THE U.S. COAST GUARD AT NORMANDY

BY SCOTT T. PRICE

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Front Cover: Soldiers under fire wade in towards the beach from a Coast Guard landing craft soon after H-Hour — the hour the invasion began.

Inside Front Cover: A panoramic view of the Omaha beachhead after it was secured. Vehicles pour inland from beached LSTs as many of the thousands of ships from the Allied-invasion fleet at anchor in the background.

Back Cover: PVT William Bonneville attempts to warm up with a cup of hot coffee in the galley of a Coast Guard rescue craft, after the Coast Guard crew pulled him from the frigid English Channel.

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Right: *Army troops crowd aboard one of the 24 Coast Guard-manned landing craft, also known as LCIs, bound for Normandy.*

The Coast Guard-manned *LCI(L)-85* approached the beach at 12 knots. The crew winced as they heard repeated thuds against the vessel's hull made by the wood stakes covering the beach like a man-made forest.

No clear channel existed where the commanding officer's charts indicated there would be, so he ordered the landing craft straight through the obstacles that had been covered by the incoming tide. The bow soon touched bottom, and as the ship ground to a halt so did its luck.

A mine exploded and ripped a gaping hole in the forward compartments, and then German batteries pummeled the LCI. Many of the troops were torn to pieces. Those who were still able to disembark could not, because the explosions had destroyed the vessel's landing ramps.

The burning LCI backed off the beach as the crew fought the fires in the forward compartments. The ship then began to iist as water poured in through the shell holes. Other landing craft approached to take off the uninjured troops. Then the crew sailed back to the transport area as the ship's list became more pronounced. They stayed with the listing LCI and managed to offload the wounded onto the Coast Guard-manned attack-transport *USS Samuel Chase* before they had to abandon their ship. The waters of Normandy slowly washed over the blood-stained decks as the LCI settled deeper. Slowly it capsized and later sank. The *LCI(L)-85* was one of the Coast Guard-manned ships that participated in the landings in France on June 6, 1944 — a day that would prove to be one of the bloodiest in the Coast Guard's long history.

Fifty years ago, U.S., British, Canadian and French forces invaded Adolf Hitler's Fortress Europe in an operation code-named Overlord. GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Allied commander, called this liberation of Europe a "Great Crusade." The Coast Guard, along with the Army, Navy and Army Air Force participated in the crusade's onset, the greatest amphibious operation the world had ever seen.

In August 1943, at the Quebec Conference, the combined chiefs of staff finalized the agreement to invade France in 1944. The plan called for an initial assault by six divisions along the French coast at Normandy. In addition, three divisions of para-

LANDING CRAFT

LCI(L): .....Landing Craft, Infantry (Large)

LCH: .....Landing Craft, Headquarters

LST: .....Landing Ship, Tank

LSI(L): .....Landing Ship, Infantry (Large)

LCVP: .....Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel

LCA: .....Landing Craft, Assault

LCM: .....Landing Craft, Mechanized

troopers were to be dropped behind the coastline to help isolate the frontline German troops.

Eisenhower was appointed the commander of Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, known as SHAEF. He set the invasion date, D-Day, for June 5, 1944, when tidal and moon conditions would be most favorable.

Neptune was the code name given to Overlord's amphibious assault and naval gunfire support operations. These operations were divided between two task forces that would get the troops from ports all over Great Britain and land them on the beaches of Normandy, keep them supplied, and give them fire support.

The Western Naval Task Force, under the command of Navy RADM Alan Kirk, transported the U.S. First Army to the American assault areas code named Utah and Omaha. The Eastern Naval Task Force, commanded by Royal Navy RADM Sir Philip Vian, landed the British Second Army on assault areas to the east of the American landings, codenamed Gold, Juno and Sword.

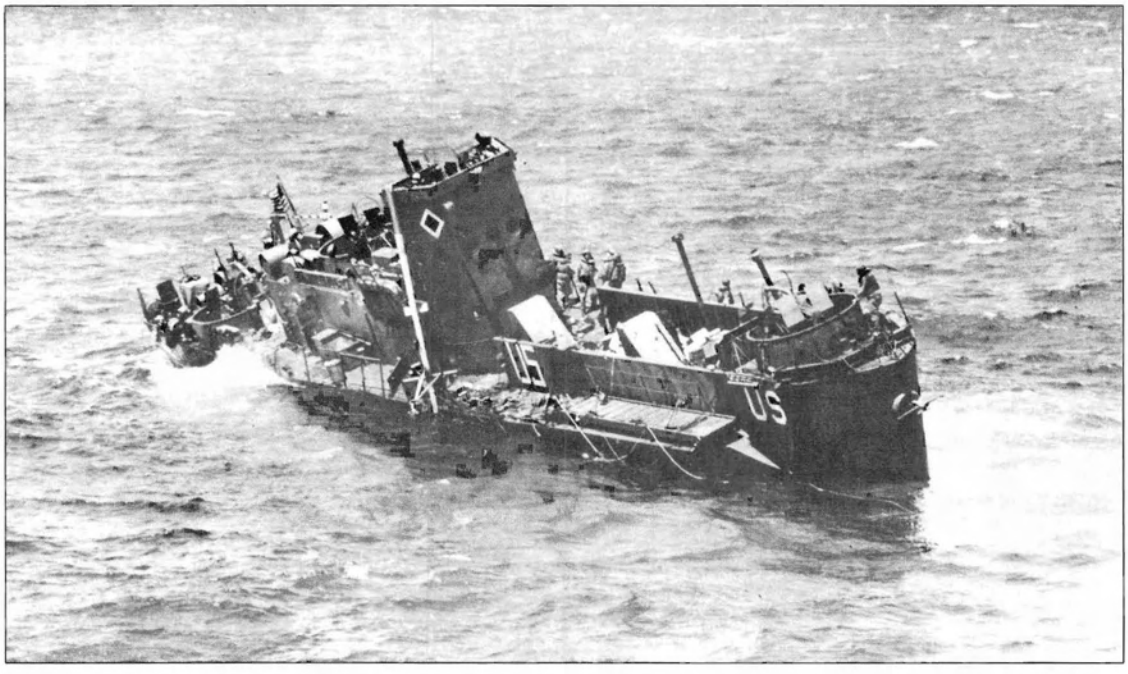
The U.S. Coast Guard was an integral part of Operation Neptune. The service's presence centered around Assault Group "O-1" that landed troops of the famous 1st Division on the easternmost beaches of the Omaha assault area. Commanded by Coast Guard CAPT Edward H. Fritzsche, this assault group consisted of the *Samuel Chase*, the Navy's *USS Henrico* the *HMS Empire Anvil*, six LCI(L)s, six LSTs, and 97 smaller craft.

The deputy assault commander of Assault Group O-1 was another Coast Guard combat veteran, CAPT Miles Imlay, who doubled as the commander of the Coast Guard manned LCI(L) Flotilla 10. Flotilla 10 had landed troops during the invasions of both Sicily and Salerno. The battle-tested landing craft of Flotilla 10 were divided between the various assault groups for Neptune, including two of the other three Omaha landing forces. Assault Group O-1 proved to be the largest Coast Guard command of Neptune but it was not the only.

