

The Navy's D-Day

by William S. Dudley, PhD

Several years ago, it was brought to the attention of the Naval Order of the United States (NOUS)¹ that over the many years since the end of World War II, no monument had been erected to commemorate 1,068 American sailors who had died on the first day of the invasion of Normandy, 6 June 1944. This seemed a grievous omission, since the fallen of many other military services and nations had been so recognized. Since the Naval Order's chosen mission is to recognize and promote the history of the US Navy, the implication was obvious. The Naval Order took on the task in 2005. After a challenging three years of creating a design, fundraising, finding a sculptor, casting, and transporting the monument, it was set in place and unveiled overlooking Utah Beach near Ste. Marie du Mont, Normandy.² It seems appropriate on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of D-Day to offer this brief appreciation of what the US Navy accomplished that day, on behalf of those who sacrificed their lives.

The war to defeat Germany's domination of Europe began in 1939. Five years later, after the loss of millions of lives, the Allies had invaded Africa, Sicily, and Italy. The one remaining redoubt was Hitler's massive "Atlantic Wall," built along the coast of France. To stage a successful amphibious invasion would require a cast of tens of thousands from all services and

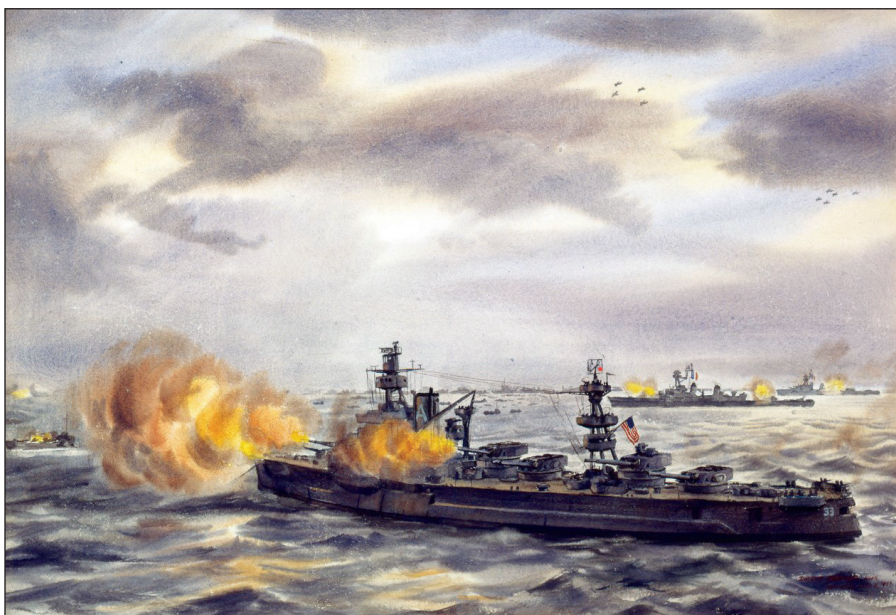


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Landing ships putting cargo ashore on Omaha Beach at low tide during the first days of the operation. Among identifiable ships present are LST-532 (in the center of the view); USS LST-262 (3rd LST from right); USS LST-310 (2nd LST from right); USS LST-533 (partially visible at far right); and USS LST-524. Note barrage balloons overhead and Army "half-track" convoy forming up on the beach. LST-262 was one of ten Coast Guard-manned LSTs that participated in the invasion of Normandy, France.

several nations. The D-Day invasion became the world's largest naval operation. It required a vast armada manned by 124,000 US Navy sailors (75%) and Coast Guardsmen (25%) who had assembled in England. Of those, 15,000 were attached

to combat ships, 87,000 to landing craft, and 22,000 at naval bases and other training sites. The American ships included in the Western Naval Task Force, which carried the assault troops across the English Channel and supported the landings on Utah and Omaha beaches at the foot of the Cotentin Peninsula. The Royal Navy, moving in coordination with US Navy, led the Eastern Naval Task Force that landed and supported the British, Canadian, and other allied troops who landed on Gold, Juno,



D-Day morning broke over the Normandy coast to find USS Arkansas (BB-33), matriarch of the battle fleet, conscientiously banging away at the beachhead with her main battery guns. To seaward, the French cruisers George Leygues and Montcalm sent shells hurtling into their captive homeland. Assault waves of landing craft streamed toward the beaches while attack transports filled the horizon. This was the view of the "Arkie" as seen through binoculars from the bridge of USS Emmons (DD-457) at a bombardment station farther inshore.

and Sword beaches. To support the landing forces, the US Navy contributed three battleships (*Nevada*, *Arkansas*, and *Texas*), three cruisers (*Augusta*, *Tuscaloosa*, and *Quincy*), thirty-one destroyers, 168 LSTs, and more than 1,600 other landing and small craft.

