



2014

Voices from D-Day, June 6, 1944

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Voices from D-Day, June 6, 1944

Description

Seventy years on from D-Day, we still marvel at the stoic heroism of the men who contributed to the success of what remains the greatest amphibious invasion in the history of warfare. The Normandy campaign would, in one way or another, prove a pivotal moment in the ongoing world war. A disaster in the campaign to liberate France would set back Allied hopes for crushing Nazism in Western Europe. It would also fray the alliance with the Soviet Union that was essential to defeating Hitler's forces. By contrast, success would mark not just the end of the beginning of the conflict, but the beginning of the end.

There are as many Normandy campaign stories, from both sides, as there are participants. But absent some formal way of collecting them, those stories would disappear with the generation that made this history. That is where oral history comes in. Since the early 1990s, Gettysburg College has done its share to create an archive of World War II memories, covering the gamut of life experience of a generation that grew to maturity during the Great Depression and World War II.

Launched in a Historical Methods course in 1991, and continuing into the present day, the World War II oral history project has collected nearly 700 oral histories from the home and battle fronts and places in between. Recordings and transcriptions of each of these interviews are available in Special Collections at Musselman Library. At some point, if resources are sufficient, they will be digitized and available online. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

World War II, United States, veterans, oral history, D-Day, Omaha Beach, Normandy, Utah Beach, Allied Powers, Axis Powers

Disciplines

European History | History | Military and Veterans Studies | Military History | Oral History | Public History | United States History

Publisher

Gettysburg College

Comments

Editorial Staff: Dr. Michael Birkner '72, Sunni DeNicola, Devin McKinney, Robin Wagner, & Emily Wass

Interviews were conducted by Gettysburg College students including: Ryan Adams '02, Cory Allen '05, Alex Bilodeau '08, Alex Brochu '11, Tim Calabrese '03, Justin Causey '09, Andrew T. Douglas '06, Cara Elliott '11, Dan Gallucci '94, David S. Gentile '03, Robert L. Gouthro '02, Regina Kee '93, Devin Hewitt '08, Jason T. Lamoreaux '15, Amanda Nagele '02, Eric Sakovics '03, Eric Shulman '03, Nick Stahle '05, Brendan Sullivan '02, Vincent M. Umbrio '03

Voices from D-Day

June 6, 1944



Voices from D-Day

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Assault troops of the Third Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, First US Infantry Division, assemble on a narrow strip at Omaha Beach before moving inland.
(Taylor, Office of the Chief Signal Officer)



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Introduction

Seventy years on from D-Day, we still marvel at the stoic heroism of the men who contributed to the success of what remains the greatest amphibious invasion in the history of warfare. The Normandy campaign would, in one way or another, prove a pivotal moment in the ongoing world war. A disaster in the campaign to liberate France would set back Allied hopes for crushing Nazism in Western Europe. It would also fray the alliance with the Soviet Union that was essential to defeating Hitler's forces. By contrast, success would mark not just the end of the beginning of the conflict, but the beginning of the end.

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*An officer observes Omaha as his craft approaches the beach.
(Robert F. Sargent, Chief Photographer's Mate, US Coast Guard)*

In honor of the looming 70th and 75th anniversaries of the D-Day landings, Archives Assistant Devin McKinney has extracted some of the most memorable recollections of those who participated in D-Day and its aftermath as soldiers, sailors, pilots, medics, and other support personnel. When you read the text that follows, you will, I suspect, be as touched as I am by the testimony offered—not least because the individuals quoted are telling it just as they remember it, without varnish or self-promotion. This is how it was, in preparation, at zero hour, on the beaches, and beyond. That the soldiers were scared is the most obvious—and human—revelation. Not everything went right. Some things, notably the landings themselves, went very wrong from the beginning. Getting off the beach took acts of will and courage. There was plenty of fighting to do once beachheads were established.

The testimonies excerpted here, as one participant noted, are often more fabulous than fiction. They are but samples of the thousands of recollections that are already available in repositories across the United States and Europe, and of the millions more that have yet to be collected—or that, because of a generation's mortality, will never be shared.

We hope you enjoy this keepsake, and that if you have the chance to collect a World War II-era story from someone who lived through it, you'll answer history's call.

Michael J. Birkner

*Professor of History
Benjamin Franklin Professor of Liberal Arts*

The Voices

MARLON BEAM

Born Gardners, PA, December 18, 1920. Drafted in late 1943. Assigned to 26th Infantry Division as rifleman. Landed at Omaha Beach soon after D-Day with the 352nd Combat Engineer Division. Fought in Battle of the Bulge. Died Gettysburg, PA, November 12, 2006.

Interviewed by David S. Gentile '03, Gardners, PA, March 23, 2001.



ROBERT B. BRADLEY (left)

Born Cadillac, MI, March 2, 1921. Enlisted in October 1942. Combat medic, 125th Infantry Company, Third Division (also served with 30th Division). Landed at Normandy on D-Day + 2. Participated in the Battle of Mortain. Taken POW by Germans. Died November 19, 2009, Gettysburg, PA.

Interviewed by Ryan Adams '02, Gettysburg, PA, March 3, 2000.

PAUL K. CLAUS

Born Baltimore, MD, March 15, 1925. Drafted on June 2, 1943. Served with the army in Europe. Fought at D-Day and Battle of Aachen. Currently living in Baltimore, MD.

Interviewed by Vincent M. Umbrio '03, Arendtsville, PA, March 26, 2001.

FLOYD E. COOK

Born Cashtown, PA, December 1, 1924. Inducted on March 7, 1943. Assigned to First Engineers Special Brigade. Participated in Operation Tiger, rehearsal for D-Day in which 946 US servicemen were killed by friendly fire. Fought at D-Day. Died Cashtown, PA, November 2, 2009.

Interviewed by Robert L. Gouthro '02, Cashtown, PA, March 23, 2000.