Further west from the Omaha beaches was the Utah assault area. Navy RADM Don P. Moon commanded this assault from the Coast Guard-manned attack transport *USS Bayfield*. Designated the force flagship, the *Bayfield* was commanded by Coast Guard CAPT Lyndon Spencer and served as the nerve center for the entire Utah assault. Among the other vessels that landed the 4th Infantry Division at Utah were 12 LCI(L)s from Flotilla 10, the Coast Guard-manned *USS Joseph T. Dickman*, the *USS Barnett,* which had a partial Coast Guard crew, and the *HMS Empire Gauntlett.*

The Coast Guard participated in the British and Canadian landings as well.

Four Coast Guard-manned LSTs trained with and carried British troops and equipment to the landings at Gold Beach. The Coast Guard also partially manned many U.S. Navy vessels including the transport *USS Charles Carroll.* Beyond providing leadership and men to crew U.S. Navy vessels, the Coast Guard also provided the Allied



Left: *Coast Guard* LCI(L)-85 *sinks in the transport area after the crew safely evacuated the wounded.* LCI(L)-85 *was hit as it landed at the Omaha beachhead.*

fleet with cutters of its own.

A few weeks prior to D-Day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt suggested that Operation Neptune needed a rescue flotilla. Since resources were stretched to the limit the commander in chief of the Navy, ADM Ernest King, looked to the service dedicated to life saving at sea.

The Coast Guard had 60 83-foot patrol boats, nicknamed the "matchbox fleet," on anti-submarine duty along the East Coast of the United States. Although they were constructed of wood and had gasoline engines, hence the nickname, they were available and had trained crews. King ordered them to New York harbor where they were hastily put aboard freighters and shipped to Great Britain.

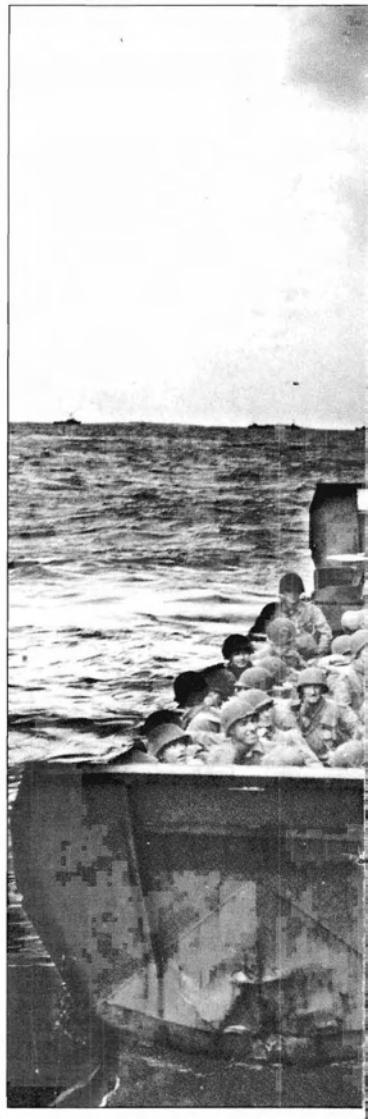
Renamed Rescue Flotilla One for the invasion, it was commanded by Coast Guard Reserve LCDR Alexander Stewart. Each patrol boat was assigned a hull number sequentially from one to 60 to aid in identification, and

landing-craft crews were trained in small-boat handling, ship-to-shore movement, and beach landings and retractions. They also received training in beach-party operations, beach markings, salvage and general maintenance. Coast Guardsmen and Navy sailors also trained together in joint exercises with the army assault troops.

They practiced small-scale landings along the British coast and made five full-scale practice assaults at Slapton Sands, whose beaches were similar to those at Normandy. Imlay's Flotilla 10 participated in many of the exercises as did most of the Coast Guard-manned LSTs and transports.

The intense training and the experience gained during the invasions in the Mediterranean were critical to ensuring a successful landing of troops and supplies on the beaches.

While the Allies prepared to assault Fortress Europe, the Germans prepared to throw them back into the sea. In November



Right: *Assault troops from the 4th Division set out on their way to Utah beach aboard Coast Guard-manned* LCI(L)-326.
Center: *Soldiers climb into a Coast Guard-manned landing craft from an LCI off the Normandy beaches. Although loading into the smaller craft was more time consuming than landing the LCI on the beach, it protected the LCIs from German shell-fire and obstacles.*
Far right: *A Coast Guard landing craft gets underway.*

SHAEF planners ordered half of the patrol boats to sail in support of the Eastern Naval Task Force while the other half sailed with Kirk's command.

While Allied bombers continued to bomb targets in Northern Europe and battle the Luftwaffe in preparation for Normandy, Navy RADM John L. Hall, commander of the Omaha assault force, supervised the training of all Navy and Coast Guard sailors. Hall established joint amphibious schools where

1943, Hitler turned to his most trusted army general, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, also known as the "Desert Fox," to inspect and improve German defenses from Denmark to the Spanish border. Here, the

man who nearly drove the British out of North Africa energetically went to work reinforcing the "Atlantic Wall."

At every stop Rommel urged the troops to greater effort. When one officer told Rommel that he was working the men too hard, the Desert Fox snapped, "Which would your men rather be, tired, or dead?"

To strengthen the defenses he devised a number of sinister devices that would tear the bottom off a landing craft or wreck a glider. These included sharpened wood poles that the Germans nicknamed *Rommel's asparagus* and a more lethal trap of three steel bars welded together and called *hedgehogs*. Behind these beach obstacles the Germans placed 4 million mines, dug bunkers, built concrete pillboxes and flooded fields.

Although formidable, Allied intelligence kept a close watch on the German preparations and noted two oversights. First, as expected, the defenses were concentrated around the Pas de Calais, France, well away from Normandy. Second, the beach obstacles were set to repel an invasion at high tide and as such they lay exposed during low tide. It was not until May that Rommel realized his error and ordered them extended past the low tide mark. But it would take time to add the extra obstacles.

The planners at SHAEF took advantage of these oversights by setting up a phantom army, complete with bogus radio traffic and dummy vehicles at Dover Great Britain, directly across from Pas de Calais to reinforce the German conviction that the invasion would land there. They also scheduled H-Hour, the time of the first landings, to begin one hour after low tide, when all of the obstacles would be exposed and therefore easier to destroy.

On May 28, the crews were "sealed" aboard their vessels, and the troops were kept within their camps. The heavily-laden soldiers began loading into their waterborne taxis on Friday, June 2.

They would be aboard for nearly three days before D-Day and to combat sea-sickness each soldier was provided with motion sickness pills and bags which the Army listed as, appropriately, "Bag, vomit, one." They would be needed.

During the cramped weekend, the troops managed to stay busy cleaning their weapons, writing letters or just resting while their Coast Guard, Navy and the British Royal Navy hosts prepared their ships for the channel crossing. The invasion fleet restlessly sortied from their British ports on June 4, but the weather worsened to the point that Eisenhower postponed the invasion for 24 hours. The ships returned to their harbors.

Early on Monday, June 5, Eisenhower attended a conference with Allied meteorologists. They predicted that the weather would partially clear for two days and then worsen. If postponed again it would be nearly two weeks before the tide and moon conditions would be right. He thought for a moment and then at 4:15 a.m. looked up and said, "OK, We'll go."

