



Grupo de Investigación  
**Historia Militar**

## ***Bloody OMAHA: Tragedy and Triumph On D-Day's Most Costly Landing***

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The Western Allies landed on five code-named beaches on D-Day, from right to left as they faced the enemy, UTAH, OMAHA, GOLD, JUNO, and SWORD. Each was a decisive part of the amphibious landings in Normandy, and two UTAH and SWORD, were directly supported by airborne landings of divisions. OMAHA suffered the highest losses of the amphibious landings, and came the closest to failing, a failure which would have posed a major setback for the American landings, and would have cut off the American sector to the west, in the Cherbourg Peninsula. Was OMAHA badly planned? Did they have bad luck? Was OMAHA even necessary as an objective?

The planning was the result of a nearly two year contentious discussion concerning the feasibility and proper force employment for entering the Continent of Europe. The Americans had pressed for an early landing, with a possible emergency landing in 1942 (SLEDGEHAMMER), and a major landing in the early summer of 1943 (ROUNDUP). The British felt the landings too perilous at the time, and a fixation which would ignore the necessity to stabilize both the German-Italian and Japanese theaters. The delay had significant advantages. During the period before the Normandy landings, the Allies developed both the veteran command teams and specific equipment for such an undertaking in North Africa, (TORCH), Sicily (HUSKY) and Salerno, Italy (AVALANCHE), and the air campaign had progressed to such an extent that air superiority was never in doubt. Perhaps more importantly, the Atlantic campaign against the U-boats had made possible safe passage for the shipping needed for such a massive buildup and German airpower, had been decisively weakened. Both were necessities in order to support an ocean launched attack on the continent of Europe in the Northwest.<sup>1</sup>

In August, 1943, the Allies approved OUTLINE OVERLORD, a draft plan for the invasion of Europe now called OVERLORD.<sup>2</sup> This was produced by the Chief of Staff, Supreme Allied Commander (COSSAC), an ad hoc planning Headquarters created at Norfolk House, St. James Square, in London. It was eventually to form the cadre for the final Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF). Upon their appointments as Supreme Allied Commander and 21 Army Group Commander in late December 1943, both General Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander and General Montgomery, the ground commander for OVERLORD, agreed to expand the plan into a larger operation, both to gain width and depth to the landing by adding two assault divisions. While Eisenhower successfully demanded more naval assets to permit a larger landing, Montgomery recast the plan, now called NEPTUNE. He reshuffled the command design to provide two Army Headquarters for landing corps in their own national sectors and added an American beach UTAH backed by one (and later a second) airborne division, and one British beach,

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<sup>1</sup> Planning and Strategy is handled nationally in each of the Official History series. See Maurice Matloff *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare. 2 volumes, 1941-1942; and 1943-1944.* And Butler, *Grand Strategy Volumes III and IV*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, For specific plans, see *Planning D-Day (Operation OVERLORD), Report No. 42, Canadian Historical Section, 1951, available at Canadian Defence History site.*

<sup>2</sup> Gordon A. Harrison. *Cross-Channel Attack. Appendix A. Digest of Operation OVERLORD.* Washington: Center of Military History, 1951, pp. 450-456. See also L.F. Ellis. *Victory in the West. Volume 1.* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962, Chapters 1-4, passim. See CARL DIGITAL Library, Allied Conference////////

SWORD which was flanked in depth by a British airborne division. The original three beaches, later named OMAHA, GOLD, and JUNO remained.<sup>3</sup>

The American FIRST Army, commanded by Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley was tasked to assault and capture UTAH and OMAHA beaches, with the intent of capturing the port of Cherbourg early, and cutting off and holding the Cotentin Peninsula. VII Corps was assigned this task, with the V Corps under Maj. Gen. Leonard T. Gerow, commanding the left hand corps of First Army, seizing OMAHA beach. Its vital task was to tie the western most effort, with the British Second Army landing on GOLD, JUNO and SWORD. Second Army would seize Caen, and move southwards to both gain better airfield terrain, and to provide a shield against the main attacks expected from the Pas de Calais area, and also aimed at the twin crossroads at Bayeux, east of OMAHA, and Caen on the far eastern flank. All corps would close together beginning on D+1, to ensure a continuous frontage, thus preventing a defeat in detail as well as freeing additional beach for direct landings of supplies and equipment.<sup>4</sup>