JOHN G. CUTHBERT (left)

Born Baltimore, MD, October 4, 1919. Drafted on April 19, 1941. Began in 29th Division (Maryland National Guard), 175th Regiment, later joined First Infantry Division. Supply sergeant for First Battalion. Landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day. Liberated a concentration camp near Gersdorf, Germany. Died Towson, MD, July 5, 2013.

Interviewed by Devin Hewitt '08, Baltimore, MD, March 12, 2006.

RICHARD Y. DALRYMPLE (right)

Born Chester, WV, January 14, 1912. Enlisted on September 22, 1941. Volunteered for Army Medical Corps, 1942. Medical Officer for 16th and 26th Regiments, First Division. Served in Africa and Europe; participated in Algiers, Sicily, D-Day, Battle of the Bulge, and Czechoslovakian campaigns. Discharged as major. Died Hanover, PA, January 27, 2007.

Interviewed by Andrew T. Douglas '06, Hanover, PA, October 20, 2004.

EARL E. FETROW

Born York Haven, PA, August 13, 1923. Drafted in May 1943. Assigned to 69th Infantry Division as a replacement, then to 401st Glider Infantry, 101st Airborne (later 82nd Airborne). Participated in D-Day landing. Awarded Purple Heart, Good Conduct Medal, and ETO medal. Died Gettysburg, PA, March 14, 2004.

Interviewed by Brendan Sullivan '02, Arendtsville, PA, March 22, 2002.



HAROLD E. HESS

Born Gettysburg, PA, May 11, 1923. Inducted in late 1942. Tank turret gunner, 67th Regiment, Second Armored Division. Fought in Italy, Normandy following D-Day, and the Battle of the Bulge. Awarded Purple Heart. Died Gettysburg, PA, November 17, 2010.

Interviewed by Tim Calabrese '03, Gettysburg, PA, April 2, 2001.

HERBERT W. LEVY

Born Philadelphia, PA, December 18, 1924. Drafted in April 1943. Assigned to Corps of Engineers. Landed at Utah Beach on D-Day + 4. Helped build bridges in France and liberate prison work camp at Nordhausen, Germany. Currently living in Gwynedd, PA.

Interviewed by Jason T. Lamoreaux '15, Gwynedd, PA, March 23, 2014.

LEAH A. MAITLAND

Born York County, PA, April 1, 1923. Joined WAVES after Pearl Harbor. Stationed in Washington, DC, working in navy code-breaking section. Later attached to Recreation and Welfare section of Personnel Division. Died Gettysburg, PA, January 18, 2005.

Interviewed by Amanda Nagele '02, Gettysburg, PA, March 23, 2001.



MELLICENT SCOTT MOORHEAD (left)

Born McDonald, PA, February 6, 1916. Enlisted in July 1942. Served in Army Air Corps. Co-pilot and later pilot on B-24 Liberator bomber, assigned to Eighth Air Force. Participated in D-Day invasion. Died Gettysburg, PA, July 3, 1997.

Interviewed by Regina Kee '93, Gettysburg, PA, February 4, 1991; and Dan Gallucci '94, Gettysburg, PA, March 26, 1993.

FRANCIS L. MUMMERT

Born Littlestown, PA, July 23, 1924. Enlisted in mid-1943. Assigned to 69th Signal Battalion. Sent to Normandy soon after D-Day as communications specialist. Died Hanover, PA, June 21, 2013.

Interviewed by Cory Allen '05, Littlestown, PA, October 31, 2002.

RUSSELL W. RICHERT

Born Sewickley, PA, July 17, 1921. Drafted in December 1942. Sent to North Africa to train as replacement in 16th Regiment, First Infantry Division. Fought in Sicilian invasion, D-Day, Hurtgen Forest, and Battle of the Bulge. Wounded twice. Currently living in Sewickley, PA.

Interviewed by Justin Causey '09, Sewickley, PA, April 13, 2007.

CHARLES K. RILEY

Born Harrisburg, PA, February 25, 1917. Enlisted on February 17, 1941. Served with National Guard and Pennsylvania Selective Service prior to Pearl Harbor. Participated in ordnance supply and transport of material for D-Day. Oversaw a POW camp in France. Later served in Korean War. Died Gettysburg, PA, July 8, 2006.

Interviewed by Nick Stahle '05, Gettysburg, PA, October 24, 2002.

ALBERT M. ROSE (right)

Born York, PA, March 31, 1923. Inducted on March 7, 1943. Assigned to First Engineers Special Brigade. Participated in Operation Tiger. Fought at D-Day. Currently living in York, PA.

Interviewed by Robert L. Gouthro '02, Cashtown, PA, March 23, 2000.



GEORGE F. SMITH, Jr.

Born Gettysburg, PA, February 8, 1921. Enlisted in early 1943. Joined Army Air Corps, served in 95th Bomb Group, 412th Squadron. Stationed in England, plotting bomb patterns. Awarded six Bronze Stars, Good Conduct Medal, and Distinguished Unit Badge. Died York, PA, July 23, 2009.

Interview by Eric Sakovics '03, Gettysburg, PA, March 24, 2001.

ROBERT B. THORNBURG

Born Hagerstown, MD, November 1, 1920. Drafted on August 27, 1942. Served in Army Air Corps. Spent most of the war in various training programs, camps, and classrooms, studying languages, geography, and cryptography. Later attached to Second Signal Service Battalion of the Armed Forces Security Agency. Currently living in Allentown, PA.

Interviewed by Alex Brochu '11, Allentown, PA, October 13, 2008.

M. EVERETT WEISER

Born Huntington Township, PA, December 6, 1924. Enlisted in June 1943. Served in 553rd Military Police and Escort Guard Company, tending Italian POWs in Arkansas. Later served with the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions. Currently living in York Springs, PA.

Interviewed by Alex Bilodeau '08, York Springs, PA, March 9, 2007; and Cara Elliott '11, York Springs, PA, October 24, 2008.

GEORGE S. WEYER, Jr.

