

D-Day correspondent returns 10 years later

Ten years after landing on Omaha Beach for D-Day, AP correspondent returns to Normandy

By **DON WHITEHEAD**
Associated Press

OMAHA BEACH, Normandy — Between the rows of white crosses they walked hand in hand, the gray-haired man and woman who had traveled across an ocean to visit the American cemetery overlooking the invasion beaches of Normandy.

They walked slowly among their memories of the dead. And then they paused besides a cross distinguished from thousands of others only by the name and number it bore. They stood and looked for a long moment at the name. They were alone with a heartbreak that went back to that day of invasion, June 6, 1944.

Above the man and woman and the crosses rose the outlines of the cemetery chapel, on which were chiseled these words:

“These endured all and gave all that justice among nations might prevail and that mankind might enjoy freedom and inherit peace.”

They come by the hundreds — Americans, British, Canadians, French and Germans — to visit these beaches called “Omaha” and “Utah,” which with the years have become symbols of man’s struggle for freedom and peace.

Never has symbolism meant so much

Never before, with another brand of tyranny rising from the ashes of world war II, has the symbolism meant so much as on this 10th anniversary of the invasion.

The visitors come to stand for a moment with someone they loved or to wonder how it was they themselves lived through the inferno of battle while others died. They come to see the historic battleground, carrying flowers in honor of the dead.

A few, like Albert Dossmann, 13, and Rene Bataille, 6, come with no memories of invasion day because they were born too late for such memories. They are there to hunt for bayonets and carbines in the sand and to play the game of war among crumbling ruins of trenches and old blockhouses.

Beyond where the youngsters play — clutching rusty carbines in their hands and peering from under battered old helmets — fishermen set their fishing lines in the sand and bait them for the incoming tide. Only battered bits and pieces of the invasion fleet and artificial harbor can be seen



AP Photo/Bill Allen, File

Don Whitehead, Associated Press correspondent, writes his story of the landing at Anzio Beach in Italy, from a foxhole. Whitehead, known by his colleagues as “Beachhead Don,” returned to Normandy for the 10th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, June 5, 1954, which he covered when he followed the 1st Infantry Division onto Omaha Beach.

even at low tide to mark the landing site. Channel tides slowly are breaking these up and wearing them away.

The brown sand stretches hard and smooth to the rock-shale shelf marking the high-tide line. The sand is clean again. The tides have washed away the blood and debris of battle.

Grass, vines almost hide scars of war

Beyond the beach rise the bluffs where the Germans built their first line of defenses with trenches and blockhouses. The blockhouses still stand. The eyes of their gunports stare at the scene impotently. The trenches have crumbled. The green grass and vines almost hide the scars, but not quite. Slowly the signs of war are disappearing.

Looking at this country and standing again at the water’s edge, the memories come with a rush ... memories of that terrible dawn when the Allies smashed across the beaches in the great drive on which hung the hope of peace.

Through the night the vast invasion armada rode the rough channel waters toward Normandy. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower had given the signal to go. Now the decision had passed from his hands to the men riding the invasion craft. The greatest invasion gamble in history couldn’t be halted.

Gen. Omar N. Bradley, commanding the American forces, had chosen the 1st Infantry Division to carry the weight of the drive against Omaha Beach because “The Big Red One” had been hardened in the battles in North Africa and Sicily. The division was commanded by Maj. Clarence Huebner.

34,000 men composed initial assault force

This initial assault force had the code name of “Force O.” It was a battering ram of 34,000 men and 3,300 vehicles plus artillery, armor, rangers, engineers and service elements. Behind them came the follow-up waves of 25,000 men and 4,400 vehicles from the 29th Infantry Division. In other waves waited tens of thousands more.

On the left were the British and Canadians. And on the right, Gen. J. Lawton Collins led his U.S. 7th Corps toward Utah Beach with the 4th Infantry Division as his spearhead.