First Army intended to develop operations by landing 4<sup>th</sup> Division on UTAH beach followed by the 9<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> Divisions, and both the 29<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Divisions abreast on OMAHA Beach. First Division was given the assault command for H-Hour with two regiments of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division directly under command, as well as the two assault regiments of the First landing to their east. Command would be switched to the respective divisions when the command posts came ashore in late afternoon and V Corps established its advanced command post ashore. Each corps would assume command of the entire sector including all attached Army level troops, and supporting troops until First Army designated a “rear area command” be established. V Corps would swell to a force of six reinforced divisions by D+3 (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored, 3d Armored, 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Divisions) before splitting into a two corps sector, after the activation of the XIX Corps.<sup>5</sup>

V Corps published its own plan for the NEPTUNE assault on March 26, but immediately had a major change in order of battle. Operating from the draft directive issued orally, V Corps had already decided to use the 1<sup>st</sup> Division as the assault task force command with the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, the longest in theater asset having been V Corps original cadre in 1942. The 28<sup>th</sup> Division was transferred to the First Army reserve for an emergency landing in Brittany, and replaced by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. Divisions likewise operated off “draft” plans as landing craft availability and enemy information prompted some changes. Final plans as a result were not confirmed until April or May for the division though units had already begun “wet rehearsals” of the basic outline at the Amphibious Training area at Slapton Sands.<sup>6</sup>

OMAHA Beach has complex terrain. Identified in the original COSSAC plan as the largest beach, it was about 8000 yards long and had high cliffs on both ends. Exit from the shallow beach was through five terrain draws spread almost equally on the south end of the beach.<sup>7</sup>

While the terrain complexity and the need to develop a deep beachhead remained as a critical consideration, the enemy’s defenses also determined OMAHA’s selection. When assigned in January,

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<sup>3</sup> *Montgomery in Normandy*. Edited by Army Records Society. This provides a selection of planning documents and assessments from 21 Army Group Headquarters along with early directives from 21 Army Group. See COSSAC, outline OVERLORD, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> *First Army Report of Operations, 20 Oct 1943 to August 1944*. Appendix 1 and 2. See Initial Joint Plan,

<sup>5</sup> See *First Army Report of Operations, Volume 1 and Appendices 1 and 2*.

<sup>6</sup> CARL DIGITAL Library. N 7375. *Operations Plan. NEPTUNE, Headquarters V Corps, 26 March 1944*.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit.

1944, OMAHA's defense was rated as one coastal battalion of roughly 7-9 platoons, stretched thinly along the high ground overlooking the beach. The 716<sup>th</sup> Coast Division, rated as a second-tier defense asset, was known to be defending a sector of roughly 53 miles for its 7,700 man strength. The veteran 352d Infantry Division was located approximately ten kilometers to the southwest at St. LO, and was expected to be in reserve to react to threats either in the Cherbourg peninsula, or more likely towards Bayeux, which had open landing beaches and was a vital defensive hub. The 352d Division was not assessed as being part of the immediate coastal defense.<sup>8</sup>

Aerial photography and other intelligence discerned that the Germans were adding beach defenses extensively throughout the Normandy area. In addition to extensive minefields, the beaches were given three defense belts of fortifications. At the high tide sector, these consisted of metal hedgehogs and also seaward facing logs mounted as a tripod, with mines or explosives on a large proportion of them. A second belt at the mid tide level consisted of large metal gates, some twelve feet high and equally wide, with additional hedgehogs at the low water line. These three belts were obstacles throughout the tidal range, though the Germans were convinced that a landing would take place at high tide, the obstacles were therefore designed to rip landing craft bottoms, not actually block landings. There were no mines on the tidal flat though mines falling from the obstacles did wash up there. Past the beach road, there were wire entanglements and mines covering the reentrants leading off the beach.<sup>9</sup>

Directives given to the Corps and Divisions had initiated planning before these obstacles were located and assessed. This required an extensive upgrade of both engineering planning and a modification in assault tactics as the event horizon on the landing closed, with the landings expected to take place after 31 May.