Under the partially-obscured June moon the Coast Guard attack transports *Bayfield* and *Joseph T. Dickman* departed Britain and formed up with the rest of the Utah assault force at a rendezvous point nicknamed the "Picadilly Circus." The crews could see the Coast Guard 83-foot cutters form up along the convoy's outskirts and they heard the thundering formations of thousands of Allied aircraft overhead. The convoy traversed the lighted-buoy channels while an 18-knot westerly wind raced across the waters of the English Channel.

In the transports, the men who would man and pilot the assault craft filled with troops through rough seas, enemy fire and underwater obstacles received their final instructions. Just like their comrades aboard the LCIs, they studied highly-detailed relief maps and memorized landmarks that would guide them to their assigned landing areas.

They had trained hard for Neptune and many were veterans of previous landings but their responsibilities still lay hard with them. It was their job to get the soldiers to the beaches in order for the invasion and liberation of Europe to succeed; the assault troops were useless unless they made it ashore in a condition to fight.

The *Bayfield* dropped anchor in the transport area 11 miles from the coast at 2:30 a.m., June 6. Over the ship's loudspeakers the troops heard the ominous words "Now hear this. Stand by, all troops." Soon they were clamoring down cargo nets into the pitching and heaving LCMs and with a grunt and a puff of smoke from the diesel engines the landing craft were off towards the coast of France. The *Joseph T. Dickman* ordered boats away at 3:53 a.m. Unloading went off without a hitch despite the rough seas and soon its boats were off to Utah through mine-swept channels.

The heavy seas cascaded over the hulls and blunt bows of the landing craft, drenching the troops aboard.

One Coast Guard sailor said, "We were cold and soaked to the skin even before we started on our 11-mile trip shoreward, as a choppy sea broke over our square bow."

The American landing craft had bilge pumps but the British did not and those soldiers aboard kept busy bailing with their helmets. But regardless of the type of craft, everyone got wet.

Life on the flat bottomed LCI(L)s was not pleasant either. The sailors joked that "LCI" stood for "Lousy Civilian Idea" but had long since become accustomed to their pitch and roll. But the soldiers had not, and the rough seas did not make their journey any easier. Some wolfed down their motion sickness pills and became drowsy but most just got seasick. In fact, seasickness was rampant throughout the invasion forces that night.

Right: *Coast Guard-manned landing craft approach the Omaha assault area under fire. The Germans placed heavy artillery, machine guns and mortars on the hills visible in the background and had the beach in a deadly crossfire.*

While the rough seas made life for the Allied troops miserable, they ironically proved to be a blessing.

The poor weather convinced the German navy and army commands that the Allies would not be able to launch an invasion. The German naval commander ordered all vessels to stay in port, while Rommel traveled back to Germany on Sunday, June 4, to celebrate his wife's birthday and then visit Hitler. He was sure that the invasion was not imminent.

The German air force was almost non-existent near Normandy anyway and so there were no reconnaissance flights to detect the armada as it left Great Britain. The Allies achieved total surprise.

The landing craft of the Utah assault soon passed the warships of the gunfire support squadron at their station 11,000 yards off the landing area. At 5:30 a.m., they opened fire on German gun emplacements.

The Utah landing area was a gentle sloping beach backed by sand dunes on the Cotentin Peninsula south of Cherbourg, France — the ultimate objective of the Utah assault. The German defenses here included 28 heavy batteries of fixed 210mm artillery and a large number of deadly mobile 88mm guns.

The proposed landing area was divided into two sections, code named Beach Red and Beach Green. Two Navy control vessels guided the landing craft and a number of amphibious tanks from an assembly point onto their respective beaches.

Despite the meticulous planning, confusion reigned on Utah beach. Beach Red's control ship struck a mine and sank. The relatively featureless beaches, further obscured by naval gunfire and rocket explosions, and the nearly 11-mile trip in from the transport area, all combined to confuse the remaining control vessels and landing craft.

Left: *A landing craft from the* Chase *burns after being struck by German machine-gun fire. The crew managed to disembark the troops on Omaha beach and put out the fire before returning to the transport.*

As a result, the first wave of landing craft discharged their troops 1,500 yards further south than planned. What otherwise could have turned out to be a disastrous turn of events actually proved to be fortuitous. There were fewer obstacles and no German heavy-gun emplacements at this landing site. BRIG GEN Theodore Roosevelt Jr., the son of President Theodore Roosevelt, came ashore with the first wave and determined the error.

After careful consideration he ordered the invasion to commence "right here."

The second wave, carrying the underwater demolition squads, moved in and they quickly went to work destroying the exposed obstacles while the infantry fought their way inland.

With channels to both beaches cleared, the landings commenced in earnest. The landing craft, continually exposed to enemy gunfire, dodged sunken obstacles and

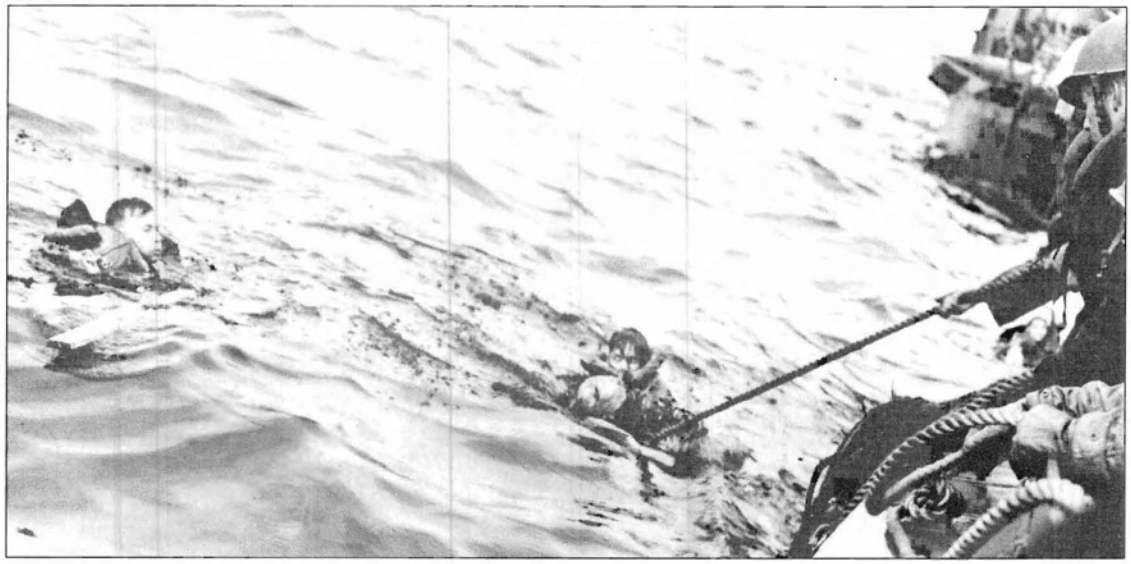
sailed through the heavy seas, shuttling between the landing areas and the transports bringing desperately needed supplies and reinforcements right to the beaches. Both transports and their landing craft successfully disembarked their troops, equipment and ammunition on schedule. The training and professionalism of both Coast Guard-manned transports were responsible for that effort. Nevertheless, they did take losses. Although all of the *Bayfield's* landing craft returned, seven of the *Dickman's* did not. Three swamped in the heavy surf and four were sunk by artillery fire.

