

The Longest Day Dawns

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NEVER had there been a dawn like this. In the murky, gray light, in majestic, fearful grandeur, the great Allied fleet lay off Normandy’s five invasion beaches. The sea teemed with ships. Battle ensigns snapped in the wind all the way across the horizon from the edge of the Utah area on the Cherbourg peninsula to Sword Beach near the mouth of the Orne. Outlined against the sky were the big battlewagons, the menacing cruisers, the whippetlike destroyers. Behind them were the squat command ships, sprouting their forests of antennae. And behind them came the convoys of troop-filled transports and landing ships, lying low and sluggish in the water. Circling the lead transports, waiting for the signal to head for the beaches, were swarms of bobbing landing craft, jam-packed with the men who would land in the first waves.

The great spreading mass of ships seethed with noise and activity. Engines throbbed and whined as patrol boats dashed back and forth through the milling assault craft. Windlasses whirred as booms swung out amphibious vehicles. Chains rattled in the davits as assault boats were lowered away. Landing craft loaded with pallid-faced men shuddered and banged against the high steel sides of transports. Loud-hailers blared out, “Keep in line! Keep in line!” as coastguardmen shepherded the bobbing assault boats into formations. On the transports men jammed the rails, waiting their turn to climb down slippery ladders or scramble-nets into the heaving, spray-washed beaching craft. And through it all, over the ships’ public-address systems came a steady flow of messages and exhortations: “Fight to get your troops ashore, fight to save your ships, and if you’ve got any strength left, fight to save yourselves.” . . . “Get in there, Fourth Division, and give ’em hell!” . . . “Don’t forget, the Big Red One is leading the way.” . . . “U.S. Rangers, man your stations.” . . . “Remember Dunkirk! Remember Coventry! God bless you all.” . . . “*Nous mourrons sur le sable de notre France chérie, mais nous ne retournerons pas* [We shall die on the sands of our dear France but we shall not turn back].” . . . “This is it, men, pick it up and put it on, you’ve only got a one-way ticket and this is the end of the line.

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Twenty-nine, let's go!" And then the two messages that most men still remember: "Away all boats," and "Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name . . ."

Along the crowded rails many men left their positions to say goodbye to buddies going in on other boats. Soldiers and seamen, who had become firm friends after the long hours spent aboard ships, wished one another good luck. And hundreds of men took time to exchange home addresses "just in case." Technical Sergeant Roy Stevens of the 29th Division fought his way across a crowded deck in search of his twin brother. "I finally found him," he says. "He smiled and extended his hand. I said, 'No, we will shake hands at the crossroads in France like we planned.' We said goodbye, and I never saw him again." On H.M.S. *Prince Leopold*, Lieutenant Joseph Lacy, the chaplain of the 5th and 2nd Ranger battalions, walked among the waiting men and P.F.C. Max Coleman heard him say, "I'll do your praying for you from here on in. What you're going to do today will be a prayer in itself."

All over the ships, officers wound up their pep talks with the kind of colorful or memorable phrases that they felt best suited the occasion—sometimes with unexpected results. Lieutenant Colonel John O'Neill, whose special combat engineers were to land on Omaha and Utah beaches in the first wave and destroy the mined obstacles, thought he had the ideal conclusion to his debarking talk when he thundered, "Come hell or high water, get those damned obstacles out!" From somewhere nearby, a voice remarked, "I believe that s.o.b. is scared, too." Captain Sherman Burroughs of the 29th Division told Captain Charles Cawthon that he planned to recite "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" on the way in to the beach. Lieutenant Colonel Elzie Moore, heading up an engineer brigade bound for Utah, was without a speech. He had wanted to recite a most appropriate excerpt from the story of another invasion of France, a battle scene from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, but all he could remember was the opening line, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends . . ." He decided to give up the idea. Major C. K. "Banger" King of the British 3rd Division, going in on the first wave to Sword Beach, planned to read from the same play. He had gone to the trouble of writing down the lines he wanted. They closed with the passage, "He that outlives this

day, and comes safe home/Will stand a tip-toe when this day is named . . .”