Besides dealing with the growing defenses, the landing was influenced greatly by the beach profile, and hydrography, the underwater condition of the landing area. OMAHA is located off a rising shelf of soft beach permitting landing and the refloating of landing craft, which were determined to be best landed at half-tide, permitting them to back off with the rising tide. The actual tidal flow gave a 300 yard shelf before deep water, with the tide rising between 9 and 23 feet in that area over about a three hour space. The three assault waves planned to land in this space of time.<sup>10</sup>

A shale pile ranging from 150 to 400 yards wide lay at the southern end of the beach, which then ended on the lateral beach road along the beach. This road was backed by steep bluffs, about 50 meters above the beach area. The beach reentrants or exits each had a road, with four graded for heavy traffic. All were heavily protected.<sup>11</sup>

While the landing occupied the planners immediate concern, the hedgerows behind the beaches became the most operationally influential terrain in the corps sector. Once the beach exits were traversed or the bluffs climbed directly, the rising ground led to small farms and the bocage. The bocage was a seemingly endless series of high hedges, some ten feet high, with a three foot or so base. The heavy root system made the thick hedges impenetrable even to tanks. The hedgerows divided the fields

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. Intelligence annex.

<sup>9</sup> *V Corps History, Chapter 2.*

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Georges Bernard. *Omaha Beach*. Bayeux: Heimdal, 1957, Chapters 1 and 2, and War Department. *Omaha Beachhead*. Washington: Center of Military History, 1945, 2001, pp. 8-27.

into small rectangles roughly a hundred meters square with one or two exits. This made movement difficult and unit maneuver almost impossible.

Each rectangle was a natural fire trap for German ambushes and therefore had to be fought for and cleared. It was not until the U.S. modified tanks into "hedge-cutters," was a breakthrough in this area possible. The influence and strength of these hedges, was a massive intelligence failure to perceive how difficult these obstacles were going to be to maneuver units in the final development of the Corps area.<sup>12</sup>

The arrival of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel to command German Army Group B, the main defense on the Channel coast, portended major changes not envisioned by the original OVERLORD Outline plan. COSSAC had estimated that the Germans would man the coast thinly except at major ports, and would concentrate armor and mobile reserves to meet any footholds gained. This, indeed, had been the plan favored by Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, the German commander in the west.

Rommel viewing airpower at the main allied advantage, and one which would prevent massed armor and movement of reserves from far inland, decided to thicken the defense with both concrete strongpoints and minefields. This mass attempt at field engineering took place during the allied planning period. More importantly, Rommel moved reserves to become virtually a second line behind any good landing areas, and ordered the defense to destroy the enemy in the water, or immediately after landing by rapid assaults. This had been foreseen by 21 Army Group in May, and Montgomery correctly briefed this at the final plans review in mid-May. This had caused no major changes in planning except to underscore the immediate move inland to gain defensible ground, a fact covered in V Corps concept of establishing two full divisions ashore before dark on D-Day. This also included having two full armored battalions ashore to support the infantry.<sup>13</sup>

Worst assessed and understood by intelligence was the series of 15 hardened strong points and pillboxes that were on the lower part of the bluffs at OMAHA. These were on a low embankment, with the fortifications all covering the beaches and capable of raking the landing area not only with machine gun and mortar fire, but with direct fire of 75-mm and 88-mm guns. These guns were angled to cover a designated fire zone, and were not free traversed. The actual seaward face of the emplacements were solid concrete to protect the guns from naval gunfire. Though they had limited traverse within their sectors, every area was covered by pairing these emplacements to cover sectors from each flank.<sup>14</sup>

The reentrants were heavily mined and boobytrapped, besides covered by fire from these positions. There were no real emplacements on the bluffs, though the Germans dug in and probably had limited field works around their company areas and around the villages of Vierville and Colleville. (see obstacle diagrams, V Corps Report of Operations).

There were 15 concreted strong points. These included widertandnests, or Standing Firing points. Tobruk rings, a form of hardened foxhole, gave sited positions for machineguns and mortars which were accessed from concrete shelters for crews and ammunition. Wire and minefields were laid within the positions which were sited for all round defense, though their designated firing sectors were their main

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<sup>12</sup> CPT Michael Doubler, *Busting the Bocage. Ft. Leavenworth, Combat Studies Institute, 1988*, passim.

<sup>13</sup> 15 May briefing. See Oplan NEPTUNE, and *Montgomery in Normandy*, pp. 99-103.

<sup>14</sup> Georges Bernage. *OMAHA Beach. Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 1957*, pp. 16-63.

mission. This defense was a work in progress and was being added to with additional mines and wire and was to be extended in depth had there been more time.

