

ON SANDS STAINED RED

Ordinary Men and Extraordinary Courage on Omaha Beach

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On June 6, 1944, at approximately 7:15 A.M., only 45 minutes after the initial allied landing craft hit the beaches of Normandy, France, to breach Hitler's Atlantic Wall, 1st Lt. Bob Edlin and the men of 1st Platoon, A Company, 2nd Ranger Battalion approached the smoke-shrouded Dog Green Sector of Omaha Beach in their LCA (Landing Craft Assault).¹ Both A and B Companies' landing craft had spent the early hours of the morning trolling in a circling pattern a few miles off the coast of France awaiting orders to land. Those orders had now arrived.

The time aboard the small LCA in rough seas took its toll on the Rangers. Lt. Edlin recalled: "There were many sick people. They were vomiting on each other's feet and on their clothing."² They had been told

to expect minimal resistance. The massive thirty-minute naval bombardment, accompanied, as historian Stephen E. Ambrose explained, by "480 B-24s carrying 1,285 tons of bombs,"³ was intended to annihilate German resistance on Omaha Beach and create shell holes to provide the advancing Americans cover. The bombardment, however, accomplished very little.

"When we came in, there was a deep silence," Lt. Edlin recollected. "The only thing that I could hear was the motor of the boat that we were on. It was dawn; the sun was just coming over the French coast. I saw a seagull fly across the front of the boat, just like life was going on as normal. All the gunfire had lifted for a very short time.... I didn't hear anybody pray. I didn't hear anybody say anything. We knew that the time was here." Suddenly, machinegun fire pinged off the front of the LCA.

1. Joseph Balkoski, *Omaha Beach: D-Day June 6, 1944* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004), 158.

2. Marcia Moen and Margo Heinen, *The Fool Lieutenant: A Personal Account of D-Day and World War II* (Elk River, MN: Meadowlark Publishing, 2000), 27.

3. Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day: June 6, 1944, The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 120.



German artillery fire began landing all around the Rangers' landing craft. "We crouched in the bottom of the boat in the vomit, urine, and seawater."⁴

An LCA beside Lt. Edlin's carrying men of B Company exploded from a direct hit, likely killing everyone aboard before they could even hit the beach. Edlin's LCA struck a sandbar and ground to a halt 75 yards off the beach, but the ramp did not drop because the British seaman tasked with operating it had been decapitated by the intense hail of incoming German fire.⁵ Edlin screamed at the British coxswain to get the boat in further so his men would not have to cross such a vast expanse of beach, 75 yards of at least shoulder deep water followed by roughly 200 more yards of sand,⁶ under withering fire, but the coxswain refused to go any further. Exasperated, Edlin moved the decapitated sailor aside to operate the ramp on the front of the craft.⁷ Lt. Edlin and his fellow Rangers prepared to surge forward into the maelstrom of death and destruction that was Omaha Beach.

A reported 4,720 Americans died on Omaha Beach.⁸ A great many of these casualties can be attributed to failures from those at the top entrusted with the planning of the attack. Be it the failure of pre-invasion tactics, an improper understanding of the conditions the men would

be entering, or the introduction of inappropriate men and machinery, none of the expected advantages actually materialized on the French beaches. In spite of all of these failures from the top, the men on Omaha Beach accomplished their objective. As the dawn broke then next day, although casualties covered the beach, the sunrise shone brightly on American flags as well. The victory was won not through brilliant military strategy from the top, but on the battlefield — through bravery and poise exhibited by men at the bottom. It was the ability of officers on the ground, officers like Colonel Schneider, Lt. Edlin, Lt. Spaulding, and Capt. Dawson, to adjust to the disadvantages they found on the battlefield and to persevere through the endless challenges they faced on June 6, and through their perseverance they encouraged others who witnessed their resolve. It was their ability, bravery, resolve and self-control that found triumph in the face of defeat.

Though failures made from the top prior to June 6th resulted in a great loss of life on Omaha Beach, the valor and composure of those on the ground proved great enough to persevere and win the day, beginning their road to Berlin.