Ahead was Omaha Beach. The first waves were under the command of Col. George Taylor, commanding the 1st Division’s 16th Regimental combat team. In his cabin aboard the USS Samuel Chase, Taylor outlined the battle plan:

“The first six hours will be the toughest. That is the period when we’ll be weakest. But we’ve got to open the door. Some-

body has to lead the way — and if we fail ... well ... then the troops behind us will do the job. They’ll just keep throwing stuff onto the beaches until something breaks. That is the plan.”

Already the paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were dropping from the skies into the hedgerows of Normandy. Bombers and naval guns were pounding the coastline.

Assault boats head for the beach

At dawn, the men climbed over the ship’s side into the pitching assault boats and headed for the beach. Soon the roar and smoke of battle rolled over us. Our craft found an opening blown in the steel and barbed wire defenses at the beach and ploughed through. The ramp lowered. We waded to the rocky shingle where thousands of men were burrowing in the shale.

Machine gun bullets whipped across and ripped small geysers in the water. A shell screamed into an assault boat just as the ramp was lowered.

Men clawed foxholes with bare and bloody fingers. The wounded moaned at the water’s edge, and the bodies of the dead moved gently with the tide or were frozen in stillness there on the rocky shelf. The moans of the wounded grew muffled. But it would be hours before all the wounded could be removed. The incoming waves of men and machines had priority over the suffering.

During the night the German 352nd Infantry Division had moved onto the bluffs in a training maneuver. They had no hint the invasion was under way. Suddenly the maneuver was real. From the trenches and blockhouses they poured a deadly fire across the bloody beach called Omaha.

Order formed out of vast confusion

The sands were strewn with the dead. Still the invaders came.

In the vast confusion, order began to take shape because of men like Col. Taylor and Maj. Paul Gale and Capt. Joe Dawson, and Sgt. John Griffin, and Lt. Carl W. Giles and Pvt. Vincent Dove. They were a few among many heroes on that day.

In his twangy Indiana voice, Col. Taylor said: “Gentlemen, we’re being killed on the beaches. Let’s go inland to be killed.”

And so they went inland. They fought their way from the water’s edge across the open flats, through the barbed wire and minefields, and onto the bluffs where the German guns blazed.

With only a sweatshirt as armor, Pvt. Dove climbed into the seat of a bulldozer and while bullets and shells whipped around him he bulldozed the first roadway off Omaha Beach.

AP was there: Allied troops land in Normandy on D-Day

Troops land on June 6, 1944, to begin the liberation of France

By **DON WHITEHEAD**
Associated Press Foreign Staff

OMAHA BEACH, Normandy — Fighting as American troops did in Tunisia, Sicily and Italy, doughboys have smashed through the outer crust of Hitler’s fortress in a gallant display of courage and skill.

Never before has an army attempted to land such vast numbers of men and materials in such a short time, but the job is being done after a shaky start.

When we landed behind the assault troops the enemy still was pouring a heavy machine-gun mortar and artillery fire into the boats as they drove ashore and had our troops pinned behind a gravel bank just above the water’s edge.

Supplies pile up

Troops, supplies and vehicles began to pile up on the beach at an alarming rate. The enemy controlled the exits with accurate fire and the time schedule was being disrupted.

One unforeseen difficulty here was that three fresh regiments of German infantry moved onto the beach area just before the landing for anti-invasion maneuvers. They were sitting in their positions when the armada arrived offshore.

But under the urging of a soft-spoken brigadier general the organized enemy positions were silenced and the great surge inland began.

In the matter of a few hours the engineers had roads built from the beach and heavy equipment was pouring across.

Along the beaches were underwater barriers, barbed wire, emplacements, concrete houses with 88-mm guns covering the beach approaches. The walls of houses were of reinforced concrete four to six feet thick.

Two hundred yards from the beach on the side of a steep bank the Germans had built one strong-point and had another under construction. This blockhouse was about 15 feet square with one opening through which was poked the snout of an 88-mm gun.