Opposing the allied landing forces, the Germans had erected formidable defenses all along the European coast from Spain to Norway, but had concentrated their efforts at the most obvious, closest landing point, the Pas de Calais, though they built strong points along the Normandy coastline on the Bay of the Seine. The enemy's resources were relatively thin but still potent. Germany's troops were committed in Italy and the Balkans, and were on the retreat in the USSR. What remained of the Luftwaffe was primarily fighter defense used against the round-the-clock bombing raids staged from England. This left General Irwin Rommel's Seventh Army charged with coastal defense in Normandy. He reinforced the Atlantic Wall shore battery fortifications, built beach obstacles, laid naval mines, readied torpedo craft (E-boats), and held Panzer (tank) units back from the coast so they could be thrown in wherever the invasion threat materialized. Had German intelligence units been more alert, they might have realized that the real threat was not an invasion at the Pas de Calais, but at Normandy.³

After a day's delay due to bad weather, the invasion fleet approached the Normandy coast during the night of 5–6 June, with minesweepers preceding the troop transports and gunfire support ships by several miles. As they swept mines and cleared the channels selected for the landing beaches, the first naval casualties occurred. USS *Osprey* (AM-56) struck a floating mine and sank with the loss of six crewmembers. Despite continuing efforts to clear the waters, German mines of all types would account for the majority of ship losses during the operation. The battleships, cruisers and larger troop ships anchored at sea several miles out. The transports transferred their troops, tanks, and other vehicles to smaller amphibious vessels that were to make the long, dangerous voyage to the beaches and the enemy weapons



USS Arkansas (BB-33) fires her 12-inch guns at German positions, while supporting the Omaha Beach landings, 6 June 1944.

that awaited their arrival. Timing of the landings was crucial, not only for the element of surprise, but also because the tide had to be right. The Germans anticipated the landings to take place at high tide to reduce the distance the invaders have to make to dry land, but the Allies timed their arrival for low tide, so that the enemy's beach obstructions would be visible and could be destroyed before the landings took place. To cope with this dangerous task, they collaborated in the formation of 32 joint gap assault teams made up of Army Engineers and Naval Combat Demolition Units, originally part of the Navy's Beach Battalions. Each team included 42 men divided into two mine-clearing crews and two demolition crews, commanded by naval officers. These teams landed early on 6 June on both Utah and Omaha beaches and worked effectively to clear lanes to the beaches, but they took heavy casualties. The Omaha Beach units had a 52% casualty rate, with 31 naval demolition men killed and 60 wounded. Off Utah Beach the casualties were far fewer, with just six killed and eleven wounded.

Meanwhile, the gunfire support ships began their bombardment. Decades later, the soldiers and crews of the landing craft, who had made their way through the still rough waters, could recall with chilling detail the great tremors felt by concussions of the 14-inch guns of the battleships and the 8-inch cruiser batteries. US and Royal Navy destroyers and landing craft equipped

with rocket launchers let loose from distances of 5,000 to 7,000 yards until small landing craft made it past them. While this was happening, a German 210 mm battery let loose on USS *Corry* (DD-463). Her commanding officer ordered evasive action, but the ship then struck a mine, which exploded below her engineering spaces and all power was lost. Within minutes, she had broken amidships and her main deck was under two feet of water. The order was given to abandon ship, and her survivors treaded water some two hours under constant shelling until they were rescued by *Fitch* (DD-462), *Hobson* (DD-464), *Butler* (DD-636), and *PT-199*. Of her crew, six were killed, sixteen were missing, and another thirty-three were injured.