The 352d Division had moved forward in March, but it had not been located until immediately prior to the landings, and troops and units offshore awaiting landing, could not be notified while at sea. Warning, however, could not have changed their plans or dispositions. One of the 352<sup>nd</sup>'s regiments had moved behind the 716<sup>th</sup> Division, with one behind OMAHA. Its third regiment moved to Bayeux. The division had its full complement of 13,700 men.<sup>15</sup>

This move added four battalions to the OMAHA sector, and no less than 16 artillery pieces to supplement the 6x155-mm guns at Point du Hoc. This added depth to the *716<sup>th</sup> Division's 726<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment's battalion*, 50% of which were Eastern prisoners enlisted to fight on the German side, and were considered of low dependability.<sup>16</sup>

Good intelligence, however, was provided to the assault troops on the physical obstacles to be met on landing. These were depicted in large-scale overprinted color maps issued just before landing. They showed every known obstacle, emplacement, and gun, and permitted assault troops to be prepared to deal with these upon landing. These were issued to company grade officers, and key engineer personnel. (see photos of maps).

The attackers had estimated that the defense would follow German defense doctrine as much as their strength permitted, thus that a designated reserve would counterattack any penetration that developed. Since the attackers expected a thin defense, they believed their primary challenge would be the counterattack launched by elements of the *352d Division, probably in the early afternoon*. They expected a major counterattack by panzer divisions against the Allied bridgehead to materialize as early as D+1/D+2.<sup>17</sup>

V Corps had organized its first waves based on four companies landing abreast, from two regiment's also abreast, roughly 1450 infantrymen. Additionally, combat engineers, amphibious assault tank companies, and Rangers would take part in the landing. These came from special units formed specifically for the Normandy landing. These featured predominantly in the first wave to land. Each wave would have this 8 company attack formation, reinforced by a Ranger Company.<sup>18</sup>

The Provisional Engineer Brigade was the largest unit deployed on OMAHA Beach, and continued to be formed over several days of landings. Its assault job was to clear beach obstacles by blowing gaps, then clearing the exits of the beach, and finally laying mesh matting on the beach for vehicle landings. It was charged with organizing the area to receive supplies and communications units until First Army could assume control of the "Army Rear Area." Upon full deployment, the Brigade totaled 20,000 men including combat engineer battalions from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Engineer Special Brigades and the 11<sup>th</sup> Port Unit. Five hundred and forty combat engineers landed at H minus Five minutes preceding the infantry

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<sup>15</sup> F.H. Hinsley. *British Military Intelligence in the Second World War. Volume III, part 2. Appendix 14. Intelligence relating to the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division and 352<sup>nd</sup> Division Up to D-day*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Georges Bernage. *Omaha Beach, ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> Hinsley, *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> U.S.Army. *Omaha Beachhead*. Washington: Center of Military History,

of the first wave. These included combined teams of both Navy demolition specialists and similar groups of special amphibious engineers. Each of sixteen five man teams planned to blow a 150 yard wide gap.<sup>19</sup>

Also arriving ahead of the landing infantry in the first wave were three companies of “swimming tanks”, each from a battalion assigned to the two landing regiments. The 743d Tank Battalion landed on the right supporting the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, and the 741<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion on the left, supporting the First Division. These six companies of specially modified M4 Sherman DD (Dual Drive) tanks had braced canvas screens erected all round the hull to give the tank freeboard in calm water and some degree of floatation. Engine compartments were waterproofed, and air ducts raised above the screens to permit the engines to breath and also for exhaust ducts. Propellers and rudders permitted both propulsion and steering. These were meant to be launched from Landing Craft, Tanks (LCT) some six thousand yards from the beach and precede the infantry waves.<sup>20</sup>

Two battalions of Rangers landed on D-day, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger landing below Point du Hoc’s 100 foot sheer cliff, and the elements of the 29<sup>th</sup> Rangers, a specially trained battalion of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, landing on the right of the Division. These rangers assaulted the Point Du Hoc gun emplacements, one from direct assault, and one from an encircling move, to neutralize the guns located there. This was a supporting operation, to prevent the guns from interfering with landings at both UTAH and OMAHA beach. In the event, the guns were not in the emplacements, but were neutralized when they were located deeper inland.<sup>21</sup>