Behind the thick walls were cases of ammunition. Behind the blockhouse the gun crew had tunneled into the side of the hill and installed living quarters.



AP File Photo

U.S. reinforcements waded through the surf as they land at Normandy in the days following the Allies’, D-Day invasion of occupied France.

Two young Germans were supposed to man the weapon but they were in quarters when the naval bombardment began and a shell ripped squarely through the gun port.

They ran out of their tunnel and hid under a bridge where Lieut. Carl W. Oelze, Cleveland, found them and took them prisoner. One was 17 years old and the other 18 and both said they were glad the invasion had come and that they were prisoners as they did not want to fight anyway.

On the other side of the draw was a similar position and further inland above the exit from the beach was another concrete blockhouse with its 88-gun pointing down the approach.

The prisoners coming back to the rear looked rather small and scrawny. They looked with wonder at the bigger and stronger American boys and their fine equipment.

During the night German snipers infiltrated our lines and made life uncomfortable. The troops were wet from wading through the surf and the bedding of most troops was lost in vehicles swamped on the beach.

General is calm

Big guns of our warships are standing offshore and belching flame and smoke.

Small craft are shuttling troops and guns to the strip of beach. Big bulldozers are gouging out a road.

Along the beach are still the khaki-clad bodies of boys who gave their lives in the United Nations bid to crush German’s armed might. But there were not so many as I had expected to see, and I patrolled this strip from end to end.

Canadians reported that German parachute troops were being dropped on a small scale behind Allied lines.

American parachutists took one village.

In my books much credit goes to the tall lean brigadier general who showed absolute disregard for his own safety in organizing his troops and getting them moving inland.

I cannot name him. But I can name the cool calm lieutenant who stayed by his side during the whole time. He was Robert J. Riekse of Battle Creek, Mich.

Eight hours after landing, not a single enemy plane made an appearance over our beach.

Wounded man topples over

We had waded ashore to the rattle of machine guns and the bursting of shells.

A soldier riding on the rear of a “duck” at the water edge behind me suddenly gave a startled cry and toppled into the water. A

medic dragged him to the beach and treated a wound in his thigh.

Wounded men, drenched by cold water, lay in gravel, some with water washing over their legs, shivering and waiting for stretcher bearers to take them aboard returning small craft.

“Oh, God, let me aboard a boat,” whimpered one youth in semi-delirium. Near him a shivering youth dug with bare fingers into gravel.

Shells burst all around

Shells burst on all sides of us, some so close they threw black water and dirt over us in showers. They smacked into water around the boats, but in all the shelling I saw only one boat hit and she pulled out under her own power.

An A. E. F. sergeant, William McFadden, Olean, N.Y., said, “I was damned glad to get onto the beach, and I’ll be glad to get off.”

A runner came from an advance unit bearing a message for the general. He was John P. Foley, Trenton, N.J.

Although nicked by a bullet over one eye, Foley came through enemy fire to carry an important message which resulted in the general sending reinforcements to a certain sector.

“You’ve done a fine job, lieutenant,” said the general, “and shown great initiative and good judgment.”

Then the general began working to get troops off the beach. It was jammed with men and vehicles. He sent a group to the right flank to help clean out the enemy firing directly on the beach. Quietly he talked to the men, suggesting the next move.

The Army’s communication system for correspondents accompanying American troops broke down completely and for more than 28 hours we were unable to get news out. The public relations officer brought a radio ashore early among the assault waves, but it was put aboard a jeep which he was unable to find until the next day.

There was supposed to be a system of couriers to take correspondents’ dispatches from the beach to ships, but there were no couriers.

My first article was handed to a litter bearer who said he would try to get it to a control ship which has a courier service.

We were even more bitterly disappointed when we turned on the radio and heard a B.B.C. report from British correspondents accompanying British troops. Their communications apparently functioned well.