After their human cargo was offloaded the transports' job was not finished. Each had well-equipped sick bays that saw great use during D-Day. Many of the wounded soldiers and sailors owed their lives to the corpsmen and the U.S. Public Health Service doctors aboard the Coast Guard-manned transports. Sixty-three wounded came aboard the *Dickman* before it weighed anchor and sailed back to Britain. The *Bayfield,* as the command ship, remained off Utah, while its doctors treated the wounded and its radios buzzed with messages from and to the beaches.

The patrol boats from the matchbox fleet had a hectic and dangerous morning. Unlike the troops who could seek shelter, they, along with the assault boatcrews, braved enemy fire and obstacles time and again from H-Hour through the rest of the day. Originally, most were to remain near the transports, but it soon became evident that they would be needed close ashore.

The 83-foot *CGC-16*, nicknamed the *homing pigeon,* arrived off the beachhead prior to the invasion and began picking up survivors from disabled landing craft in the assembly area at 5:30 a.m. Throughout the morning, the vessel's crew pulled 90 soldiers and sailors from the water. By 9:30 a.m., after administering first aid to the wounded, the crew transferred the survivors to the *Dickman.* By the end of the day they had pulled 126 men from the English Channel, the largest number saved by any of the Coast Guard matchbox-fleet craft that day.

Meanwhile, along the Allies' left flank four Coast Guard LSTs and 29 cutters from the matchbox fleet accompanied the British and Canadian assaults at Gold, Juno and Sword. The four LSTs safely delivered their troops and cargo but some of the cutters had difficulties.



Right: *The crew of a Coast Guard-manned landing craft pull two survivors from the waters off Normandy. The versatile landing craft were put to many uses throughout the invasion.*

The *HMS Hind* almost opened fire on four 83-foot craft when they attempted to join their convoy. Other British commanders were not sure how to best use the craft and ordered them to stand by a cruiser where they milled about during the invasion and then returned to Britian.

The *CGC-24* stood by the *HMS Albatross* for two days and acted as a courier, including "fetching an officer's pipe" and transporting personnel. Despite these minor difficulties, most of the cutters were well used and spent the day pulling British and Canadian soldiers and sailors from the channel.

The *CGC-35* traversed the channel in support of 24 Royal Navy LCI(L)s and followed the first wave in to the Sword landing area at 7:40 a.m. The cutter sailed to a burning craft, and rescued five survivors. Unable to transfer them to a transport because of the heavy seas, the crew made the survivors

comfortable below and returned to their patrol station.

The *CGC-34* pulled 32 British soldiers and seamen from the channel on D-Day. The *CGC-53* took station off the beaches and soon thereafter the crew rescued five men from a swamped landing craft and came under fire from German shore batteries. The crew watched as the battleship *HMS Rodney* opened fire and silenced the Germans before they proceeded back to Britain.

The cutters assigned to the Eastern Naval Task Force ably lived up to the Coast Guard's tradition of saving lives at sea and the Coast Guard LSTs also distinguished themselves in support of their allies. Fortunately, no Coast Guard vessels were lost off the British beaches on D-Day, but the same was not true at Omaha.

A bad omen opened the action at Omaha that morning when just before H-Hour, 480 Eighth Air Force-heavy bombers released their deadly cargo in an effort to silence the German defenders. Unfortunately, because of heavy cloud cover and a desire not to hit the approaching landing craft, they released late and the bombs fell three miles inland. With the German defenses in place and manned, the Americans would have a bloody morning.

The beaches at the Omaha assault area were ideally situated for defense. Rocky cliffs and sandy bluffs framed the booby-trapped beaches which were 300-yards long at low tide. The bluffs gave excellent fields of fire and with the high ground the defenders could fire down into approaching landing craft.

The Germans embellished every advantage nature provided. They built eight large concrete bunkers, 35 smaller pillboxes with artillery, anti-tank, and machine-gun positions; six mortar pits; and 35 rocket-launching sites. The German soldiers, including men of the veteran 352nd Division whom the assault troops did not know were there, had dug 85 machine-gun nests which held the entire beach in a crossfire. In front of these troops, covering the beaches, were Rommel's obstacles, laid bare by the receding tide, but the tide would creep back in, foot by foot. It would rise 22 feet that day.

During the early hours of D-Day the behemoths of the fleet, including the battleships *USS Texas* and *Arkansas*, arrived and took their stations at either end of Omaha and patiently awaited for the appointed hour to begin blasting targets along the coast.

The *Samuel Chase*, accompanying attack transports and LSTs of Assault Group O-1, sailed from England and were joined by five LCI(L)s from Flotilla 10 and 10 craft from the matchbox fleet. All safely arrived in the transport area, and the *Chase's* anchor dropped into the channel at 3:15 a.m. The remaining LCI(L)s from Flotilla 10 were dispersed with the other assault groups and made the voyage across without incident.

Left: *Two Coast Guard 83-foot rescue craft painted in invasion markings traverse the waters off Normandy. The rescue craft that accompanied the invasion fleet saved more than 400 men on D-Day.*

All was quiet on the Samuel Chase when the order to "lower away" was given at 5:30 a.m. All that could be heard was the squeaking of the davits and the quiet whispers of the soldiers as they loaded into the LCVPs. The landing craft were lowered into the swells and headed towards France. Here too, as at Utah, they were well away from the coast and subjected to the unshel-

tered waters of the Channel.

All of the *Chase's* boats got away without incident but seasickness soon overtook most of the soldiers. They had to go through 11 miles of rough seas, strong currents, and minefields. They soon passed the battleships on their journey in and the soldiers winced as the 14-inch guns fired.

Ernest Hemingway, author, in one of the LCVPs, later wrote about the men, "Under their steel helmets they looked like pikemen of the Middle Ages to whose aid in battle had suddenly come some strange and unbelievable monster."

Imlay, as the deputy assault commander of the Coast Guard's Omaha Assault Group O-1, went in with *LCI(L)-87* to act as a traffic policeman and to ensure that all went according to plan. He cajoled, threatened and encouraged the ships and craft all up and down the waters off the Omaha assault area all morning, making sure that they landed on the correct beaches at their appointed times.

The landing craft formed up for the assault on areas code-named Easy Red and Fox Green on the eastern end of the assault area and their colorful code-names belied their deadly nature. These landing craft, manned by Coast Guard and Navy crews, carried the troops of the 1st Division, otherwise known as the "Big Red One." This was to be the Big Red One's second journey to France but no bands greeted them this day as they had for their first arrival during World War I.

Five-thousand yards from the beach, LCTs released amphibious tanks which, as at Utah, were to "swim" through the water and land one minute before H-Hour. But their canvas sides caved in under the heavy seas and those destined to support the eastern landings began to founder. Rescue-craft *CGC-3* rescued the crew of one tank but most of the sinking-steel coffins took their crews with them straight to the bottom. Only five out of 32 amphibious tanks made it ashore to the Coast Guard's assault area.