Preparation fires for the landing would come from the air forces, and naval task group offshore. While some bombing began as early as February, the intensive phase called for in the TRANSPORTATION PLAN began in May, culminating on the attack on bridges and near targets, which also saw the dropping of all bridges over the Seine River. This bombing was done with a two to one ratio favoring the Pas de Calais region to support the deception plan, FORTITUDE, which falsely portrayed a major landing to follow Normandy to fix major enemy reserves in the north. More than 2900 US Aircraft, and 2700 Royal Air Force aircraft were controlled by AEAFF, the Allied Expeditionary Air Forces. They flew more than 22,000 sorties prior to D-Day and suffered losses of 4560 Killed, and 29,078 air crewmen missing in action with a further 4665 wounded.<sup>22</sup>

On D-day itself, the Western Task Force provided naval gunfire from 2 battleships, 2 light cruisers, 12 destroyers, and 14,000 rockets fired from specially prepared Landing craft to hit more than forty targets designated by V Corps throughout the beach and inland sector. Firing at first light, this bombardment lasted from 0550 to 0624 hours. Overhead, the EIGHTH Air Force’s Second Bomb Division provided 1361 bombers, of which 1083 bombed. Due to bad visibility, bombardiers used H2X bombing aids and were

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<sup>19</sup> OMAHA BEACH Provisional Engineer Special Brigade Group. *Operation Report NEPTUNE. OMAHA BEACH. 26 February-26 June 1944. 30 September 1944, passim.* This is the single most valuable report on the OMAHA landings.

<sup>20</sup> US Army Armor School. *Armor in Operation NEPTUNE. Available CARL DIGITAL LIBRARY.* www. Carl digital Library.

<sup>21</sup> War Department. *Army in Action Series. Small Unit Battles, 1945, chapter 1.*

<sup>22</sup> American Battle Monuments Commission. *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe: World War II.* Washington: ABMC, 2020, pp. 222-224; see also CARL DIGITAL Library, *Review of air support Prior to Operation NEPTUNE, Allied Expeditionary Forces.* This indicates more than 195,000 sorties flown by all commands prior to D-Day from April, 1944. Whether directly air interdiction or not, these all contributed to total air supremacy by destruction of the German Air Force west of German border.



told to toggle late, to avoid short bombing into the boat lanes. As a result, the 2944 tons of bombs actually dropped landed as much as several kilometers south of the beach, and no German emplacements were hit. These bombers carried only 100 lb. bombs at the request of Gen. Bradley, First Army commander, and were intended only for shock effect, as he did not want the roads leading up from the beach cratered. Later in the day, a further 782 heavy bombers hit road and rail concentrations from Caen, Lisieux and Coutances to add to interdicting the movement of German reserves.<sup>23</sup>

Troops carried as much as 75 lbs. of equipment, but their unit basic loads of ammunition, food and supplies would come ashore in later loads in either amphibious dukw vehicles, or mainly on landing craft. An artificial port, called MULBERRY was to be assembled on OMAHA's right flank from towed into place ships which were sunk as breakwaters. Concrete caissons were used for wharfage and to place flexible roads to rise and fall with the tide on pontoons. This harbor took several days to assemble and was destroyed in the great Channel storm of June 19, leaving across the beach operations as the prime method of supplying V Corps. But on D-day, soldiers fought with what they carried, and their artillery landed their basic loads from landing craft.<sup>24</sup>

V Corps had divided OMAHA into seven named sections, each to handle one or two companies. These coded sections became the basis for organizing each assault wave on separate company frontages. Each of the two assaulting divisions were given objectives beyond the beach, to reach and defend a beachhead defensive line, which would permit the landing to operate free from observed fires, as well as to defend against the expected German counterattacks.

V Corps assigned the right (western) flank to the 29<sup>th</sup> Division under Maj. Gen. Charles H. Gerhardt. The left (eastern) flank was assigned to the First Division which also controlled the entire landing until the command posts for both divisions and the corps were operating ashore, later in the day. This command fell to Maj. Gen. Clarence R. Huebner. Gen. Gerow opened his command post late on D-day. Regiments were assigned objectives to widen and deepen the objective area, to permit the landing of subsequent divisions and to provide a base to expand outward to link with the UTAH and GOLD Beach landings on D+1. (see map D-Day Objectives).