The ships of Destroyer Squadron 18 were first assigned to screen positions to protect the heavier anchored gunfire support ships. Soon, however, they were sent in closer to the beaches at about 1,000 yards off to provide close support off Omaha and Utah beaches. Here they became the key to troops breaking through and taking control of the beaches. The Germans had machine gun nests with intersecting fields of fire crisscrossing the beaches; lower on the cliffs the Germans had built pillboxes with more powerful weapons that targeted the LCVPs and LCTs as they approached the shore. Once landed, many soldiers were pinned down, wounded, or killed in the surf and on the sand before they had a chance to get organized. Those who did

and were able to approach the cliffs on Omaha Beach had great difficulty moving up the steep slopes. At one point, General Omar Bradley, on board USS *Augusta*, heard such disturbing reports that he considered withdrawing the troops and moving them to Utah Beach where there was less opposition. At about 0900, Captain Harry Sanders, Commander Destroyer Squadron 18, embarked in USS *Frankford*, saw what was happening and ordered his destroyers

As the destroyer proceeded toward the western end of the beach, I continued to watch her and wondered how she could be so close without taking any artillery or mortar hits. I watched her go farther and farther from me and expected to see her pull out to sea at any moment, when suddenly I realized she was backing up and her guns had yet to pause since commencing fire. She backed up to almost where she had started—still to my knowledge without

By this time, Admiral Bryant had become alarmed and ordered the other destroyers to take close-in positions. These included *Baldwin*, *Carmick*, *Harding*, *Emmons*, *McCook*, *Doyle*, *Satterlee*, and *Thompson*. One of the *Thompson*'s sailors was Dale K. Dirst, a Fire Controlman who kept a diary, written in pencil on the 4" x 6" pages of a "cash book." His brother Charles recently shared the diary with NOUS. These are Dale's thoughts:



USS Frankford (DD-497)

to move in closer to assist the troops. Admiral C. F. Bryant, commander of the Gunfire Support Group, issued his own exhortation to all gunfire support ships at 0950, "Get on them men! Get on them! They are raising hell with the men on the beach, and we can't have any more of that! We must stop it!"⁴

Sergeant James E. Knight of the 299th Combat Engineer Battalion was an eyewitness of what happened next. As a member of a special demolition team, his mission was to blow 50-yard gaps in rows of beach obstacles facing the 1st Infantry Division's eastern half of Omaha Beach. One of many men pinned down on the beach for several hours would later write, "all of a sudden at about 1000 or 1030, I guess, a destroyer loomed out of a sea swarming with dozens of landing craft and DUKW amphibious vehicles. She was heading straight toward me. Even though she wasn't listing or smoking, my first thought was that she had either struck a mine or taken a torpedo badly enough that she was being beached. While I was coming up with my reason for the destroyer to head in and before she completed her turn to be parallel to the beach, all her guns opened fire. At the same time I saw smoke leave the gun barrels, shells landed a few yards above my rock cover.

taking a hit—and again headed toward the other end of the beach, with all guns blazing. When she reached the western section of the beach she pulled out to sea."⁵ This ship was USS *Frankford* (DD-497). She had come in as close as a ship could get without grounding, roughly 300 yards from shore, and made herself a sitting target for the enemy's guns.

Lieutenant Owen Keeler, *Frankford*'s gunnery officer, remembered that when his ship was released from the screen and went in to 1,000 yards, he could not contact the shore fire control party. Without communication and unable to identify the well-camouflaged German firing positions, the ship's commanding officer, Commander James Semmes, decided to press farther in to about 300 or 400 yards. He saw a disabled tank on the beach fire at a target. *Frankford* followed up with a five-inch salvo at the same target. The tank's commander was so amazed he popped his hatch, waved at the ship, dropped down and fired at another target. The ship followed suit, thereafter, using the ship's rangefinder optics until her ammunition was exhausted. The American troops began to move up the slope. *Frankford* then put out to sea with her crew pleased at having been able to help the troops out of their predicament.⁶

While still quite a few miles from France, we can see bomb flashes and can hear them burst. They are just beating hell out of the beach. We can see our target for the morning. It is a strong point on top of a 146 foot high cliff, Point Purcee [Pointe de la Percee]. There is an assortment of targets, at least three 75 mm guns, one six-inch gun, and a bunch of little AA guns. Also pill boxes. We are to go in to 2,000 yards and open fire—this is a damned dangerous job—we are liable to get our ass shot off—but then I'm not alone—there must be thousands of others who feel the same way—especially the Rangers and rest of the troops.