The LCVPs from the assault transports circled 4,000 yards off the beach at the line of departure, shepherded by the control vessels, as they waited for H-Hour to proceed to their assigned landing areas. These smallboats brought the first waves ashore. The LCIs and LSTs landed their troops and equipment later. The rescue cutters circled here as well.

The Coast Guard coxswains anxiously awaited the signal to move in. The beaches that comprised these two landing areas stretched for 3,000 yards. There were six boats for each area and every boat had a specific landing point within those 3,000 yards. Besides having to keep all of that straight, the coxswains also had a timetable to keep.

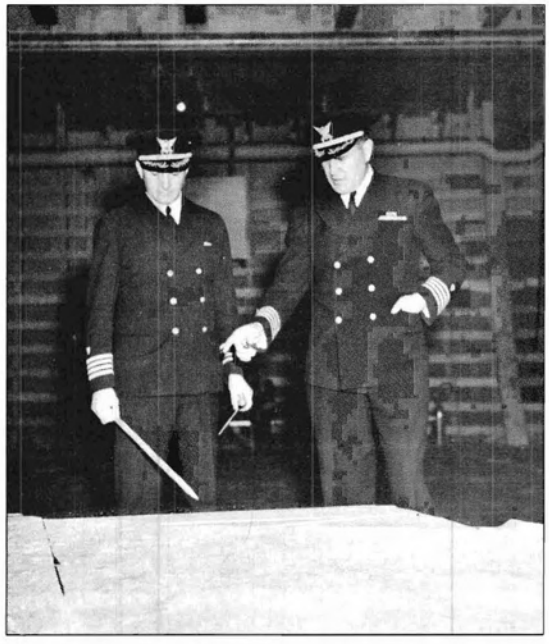
After the first wave of eight assault battalions landed, the second wave carrying 14 demolition teams landed a mere two minutes later. They had 30 minutes to blow up the exposed obstacles so that later assault waves would have clear channels. Then a new assault wave would arrive every 10 minutes until 9:30 a.m. It was a well-choreographed affair, ripe for problems sure to be brought out by the "fog and friction" of war.

At the appointed time, the crews of the 12 boats of the first wave of Assault Group O-1, under the command of Coast Guard LTJG James V. Forrestal, formed up and headed towards France. The cliffs behind the beach appeared menacingly through the early-morning haze as water splashed into the open craft. When they closed to within 500 yards of the beach the Germans opened fire with machine guns, mortars and heavy artillery.

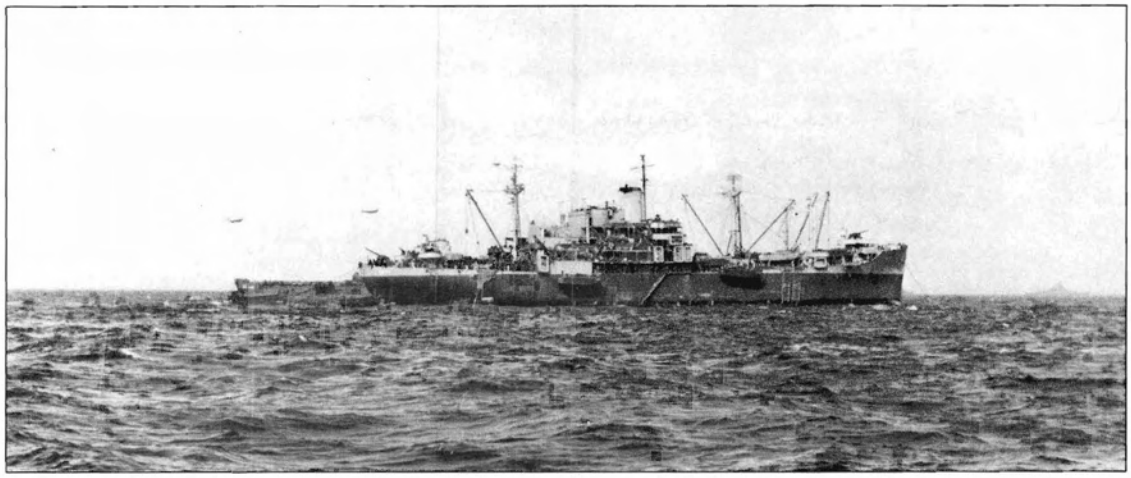
Bullets struck the landing craft with metallic pings and columns of water shot high into the air as they raced towards shore.

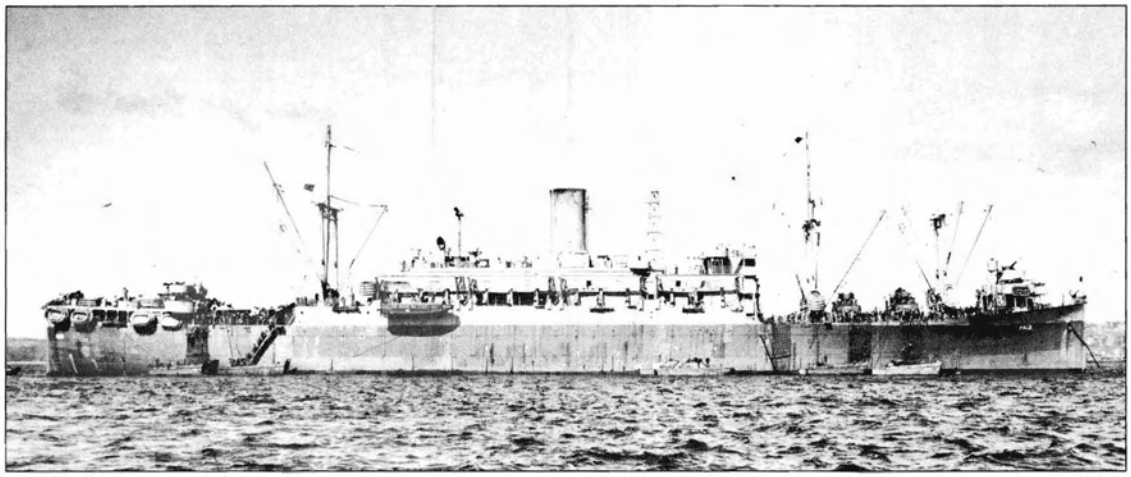
One Coast Guard coxswain noted, "We knew we were going to catch hell when we saw machine-gun fire spraying the water before us."