The tempo was increasing. Off the American beaches more and more troop-filled boats were joining the churning assault craft endlessly circling the mother ships. Sodden, seasick and miserable, the men in these boats would lead the way into Normandy, across Omaha and Utah beaches. In the transport areas, debarking was now in full swing. It was a complex and hazardous operation. Soldiers carried so much equipment that they were barely able to move. Each had a rubber-tube life preserver and, besides weapons, musette bags, entrenching tools, gas masks, first-aid kits, canteens, knives and rations, everybody had extra quantities of grenades, explosives and ammunition—often as much as 250 rounds. In addition, many men were burdened with the special equipment that their particular jobs demanded. Some men estimate that they weighed at least three hundred pounds as they waddled across decks and prepared to get into the boats. All this paraphernalia was necessary, but it seemed to Major Gerden Johnson of the 4th Infantry Division that his men were “slowed down to the pace of a turtle.” Lieutenant Bill Williams of the 29th thought his men were so overburdened that “they wouldn’t be able to do much fighting,” and Private Rudolph Mozgo, looking down the side of his transport at the assault craft that smashed against the hull and rose sickeningly up and down on the swells, figured that if he and his equipment could just get into a boat “half the battle would be won.”

Many men, trying to balance themselves and their equipment as they climbed down the weblike scramble-nets, became casualties long before they were even fired on. Corporal Harold Janzen of a mortar unit, loaded down with two reels of cable and several field phones, tried to time the rise and fall of the assault craft beneath him. He jumped at what he thought was the right moment, misjudged, fell twelve feet to the bottom of the boat and knocked himself out with his carbine. There were more serious injuries. Sergeant Romeo Pompei heard someone scream below him, looked down and saw a man hanging in agony on the net as the assault boat ground his foot against the side of the transport. Pompei himself fell headlong from the net into the boat and smashed his front teeth.

Troops that boarded craft on the decks and were lowered down from davits were no better off. Major Thomas Dallas, one of the 29th's battalion commanders, and his headquarters staff were suspended about halfway between the rail and the water when the davits lowering their boat jammed. They hung there for about twenty minutes—just four feet beneath the sewage outlet from the “heads.” “The heads were in constant use,” he recalls, “and during these twenty minutes we received the entire discharge.”

The waves were so high that many assault craft bounced like monstrous Yo-yos up and down on the davit chains. One boatload of Rangers got halfway down the side of H.M.S. *Prince Charles* when a huge swell surged up and almost pitched them back on the deck. The swell receded and the boat dropped sickeningly down again on its cables, bouncing its seasick occupants about like so many dolls.

As they went into the small boats veteran soldiers told the new men with them what to expect. On H.M.S. *Empire Anvil*, Corporal Michael Kurtz of the 1st Division gathered his squad about him. “I want all of you Joes to keep your heads down below the gunwale,” he warned them. “As soon as we’re spotted we’ll catch enemy fire. If you make it, O.K. If you don’t, it’s a helluva good place to die. Now let’s go.” As Kurtz and his men loaded into their boat in the davits they heard yells below them. Another boat had upended, spilling its men into the sea. Kurtz’s boat was lowered away without trouble. Then they all saw the men swimming near the side of the transport. As Kurtz’s boat moved off, one of the soldiers floating in the water yelled, “So long, suckers!” Kurtz looked at the men in his boat. On each face he saw the same waxy, expressionless look.

It was 5:30 A.M. Already the first-wave troops were well on the way to the beaches. For this great seaborne assault which the free world had toiled so hard to mount, only about three thousand men were leading the attack. They were the combat teams of the 1st, 29th and 4th divisions and attached units—Army and Navy underwater demolition teams, tank battalion groups, and Rangers. Each combat team was given a specific landing zone. For example, the 16th Regiment of Major General Clarence R. Huebner’s 1st Division would assault one half of Omaha Beach, the 116th of Major General Charles

H. Gerhardt's 29th Division the other.* Those zones had been subdivided into sectors, each with a code name. Men of the 1st Division would land on Easy Red, Fox Green and Fox Red, the 29th on Charlie, Dog Green, Dog White, Dog Red and Easy Green.

The landing schedules for both Omaha and Utah beaches were planned on an almost minute-by-minute timetable. In the 29th Division's half of Omaha Beach at H Hour minus five minutes—6:25 A.M.—thirty-two amphibious tanks were to swim onto Dog White and Dog Green and take up firing positions at the water's edge to cover the first phase of the assault. At H Hour itself—6:30 A.M.—eight LCTs would bring in more tanks, landing them directly from the sea on Easy Green and Dog Red. One minute later—6:31 A.M.—the assault troops would swarm across the beach on all sectors. Two minutes after that—6:33 A.M.—the underwater demolition engineers were due; they had the tough job of clearing sixteen 50-yard paths through the mines and obstacles. They had just twenty-seven minutes to finish this ticklish job. At six-minute intervals from 7 A.M. on, five assault waves, the main body of troops, would begin landing.