SETTING THE STAGE

In 1943, the German war machine of the Third Reich ground to a halt on all fronts after their seemingly invincible onslaughts in the first four years

4. Moen and Heinen, *The Fool Lieutenant*, 27.

5. *Ibid.*, 98.

6. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 158.

7. Moen and Heinen, *The Fool Lieutenant*, 28.

8. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 352.

of World War II. General Omar Bradley recalled: “Expelled from Africa, hard pressed in Italy, hunted in the Atlantic, and now demoralized in Russia, everywhere the German had lost the initiative. To some it looked as though he had lost the war.”⁹ Allied forces were establishing air superiority as the air offensive into the heart of Germany kicked into full gear, and as Bradley later recounted, some air commanders “believed that it was only a matter of months until Germany’s back would be broken by the Allied bombing campaign.”¹⁰

Despite the growing success of the Allies throughout the European Theater, many high-ranking American general officers, including U.S. First Army commander General Omar Bradley, Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, and Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, believed that the only way to win the war was to totally defeat Germany.¹¹ And the only way to do this would be to invade Germany itself. The British supported a less aggressive approach with a focus on the Mediterranean.¹² Despite this disagreement, a new position of “Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander” (COSSAC) was established on March 12, 1943, with British Lieutenant General Fredrick Morgan as the chief planner for the invasion

of northwest Europe.¹³

United Kingdom prime minister Sir Winston Churchill expressed in his memoirs his skepticism of the brash American plans: “While I was always willing to join with the United States in a direct assault across the Channel on the German sea front in France, I was not convinced that this was the only way to win the war, and I knew that it would be a very heavy and hazardous adventure.”¹⁴ The horrible casualties associated with the frontal assaults of World War I remained fresh in the minds of Englishmen like Churchill.

Two landing areas were considered by COSSAC as sites for the Allied invasion of northwest France. The first was the Pas de Calais, the narrowest point in the channel and the most obvious tactical and logistical place to attack German-occupied France. But the Pas de Calais, because of its position as the prime invasion location, was “the most strongly defended area on the whole French coast,”¹⁵ according to General Morgan and COSSAC. Because of the tremendous defenses put in place at the Pas de Calais by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the German Army Group B, and by the German Commander in Chief of Western Operations, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt,¹⁶ COSSAC suggested that the second invasion site be used. This site was Normandy.

9. Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier's Story* (Scranton, PA: The Haddon Craftsmen, 1951), 197.

10. Bradley, *A Soldier's Story*, 198.

11. Bradley, *A Soldier's Story*, 201; Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 6; Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Organizer of Victory* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 329.

12. Bradley, *A Soldier's Story*, 196.

13. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 6.

14. *Ibid.*, 7.

15. *Ibid.*, 10.

16. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 63.

Normandy was less heavily defended than the Pas de Calais for a reason. The English Channel was much wider at Normandy. Normandy was also further southwest, placing it further from Germany. A third problem with Normandy was that it had only one port, located at Cherbourg, large enough to support Allied logistical needs.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Normandy was chosen by COSSAC on the belief that, despite geographical and logistical issues, it held a much higher chance of success than the Pas de Calais. This decision gained approval by the Allied Supreme Command, and British backing was achieved from Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, the “operational command of [Allied] ground forces for the invasion of Europe,” after Montgomery made some significant changes to the invasion plan.¹⁸ He proposed a larger invasion front with more landing zones, the abandonment of the invasion of southern France (codenamed Operation Anvil), and the use of Airborne forces prior to the amphibious assault on Hitler’s Atlantic Wall. Eisenhower supported Montgomery’s proposal.¹⁹ The plan was named Overlord, and the invasion date, D-Day, set for June 5, 1944, later pushed back to June 6 due to bad weather conditions. H-Hour, the time of the landings, would be 6:30 a.m.

The United States was assigned two beaches on the western end of the invasion site where American forces would, it was anticipated, quickly secure the vital port of Cherbourg. One of them, initially codenamed Beach 313, was not ideal. It was a roughly four-mile, crescent-shaped beach. The high water mark could vary by as much as 600 yards from low to high tide.

