs in daylight under fire.

Scaling the cliffs is exactly what Captain Ralph E. Goranson, the Ranger company commander, decided to do. Given his losses and the fact that the Germans blocked his primary route, Goranson ordered Lieutenant William D. Moody, leader of 1st Platoon, to scale the cliff west of the Vierville draw and establish an alternate route for the com-

pany's objective. Using their fighting knives to dig handholds, Moody—along with Sergeant Julius Belcher, and Private First Class Otto Stephens—scaled the cliff as the defending Germans lobbed hand grenades over the side. Establishing a foothold in a minefield 15 feet below the crest of the cliff, Lieutenant Moody and his Rangers dropped toggle ropes for the rest of the unit. As the company moved up the ropes (including five wounded Rangers who crawled across the beach to rejoin their comrades), Captain Goranson sent a runner to take charge of 20 men from Company B, 116th Infantry, whose boat had landed near the Ranger position. Although they did not realize it at the



Map 2. Assault Landings and Enemy Locations

time, they were the first U.S. troops to fight their way off Omaha Beach and assault the German defenses.

As the Rangers expanded their foothold at the top of the cliff, they discovered a fortified house and entrenchments that were part of the Germans' Vierville strongpoint. Although this enemy position was not their objective, the Rangers recognized its importance and immediately assaulted it. Goranson's force, outnumbered more than two to one, fought with a vengeance, paying back the Germans for the losses it had suffered on the beach.

Two Ranger NCOs spotted a German machinegun nest that had inflicted heavy casualties on Company C and was continuing to kill the men of the 116th Infantry. They knocked out the concrete pillbox by tossing a white phosphorous hand grenade inside and shooting the crewmen as they ran out the back door. This close-quarters fighting continued for hours as the Germans reinforced the strongpoint and continually counterattacked the Rangers.

As the Ranger force gradually prevailed over the Germans, each individual Ranger—despite their local success—experienced his own internal struggle with the combat emotions of fear, loss, and isolation. Having lost its radios on the beach, the unit had no knowledge of Allied successes elsewhere in Normandy. From their cliff-top position, the Rangers could see only signs of U.S. defeat in the form of casualties, burning vehicles, and sunken landing craft.

Captain Goranson recalls, "I was worried until three o'clock in the afternoon of D-Day because we had no radio or physical communications with any other unit, and I thought we were to be stranded, alone, for quite some time." Lieutenant Sidney A. Salomon, 2d Platoon leader, said, "Once atop the cliff, I felt bad when I found out the number of casualties we had suffered.... Up until noon, I thought the invasion was a failure and wondered if we could make a successful withdrawal and try again in the near future."

Compounding the Rangers' sense of isolation was the intermittent shelling they received from Allied vessels off shore. The first incident involved a ship that unexpectedly fired 20mm rounds at the German strongpoint. Fortunately, some of the rounds actually hit the remaining German positions. An hour later, a U.S. destroyer opened up with five-inch guns from 500 yards offshore. This time the Rangers were not so lucky, and two men were wounded. Quick-thinking naval observers on the beach detected the error and called off the fire. Around noon the naval shore fire control party accurately directed the fires of the battleship USS Texas onto the remaining German positions east of the Vierville draw. After four salvos from the ship's 14-inch guns, the surviving Germans surrendered.

Despite all of these conditions, the 31 Rangers of Company C—within seven hours after they first assaulted the strongpoint—had killed 69 Germans,

Using their fighting knives to dig handholds, Moody—along with Sergeant Julius Belcher, and Private First Class Otto Stephens—scaled the cliff as the defending Germans lobbed hand grenades over the side.

taken one wounded prisoner, and forced the remaining enemy to withdraw. After securing the position, Captain Goranson led a reconnaissance patrol to his original objective, Pointe de la Percee. The patrol leader, Staff Sergeant Elijah Dycus, confirmed that naval gunfire had destroyed the now deserted enemy positions. In contrast to their high casualties while crossing the beach, the Rangers had suffered much less during the close quarters fight. Most important, they accomplished their mission by destroying the enemy positions that were placing enfilading fire onto the 116th Infantry on Omaha Beach.