At 0550—we open up on the beach. 0630—the troops go in. The Heines are wise and don't open fire till our troops are on the beach and then they give them hell. Throughout the day we see bodies of Soldiers and Sailors who never reached the beach. Many of our LSTs & LCI have been hit and are burning. We fired upon targets throughout the day and nite [sic] — Our planes came over again tonight & blasted the beaches and German fortifications. Resistance on the beach is very stiff—many US soldiers are being killed. We can see the beach very plainly. There are many of our tanks and trucks on the beach out of commission. June 7—troops and material continue to pile ashore—we have expended 1,027 rounds of ammunition and are leaving for Portland England to reload and get fuel.⁷

USS *Harding*'s gun crew took out the steeple of a church in Vierville, where German spotters had been directing fire on the

beaches; *McCook* actually supervised the surrender of a group of Germans to a squad of Rangers; *Emmons* destroyed a church tower in Colville-Sur-Mer; *Thompson* destroyed a German radar station west of Pointe de la Percee and a villa from which guns were firing on the beach. Of all these plucky ships, only *Baldwin* sustained gunfire damage from shore batteries, but even that was superficial. They all went to within a few hundred yards of the beach, where only a few feet or sometimes inches of water kept them from grounding. *Harding* actually touched bottom (or a sunken ship), and but for the alertness of sonarman Don Krebs, might have lost her sonar gear.⁸ *Harding* got off, but not without damaging her screws. They pounded gun emplacements in the cliffs until the rock and concrete caved in or the guns were put out of action. At the end of the day, senior Army officers gave credit where it was due. When Major General Huebner of the 1st Division got ashore, he described the destroyers' actions to Major General L. T. Gerow. He in turn sent Lieutenant General Omar Bradley the message "Thank God for the United States Navy."⁹

Among other Navy and Coast Guard units that gave of themselves, with many members making the ultimate sacrifice, were those called Beach Battalions. The 2nd, 6th, and 7th Navy Beach Battalions were those assigned to Omaha and Utah beaches. Their mission was that of reconnaissance and demolition, communications, evacuation of wounded, and unloading supplies on the beach. A typical beach party or platoon comprised forty enlisted men: ten corporals, ten signalmen, ten motor machinist mates, and ten men of the hydrographic corps. They trained with and were later put under the control of an Engineering Special Brigade, US Army. They boarded vessels called Landing Craft Infantry (LCIs) or Landing Ship Transport (LSTs), later disembarking into LCVPs for the voyage to the beaches early on 6 June (H+65 Min.). Once ashore, they became the vital link between the land and sea forces. The 400-man Navy battalion was composed of three companies, including three platoons within each company. The commander of each company was called a "beachmaster," whose role was similar to a traffic cop at a

busy intersection. The "hydrographic" sailors' (demolition teams) jobs were to clear beach obstructions, the doctors and corpsmen attended the wounded, machinist mates repaired boat engines, and the signalmen conveyed information back to the units shipping men and material to shore. The beachmaster's task was to control all boat traffic coming to the beach and to arrange for the evacuation of the wounded back to the ships.

Former IRS Tax Commissioner Mortimer Caplin had been a member of the 7th Beach Battalion, which trained with the Army's 6th Engineering Special Brigade. He described his particular D-Day experience as one where his unit was scheduled to land at H+8 hours, but due to confusion on the beach and enemy air action, the LST commander delayed debarkation until 0700 the next day. He and his shipmates debarked into an LCVP and jumped into waist-high water, holding guns and gear overhead. They zigzagged across the beach, dodging sporadic enemy gunfire. As soon as they could, they dug foxholes and took on the jobs they were trained to do.

On Easy Green Beach, the obstacles had been blown away but broached rhino ferries, LCVPs, and LCTs [Landing Craft, Tank], as well as all

sorts of blown up and bogged down equipment blocked whatever had proven to be good channels. Dead bodies and organizational and personal equipment were strewn over the entire beach. Our efforts on D+1 were directed primarily toward clearing up all the wreckage, moving the dead bodies away from the channels and off the beach, directing bulldozers in pulling away obstacles where necessary explosive work had to be done, and aiding in the salvage of broached and wrecked craft. Throughout the clearing work, signalmen and radiomen were occupied in waving-in craft and contacting the control vessel in order to secure additional craft for further evacuations. The beaching of loaded landing craft was attempted at all stages of the tide at every possible channel. Our medical team was overwhelmed in caring for wounded found on landing. They continued this work for the next thirty days.¹⁰

Rapidly, the Allies created order out of chaos. Navy Construction Battalions built an artificial "Mulberry" harbor by sinking portable concrete caissons and scuttling old merchant ships in place. Britain's



Forward 14/45 guns of USS Nevada (BB-36) fire on positions on Utah Beach.