The beach proved to be a fantastic natural defensive position for the Germans. German troops fortified the beach, as historian Cornelius Ryan detailed, by installing “eight 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 38-millimeter rocket tubes; and no less than 85 machine-gun nests.”²⁰ Filling the beach were countless mines and beach obstacles designed to stop landing craft, vehicles, and infantry. Thought to be defended by one battalion of the German 716th Division, poorly-trained and poorly-equipped, unknown to the Allies it was in fact defended by three battalions of the more elite 352nd Division.²¹ Despite these drawbacks, Beach 313 was “an obvious landing site, the only sand beach between the mouth of the Douve to the west and the Arromanches to the east, a distance of almost

17. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 10.

18. Adrian R. Lewis, *Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 125.

19. Lewis, *Omaha Beach*, 126–130.

20. Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day: June 6, 1944* (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 187.

21. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 323.

forty kilometers.”²² When the beach was finalized as a landing site, it was renamed Omaha.²³

Initially, because of its necessity as a landing site, the beach assault was assigned to elements of two U.S. Army divisions. The 116th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Infantry Division, supported by amphibious tanks, would attack the right flank of the beach in sectors, named (from left to right) Easy Green, Dog Red, Dog White, and Dog Green.²⁴ The 16th Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division, also supported by amphibious tanks, would assault the left flank of the beach in sectors, called (from left to right) Easy Red, Fox Green, and Fox Red.²⁵ Their main objectives were to cover demolitions teams as they cleared the beach of obstacles and to secure the five heavily-defended draws along the beach so as to allow vehicles to quickly get off the beach.²⁶ To facilitate the destruction of obstacles, the men would be landing just after low tide.²⁷ This would give soldiers a huge exposed area to cross, but the massive aerial and naval bombardment—starting at sunrise, 5:58 A.M., and continuing to five minutes before the landings—was supposed to flatten all opposition and cover the beach with craters to provide the landing soldiers with cover from potential enemy fire.²⁸

22. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 320.

23. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 11.

24. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 121.

25. *Ibid.*, 346.

26. Gerald Astor, *June 6, 1944: The Voices of D-Day* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1994), 223.

27. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 119.

28. *Ibid.*, 118.

The plans were in place, but even the best of plans can go awry, and the operation was far from ideal. Nevertheless, in the early morning hours of June 6, young soldiers of the 29th and 1st Infantry Divisions boarded assault craft in rough waters. Predawn light illuminated their approach as a massive—yet, as it turned out, hugely-ineffective—bombardment crashed down on German-occupied France. Fear and uncertainty filled the Allied general staff who had planned the invasion. They had been like gods, assigning the movements and tasks of thousands of Allied forces. But now they were helpless. The fate of the war, and very well the world, was held in the hands of a group of young men who crouched wet, miserable, scared, and uncertain in their landing craft that slowly lumbered through white-capped waves toward a smoke-shrouded beach.

A MORNING ON HELL'S SHORES

Widerstansnesten (resistance nest) 62 was one of the main defensive fortifications on Dog Green sector of Omaha Beach. Its job was to protect the vital paved road of the Vierville Draw. After the initial bombardment, German soldiers of the 352nd Division rushed to prepared defensive positions along the bluffs overlooking Omaha Beach.

What they saw shocked them: allied landing craft coming directly for them. “They must be crazy,” Sergeant Krone declared. “Are they going to swim ashore?”

Right under our muzzles?”²⁹ The Germans received orders to hold their fire until the Americans reached the waterline. There the slaughter would ensue.