After contacting the 2d Ranger

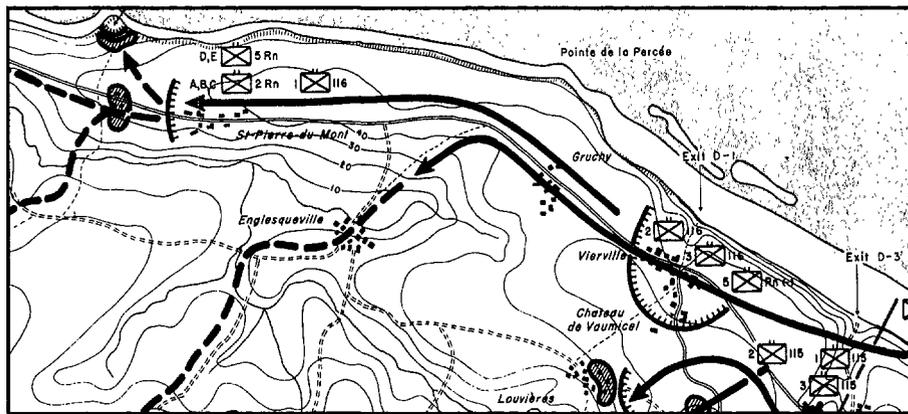
Battalion S-3, Captain Goranson coordinated the handover of his position to the 116th Infantry. At 2200, the 28 walking members of Company C linked up with the 5th Ranger Battalion and Companies A and B of the 2d Ranger Battalion at the town of Vierville. The next day, 7 June 1944, they were part of the point element as the 5th Ranger Battalion and Companies A, B, and C of the 2d Battalion attacked west to relieve the 2d Ranger Battalion(-) at Pointe du Hoe (Map 3). The emotional pendulum of combat finally took a positive swing as Company C's Rangers were reunited with their buddies from the other companies.

Reasons for Success

How did the Rangers of Company C manage to cross 300 yards of open beach under fire in broad daylight, scale a 90-foot cliff, breach a minefield, successfully assault an enemy strongpoint against superior numbers, and win? How were they able to do this after suffering more than 50 percent casualties in the first 30 minutes of their first combat action? Finally, what enabled these men to fight as well as they did, while dealing with the powerful emotions of fear, loss and isolation?

The company's success was due to a combination of demanding and realistic training, thorough preparation for combat, exceptional leadership, superior physical fitness, and strong unit cohesion.

Training. Demanding and realistic training was a hallmark of the 2d Ranger Battalion from its inception. Formed on 1 April 1943 in Camp Forrest, Tennessee, the battalion of volunteers conducted eight months of rigorous training in the United States on basic infantry skills with special emphasis on speed marching, land navigation, hand-to-hand combat, patrolling, amphibious operations, live-fire assaults, and night raids. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel James E. Rudder, whipped the unit into shape by integrating the toughest possible conditions into every task the unit performed. Limited sleep, no rations during extended patrols, and night



Map 3. 7 June 1944

operations were standard.

Live-fire exercises were performed to the highest standards. Performing amid fear became a condition in this training program. Since failure meant separation from the unit, fear of failure was real. And since physical danger was involved in most Ranger tasks, all the soldiers learned to perform with this fear as well. By the time the 2d Ranger Battalion left the U.S., they were physically, mentally, and emotionally tough.

After the battalion deployed to England, the training plan focused more on amphibious operations, live fire assaults, and cliff climbing. Unit flexibility was developed through cross-training until each Ranger, regardless of his duty position, was an expert on all weapons and equipment, both Allied and Axis. The battalion trained on terrain similar to that of the objective area at the Isle of Wight and at the U.S. Assault Training Center at Bude, England. Colonel Rudder further developed individual initiative by having his men conduct their 200-mile movement from Bude to Isle of Wight by two-man buddy team.