This was the basic landing plan for both beaches. The build-up was so carefully timed that heavy equipment like artillery was expected to be landed on Omaha Beach within an hour and a half and even cranes, half-tracks and tank recovery vehicles were scheduled to come in by 10:30 A.M. It was an involved, elaborate timetable which looked as if it could not possibly hold up—and in all probability the planners had taken this into consideration, too.

The first-wave assault troops could not yet see the misty shores of Normandy. They were still more than nine miles away. Some warships were already dueling with German naval coastal batteries, but the action as yet was remote and impersonal for the soldiers in the boats—nobody was firing directly at them. Seasickness was still their biggest enemy. Few were immune. The assault boats, each loaded with about thirty men

*Although the 1st and 29th Divisions' combat teams shared the assault, the actual landings were technically under the command of the 1st Division in this opening phase.

and all their weighty equipment, rode so low in the water that waves rolled over the side and out again. With each wave the boats pitched and tossed, and Colonel Eugene Caffey of the 1st Engineers Special Brigade remembers that some of the men in his boat “just lay there with the water sloshing back and forth over them, not caring whether they lived or died.” But for those among them not yet incapacitated by seasickness, the sight of the great invasion fleet looming up all about them was awesome and wonderful. In Corporal Gerald Burt’s boatload of demolition engineers, one man wistfully remarked that he wished he’d brought his camera.

Thirty miles away Lieutenant Commander Heinrich Hoffmann, in the lead E-boat of his 5th Flotilla, saw a strange, unreal fog blanketing the sea ahead. As Hoffmann watched, a single plane flew out of the whiteness. That confirmed his suspicion—it must be a smoke screen. Hoffmann, followed by the other two E-boats, plunged into the haze to investigate—and got the shock of his life. On the other side he found himself face to face with a staggering array of warships—almost the entire British fleet. Everywhere he looked there were battleships, cruisers and destroyers towering over him. “I felt as though I were sitting in a rowboat,” Hoffmann says. Almost instantly shells began to fall around his dodging, twisting boats. Without a moment’s hesitation, the cocky Hoffmann, unbelievably outnumbered, ordered the attack. Seconds later, in the only German naval offensive of D Day, eighteen torpedoes knifed through the water toward the Allied fleet.

On the bridge of the Norwegian destroyer *Svenner*, the Royal Navy’s Lieutenant Desmond Lloyd saw them coming. So did officers on the bridges of *Warspite*, *Ramillies* and *Largs*. *Largs* promptly slammed her engines to full speed astern. Two torpedoes sliced between *Warspite* and *Ramillies*. *Svenner* couldn’t get out of the way. Her captain yelled, “Hard aport! Full ahead starboard! Full astern port!” in a vain effort to swing the destroyer so that the torpedoes would pass parallel to the ship. Lieutenant Lloyd, watching through his binoculars, saw that the torpedoes were going to hit directly beneath the bridge. All he could think of was, “How high will I fly?” With agonizing slowness *Svenner* turned to port and for a moment Lloyd thought they might escape. But the maneuver failed. A

torpedo slammed into the boiler room. *Svenner* seemed to lift from the water, shuddered and broke in two. Nearby, Leading Stoker Robert Dowie, on the mine sweeper H.M.S. *Dunbar*, was amazed to see the destroyer slide beneath the water with “her bow and stern sticking up to form a perfect V.” There were thirty casualties. Lieutenant Lloyd, unhurt, swam about for nearly twenty minutes, keeping a sailor with a broken leg afloat, until they were both picked up by the destroyer *Swift*.

To Hoffmann, safely back again on the other side of the smoke screen, the important thing now was to raise the alarm. He flashed the news to Le Havre, serenely unaware that his radio had been knocked out of commission in the brief battle that had just taken place.

On the flagship *Augusta* lying off the American beaches, Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley plugged his ears with cotton and then trained his binoculars on the landing craft speeding toward the beaches. His troops, the men of the U.S. First Army, were moving steadily in. Bradley was deeply concerned. Up to a few hours before he had believed that an inferior and overextended German “static” division, the 716th, was holding the coastal area, roughly from Omaha Beach all the way east to the British zone. But just before he left England, Allied intelligence had passed on the information that an additional German division had moved into the invasion area. The news had arrived too late for Bradley to inform his already briefed and “sealed” troops. Now the men of the 1st and 29th divisions were heading for Omaha Beach, unaware that the tough, battle-tested 352nd Division manned the defenses.*