The Mulberry artificial harbor off Arromanches in Normandy, September 1944.

Royal Engineers sank a second Mulberry in their sector to the east of Omaha Beach. Each of them formed an artificial harbor, a complex of protected floating piers and off-ramps leading to the beaches. From there, ships could offload supplies directly in trucks that would be driven to the beaches from several hundred yards out, enabling rapid build-up of critical supplies, such as food, gasoline, ammunition, and medical supplies for delivery to the troops as they fought their way inland. Regarding human casualties on D-Day, the numbers vary, but it is generally estimated the United States suffered 6,000 killed from all services, including 1,068 naval personnel

(combined Navy and Coast Guard) or close to 18% of those killed in action.

Those wishing to make a World War II tour of remembrance can do no better than to visit the Normandy Beaches from the Seine River to the Cotentin Peninsula, where they will see the beaches that brave soldiers and sailors reclaimed that day and in the many weeks that followed. There they will see the unforgettable American cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, where the graves of so many soldiers and sailors are beautifully enshrined. Travelling then to the western end of the beaches, past the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc, they will come to the little town of Ste. Marie du Mont and

view Utah Beach where the heroic statue of three sailors symbolizes the closely bonded interaction of officers and men fighting to prepare a pathway on Normandy Beach for the soldiers who followed. ⚓

William S. Dudley, PhD, was the Director of the Naval Historical Center (now Naval History and Heritage Command) from 1995 to 2004. He is the original editor of The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, 3 vols. to date. He is the author of Maritime Maryland: A History and co-author, with Scott Harmon, of The Naval War of 1812: America's Second War of Independence. Dr. Dudley serves on the Editorial Advisory Board for Sea History and is a trustee of the National Maritime Historical Society.



US Navy memorial at Utah Beach, Normandy, France.

NOTES

¹The Naval Order of the United States is a non-profit organization, established in 1890 to keep naval history alive through the restoration of historic artifacts, establishment of memorials at key sites and the collection of our shared history through academic papers, published works, and occasional unpublished works. Its membership comprises officers and enlisted who have served in the Sea Services of the United States. A portion of this article appeared in *The Navy D-Day Monument* published by the Naval Order of the United States in 2009. The Naval Order Commander General, CAPT Paul Crissy, USCG, has graciously granted permission to reprint this extract.

²The sculptor of the D-Day monument is Stephen C. Spears of Loveland, Alabama.

³Captain Jeff Subko, USNR (Ret.), "The US Navy and the D-Day Landings," Background Paper, 7 September 2008.

⁴Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. XI: The Invasion of France and Germany, 1944–45* (Little, Brown 1957, reprinted by Castle Books, p.143).

⁵James E. Knight, "The Old Navy: The DD That Saved the Day," *Naval Institute Proceedings*, August 1989, pp.124–25.

⁶Owen F. Keeler, "From the Seaward Side," *Naval Institute Proceedings*, August 1989, p. 126; another version is Thomas B. Allen, "The Gallant Destroyers of D-Day," *Naval History*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (June 2004).

⁷Dale K. Dirst, Diary, 5 June – 24 September 1944. Copy in possession of NOUS. Original has been donated to the Library of Congress, Veterans' History Project.

⁸Sonarman Don Krebs of Amherst, Ohio, joined the Naval Order Tour with his family on what would be his last visit to Normandy. He had made an earlier pilgrimage to Normandy some years before when he received the French Legion of Honor medal in recognition of his service in USS *Harding*.

⁹Morison, *Invasion of France and Germany*, p.152. William B. Kirkland Jr., *Destroyers at Normandy: Naval Gunfire Support at Omaha Beach*, edited by John C. Reilly (Washington, DC, Naval Historical Foundation, 1994).

¹⁰Mortimer Caplin, "US Navy Beachmaster at Omaha" Personal Recollection, remarks presented at NOUS Congress, Rosslyn, VA, 21 October 2006.