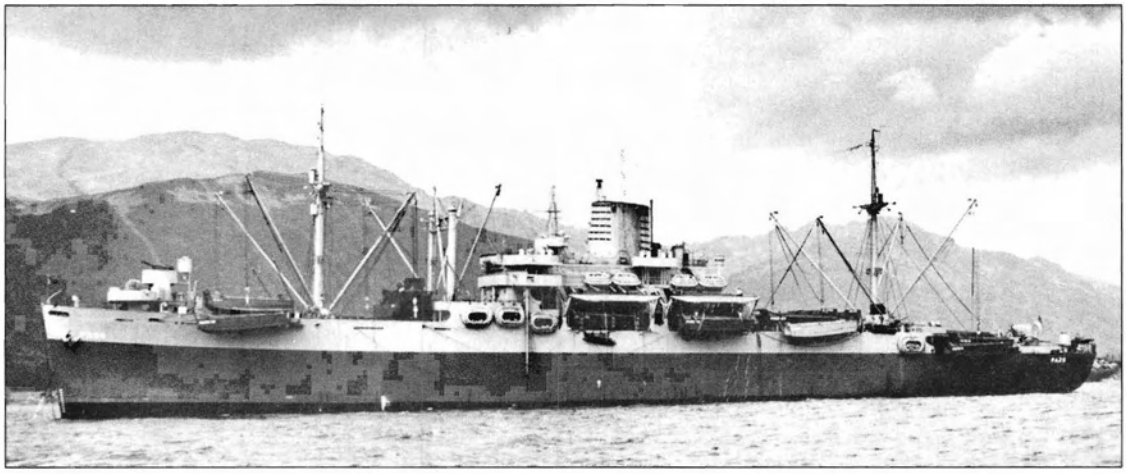
The bow doors dropped as soon as the craft touched bottom on sand bars well



Left: *Coast Guard CAPTs E.H. Fritzsche and Miles Imlay discuss the Omaha assault using a relief map of the French coast in the hold of the Coast Guard-manned* USS Samuel Chase.







Left: *The Coast Guard-manned* USS Bayfield, *flagship of the Utah assault, off the Utah beaches on D-Day. The* Bayfield *remained off the coast for 19 days, surviving nightly German air attacks.*
Center: *The Coast Guard-manned* USS Joseph T. Dickman *transported troops to the Utah assault area on D-Day.*
Below: *The Coast Guard-manned* USS Samuel Chase *landed landed troops of the 1st Division on the Omaha assault area.*

away from the shore line. The soldiers disembarked into three feet of water and ran for the shore. Intense enemy fire cut down many as they jumped off. Others drowned after being wounded in the surf, weighted down by their heavy packs. Most of the officers were killed, and those troops that actually made it to the beach huddled near the sea wall after a tortuous 400-yard journey across open terrain under fire.

The demolition teams fared little better. The Germans killed everyone in two of the 14 teams in minutes, and the rest suffered crippling casualties. The survivors managed to blow five channels clear, but the tide rose too quickly to mark them. By 8 a.m., all of Rommel's obstacles were covered by a blanket of water, invisible to the eye. They would claim many lives during the day, including a number of Coast Guardsmen and their vessels.

As the demolition teams braved enemy fire, the Coast Guard-manned LCVPs from the *Samuel Chase,* carrying 1st Division sol-

diers, made their way to Easy-Red beach in three waves. As each wave lowered their ramps German machine guns and mortars opened up.

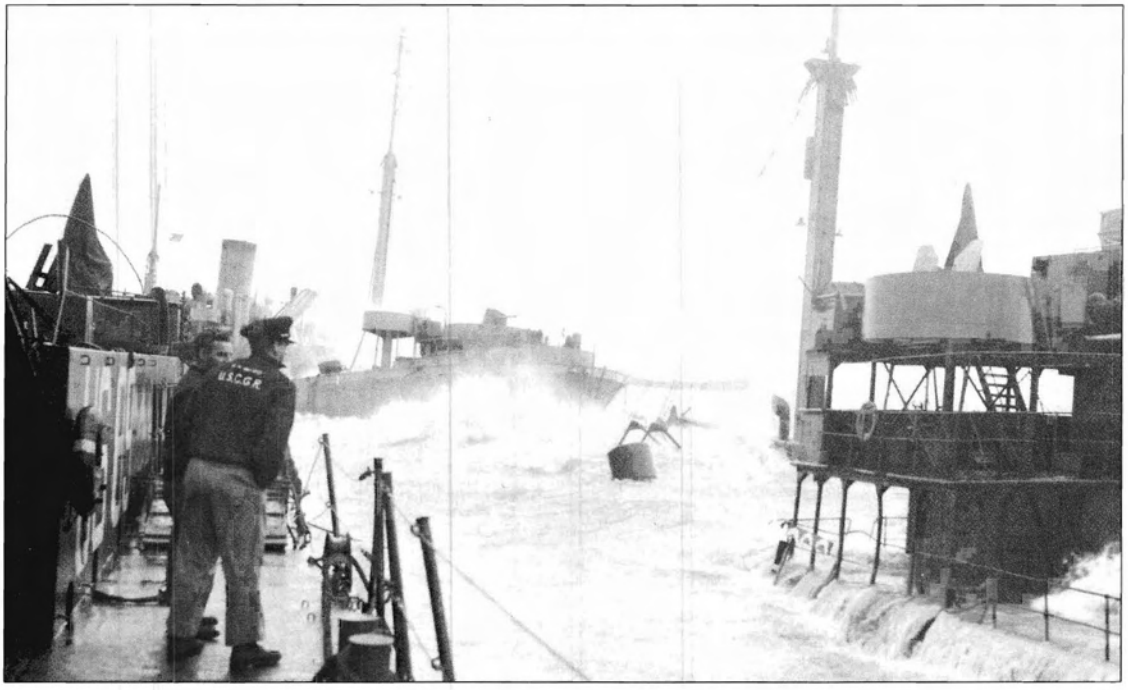
A Coast Guard coxswain said, "You have no idea how miserable the Germans made that beach. From a half mile offshore we could see rows upon rows of jagged obstructions lining the beach ... When our ramp went down and the soldiers started to charge ashore, the (Germans) ... let loose with streams of hot lead which pinged all around us. Why they didn't kill everyone in our boat, I will never know."

Another Coast Guard LCVP skipper said, "My eyes were glued to the boat coming in next to ours, and on the water in between, boiling with bullets from hidden shore emplacements, like a mud puddle in a hailstorm. It seemed impossible that we could make it in without being riddled."

By 8 a.m., the troops on the beach were virtually leaderless and pinned down by heavy, concentrated machine-gun and mortar fire. German 88s continued to pick off landing craft. No troops had penetrated the German defenses and the continuing waves of assault troops began backing up in a huge traffic jam. At 8:30 a.m., the LCIs moved in at their appointed time and added to the confusion.

To save time and avoid the risky journey in through the obstacles many disembarked their troops into smaller landing craft well offshore.

One of the instruction manuals given to the crews during training noted, however, that "Hedgehogs, stakes, or tetrahedra will not prevent your beaching provided you go flat out. Your craft will crunch over them, bend them and squash them into the sand and the damage to your outer bottom can be accepted. So drive on."



Right: *Two Coast Guardsmen on the LCI(L)-89 during the storm of June 19-21 survey a Gooseberry, a breakwater of sunken vessels which protected the waters off the Normandy beaches.*

With those comforting words on their minds, a few risked the journey right to the beach and found that, in fact, the obstacles did crumple like paper toys when rammed by an LCI, as long as they were not mined. After observing a few landing craft make it through successfully, many more began charging the beach like knights at a medieval joust.

For instance, the *LCI(L)-89* rammed its way through the obstacles, grounding at exactly 8:30 a.m., on Easy Red beach.

Six minutes later, an 88mm shell penetrated the hull and

exploded in the forward troop compartment, wounding six men. The crew backed it off the beach and unloaded the troops into LCVPs from the Chase.