In addition to producing highly skilled soldiers, this training program instilled aggressiveness, initiative, and confidence. In turn, these qualities further lessened the effects of fear and isolation on the battlefield.

Preparation for Combat. Planning and rehearsing for Operation OVERLORD were extensive and thorough. The training events consisted of rehearsals of the tasks the unit would perform in combat. In April 1944 the battalion conducted a full-scale

rehearsal of the invasion during Exercise Fabius I. From that time forward, the unit and its leaders knew their specific D-Day tasks and, equally important, the specific conditions they would encounter on their objective. This knowledge enabled them to develop a simple, but effective, plan.

Captain Goranson describes the planning as follows:

We received excellent [information] in the form of photographs, etc., right up to embarkation. Based on this, we (myself, Moody, Salomon, and the

Establishing a foothold in a minefield 15 feet below the crest of the cliff, they dropped toggle ropes for the rest of the unit.

senior NCOs) agreed on two plans: Plan 1, follow the 116th up the Vierville draw and [turn] west to [Pointe de] Percee.... Plan 2, recon a good route up the cliffs and engage the enemy.... We hammered the men with one big idea—Get across the beach ASAP, then execute Plan 1 or 2!

Today's infantrymen should take note of two important points in Company C's planning process. First, given sufficient planning time, the company commander included his platoon leaders and senior NCOs in the process. The plan belonged to all of them. Second, Goranson's intent was simple and clear, "Get across the beach ASAP, then execute Plan 1 or 2." In the confusion of

the soldiers' first combat, this simplicity undoubtedly contributed to their eventual success.

Company C refined their planning throughout May until each man knew exactly where he was going every minute of D-Day. Another benefit of the thorough troop-leading procedures was that all men in the unit were so familiar with the plan that even the most junior of them could readily replace leaders who became casualties. The wisdom of this preparation was borne out, as two officers and 17 NCOs of Company C eventually became casualties on D-Day. While thorough preparation did not necessarily help the Rangers deal with the emotion that accompanied the nightmare of losing so many buddies, it did prepare them for the actions they would take when those men fell.

Thorough preparation for combat reduced fear of the unknown. By rehearsing as many of the combat tasks and conditions as possible, the Rangers lessened the enemy's ability to surprise them. When the volume and accuracy of the German fire prevented the company from executing its primary plan, the Rangers were prepared. "With so little of the company left, I just gave LT Moody the word to proceed with Plan 2 and hoped for the best," recalls Captain Goranson.

The unit's ability to execute Goranson's decision quickly resulted, in part, from thorough planning and rehearsals, which enabled them to surprise the Germans by attacking from an unexpected direction (up the cliff) and at an unexpected time (after suffering 50 percent casualties). This preparation enabled the Rangers to apply their remaining combat power at the decisive place (inside the enemy strongpoint) at the decisive time (while the enemy engaged Americans on the beach).

While the Rangers' aggressiveness and skill played a critical role in the close quarters fight, it is important to remember that thorough preparation played a major role in getting them off the beach and into the fight.

Leadership. Despite the shock of heavy casualties and the fact that this

was their baptism of fire, the leaders of Company C performed exceptionally well throughout the mission. The relatively small Ranger companies, 68 men each, were leader-heavy with three officers and 24 NCOs. Each platoon consisted of only two squads, so the platoon leader's span of control was tighter than that of a regular infantry platoon.

During the mission, the company was fortunate in that all of its officers and most of its NCOs survived the first 30-minute firefight. This facilitated rapid execution when Goranson ordered the cliff climb. The company commander made another smart decision in going after the German strongpoint instead of immediately pressing on to Pointe de la Percee. His actions revealed a clear understanding of the battalion commander's intent for his unit: to protect the western flank of the beachhead from German enfilading fire. By assaulting the cliff-top entrenchments, Company C attacked the most immediate threat to the beachhead's flank. Goranson's subsequent patrol confirmed the wisdom of his decision when it revealed that naval gunfire had eliminated any threat from Pointe de la Percee.