Born Norfolk, Virginia, September 15, 1917. Enlisted in late 1939. Assigned to Medical Corps, First Marine Division. Sent to Officer Candidate School. Assigned to Combat Engineers after Pearl Harbor. Marched into Germany, witnessed liberation of Dachau. Served with Army of Occupation. Died Denison, TX, January 24, 2013.

Interviewed by Eric Shulman '03, Lancaster, PA, October 30, 2001.

Prelude

Leah A. Maitland: I knew it was going to occur. I knew because of working in Radio Central [in Washington, DC]. I didn't know when; I knew a limited amount of knowledge of *where* it was going to be. Not specifically where, but probably in a closer area than most people because of the coding and the wires that came across while I was there.

Robert B. Thornburg: A program called the Army Specialized Training Program [ASTP] was instituted. ... I remember having been assigned a paper on an area of choice that you thought might be of significance later in the campaign, and I had the astonishing foresight to pick Normandy as my area of concentration. I wrote a little booklet about that, which no one else ever paid any attention to.

Maitland: They garbled the wires, and the lines were continuously busy with messages that said nothing because they didn't want any one area to have more messages coming in—it would give away the fact that there was more activity there. So they had what we called garbled or false messages, and when you unravel them, they unravel and unravel into nothing. And there were certain things that told you how to [unravel], and maybe it was six or seven times, and then you would throw it away because it was nothing. ...The lines were just jammed for days in all directions.

I realized what a terrible endeavor it was, and how many people were going to be lost and killed in that.

Preparation

Paul K. Claus: We knew around the 1st of June that something was going to happen very, very soon.

Herbert W. Levy: But we had no idea when or where.

Richard Y. Dalrymple: We got back to Liverpool, England, in December of '43 to get ready for D-Day. ...We aren't happy because we know we're gonna be in the invasion.

Levy: We were moved to a camp [in Bath, England] ...Nobody could get in or out; most of the time we were even separated from others in our own unit. We were in tents working on models, which we assumed were landing beach models, but there was no way we could identify any of them because they were all in parts ...There were two Ninth Engineer Command units in the camp, and the Scottish Black Watch, [who] just marched through the camp all day long playing bagpipes.

Russell W. Richert: [If] you were sent to England, you knew damn well you were being prepared to be going into France. There was a lot of hype, and we did field maneuvers and ground and night attacks and stuff like that—simulated. You practiced boat landings and so forth. You knew you were gonna go. But you didn't know where or when. ...They kept you in the dark, as far as exacts.

A large group of LCTs (Landing Craft, Tank) moored along the quayside at Southampton.
(Lt. J. A. Hampton, Royal Navy official photographer)



Charles K. Riley: It was hard work and long hours [planning for D-Day]. ...Our reason for being [in England] was to supply these troops. When they figured they needed something that they didn't have, they could put out a call and we had what they called the Red Ball Express. That's when they would truck these things to the coast, load them on the ship—sometimes truck and all—and send them over to the continent, even after Normandy took place. That was our mission, really: to supply the actual combat troops. Get them all ready and as fast as possible give them anything that they needed.

John G. Cuthbert: I didn't know anything about it until about three weeks before the invasion. ... We knew something was in the wind, but we didn't know where we were gonna go or at what time. ... We trained under some British commandos—guys that had been at Dunkirk, real experts.¹

Earl E. Fetrow: We were issued a lot of things we didn't have before. Gas masks—we had training with them, but now we *had* them. We had a Mae West [life preserver].² And they kept giving us more ammunition. We had what you call bandoliers with the clips for the different rifles, extra what you had on your belt—and so we were starting to get heavy. ...Actually we had so much weight that we had to help each other [into] the glider.³ ...You couldn't hardly walk.

Richert: We learned to land off LCVPs [Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel]. That's the one where the front end comes down. And sure as the devil, when we landed on D-Day, the boat I was on was a Lend-Lease ship that had been built in Seattle.⁴

Anticipation

Richert: Just a day or two before you were going to land, they'd show you maps or photographs of where you were going in.

Fetrow: We knew it was something coming.

Cuthbert: The initial D-Day was supposed to be June 5th. We were halfway across the Channel and Eisenhower called us back because the weather was so bad, there was no way we could make a landing. ...So he turned around and brought us all back and we stayed aboard ship and we left the next day, June 6th.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, with Col. Sidney Hinds (left) and Maj. Gen. Edwards Brooks (right), inspect D-Day preparations, May 15, 1944. (US Army)



Zero hour

Fetrow: [The night before,] they had put us in a big airport hangar, and we slept on the cement floor.

Mellicent Scott Moorhead: We got up, normally, about five o'clock. But this day, we were awakened about one-thirty, if I remember. We knew that this was the day. ...[They] took us down to the briefing room. We sat there and drank coffee. Ate breakfast, and still drinking coffee. Then out to our ships. We started getting down there and, boy, I had to pee. But I was afraid to get out of my seat.

Richert: We had an English weatherman or something that said, "We're gonna have a break in this [weather] for a matter of 12 or 14 hours." And so we went in on that break, and that was it.

Albert M. Rose: Our company commander said that we were getting in a pretty rough outfit, [and] that we had a lot to be proud of. He didn't know that we were shaking in our boots.

Dalrymple: We knew that this was going to be a bloodbath.

Cuthbert: As a staff sergeant I was supposed to show the young guys that I was in command ... But of course I was apprehensive as hell. Good Lord, I didn't know what to expect.

Greenham Common Airfield, 8:30 pm, June 5. Gen. Eisenhower gives the order—"Full victory—nothing else"—to the paratroopers of Co. E, 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment (Strike), before they board their planes for the first assault. (US Army)

Fetrow: So it was finally take-off time, and they lined up the gliders on one side and the tow-planes on the other. Then they had the men hook up the gliders, and we got in and took our turn down the runway.

Rose: Then we loaded up on the boats.

Moorhead: We got greased and we assembled. Then we flew over Normandy.