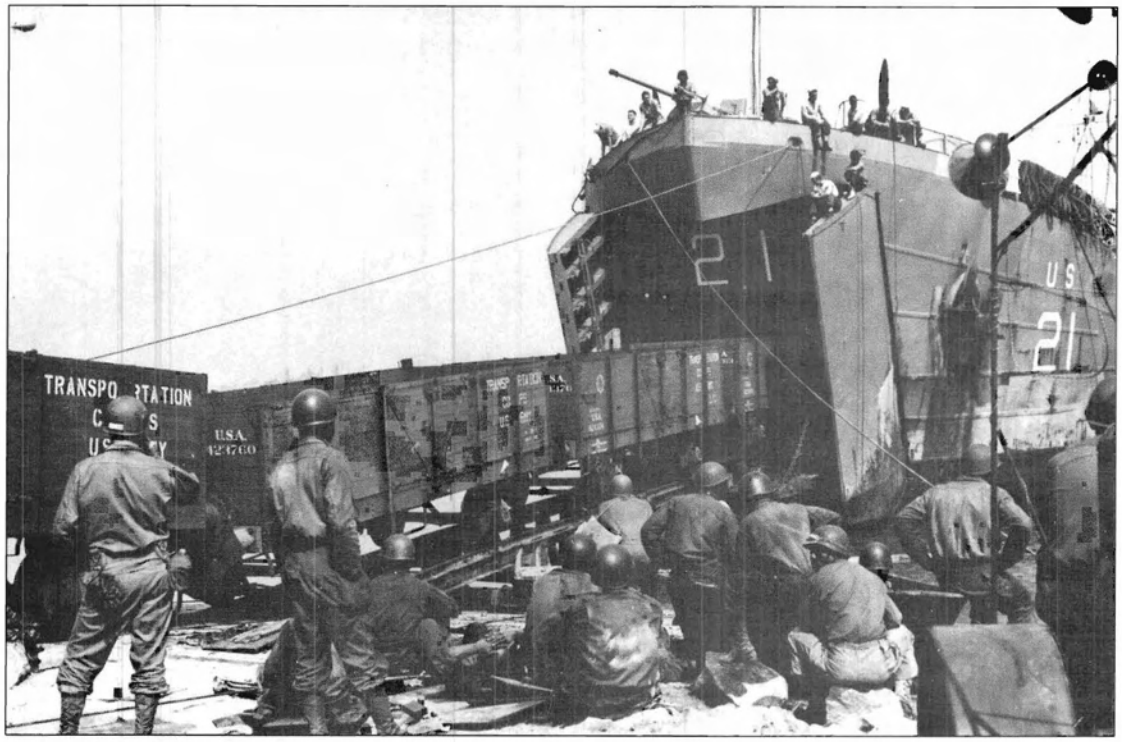
The *LCI(L)-85* struck a mine and was hit by 25 artillery shells.

Its commanding officer stated, "The 88's began hitting the ship, they tore into the compartments and exploded on the exposed deck. Machine guns opened up. Men were hit and men were mutilated. There was no such thing as a minor wound."

It returned to the *Chase* and off loaded the wounded before it sank.

Left: *LCTs "dry out" along the Normandy coast. Every landing craft was fitted with a barrage balloon which protected the vessels from low-flying German aircraft.* ***Below:*** *As the troops push their way inland, Coast Guard landing craft land reinforcements on the Utah beaches.*

Right: *African-American soldiers from a segregated supply unit unload railcars from Coast Guard-manned* LST-21. *Rail lines were extended directly from the shores to facilitate unloading.*
Below: *Thousands of German prisoners were captured by the Allies at Normandy.*



Further to the west the *LCI(L)-91* grounded and the troops disembarked. The LCI moved forward as the tide came in and it struck a mined obstacle. The commanding officer backed it off the beach and moved 100-yards west and ordered it in again. The Germans found the range and repeatedly hit the vessel with 88mm artillery fire. One shell exploded in the forward troop compartment and killed everyone there. The ship caught fire and burning men leapt into the water. The crew abandoned the ship and the beached *LCI(L)-91* burned all morning. Seven of its Coast Guard crew perished and 11 were wounded.

The *LCI(L)-92* with 192 troops aboard, approached the beach shortly after the *LCI(L)-91*, and the men saw it burst into flames. The crew beached the LCI in the lee of the burning Coast Guard ship in the hope that the smoke from its fire would help cover the landing. The ship grounded near the *LCI(L)-91* but the German shells still found their mark. An explosion ripped through the forward compartments and it burst into flame. The crew fought the fire while the disembarking troops were cut down by German machine gun fire. Shells continued to hit the LCI and the fire spread despite the crew's efforts to contain it. They fought to save their ship until 2 p.m. when the order to abandon ship was finally given. Eleven crewmen were wounded that day. The funeral pyres of these two Coast Guard-manned LCIs served as landmarks that day for the incoming craft and German artillery spotters.

Down the beach, the *LCI(L)-93* delivered its first load of troops and emerged unscathed but on the second trip grounded on a sand bar off the beach and took 10 direct hits.

Thus, four Coast Guard-manned LCIs were lost after they made it to the beach. Theirs were the only Coast Guard LCIs lost during D-Day and their sacrifice made clear the strength of the German defenses and the bravery of the crews who risked enemy fire

to get their troops directly to the beaches.

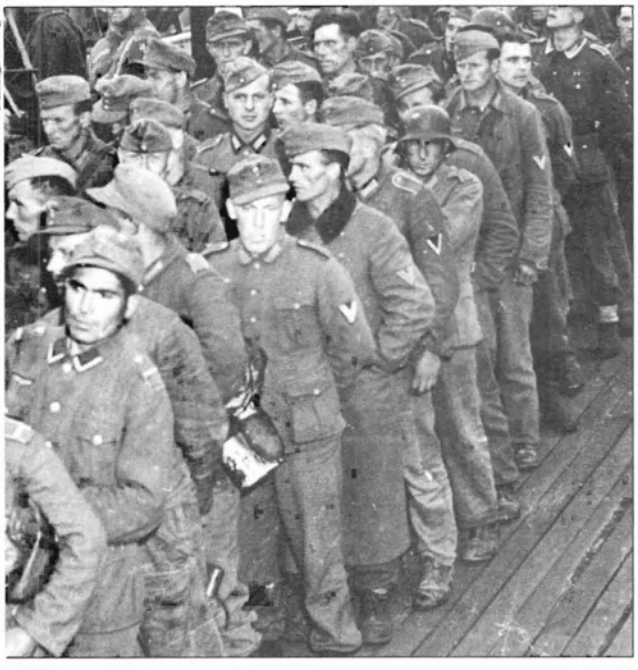
Two more Coast Guard-manned LCIs were damaged. The *LCI(L)-83* struck a mine close to the beach and settled into the shallow water. Later, when the receding tide exposed the punctured hull, the Coast Guard crew patched it and made it back to Great Britain for a complete repair. The *LCI(L)-88* was also extensively damaged, but the crew managed to disembark their troops and return to port. But four Coast Guard-manned LCIs were lost, the only Flotilla 10 LCIs lost during the war.

The *Chase* launched 15 assault waves and by 11 a.m. all of the 1st Division troops aboard had disembarked. LCTs maneuvered alongside and soon all of their equipment was on the way to the beaches as well. The LCVPs and LCMs returned with casualties who were cared for by the *Chase's* Public Health Service doctors. Some of the smallboats became rescue vessels.