The landing craft approaching the Vierville Draw were filled with the men of A Company, 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Division, otherwise known as the Bedford Boys. Because of their ability to use the still-visible Vierville church steeple behind the draw as a reference point, they were one of the few units of the first wave to land on target.³⁰ Their company would have to face the heavy fortifications of the all-important Vierville draw alone until the second wave arrived. Currents at 2.7 knots going with the rising tide on Omaha Beach, together with wind pushing ten to eighteen knots, created three to six foot waves that pushed landing craft to the left, away from A Company. Most of the LCVPs operated by American sailors were ill-designed to function in the swirling currents of the English Channel, leaving units like A Company, which had British sailors familiar with the Channel, isolated. Their isolation allowed the Germans to concentrate their fire to devastating effect. According to Ambrose, “Half of E Company was more than two kilometers to the east of its assigned sector.”³¹

“Where,” Captain Robert Walker yelled as he saw the pristine, green terrain of the bluffs, “is the damned Air Corps?”³²

Sub-Lieutenant Jimmy Green, an English operator of one of Company A’s LCAs, saw the state of the beach and feared for the men he was taking into hell. No B26 bombs had cratered the beach; instead, Omaha was as “flat as a pancake.”³³ General Bradley later explained the failure this way: “In bombing through the overcast, air had deliberately delayed its drop to lessen the danger of a spill-over on craft approaching the shore. This margin for safety had undermined the effectiveness of the heavy air mission. To the seasick infantry,” he continued, “this failure in air bombing was to mean many more casualties upon Omaha Beach” than there might have been.³⁴ Even if the bombs had landed on target, many were set to impact fuses so that they would not crater the beach *too* badly.³⁵ This made the bombs completely ineffective against heavy fortifications like those on Omaha Beach where delay fuses were needed but not used.³⁶

33. Alex Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys: One American Town’s Ultimate D-Day Sacrifice* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 127.

34. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 96.

35. *Ibid.*, 77.

36. Impact fuses were chosen because Allied planners wanted to limit cratering the beaches, which after all would function as artificial ports for landing more forces and supporting the massive logistical needs of the invasion force. Impact fuses do not have the penetrating power to destroy sturdy concrete fortifications such as those on the bluffs overlooking Omaha Beach. Delay fuses will penetrate their target before detonating, causing massive damage to a fortification such as a bunker. Today’s “bunker buster” bombs function on the principle of a delayed fuse. For a detailed chart of the bombing plan of Omaha Beach see Joseph Balkoski’s *Omaha Beach*, 77.

29. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 322.

30. *Ibid.*, 327.

31. *Ibid.*, 324.

32. *Ibid.*, 323.

In addition, nearly half of the sixty-four amphibious Sherman DD tanks that were to land ten minutes before the infantry on the Omaha Beach to help neutralize German positions ended up at the bottom of the channel due to the poor planning and rough waters.³⁷ The ineffectiveness of DD tanks proved that the untested technology should never have been implemented by planning staff. Instead, the LCTs (Landing Craft Tank, essentially a larger LCA that could carry four Sherman DD tanks) that brought the DD tanks to within 5,500 yards of the beach should have brought the tanks all the way to the shore, dropping them off intact and together on the beach to concentrate their firepower.³⁸

An unknown Navy Lieutenant recognized the flaws of the DD tanks and, disobeying orders, commanded his LCTs to take the 743rd Tank Battalion all the way to the beach instead of following the plan. Seven of his eight LCTs made it to the beach, bringing 28 much-needed tanks to the 29th Infantry's aid.³⁹ These tanks accounted for the vast majority of tanks that made it to the beach at all. The firepower

they gave and the lives they saved cannot be measured, although the fact that they came in first without the infantry allowed the Germans to concentrate their fire on them for a time and reduced the tanks' effectiveness.

Having the DD tanks come in ten minutes before the infantry defied the doctrine of combined arms that armies were learning during World War II and the Germans showed mastery of in their *blitzkriegs* at the beginning of the war. The few that made it to the beach were isolated, allowing the Germans to concentrate fire on them. They should have come in on-line with the infantry to provide mutual support. Combat engineers should have either been in the LCTs or in LCAs or LCVPs in formation with the tank-carrying LCTs so they would be in position no matter where the current pushed them to clear a path through obstacles to allow tanks to get up the beach. Instead, engineers were to arrive with the infantry ten minutes after the tanks in LCMs (Landing Craft Mechanized).⁴⁰

This caused engineers to be in one place on the beach and tanks at another. The few DD tanks that made it to the beach could not make it through the obstacle belt because they did not land with combat engineers. In short, planners ignored the ability of the current to cause landing craft and DD tanks to miss landing objectives. If the engineers, infantry, and tanks all landed on the same type craft, they might not have landed

37. Ryan, *The Longest Day*, 205–6.

38. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 102. The historian Adrian R. Lewis makes a similar argument in his book *Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory*, although he argues that United States forces should have dropped off their DD tanks from their LCTs closer to shore like the British did where pre-invasion studies had shown a much higher success rate for DD tanks getting to the shoreline.