The naval bombardment which Bradley prayed would make their job easier was about to begin. A few miles away Contre-Amiral Jaujard, on the French light cruiser *Montcalm*, spoke to his officers and men. “*C’est une chose terrible et monstrueuse que d’être obligé de tirer sur notre propre patrie,*” he said, his voice heavy with emotion, “*mais je vous demande de le faire*

* Allied intelligence was under the impression that the 352nd had only recently taken up these positions and then only for “a defense exercise.” Actually units had been in the coastal zone and overlooking Omaha Beach for more than two months—and some even longer. Pluskat and his guns, for example, had been there since March. But up to June 4 Allied intelligence had still placed the 352nd around St.-Lô, more than twenty miles away.

aujourd'hui [It is a terrible and monstrous thing to have to fire on our homeland, but I want you to do it this day]." And four miles off Omaha Beach on the destroyer U.S.S. *Carmick*, Commander Robert O. Beer pressed a button on the ship's intercom and said, "Now hear this! This is probably going to be the biggest party you boys will ever go to—so let's all get out on the floor and dance!"

The time was 5:50 A.M. The British warships had been firing off their beaches for more than twenty minutes. Now the bombardment in the American zone began. The entire invasion area erupted with a roaring storm of fire. The maelstrom of sound thundered back and forth along the Normandy coast as the big ships slammed steadily away at their preselected targets. The gray sky brightened with the hot flash of their guns and along the beaches great clouds of black smoke began to bunch up into the air.

Off Sword, Juno and Gold the battleships *Warspite* and *Ramillies* lobbed tons of steel from their 15-inch guns toward powerful German gun batteries at Le Havre and around the mouth of the Orne. Maneuvering cruisers and destroyers poured streams of shells into pillboxes, concrete bunkers and redoubts. With incredible accuracy, the sharpshooting H.M.S. *Ajax* of River Plate fame knocked out a battery of four 6-inch guns from six miles offshore. Off Omaha, the big battleships *Texas* and *Arkansas*, mounting between them a total of ten 14-inch, twelve 12-inch and twelve 5-inch guns, pumped six hundred shells onto the coastal battery position atop Pointe du Hoc in an all-out attempt to ease the way for the Ranger battalions even now heading for the 100-foot-high sheer cliffs. Off Utah the battleship *Nevada* and the cruisers *Tuscaloosa*, *Quincy* and *Black Prince* seemed to lean back as they hurled salvo after salvo at the shore batteries. While the big ships blasted away from five to six miles offshore, the small destroyers pressed in to a mile or two off the beaches and, line astern, sent a saturating fire into targets all over the network of coastal fortifications.

The fearsome salvos of the naval bombardment made deep impressions on the men who saw and heard them. Sub-Lieutenant Richard Ryland of the Royal Navy felt immense pride in "the majestic appearance of the battleships," and wondered "whether this would be the last occasion such a sight

would be seen.” On the U.S.S. *Nevada*, Yeoman Third Class Charles Langley was almost frightened by the massive fire power of the fleet. He did not see “how any army could possibly withstand the bombardment” and believed that “the fleet would be able to pull out in two or three hours.” And in the speeding assault boats, as this roaring canopy of steel flashed over their heads, the sodden, miserable, seasick men, bailing with their helmets, looked up and cheered.

Now a new sound throbbed over the fleet. Slowly at first, like the mumbling of some giant bee, and then building to a great crescendo of noise, the bombers and fighters appeared. They flew straight in over the massive fleet, flying wing tip to wing tip, formation after formation—nine thousand planes. Spitfires, Thunderbolts and Mustangs whistled in over the heads of the men. With apparent disregard for the rain of shells from the fleet, they strafed the invasion beaches and headlands, zoomed up, swept around and came in again. Above them, crisscrossing at every altitude, were the 9th Air Force’s B-26 medium bombers, and above these, out of sight in the heavy cloud layer, droned the heavies—the R.A.F. and 8th Air Force Lancasters, Fortresses and Liberators. It seemed as though the sky could not possibly hold them all. Men looked up and stared, eyes damp, faces contorted with a sudden emotion almost too great to bear. It was going to be all right now, they thought. There was the air cover—the enemy would be pinned down, the guns knocked out, the beaches would be cratered with foxholes. But, unable to see through the cloud layers, and unwilling to risk bombing their own troops, 329 bombers assigned to the Omaha area were already unloading thirteen thousand bombs up to three miles inland from their targets, the deadly guns* of Omaha Beach.