On the right, the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry would land four companies abreast plus a Ranger Company, and on the left, the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry would land a similar four companies. This meant that each regiment would need two subsequent smaller waves to form the First Wave, to put both regiments ashore. A total of 1460 men landed in each wave. Later waves would land the 115<sup>th</sup>, and 175<sup>th</sup> Infantry for the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, and the 18<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry for the First Division. (See First Wave Map).<sup>25</sup>

The infantry landed directly behind the engineers and tanks which were to land minutes before. The 743d Tank Battalion landed on the right and 741<sup>st</sup> on the left. Each would launch 32 tanks to support the first wave. Due to the actual wind of ten knots and the 4 foot chop in sea state, the 743d decided to land its tanks directly on shore from the landing craft. The 741<sup>st</sup> which chose to launch at sea, saw almost all of the tanks sink after being swamped by waves. While 27 of the 743d tanks made the water's edge, only three of the 741<sup>st</sup> were believed to have made the beach. Landed tanks normally stayed in the surf giving gunfire support to landing infantry but many were knocked out by direct antitank fire from the

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<sup>23</sup> Joseph Balkowski. OMAHA BEACH. D-Day, June 6, 1944. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2004, pp. 75-79.

<sup>24</sup> Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, pp. 422-426.

<sup>25</sup> OMAHA BEACH,



pillboxes. The capture and clearance of the five reentrants were necessary to permit the armor to operate inland from the beach.<sup>26</sup>

The landing infantry piled onto a rapidly unfolding disaster. Besides losing the direct support of half the tanks, heavy gunfire from virtually the entire intact German strongpoints and widernest gun positions, raked the beach and water in their own designated firing sectors. The First Wave met immediate disaster, and virtually dissolved in confusion. As engineer units lost as many as 40% of their men in the five minutes before the main wave landed, few obstacle gaps were cleared, and most engineers sought cover in the water or behind obstacles, terrified to move in the killing zone. As German mortar and artillery fire straddled the boat lane, boats clustered around the few gaps trying to reach the water's edge. Others unloaded their men in deep water, with wounded being drowned by the heavy loads which pulled them under. The strong westerly wind pulled boats to the right of their lanes and units became intermixed. As much as 50% of the first wave were casualties in the first minutes of the landings the rest were absent control, as many leaders first out of their craft had become casualties, killed or wounded in the first seconds in the water. Essentially, the men were trapped and leaderless in a deadly fire zone.

Those who remained upright and moving tried to run to the beach wall or shale area and were nearly all killed instantly. Those at the water's edge remained in the beaten zone of nearly two dozen machine guns and falling rounds from the German artillery. At least ten of the tanks were immediately destroyed by the direct fire of the 75-mm and 88-mm guns emplaced to cover the beach though one tank successfully dueled with and destroyed an 88-mm gun. A number of the tanks became swamped as the rising water covered them in their stationary water cover. Unless pulled by comrades, wounded drowned as the incoming tide covered them, as their heavy equipment held them under water. Perhaps as many as one thousand wounded or dead were washed out to sea during the day by the rising tide and then the next tide receding.

The second wave piled into this carnage, further mixing units some of whose survivors had made it to the shale or huddled in groups behind hedgehogs hoping to evade fire. More than ten large and 50 smaller landing craft had been destroyed, mostly by direct fire, indirect fire, or a few by ramming explosive laden obstacles. Smoke covered the area adding to the limited visibility of the overcast day.

Some of the worst losses occurred in front of Draw E-3, near Colleville, on FOX GREEN Beach under the guns of the German position, WN 62. WN 62 was a 400 meter square strong point with mortars, machine guns, its own minefields and wire both around and within it, and a gun shelter for a 75-mm antitank gun. Its overview of FOX GREEN was totally clear, and within its automatic weapons range. No shale mound or sea wall offered cover, the beach was totally open and clear.<sup>27</sup>

WN 62 was located on the shelf midway up the bluff and its position completely dominated at least one or two kilometers of the right of OMAHA BEACH. One of its gunners, Private Severoh, fired over 12,000 rounds or roughly sixty full machine gun belts from his MG 42 gun at targets across the beach. He survived to be captured at day's end. He claims to have killed over 1000 men, but the number was likely to have been in the hundreds, but the WN 62 position certainly inflicted as many as half of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division's casualties that day. One observer noted that the beach seemed to have "a human carpet,"

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<sup>26</sup> CARL Digital Library, Armor in Neptune Study. US Army Armor School,

<sup>27</sup> Bernage.

made of the casualties left there. Like all positions, it had to be taken from the rear by troops who climbed the bluff and outflanked its positions.<sup>28</sup>