39. Joseph Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead: The 29th Infantry Division in Normandy* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1989), 129.

40. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 148.

on target, but they would have landed together, which is the most important consideration.

As A Company landed at 6:30 A.M., exactly on time, the German positions along the bluff remained menacingly quiet. Captain Fellers, the commanding officer of A Company, and his men began to advance up the beach through the rising surf along with the two DD tanks that had made it to Dog Green. As they progressed up the beach, the Germans opened fire with MG-42 machine guns, mortars, rifles, and artillery fire. The men of A Company had never experienced combat, and their baptism of fire was an unfair and swift slaughter. Every single man of the thirty-one in Sub-Lieutenant Green's LCA including Captain Fellers died in the wall of death that rained down on A Company. Of the 155 men of A company, 100 died in those opening minutes. Most of the others fell wounded.⁴¹ If other boats had landed on target with a more effective barrage from the Navy and Air Corps and tanks in a higher concentration with supporting combat engineers in the same place, far fewer casualties would have been sustained.

The survivors froze and just searched for any cover they could find on the beach as bullets whizzed by and shells crashed down around them, sending deadly shrapnel flying indiscriminately through the air. Some retreated to neck deep water or hid behind the various obstacles littering the beach. Others took cover

41. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 121.

behind the two DD tanks.⁴²

Flamethrower operator Dickie Overstreet was one such soldier. He quickly disposed of his flamethrower to get ashore and took a rifle from one of his dead fellow soldiers. He sought cover behind a DD tank sitting along the shore, stuck behind obstacles with no engineers to aid its progress. The tank promptly took a direct hit from a German mortar or artillery round. Overstreet realized that the Germans would target large clusters of troops that were bound to be behind a tank or destroyed landing craft. He immediately ran away from the tank and was wounded by machine gun fire. He eventually made it up the beach and survived the day huddled behind the sea wall.⁴³

As historian Joseph Balkoski stated so well, "The men of Bedford had trained for almost three and a half years for this moment, only to be cut down in seconds like stalks of wheat felled by a scythe."⁴⁴ Their training failed to prepare them to move forward into enemy fire, something that many combat veterans learned by necessity. Instead, most of the men sought ineffective cover or fell back into deeper water to hide.

All over Omaha Beach, the first wave of the 1st Infantry Division and 29th Infantry Division met stiff resistance and death wherever they went. The green 29th Infantry particularly suffered through their horrible baptism of fire. The battle-

42. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 121.

43. Kershaw, *The Bedford Boys*, 130-131.

44. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 123.

hardened men of the 1st Infantry knew to quickly advance into and through the incoming hail of fire as they took the left portion of the beach. Instead of taking cover, many of them rushed forward. Allied planners should have landed two regular army, experienced divisions instead of just the 1st Infantry Division. An experienced division such as the 3rd Infantry should have been transferred from the Italian theater to northwest Europe to accompany the 1st Division in the first wave on Omaha instead of the 29th.⁴⁵ Captain Edward Wozenski, commanding officer of E Company, 16th Infantry, 1st Division, remembers how his men courageously pushed forward:

The boats were hurriedly emptied, the men jumping into water shoulder-high under intense machine gun and antitank fire. No sooner was the last man out than the boat received two direct hits from an antitank gun, and was believed to have burned or blown up. Now all the men in the company could be seen wading ashore into the field of intense fire from machine guns, rifles, antitank guns, and mortars. Due to the heavy sea, the strong cross current, and the loads that the men were carrying, no one could run. It was just a slow, methodical march with absolutely no cover up to the enemy's commanding positions.