Dalrymple: I don't think we could ever be prepared for what we saw.





Back at the base

George F. Smith, Jr.: Three o'clock in the morning everybody got up [and] went outside [at the base in England]. I never saw so damn many airplanes in my life. There must have been thousands of them. I don't know how they didn't run into each other, honestly. ...They were coming out of the western part of England. Everybody was just going that way, right over to France. ...I'll never forget that, man, the airplanes, everywhere. ...They must have had the whole United Kingdom on alert.

Francis L. Mummert: There was an airport right close to where we were stationed [near Marlborough, England], and the sky was full of planes.

Thornburg: I was going to the kitchen at 6 am or something like that. I heard as I passed the day room ... that the landing in France was underway.

Levy: We heard over the radio, the first thing in the morning, that they had landed on the five beaches.

A row of trucks waits at an ordnance depot in Britain for collection by army units and transportation to invasion departure points.
(Jack Smith, Ministry of Information Photo Division)

The approach

Cuthbert: There were five beaches: Omaha, Utah, Sword, Juno, and Gold. The Americans had Omaha and Utah, and the British and Canadians had the other three beaches.

Floyd E. Cook: Everybody was pretty quiet. It was all new. We'd went across the infiltration courses and everything like that.⁵We'd been under fire. [But] somehow it was a lot different.

Cuthbert: We loaded on an LST, a Landing Ship, Tank. ...And then we went over the side on these rope cargo nets and got into the little one, the LCVP—that holds about 30 people—and that's what you hit the beach with.

Troops in an LCVP approach Omaha Beach. The smoke in the background is from supporting naval gunfire.
(US Army Signal Corps Collection, National Archives)



Claus: Even today, I have very bad motion sickness. With cars, I have to be very careful where I drive—trains even, and things like that. But when I was on the LCI [Landing Craft, Infantry], I think I was the only one who didn't get seasick. It was a horrible mess.

Richert: You didn't see much, 'cause you were down in the landing craft. If you stuck your head up, somebody would knock it off.

Claus: Everybody was jittery. I don't think any of us knew the magnitude of what we were getting into. We knew we were going to make a landing; we knew it was going to be a big landing. We assumed that the Germans knew we were coming, and probably some of the higher-ups knew what the casualty rate was going to be. We didn't think of that. All we thought of was to get in there and get off.

A convoy of LCIs sails across the English Channel toward Normandy. Each craft is towing a barrage balloon for protection against low-flying German aircraft.
(US Coast Guard Collection, National Archives)



The landing

Dalrymple: We landed at Normandy six o'clock in the morning.

Fetrow: As soon as we crossed the coast they started shooting.

Richert: We were in the assault wave; there was nobody in there ahead of us. We got in there early.

Dalrymple: We were in the second wave.

Rose: We were in the third. ...With the first wave there was very little in the way of vehicles taken over [and put] ashore, so they only needed enough men to get a small amount of supplies unloaded at that time.

Cook: The worst part of it was climbing down onto the LST [Landing Ship, Tank] from the old LCI—down them old rope ladders, the airplanes flying around and everything else, when we got there.

Cuthbert: We lost all our artillery going in. All the boats got sunk. Lost all our tanks going in—they all sank.

Dalrymple: We had to go over the sides with ladders into the landing craft, and the Germans had all of these barricades in the water, and you [could] only go so far, and [then] you left your landing craft. And sometimes you're in water over your head, with all your gear and whatnot.



Troops wading through waist-high water and Nazi gunfire.
(Robert F. Sargent, Chief Photographer's Mate, US Coast Guard)



Claus: It seemed like everything that was coming off was getting hit. There was nothing getting in there. ... I mean, everyone who was on it, that was the end of it.

Rose: We went in on these LCIs ... [They] were designed to hit the beach and back off, but these [navy] fellas didn't want to get stuck. So they'd say, "Well, we're in a foot of water" or something, and then they lowered the thing and let you out. But unfortunately they were leaving a lot of us off in water that was over our heads. And, well, you have 60 pounds of equipment on you, and when you went down, you went down with a thud. If you couldn't swim, it was a scary situation. If you didn't have your wits about you, which a lot of them didn't, that's where the casualties came from—not the enemy, but from our own fellas. ... Some commanders went to the extreme of putting a pistol to the [pilots'] heads and saying, "Take this thing in closer."

Cuthbert: A lot of boats hit sandbars and boats got stuck—and they just opened ramps, and you were in water over your head, and an awful lot of them drowned.

Claus: Of course, when I made the landing, I not only had the radio—I had the Thompson [submachine gun]⁶, my .45, my tent, three days of rationing, clips for the sub, and then they put a Mae West around you. And with that Mae West, they might as well have tied a rope around you, because it didn't do any good. I stepped off that plank and there was a shell hole and I went down and walked underneath the shell hole and came back up. I was under water half the time.

*Early morning, low tide.
(US Army)*



Cuthbert: We would unload out in the water, and we all had life preservers on, and we all had over 60 pounds of extra equipment we were carrying, and a lot of them didn't hook their life preservers up correctly, and they would get in the water and hit their trigger to inflate their life vest, and they would have it on wrong, and it would flip them upside down, and with all of that equipment on, they couldn't get it off... They were so sick they couldn't even help themselves.

Rose: I had a lifebelt on, but here again, that was another reason we lost a lot of men. The army did not teach them to put it under their shoulders—they wore it as a safety belt. ...If you'd have inflated that darn thing you'd have just turned upside down. ...And that's what happened. I often thought that if they planned these invasions, why they didn't first of all teach every man ...that he had to be able to swim.

Cook: I could swim some, but if you're in water over your head, how [are] you going to keep your rifle out of the water? I don't see how you're going to do that.

Troops land at Utah Beach.
(Conseil Régional de Basse-Normandie / National Archives USA)

Chaos

Richert: Christ, after we got in, things got rough.

