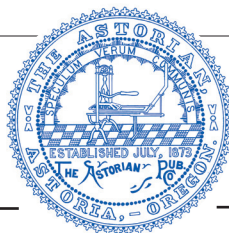


OPINION

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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK



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A Coast Guard landing barge, tightly packed with helmeted soldiers, approaches the shore at Normandy, France, during initial Allied landing operations, June 6, 1944.

Honoring D-Day, 40 years later

On June 7, 1984, I stood atop a low stone wall on a bluff overlooking the Normandy coast at Colleville-sur-Mer, France.

Behind me waited several dozen soldiers of Echo Company, 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division (Big Red One). They had served the day before as President Reagan's honor guard for international ceremonies commemorating the anniversary of the D-Day landings.



JIM VAN NOSTRAND

In front of me lay Omaha Beach at low tide, a vast expanse of sand where 40 years before, the regiment had stormed ashore in the first wave of Operation Overlord.

I was a second lieutenant in Charlie Company, chosen to accompany the honor guard to Normandy because I was also the unofficial battalion historian. The men were worn out from several days of drilling and marching on parade. The battalion commander asked me to take them on a private tour of the American cemetery at Omaha Beach before heading back to our post near Stuttgart, Germany.

The men were all looking up at me on the wall, waiting. I was at a loss for words. Finally I pointed at the ocean and swung my arm in a wide arc.

"Try to imagine yourself as a German soldier that morning, looking out there and seeing the largest invasion fleet in the history of the world — almost 7,000 ships," I said. "And many of them were headed this way."

Then, reaching into my pocket, I pulled a copy of the Presidential Unit Citation the regiment had earned that day, and began to read it aloud.



AP Photo/Marty Lederhandler

President Ronald Reagan, center, and French President Francois Mitterrand, left, with their wives Nancy Reagan (waving) and Danielle Mitterrand (right behind Reagan) review French (left) and American honor guards June 6, 1984.

Indescribable carnage

The landing was utter chaos. The landing craft began to take artillery, mortar and machine gun fire 300 yards offshore.

They landed far from their assigned sectors, and scores of men were killed or wounded as the landing craft dropped their ramps. Others were hit as they slogged through the surf or tried to run across the sand.

I had been researching the battle for several days. I was able to point to approximately where each company landed, and describe the number of casualties each suffered. All of us tried to envision, without much success, how much courage it must have taken to cross that beach.

The breakout came when Echo Company men managed to cross a minefield and breach the enemy wire, allowing the regiment to fight its way up the bluff.

The regimental commander, Col. George Taylor, famously exhorted his soldiers through the gap, yelling "The only men who remain on this beach are the dead and those who are about to die! Let's get moving!"

The moment has been immortalized in many movies, most notably "The Longest Day."

Awe-inspiring experience

My little speech lasted only about 10 minutes. The men scattered afterwards

to explore the beach and the cemetery, which contains the graves of 9,385 soldiers killed in the D-Day landings and ensuing operations.

The Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial covers 172 acres and is technically American soil, granted in perpetuity to the United States by the French government as a small thank you for the liberation of their nation.

It is an imposing and awe-inspiring experience. Many of the crosses bear the inscription "Here rests in honored glory a comrade in arms, known but to God."

Two days before on June 5, while reconnoitering the memorial grounds in uniform in advance of President Reagan's visit, I found myself suddenly ambushed by a phalanx of television cameras.

One reporter was particularly aggressive, asking me the difference between fighting in a popular war, such as World War II, and an unpopular war, such as Vietnam.

I considered my response carefully, fearing the end of my nascent military career if I screwed this up.

"The American soldier of today is no different than soldiers of any other war, including World War II and Vietnam," I said.

"They will do what it takes to survive on the battlefield. The tactics you use when you're being shot at haven't changed much in 40 years."

The battalion commander and sergeant major quickly sought me out after the television cameras departed, wondering what in the world their foolish young lieutenant was talking to the media about.

"That was a very good answer," the sergeant major said, with a knowing nod.

Jim Van Nostrand is editor of *The Daily Astorian*.

American soldiers among the first to reach the French beach struggle through the water to the shore through a maze of beach obstacles.

Associated Press