The last explosion was very near. Major Werner Pluskat thought the bunker was shaking itself apart. Another shell hit the cliff face at the very base of the hidden position. The shock of it

*There were 8 concrete bunkers with guns of 75 millimeters or larger caliber; 35 pillboxes with artillery pieces of various sizes and/or automatic weapons; 4 batteries of artillery; 18 antitank guns; 6 mortar pits; 35 rocket-launching sites, each with four 380-millimeter rocket tubes; and no less than 85 machine gun nests.

spun Pluskat around and hurled him backward. He fell heavily to the ground. Dust, dirt and concrete splinters showered about him. He couldn't see through the clouds of white dust, but he could hear his men shouting. Again and again shells smashed into the cliff. Pluskat was so dazed by the concussion that he could hardly speak.

The phone was ringing. It was the 352nd Division headquarters. "What's the situation?" a voice asked.

"We're being shelled," Pluskat managed to say, "heavily shelled."

Somewhere far behind his position he now heard bombs exploding. Another salvo of shells landed on the cliff top, sending an avalanche of earth and stones in through the bunker's apertures. The phone rang again. This time Pluskat couldn't find it. He let it ring. He noticed that he was covered from head to foot with a fine white dust and his uniform was ripped.

For a moment the shelling lifted and through the thick haze of dust Pluskat saw Theen and Wilkening on the concrete floor. He yelled to Wilkening, "Better get to your position while you have a chance." Wilkening looked glumly at Pluskat—his observation post was in the next bunker, some distance away. Pluskat took advantage of the lull to phone his batteries. To his amazement not one of his twenty guns—all brand-new Krupps of various calibers—had been hit. He could not see how the batteries, only half a mile or so from the coast, had escaped; there were not even any casualties among the crews. Pluskat began to wonder if observation posts along the coast were being mistaken for gun positions. The damage around his own post seemed to indicate it.

The phone rang just as the shelling began again. The same voice he had heard earlier demanded to know "the exact location of the shelling."

"For God's sake," Pluskat yelled, "they're falling all over. What do you want me to do—go out and measure the holes with a ruler?" He banged down the phone and looked around him. Nobody in the bunker seemed to be hurt. Wilkening had already left for his own bunker; Theen was at one of the apertures. Then Pluskat noticed that Harras was gone. But he had little time to bother about the big dog now. He picked up the phone again, walked over to the second aperture and looked

out. There seemed to be even more assault boats in the water than when he had last looked, and they were closer now. Soon they would be in range.

He called Colonel Ocker at regimental headquarters. "All my guns are intact," he reported.

"Good," said Ocker, "now you'd better get back to your headquarters immediately."

Pluskat rang his gunnery officers. "I'm going back," he told them. "Remember, no gun must fire until the enemy reaches the water's edge."

The landing craft carrying U.S. 1st Division troops to their sector on Omaha Beach had not far to go now. Behind the bluffs overlooking Easy Red, Fox Green and Fox Red, the gun crews in Pluskat's four batteries waited for the boats to get just a little nearer.

"This is London calling.

"I bring you an urgent instruction from the Supreme Commander. The lives of many of you depend upon the speed and thoroughness with which you obey it. It is particularly addressed to all who live within thirty-five kilometers of any part of the coast."

Michel Hardelay stood at the window of his mother's house in Vierville at the western end of Omaha Beach and watched the invasion fleet maneuver. The guns were still firing, and Hardelay could feel the concussion through the soles of his shoes. The whole family—Hardelay's mother, his brother, his niece and the maid—had gathered in the living room. There seemed no doubt about it now, they all agreed: the invasion was going to take place right at Vierville. Hardelay was philosophical about his own seaside villa; now it would most certainly come down. In the background the BBC message, which had been repeated over and over for more than an hour, continued.

"Leave your towns at once, informing, as you go, any neighbors who may not be aware of the warning. . . . Stay off frequented roads. . . . Go on foot and take nothing with you which you cannot easily carry. . . . Get as quickly as possible into the open country. . . . Do not gather in large groups which may be mistaken for troop concentrations. . . ."

Hardelay wondered if the German on horseback would make his usual trip down to the gun crews with the morning

coffee. He looked at his watch; if the soldier was coming, it was nearly time. Then Hardelay saw him on the same big-rumped horse, with the same bouncing coffee cans that he always carried. The man rode calmly down the road, turned the bend—and saw the fleet. For a second or two he sat motionless. Then he jumped off the horse, stumbled and fell, picked himself up and ran for cover. The horse continued slowly on down the road to the village. The time was 6:15 A.M.