Cuthbert: Everything got screwed up when we went in and nobody landed where they were supposed to. ...Maybe half a mile or a mile away, but it was all mixed up—it was terrible, just chaos. So many factors entered into landing at Omaha Beach. [That's] the reason it was the bloodiest of all the beaches.

Marlon Beam: We were in the water when the invasion was [happening].

Levy: We were just off the beaches. We saw the ships coming in. Why they were passing us, we never knew. Now, later on, we found out it's quite possible that we were all replacements, which didn't make it a lot of fun either—waiting to replace someone who was already on the beach, alive or dead.

Rose: The Germans were shelling the beach, and of course our big battleships, they were sitting there firing away.

Cuthbert: You've seen pictures of these rockets going off our ships?...Well, not one hit the beach. They all fell short in the water.

Richert: You ran like hell to get off [the landing craft]. I know in my own mind I said, "I'm gonna run till they knock me down."

Dalrymple: It was a struggle to get ashore, dodging the fire. The Germans had that beach zeroed in with artillery fire. Machine-gun fire was terrible. And I finally got ashore and on the sand and there were wounded everywhere.

Robert B. Bradley: You took hold wherever you were...did whatever you were trained to do.



Troops help members of their party whose landing craft was sunk, and who reached Omaha Beach by life raft. (Weintraub)



Claus: At the time that you're hitting that beach you only know what's happening right there. You don't even know what's happening 50 yards from you, whether they were dropping dead or getting through or what.

Cuthbert: Our intelligence failed to find out that the entire German 352nd Panzer SS infantry unit was on the beach on maneuvers ... So we ran into a whole division that we didn't know was there. ... They had been on the Russian front and they had shipped them back to France and they were there that day. They cut us a new one ... That's why Omaha was so bloody and the others were so calm.

Richert: Our objective was that we were to go to the left to contact the English that were landing at Portvessen. But that was where I Company went through, so instead of meeting the English we met our own I Company!

Cuthbert: Nobody knew what to do!!

Aerial view of Omaha Beach, showing landing of 18th and 115th Infantry Regiments, vehicles, and landing craft. (US Army)

Air cover

Cuthbert: We had no [air] support at all. ...There was supposed to be 600 B-24 Liberator bombers that were to hit the beach at 0600, and they were to bomb until 0630. ...The bombers were right on time. They unloaded their bombs. The thing was, they missed the beach by five miles.

Bradley: As our landing craft approached the breakers, the British captain put a strike of British planes over our heads. They came in very low, about 300 feet, and they shot the bluffs right ahead of us as we were coming in.

Moorhead: I flew two missions on D-Day. We couldn't drop any bombs after 7:30, because by that time our guys were supposed to be on the beaches. We dropped our bombs and then came back and loaded up again. The next mission was to disrupt the reinforcements that the Germans were bringing up. That's it.

Claus: There were so many planes coming over—they were coming over to drop their load and circle back over again in a continuous line. You'd just see a line of planes all day long.

Cuthbert: Two American destroyers came on their own volition—nobody ordered them to do it ...and just used their five-inch guns to give us support against those pillboxes and machine-gun nests.⁷ That's the only reason Omaha wasn't a disaster. Omaha could have been another Dunkirk.

Moorhead: It was something. I'll tell you...I never saw so many ships in my life. We were flying about 10,000 feet, and I mean, it looked as though you could just about walk across all those ships. But it was scary, because we did not know if we were going to get hit or not. I remember looking down there and seeing all those ships...

Cuthbert: The only thing the bombers accomplished was to bomb every damn cow in Normandy.

Vertical aerial photograph of Juno Beach landing. *(Royal Air Force)*



Casualties

Cook: There were a lot of dead people when we got there. There were a lot of them. And we had the easy one—Utah. We'd landed a mile from where we were supposed to land. Omaha was the worst.

George S. Weyer, Jr.: I knew a boy, Bobby Condon, lived a block from me. We went over at the same time. He was over on D-Day, so he was able to land on France. He was blown to pieces.

Bradley: Some guy got into a minefield and blew a foot off. I had to go out and work on him. I did this by the numbers. I knew this was stupid—but you do that kind of thing, you do what you are trained [to do] first—so I took myself and another squad out there. That means I endangered the lives of six men.

Cuthbert: And then to see the carnage on the beach—pieces of bodies lying there, a head here, a leg over there. ...And then we finally got some tanks ashore and they're running over the wounded and with the smoke and everything, they can't see where they're driving and they're running over guys and tanks get hit, and you hear the guys screaming inside who can't get out, and smelling that burning flesh...

Bradley: You had three or four minutes to save a life. It's not like this moseying around you see in the pictures. You almost leapt at him: you cut his clothes away [to] see what he had....Everything was a split-second decision, basically. The first few minutes were frantic, because that is when you saved the life.

*A US casualty on Omaha Beach.
(Photographer unidentified)*





Dalrymple: All we had were bandages, morphine, plasma....I probably saw 75 wounded right away as soon as I got ashore....We couldn't transport 'em right away; we had to hold 'em until the fighting quieted down, and then they finally got help in. Navy corpsmen came in.⁸

Bradley: We wouldn't carry canteens with us down to the wounded. You see in the movies how the wounded always ask for water. They do—after 12, 13 hours. But not right away. So we got rid of our canteens...and got cigarettes and matches.

Dalrymple: I was trying to organize what medical personnel I could find, because it was bedlam.... After maybe four to five hours, we collected enough medical officers to really do some good as far as tourniquets, morphine, and so forth.

Bradley: We didn't use the GI tourniquet. We used the guy's belt....The one around the guy's stomach, holding up his pants, was a good tourniquet. We always pulled that.

Dalrymple: Amputations. A lot of chest wounds that we couldn't do anything about. You know, the surf...bodies in and out of the surf. Terrible, terrible place.

Assault troops of the Third Battalion, 16th RCT, from the first two waves, shelter under the chalk cliffs in "Fox Red" area of Omaha Beach.
(Taylor, Office of the Chief Signal Officer)

Bradley: We altered the medical balance of each unit that came in at Omaha. Of course they say that we saved thousands of lives, and no one today knows about it.