As S.L.A. Marshall points out in *Men Against Fire*, there is no substitute for inspirational leadership in combatting the fear of death among soldiers. Lieutenant Moody's actions during the assault provide a good example of such inspirational leadership by example. After leading the climbing party up the cliff and through the minefield, Moody personally led the assault into the German strongpoint. In the ensuing action, he killed the German commander, and then was killed by a German sniper. Upon Lieutenant Moody's death, the 2d Platoon leader, Lieutenant Salomon, immediately took charge and continued the assault. Captain Goranson led from the front throughout the operation and was struck more than once by enemy bullets—all of them lodging miraculously in his equipment.

These are just a few examples of the routinely courageous actions under fire that earned members of this company five Distinguished Service Crosses, ten Silver Stars, ten Bronze Stars, and 126

Purple Hearts in their 11 months of combat.

Physical Fitness. Physical fitness was a key to Ranger survival and success because it helped them overcome the paralyzing effects of fear. S.L.A. Marshall, in *The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of a Nation*, points out:

All men feel shock in battle to some degree. [When] the man is shocked nervously, and fear comes uppermost, he becomes physically weak. His body is drained of muscular power and mental coordination.... Fear and fatigue are about the same in their effect on an advance.

Omaha Beach was covered with men who were paralyzed by their fear and fatigue on 6 June 1944. While the Rangers also experienced fear, they were able to perform in spite of it. Leadership, training, and cohesion were fac-



tors, but superior physical conditioning was equally important in enabling them to cross the beach, scale the cliff, and accomplish their mission. The long run each morning on the beach on the Isle of Wight during January to June 1944 had certainly helped. The countless physical fitness sessions and training exercises in the wet sands of Florida and on the English coast undoubtedly contributed to their survival on D-Day as well. The upper body strength they developed through those same training events enabled them to scale the cliffs with their equipment. The ability of numerous Rangers to continue fighting after being wounded is further testimony to their superior conditioning.

Cohesion. The cohesion developed through 14 months of living and training

together before entering combat was essential to the company's success. This cohesion helped overcome the sense of isolation that has been attributed to fear and shock on the battlefield. The desire to avenge their fallen comrades spurred some rangers on to acts of heroism against the German position. It was unit cohesion that motivated wounded Rangers to rejoin their buddies and participate in the assault as best they could. In all, this unit cohesion produced a profound sense of loss over the horrendous casualties they had suffered.

In spite of the United States' tremendous military and industrial might in 1944, the success of its national effort on 6 June ultimately depended on the ability of U.S. infantrymen to close with and destroy a tough opponent. Despite 50-percent casualties, significant enemy advantages (in number, position, and firepower), and the emotional shock of fear, isolation, and loss, the Rangers of Company C, 2d Ranger Battalion, accomplished their mission because of their superior training, preparation, leadership, fitness, and cohesion.

Army doctrine continues to emphasize the importance of these fundamentals to mission accomplishment. The outstanding combat performance of U.S. Rangers, Special Operations forces, and 10th Mountain Division infantrymen in the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia, on 3 October 1993 clearly demonstrates that today's soldiers are still concentrating on these fundamentals.

As Army resources shrink in the coming years, we must remain focused on these basics if we are to win the first fight of the next conflict.

Major John W. Nicholson, Jr., commanded Company C, 2d Ranger Battalion, in 1991-1992. He previously commanded Company A, 2d Battalion, 325th Infantry (Airborne), 82d Airborne Division, and served in staff positions in the 82d Division, the 2d Ranger Battalion, and in the Department of the Army in Washington. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy, also holds a degree from Georgetown University, and is now attending the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth.
