

Beachhead Hindsight:

The First Correspondent to Land Tells of D Day in the Light of D Day Plus Five Years



D Day at Utah Beach: The sea wall was the first shelter for the troops

One of the greatest news events of our time—the landing of American and British forces on the coast of Normandy to smash the German West Wall—will be five years behind us on June 6. Kenneth G. Crawford, the war correspondent who covered that event for NEWSWEEK, is returning to Normandy for the anniversary. We reprint below a condensed version of his original story along with his own hindsight comments (in italics). We now know that Crawford was the first correspondent ashore on any of the invasion beaches on D Day.

We were 32 drenched, seasick American soldiers, two placid Coast Guardsmen, and one shivering war correspondent in a pitching landing barge a few hundred yards off the Normandy coast. This was it—H Hour, D Day; 6:30 a.m., June 6, 1944. We were one of the first wave of assault teams in what promised to be the first successful cross-Channel invasion in centuries.

This was Tare Green Beach in the sector called Utah, code designations I was not permitted to use at the time. I probably would have been less confident had I landed at Omaha, farther south, where the early waves were all but massacred from cliffs overhanging the beach.

No bookmaker would have given these 32 assorted experts in killing better than an even chance of living through the next hour, much less the next day. In a vague way they knew this, but they were not impressed. In one breath they called themselves the suicide wave, and in the next they talked about what a hell of a time they were going to have after the war.

The best information I can get is that only the two Coast Guardsmen and one Army officer out of that boatload survived the war. Most of these men were killed within the first week ashore in the advance on Cherbourg. They were members



Roosevelt went in with the first wave of the Eighth Infantry, Fourth Division, under command of Maj. Gen. Raymond O. Barton.

Packs were being fastened. There was a stream of curses as straps soaked with sea water refused to come buckled. Six inches of bilge, compounded of sea water and vomit, sloshed forward and aft. Ahead, now visible in the dank morning light, was the 500-yard-wide beach. To reach their first cover, these boys would have to transverse 25 yards of water, starting at waist depth, and then the width of the beach, still partially shrouded by artillery fire and aerial bombardment. Their first objective would be the retaining wall along the dunes flanking the beach.

"Remember what you've been learning for the last three years," said Capt. Robert Crisson in an easy Birmingham voice. "Don't run in the water or you'll just wear yourself out."

Crisson, now a major and still in the service, was wounded the first hour ashore and invalided back to England. That is probably why he lived through the war. He went AWOL from the hospital later and rejoined the Fourth Division before St. Lô. We were together again the day of St. Lô break-through.

Glancing over the port side of the barge I saw one control boat lying on her side with the crew clinging to the slimy hull. One wounded man kept losing his hold and slipping. His mates snatched him back. Just beyond the control boat a tank barge was hit amidships and started sinking fast.

The Army Historical Division's book.

"Utah Beach to Cherbourg," says: "The Red Beach (next to Tare Green) control boat was sunk, probably by a mine. Shortly thereafter an LCT behind the Green Beach primary control vessel also hit a mine and sank."

Even then there was time for a kid called Red, who was more green than red after holding his head in a bucket throughout the trip, to offer up an American wisecrack:

"That son of a bitch Higgins," he said, "hasn't got nothing to be proud of about inventing this boat."

"Down ramp!" shouted the coxswain from the elevated stern.

Down it came with a clank and a splash. Ahead—and at that moment it seemed miles off—stretched the sea wall. I charged out with the rest trying to look fierce and desperate, only to step in a hole and submerge myself in the Channel.

A "waterproof" wrist watch Ernie Pyle had delivered to me in North Africa the previous Christmas stopped dead at the moment of contact with the water. It was then a few minutes after 6:30. The Historical Division says: "The first wave consisted of twenty LCVP's, each carrying a 30-man assault team from the Eighth Infantry. Almost exactly at H Hour the assault craft lowered their ramps. The actual touchdown on the beach was therefore a few minutes late."

Not a man in our wave, so far as I know, was lost, but three shellbursts followed our barge as she pulled away from the beach. Others were hit. We missed our allotted place by about 800 yards.

Historical Division: "Enemy artillery had fired a few air bursts at sea, but otherwise there was no opposition at H Hour. Landings were made about 2,000 yards south." I've always been a bad judge of distance.

I leaned against the sea wall and looked back. Once gathered together, I started exploring our beach. Presently I came upon a brigadier general, assistant commander of the division spearheading the attack. He was as wet as I and shivering even worse. He huddled against the wall at its highest point, wrapped in an Army blanket and sitting cross-legged, Indian fashion. He had landed with the first wave. Two aides were trying to make his radio work. It refused.

"That's war for you," the general complained. "It's a good thing I was here early to get that wall blown."

Historical Division: "Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt Jr., assistant commander of the Fourth Division, had volunteered to coordinate the initial attack . . . and had landed with Company E. When it was realized that the landing had been made at the wrong place, he [made] impromptu plans [that] worked with complete success and little confusion." General Roosevelt later died of a heart attack in Normandy. I was not permitted to identify him in the D Day report.

Shortly before noon the unit commanders started turning up at beach headquarters with their reports. One commander reported that he had made contact with paratroopers landed the night before on the Cherbourg Peninsula.

D~Day + 5

Everything was proceeding according to schedule despite the 88s and occasional mortar blasts on the beach and along the roads leading inland.

Toward evening I consulted a Navy beachmaster about transportation back to the mother ship. Over good wardroom coffee that night and the following day we Monday-morning-quarterbacked the whole operation.

The ship was the U.S.S. Dickman, an assault transport manned by the Coast Guard, formerly the S.S. Roosevelt. She later was sent to the Pacific.

I had first heard the details of the plan of campaign, some of which will remain secret until revealed in action, on the afternoon of June 1. A group of war correspondents accredited to the Navy were transported to the headquarters of Rear Admiral Alan G. Kirk, commander of the United States invasion task force. He told us the whole thing would be risky, no matter how carefully planned.

The secrets we learned that day were the D. D. amphibious tanks which landed on D Day with only fair success, the rocket ships that pelted the beach in preparation for the infantry, and the breakwaters and docks floated across the Channel to provide the artificial harbors at Omaha and Utah Beaches that supplied the invasion until weeks later when real ports became available. Kirk is the new ambassador to Moscow.