Richert: We went through a minefield. The guy in front of me, a guy by the name of Nick Barbari—a big Italian kid—[had his pack] and a big entrenching shovel which covered the back of his neck to his helmet. We're going up through there, and I don't know if he did it or I did it, but one of us touched off a bouncing Betty.⁹ Goddamn thing came up and exploded. I can see it right in front of my face right now—streaks of red, and white, and black going out. It must have been in a can form—it opened *this* way—and the thing blew and it all blew into the back of the guy in front of me. He shrugged his shoulders and dropped his pack ... We both should have been dead, but neither of us had a goddamned scratch.

Wounded of the Third Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, First Infantry Division, receive cigarettes and food beneath the chalk cliffs of Omaha Beach.
(Taylor, Office of the Chief Signal Officer)



Getting off the beach

Dalrymple: If [you] stayed on the beach you were going to get killed, so we tried to get off that beach.

Richert: They'd said, "You'll just have shell holes and craters to jump from, one to the other." But the weather was so bad that the air force missed the beach, and the heavy stuff that the navy had going had gone inland. So you didn't have nothing to jump into.

Rose: We could see Omaha from where we were and it was a sheer cliff. They had very little beach, and men had to go up this thing against guns.

Claus: We thought we had it bad, but there were some outfits on either side of us who really had it worse. They had to climb the cliffs and things like that, which we didn't have to get involved with.

Cuthbert: You had your objective, you knew what you were supposed to see—somebody on the beach, or there was a certain object you were supposed to get to or load up. But everybody congregated and tried to get up to this little seawall at the edge of the cliff that offered us a little bit of protection, and everybody was trying to get up there to get away from the murderous fire we were getting.

Richert: You're in there, and you're up against this wall, and after the guys get in, you start edging off...

Fetrow: Out of my company—150 men and officers—we all made it safe. But there was some [aircraft] that wrecked, hit trees. Some of them killed them all.

Richert: The guy we landed with was a photographer. He had to get in to shore, and he says, "Anybody know anything about a camera?" I said, "A little, why?" He says, "Well, I got shot through the arm and I can't set mine." So I set it for him. So shoot, I'm setting it, and he's taking all these goddamned pictures!... And I ain't got enough farting sense to get in front of the goddamned camera to get my picture taken.

Claus: That's what they kept telling us: "Get on the beach and move." We saw so many of the outfits that got on the beach and were just slaughtered because they didn't. They just stayed right on the beach. But we were fortunate—we made it off the beach.

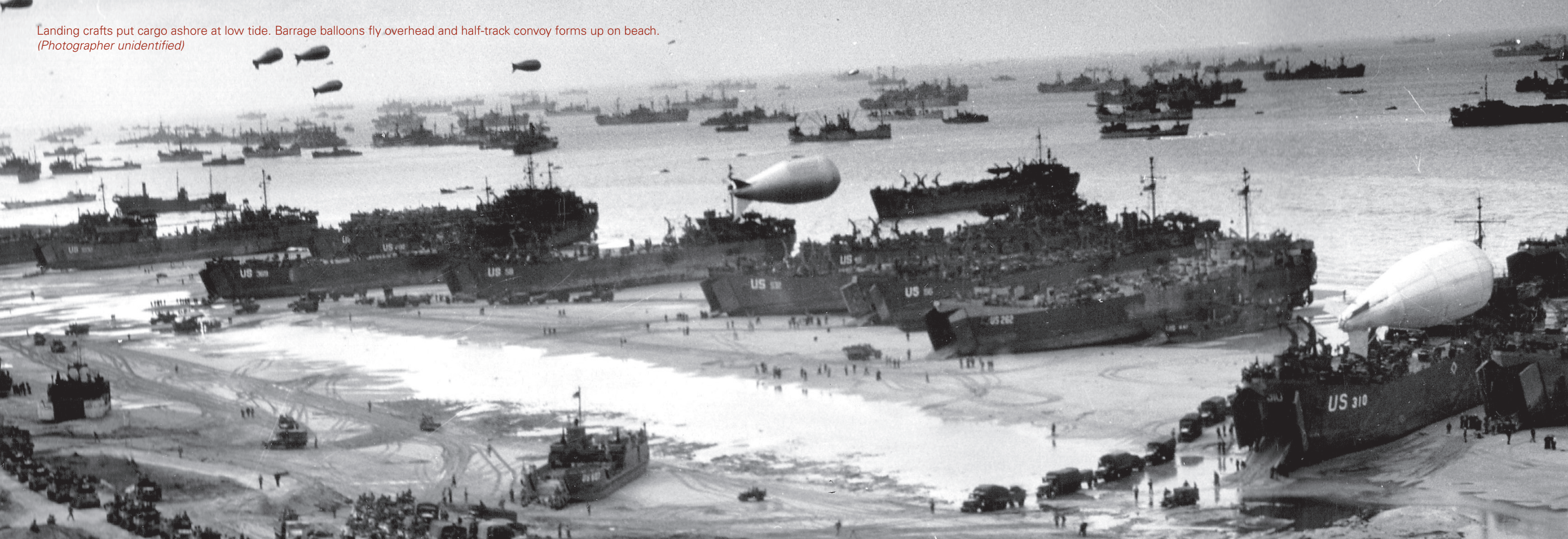
Richert: [My company] had 53 percent casualties. I truly didn't expect to get out of it.

Cook: But we made it.

Dalrymple: I don't know how I ever got through, you know. But the good Lord had his arm around me somehow.

Cuthbert: It just wasn't my time, that's all.

Landing crafts put cargo ashore at low tide. Barrage balloons fly overhead and half-track convoy forms up on beach.
(Photographer unidentified)



Harold E. Hess: We sailed out of Southampton [and] landed in the northern part of it—Omaha....There were boats all around us, and there were Germans trying to shoot us.