45. The argument of having two combat-experienced divisions was first proposed in detail by historian Adrian R. Lewis in *Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory*, though he does not make the same distinction that I do between regular and National Guard units.

Men fell, left and right, and the water reddened with their blood. A few men hit underwater mines of some sort and were blown out of the sea. The others staggered on to the obstacle-cover, yet completely exposed beach.... Men were falling on all sides, but the survivors still moved forward and eventually worked to a pile of [shingle] at the high water mark. This offered momentary protection against the murderous fire of close-in enemy guns, but his mortars were still raising hell.⁴⁶

The recognition, by officers and enlisted alike, that the beach offered no cover—despite the false security of beach obstacles and destroyed tanks or landing craft—saved many of the 1st Infantry Division's soldiers who hit Omaha Beach. Most were experienced combat soldiers who served in North Africa and Sicily before being tapped for the invasion of Normandy. Unlike the 29th Infantry, they were not crippled by the hail of incoming fire, saving many of their lives.

Despite some men, mostly 1st Infantry, making it up the beach and to the sea wall or shingle that provided temporary cover, there seemed to be too few to take the German-held bluffs ahead. The surviving men who stayed on the beach were slowly being wiped out, and those at the shingle or sea wall clung to their bit of cover as German mortars began to attempt to neutralize this cover as well. Here and there, groups of enlisted and noncommissioned officers and maybe a junior officer decided they must push on, for

46. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 137.

that was their only chance to live.

Lieutenant Spaulding of the E Company, 16th Infantry, 1st Division and his men were one such group who seized the initiative and pushed forward past the false safety of the sea wall. Spaulding and his men blew a hole with a Bangalore through the barbed wire holding them on the beach and pushed forward.⁴⁷

By this time, it was roughly 7:00 A.M., thirty minutes after the first wave landed. The subsequent waves would soon begin to hit the beaches at around 7:15 A.M. In small groups, men of the 1st Infantry on the left flank began to push up the beach and toward the bluffs through murderous fire and horrendous casualties. The situation for the 29th, particularly on Dog Green with the few survivors of A Company, was dire. The only way out of the jaws of death would be to go straight into the monster itself.

“RANGERS LEAD THE WAY!”

In an attempt to salvage the quandary on Dog Green, the 5th Rangers and two companies of the 2nd Rangers, the elite of the U.S. Army, were diverted from their original position to Dog Green to aid in the efforts there when they did not receive the code words to land on Point Du Hoc.⁴⁸ The two companies of the 2nd Rangers and Lt. Bob Edlin found themselves landing in the killing fields of Dog Green sector. They waded through

the shoulder-deep cold water of the English Channel amid enemy fire as the lifeless bodies of their comrades floated by, face down. Somehow, they made it to the water's edge where the dejected soldiers of the 116th Regiment clung to life, utterly defeated. Edlin urged them forward, but to no avail. The Rangers rushed across the beach, hell-bent on completing the objective. Men all around Lt. Edlin were gunned down.

As Edlin made it to the safety of the sea wall, he realized how few men had successfully made the run to the wall. For a reason unknown to him, he went back into the maelstrom to urge his men forward. He ran up and down the beach stirring scared men into action. Edlin was shot in both legs as he returned to the sea wall. Still, he and his comrades moved forward in any way they could. Edlin crawled as he fought the pain of his multiple bullet wounds. One of Edlin's sergeants crawled from the safety of the sea wall through intense fire and dragged Edlin to safety, quite possibly saving his life. As mortar fire came in on Edlin and his comrades, the sergeant and a medic covered Edlin, sheltering him from incoming fire. “They were the heroes,” said Lt. Edlin.⁴⁹

With all the officers dead or wounded, Edlin ordered Bill White, his platoon sergeant and now the company commander, to get his Rangers forward and off the beach. Edlin recalled what happened when he ordered Sergeant White and

47. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 350.