One Coast Guard LCVP skipper said, "We didn't think twice about going to help out a shipmate in distress. Ship spirit is at its best when the enemy is making it tough for us."

He had pulled a landing craft to safety while carrying wounded soldiers back to the *Chase*. Such incidents were common along the shores of Normandy on D-Day.

All in all, it was a successful morning for this Coast Guard-manned ship. But the day was not without loss. Six LCVPs did not return. One impaled itself on an obstacle before it made it to the beach. Four swamped in the heavy surf and one sank after taking a



Liberation of Cherbourg, France

The Coast Guard played an important role in capturing a port for the Allies. Coast Guard CDR Quentin R. Walsh, while assigned to SHAEF, helped develop artificial harbors and planned the occupation of the French port of Cherbourg. He also organized, trained and commanded a Navy reconnaissance team, part of which he took into Cherbourg on June 28. He and 16 men were sent in to to assess the port's condition and determine how to make it operable quickly after Cherbourg's commander, GEN Karl von Schlieben, surrendered. As the motley band of submachine-gun totting sailors fought their way through small pockets of resistance, in small groups, 485 Germans surrendered to them.

Next, they approached a German-held fortress within the city and Walsh waved a torn parachute fragment as a flag of truce. He was invited to meet with the fort's commander and Walsh informed him of von Schlieben's surrender. The commander refused to believe this news but told Walsh that he would surrender the fort if his men would be given safe passage to the German lines. Walsh balked at this offer and, bluffing, told him that he was in command of 800 soldiers surrounding the fort. If the Germans did not surrender they would die.

After consulting with his staff, the commander agreed to give up and also released 53 101st Airborne Division paratroopers who had been erroneously dropped on Cherbourg on D-Day and held prisoner. Three hundred and fifty German officers and men marched into the hands of the sailors.

The Americans then began the dangerous job of clearing the demolished and booby-trapped port with Walsh's assistance. They cleared it in time for the Allies to begin unloading supplies in July. For his actions Walsh was awarded a Navy Cross.

Right: *An increasingly frequent sight: a Coast Guard vessel ferries German prisoners after D-Day.*

direct hit from a German 88, killing one Coast Guardsman outright. A total of 18 crewmen were missing.

Fortunately, many were alive and had made it to the beach where they huddled with the troops and waited for a chance to get back to their transport. One later reported that after he safely landed his troops a control vessel instructed him to begin offloading waiting LCIs. As he was headed back in with a fresh load of troops "We saw two British landing craft get direct hits by 88s. One of them blew up in a great gust of flame ... (as for us) I really dreaded the thought of facing those machine guns again ... but we beached the troops on dry land. Again they cut loose on us, but this time they hit home. Bullets sprayed into the stern of my boat as I was getting ready to back off. Then my engine conked out." Uninjured, he managed to hitch a ride back to the *Chase* later in the day.

The matchbox-fleet patrol boats kept busy rescuing survivors along the entire Omaha beachhead and the experience of one of these diminutive patrol boats typified the role of the cutters that day. The *CGC-1* formed up with the Omaha assault force and arrived at its station at 6 a.m. It escorted a group of LCVPs to the beach. Two miles offshore a lookout spotted men from a sunken British LCA in the water and the *CGC-1* went to their assistance. The crew had to jump overboard and tie lines to the survivors because they were too cold to help themselves aboard. They succeeded in pulling 24 soldiers and four Royal Navy sailors from the Channel. They then sailed back to the transport area and transferred the survivors to the *Chase*.

The *CGC-1* then returned to the waters off Omaha. At 9:45 a.m. they recovered 19 survivors from the *LCI(L)-91,* 14 of whom were part of the LCI's Coast Guard crew and transferred these men to the *Chase* and once again returned to their station. They spent the better part of the day within 2,000 yards of the beach under enemy machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire. No crewman was injured and the cutter returned to Britain unscathed. On the beaches, however, the day was not going well.

Enemy fire was still intense and the naval gunfire support groups could not fire on targets because they were unable to contact the spotters on the beaches, most of whom had been killed or had their radio equipment damaged.

British and American destroyers took the initiative and moved into point blank range and opened fire. Only a few hundred yards off the beaches they plastered the pillboxes, mobile artillery and machine-gun positions. With their assistance the infantry slowly silenced the Germans, and through sheer force of will, manpower, and a few brave officers and men who rallied the troops, the Americans moved inland as the afternoon wore on. The momentum increased as obstacles were cleared and paths through them marked so that more landing craft could beach. The traffic jam cleared as Imlay sailed among the incoming craft, checked their manifests, ranked them ac-

cording to their cargoes, and sent them in as time and space permitted.

The situation stabilized by 8 p.m. to the point that Fritzsche turned command over to Imlay and returned to Great Britain. As the Allies had no ports in which to deliver supplies and reinforcements, the British, with the assistance of some Coast Guard officers, had devised a series of artificial harbors, some of which were named mulberries. These were set up around the American and British beaches. They were designed to handle 12,000 tons of supplies per day and would also allow LSTs to unload from them directly, well away from the beaches. Imlay was assigned as the port director for the Omaha mulberry which was soon handling as much traffic as most of the larger ports of the world until it was destroyed during a storm that struck the coast June 19. Its destruction emphasized the need to capture Cherbourg, the ultimate target of the Utah invasion, which the Allies did on June 29, thereby ending Operation Neptune.

The *Bayfield* continued to operate as the command ship for Utah and operated off the French coast for 19 days after D-Day. Its surgeons remained busy caring for the wounded throughout that time, and luckily the ship survived the nightly German bombing attacks, which began the night of June 6.

The other transports and Coast Guard-manned landing craft continued to bring reinforcements and supplies to France and return with wounded and prisoners. One, *LST-261,* made 53 crossings in the days following D-Day.

Once the operation was over many went on to participate in other invasions.

The Germans committed their panzer divisions too late to throw the Allies back into the sea as the Allied deceptions had convinced them that the Normandy landings were just a feint for the "real" invasion at Pas de Calais. Hitler ordered the powerful Fifteenth Army to stay there until well after the Allies secured their foothold at Normandy.

The Allies' breakout from the Normandy beachhead occurred seven weeks after D-Day, and LTGEN George S. Patton Jr.'s newly constituted Third Army raced for Paris. The liberation of Europe was at hand. The Allied forces had pooled their resources and accomplished what many believed could not be done. They successfully invaded Hitler's Fortress Europe and sealed the fate of the Third Reich.

The Coast Guard's role during that invasion has often been overlooked, but its contribution to final victory cannot be denied.

The Coast Guard manned approximately 100 vessels for Operation Neptune and lost more vessels that day than at any time during its history, mute testimony to the ferocity of the German defenders and the bravery of the crews who took the infantry right to the enemy's doorstep.

The rescue flotilla saved more than 400 men on D-Day alone and by the end of the month they had pulled 1,438 from the Channel. As at North Africa, Sicily, Italy and throughout the Pacific, the Coast Guard was instrumental to the invasion's success. An admirable record for the United States' oldest continuous seagoing service.

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