Beam: We come over on a India boat...and we unloaded on Omaha Beach. They unloaded us off that ship [with] the DUKWs¹⁰ and took us in to the beach. Omaha—that was the roughest beach that they had in the invasion. Boy, that was straight up.

Levy: We were just grabbed at first by the graves registration group to help clean up the beaches....We were picking up bodies and parts of bodies and plucking all day long.

Hess: This was D + 4, [and] the infantry was in about six miles, like from Gettysburg to Biglerville....As far as the dead, they were moved, they were gone back. They shipped them out as fast as they could, the dead and the wounded. The beach was secure and we knew what we had to do. We set up artillery as soon as we got the snorkels off—set up as a defensive for the other troops who were landing....G Company was on there, and they lost some tanks from the sea mines, so we didn't actually get into combat till we got organized....We set up as artillery and set up a defensive in case they made a counterattack.... The whole unit got organized into Combat Command A and Combat Command B, you know, and they'd take a certain company, they'd fight [that] day, and they might be the lead platoon....I can't tell you the battle plans, because we never knew 'em.

M. Everett Weiser: [I arrived] June 15. That was D-Day + 9. We weren't considered combat troops; we were considered service people....Our job was to cart prisoners of war, handle prisoners of war, and traffic control...The first job I had was to take three German prisoners and go out across the fields and gather up dead Germans, and we had a dump-truck and just threw them on there. They had been lying out in the hot sun for probably 10 days.

Levy: We dug a trench with bulldozers and we would just put the body bags in. Of course, they're now in the permanent cemetery, or they were shipped home....The Germans, we didn't do anything. We had a trench and we dumped them into the trench. But we made no attempt to identify them, nor did we care.

Mummert: We stayed in England until we went over in July, and we landed in Normandy, at the beachhead there....[We] were the first wave of the Third Army that was coming over from England....I think it was five weeks after the invasion.

Hess: About the main thing I remember is all the concertina wire—rolled-up swirls of it. Sunken ships all over, boats of all kinds sunk, parts of them sticking out there. Holes, bomb craters, stuff like that.

Mummert: The first day, they taken us about six or eight miles in...They broke us up into teams, and we went out on detached service with the infantry, and the armored divisions and stuff like that. They sent two

teams or so out to help to keep the communications in, and then we started to move, making advances, you know, 20 or 30 miles a day, so then we had a lot of lines to lay, and we laid a double line....They needed that for the amount of traffic that they were going to have telephone poles on....[I] climbed poles and put the wire overhead and stuff like that.

Weiser: They were bringing the munitions and everything it takes to fight a war in from Cherbourg. I was pulling traffic control at a kind of a crossroads one time, and trucks had trouble making the turn, and a Jeep stopped and a guy jumped out, and here was General [George S.] Patton. He said, "MP, what in the hell's going on here? Get this damn thing straightened out—I mean now!" So I saluted him and he went on his way. I thought I had better do *something*.

Hess: As far as direct fire, [there was] not too much until we got in a couple miles. Then you saw everything.

Having secured Utah Beach, American forces move inland.
(Photographer unidentified)



Memories

Dalrymple: The water wasn't blue; it was red with blood.

Smith: They just overwhelmed them, that's all. That's about exactly what it amounts to. They overwhelmed the damn Germans and whoever else was fighting for the Germans. But the poor guys on the ground got their asses beat up. Oh, man, yeah.

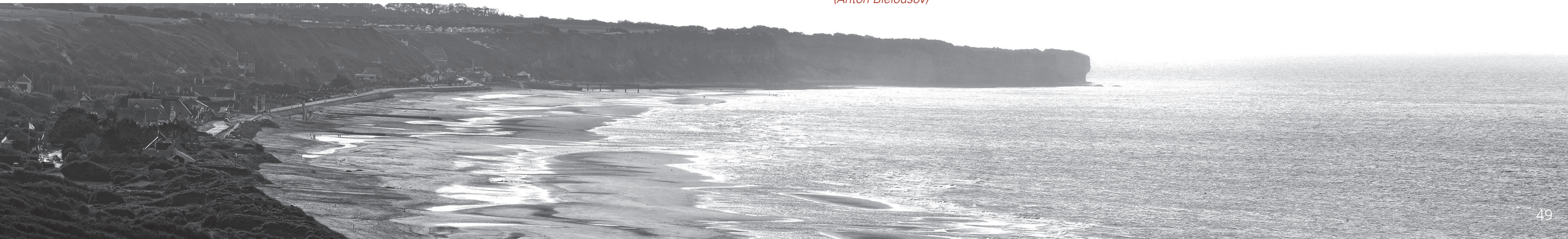
Moorhead: It's an awful thing to say, but the thing I remember about D-Day was that I had to pee so bad. I thought that I was going to die. [But] I was afraid to get out of my seat, because I thought all hell was going to break loose. That is a hell of a thing to remember about D-Day.

Richert: Honest to God—this is stupid to say—but the more unlikely or unreal it sounds, the more likely it is to be the truth. Christ, there's nobody that could imagine or dream up the goddamned stuff that happened!

Moorhead: After each mission we'd come home and look at our colleagues and wonder if we would see them the next night. When you go to bed every night and wonder if you are going to be there the next night, it does something to you. My wife said I was pretty nervous when I came home from the war.

Claus: When I got discharged I put the service behind me and that was the end of it. But some fellows couldn't let go of it; in fact, I know a couple fellows that even today can't rationalize it. But I never had any trouble—I just forgot about it. It was a part of my life that I just wanted to forget.

Omaha Beach, July 23, 2011.
(Anton Bielousov)



Endnotes

1 The Battle of Dunkirk was fought in France between May 26 and June 4, 1940. Facing an all-out German attack, British and French troops were forced to retreat from the Western Front, suffering (and inflicting) heavy casualties in the evacuation.