48. Moen and Heinen, *The Fool Lieutenant*, 27.

49. Moen and Heinen, *The Fool Lieutenant*, 28, 90–91.

the remaining men to move forward: "Everybody that could move went. There were only four or five of them and they got up and went. That was all that we had left. They went. No questions asked." That small group of Rangers pushed up the Vierville Draw courageously and neutralized most of the German positions on the bluffs. "There were no generals here, no colonels. Just three sergeants and a couple of pfcs."⁵⁰

To the left of the 2nd Rangers, the 5th Rangers landed on Dog White. They were supposed to land on Dog Green, but their veteran commanding officer Colonel Max Schneider saw the slaughter on Dog Green and the heavy smoke on Dog White caused by a burning LST or LCT and the relatively safe situation on Dog Red.⁵¹ He knew that this smoke screen would provide his men cover as they advanced on the less heavily defended beach. Then they could flank the heavy defenses of the Vierville Draw. The value of a combat-experienced commanding officer was demonstrated, and many lives were saved.

General Norman "Dutch" Cota, commanding officer of the 29th Infantry, was already on Dog White trying to get his men moving when the Rangers surged onto the beach. It is uncertain exactly what General Cota said as he valiantly urged his men forward. He encouraged his men to follow the Rangers'

example, and told the Rangers to remember just who they were. The legend that is remembered is the shout, "Rangers lead the way!" Today, that is the motto of the U.S. Army Rangers.⁵² Through the efforts of General Cota and the elite 5th Rangers under Colonel Schneider, the German strong points along the 29th Infantry's sector were mostly neutralized by 8:30 A.M., two hours after the initial landings.⁵³

Meanwhile, the 1st Infantry, spearheaded by Lt. Spaulding, Capt. Joe Dawson, and Capt. Robert Walker, was pushing its way up the bluff and taking the various strategic draws in the 1st Infantry's area of operations.⁵⁴ Slowly but surely, Omaha Beach was being secured. Hitler's Atlantic Wall had been breached.

NO GREATER LOVE

By day's end, that Wall had been toppled. U.S. forces secured a vital toehold on Omaha Beach from which they could launch operations to break out of Normandy and start on the long road to Berlin. The Allied victory throughout Normandy spelled the beginning of the end for Germany in World War II.

Despite the eventual success of the operation, the pre-invasion bombardment proved to be completely ineffective. The way in which the tanks, engineers, and infantry arrived on the battleground separately diluted combat effectiveness.

50. Moen and Heinen, *The Fool Lieutenant*, 91-93.

51. Moen and Heinen, *The Fool Lieutenant*, 93; Ambrose, *D-Day*, 427.

52. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 430.

53. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 236.

54. Ambrose, *D-Day*, 352.

The planners did not account for strong cross-current conditions. U.S. landing craft operators were poorly trained to get troops to the correct location through swirling currents. Inexperienced National Guardsmen were asked to do a job that should have been assigned to hardened veterans. Amphibious DD tanks were a complete disaster when implemented the way planners intended. When so much went so terribly wrong, how did the battle for Omaha Beach not end with the Germans holding the heights as the sun set over France on the night of June 6, 1944?

The 4,720 casualties on Omaha Beach were staggering, but if it had not been for the ability of officers to adapt to the changing situation on the battlefield and seize the initiative like Colonel Schneider or the unknown Navy Lieutenant and the ability of small groups of young men to never quit like Lt. Edlin's men or Lt. Spaulding and Capt. Dawson, the operation to seize Omaha Beach might have been an utter failure.⁵⁵ At the very least, the casualty numbers would have been even higher.

There are surely countless unsung heroes of Omaha Beach whose names and deeds of valor and self-sacrifice are lost to the annals of history. We are forever indebted to them, the named and unnamed, the living and the dead, and we must not forget what they did. Their reasons for fighting so courageously varied. Some fought for the ideal of freedom and nationalism, others

for their families back home, but most say they fought for the man next to them. It was simple: they did not want to let their buddies down. Though they varied in preparedness, the courage of each and every man who set foot on the killing fields of Omaha Beach should never be questioned, for so many of them did lay down their lives on that lonely stretch of beach so that others might live.

55. Balkoski, *Omaha Beach*, 352.

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