2 The “Mae West” was a personal flotation device, comprising inflatable rubber bladders covered with khaki cotton.

3 The glider was a lightweight airplane without an engine, lofted into flight by a larger transport vessel called a tow-plane. The glider’s primary function was to deliver personnel and supplies, its objective to secure open terrain, land safely, and deliver its cargo intact.

4 Signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in March 1941, the Lend-Lease Act provided for US aid to the British military prior to American entry into World War II. The materiel, mostly munitions, totaled more than \$50 billion. The immediate effect of Lend-Lease on British losses in 1941 was negligible, but the accumulated stockpiles were essential to victory in later battles.

5 The infiltration course, a standard part of combat training, requires the trainee to crawl a great distance on his stomach beneath intense simulated gunfire.

6 Invented by John T. Thompson in 1918, the Thompson (or “Tommy”) submachine gun was an automatic weapon firing a replaceable cartridge of .45-caliber shells. First issued to US soldiers in 1938, it saw action in every American engagement until its retirement in 1971.

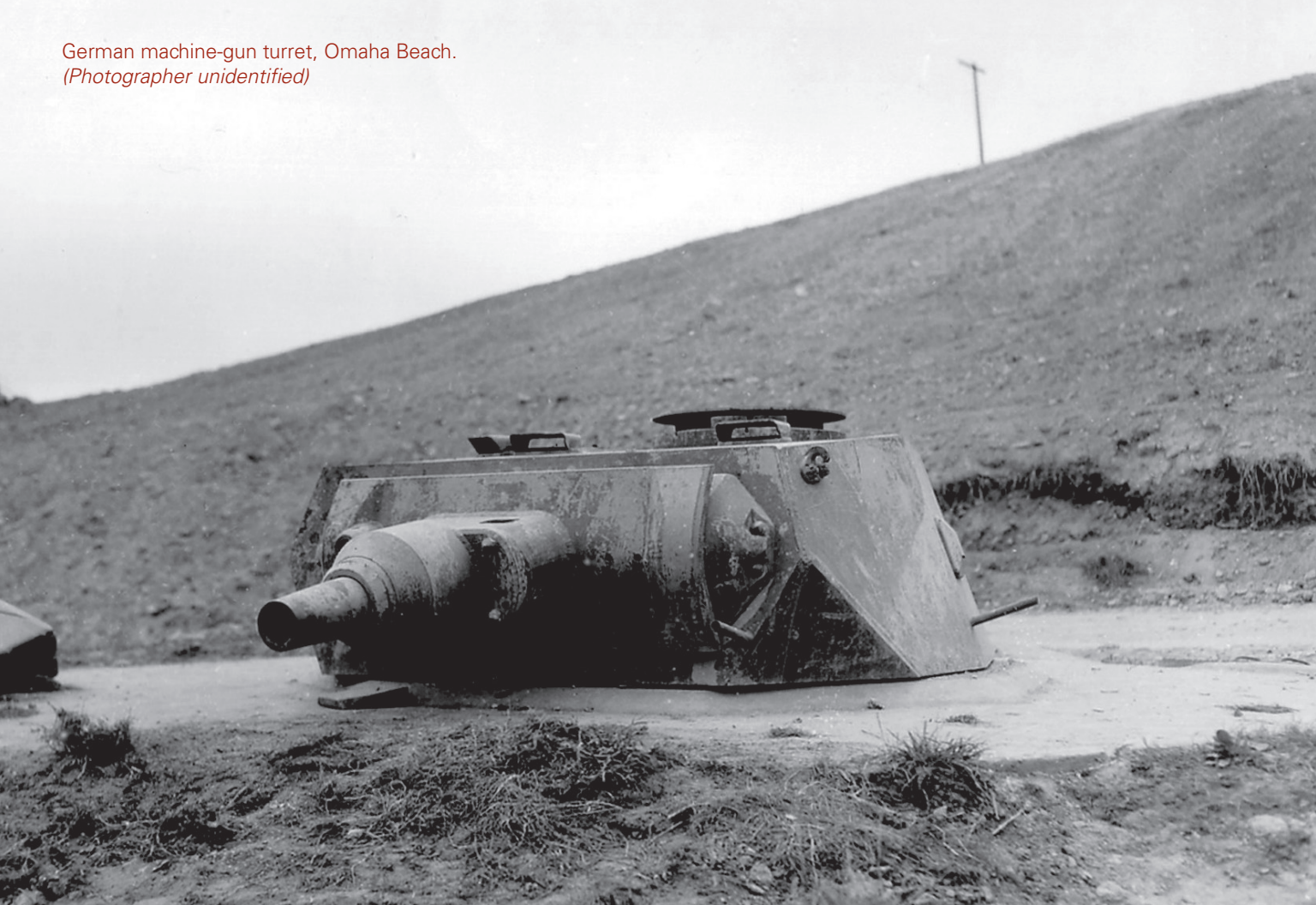
7 The pillbox was a construction of stone or concrete with metal-plated slits for firing weapons, commonly machine guns. They were employed most effectively by the Germans, who had begun using them in World War I. Several thousand were built in England in the early stages of World War II, in anticipation of a German invasion.

8 A corpsman is a trained specialist dispatched to give medical treatment at battle fronts, aid stations, and military hospitals. Corpsmen belong to either the navy or the Marine Corps, but have come to the aid of all branches.

9 The German-invented S-Mine, known to GIs as the “bouncing Betty,” was a compact anti-personnel explosive which, when detonated, propelled lethal shrapnel in a concentric spray. It was one of Germany’s most effective weapons in World War II; nearly 2 million were produced and deployed.

10 The DUKW (pronounced “duck”) was an amphibious truck designed in World War II for the delivery of heavy cargo directly to beaches. Acronymically, “D” is production code for 1942, first year of the vehicle’s manufacture; “U” stands for “utility,” the vehicle’s body type; “K” signifies a front-wheel drive vehicle; and “W” refers to the two rear driving wheels.

German machine-gun turret, Omaha Beach.
(Photographer unidentified)



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