By 0800, two full waves of over 3000 soldiers had been either killed or trapped at the water's edge. Landing in the Second Wave was the assistant division commander of the 29<sup>th</sup>, Brig. Gen. Norman D. Cota, and one Regimental Commander of the First, Colonel George Taylor. These men tried to get small groups to move inland. As the reentrants were the worst killing zones, groups or individuals, had struck out for the bluffs in between.<sup>29</sup>

By 0900 with no word from the beach and offshore observation showing the carnage and confusion, Gen. Bradley began considering withdrawing from OMAHA. Admiral Hall advised that a withdrawal would be more costly and trying to fight through was the only solution. The pattern had a morbidly similar pattern. As the men landed, they were already weakened by seasickness, vomiting, soaked in cold water, and terrified from the unexpected carnage and confusion. Few were physically strong enough to react. There were no real effective units. With the exception of one company that had miraculously landed at the far edge of converging fire zones and remained intact, virtually the rest of the more than 4000 men of the combined four regiments were scattered into groups caused by lack of gaps in beach obstacles. Many had abandoned or lost their equipment in the water.

Instinctively and with the example of such men as Cota and Taylor men began to move forward. Leaders emerged to drag comrades out of the water, and force them to climb the bluffs. Out of the beaten zone from flanking fire, men found covered firing positions as they emerged atop the bluffs and moved inland toward the villages. Each sector expanded outward, and by late morning the Atlantic Wall fortifications were being neutralized by direct assault. Hitler's Atlantic Wall had failed, and Rommel's plan to kill the invasion in the water failed, but it was a "close run thing."

By noon, large enough penetrations had formed to attack all the reentrants from the flanks and move inland and towards the German second line. More tanks had landed by morning's end, and a few moved up the draws after they were cleared by engineers.

Naval gunfire teams had begun operating by mid morning, and destroyers had moved inshore, and began firing on targets of opportunity. Their naval group leader urged by short range radio to support the advance closely as few shore based radios linked to them due to losses in the water. At least a half dozen destroyers closed to less than 900 yards, with scant water under their keels, to suppress battery fires and mortars using only direct observation to guide them. While most ships operated without naval liaison parties observing fires, a few missions were fired directed by air spotters. These engaged German reserves inland. Firing expenditures ranged from 350 to 1100 rounds for the day among the destroyers.

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By evening the penetrations filled to perhaps a third of the expected division sectors as planned, but engineers rapidly cleared lanes and troops continued landing until midnight. More than 34,000 men had disembarked from the assault transports. Nearly 5000 men were dead, wounded, or unaccounted for in the two assault divisions, the tank battalions, and the engineer provisional brigade. Sailors from landing

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Samuel Eliot Morison. *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II. Volume 11. The Invasion of France and Germany*. Boston: Little Brown, 1957, 1988, p. 137

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Balkowski. *OMAHA BEACH. D-DAY June 6, 1944*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2004, passim.

<sup>30</sup> Morison, op cit., pp 142-149.

craft added to the casualty lists and a number of airmen were shot down in the tactical air force. OMAHA's casualty listed when computed from all services, included between a third and a half of all D-Day casualties on all beaches and all services.<sup>31</sup>

These figures were computed from all service lists by historian Robert L. Balkowski using all available records and have shown that casualty estimates, based on V Corps and division records alone used by previous historians, have masked OMAHA's true cost. This was:

V Corps attached units 1568 killed, wounded and missing.

1<sup>st</sup> Division 1346, KIA, MIA, WIA.

29<sup>th</sup> Division'1272 KIA, MIA, WIA

Naval Forces 539 KIA, MIA, WIA

Air Forces 10 killed, 2d Bomb Division, 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. This doesn't include AEF losses.

4720 total killed, wounded and missing.<sup>32</sup>

While OMAHA has often been portrayed as a tragedy, it is a triumph of the individual soldier. It is a strong testimony to gallant men, and their willingness to endure and overcome battle's confusion and loss. Three Congressional Medals of Honor and one hundred and fifty six Distinguished Service Crosses were awarded to soldiers on OMAHA, or in the battle that followed throughout the day for the high ground and villages behind the beach. While it is true that that great loss caused many units to cease functioning temporarily, this band of heroes, and the nameless number that fell along side them, spearheaded the victory that became a triumph, and solidified the Allied foothold in Normandy, which grew to the massive victory that followed.

Every soldier, sailor and airman who participated in or supported this action shared the honor of those decorated. Most of the units landing are still serving in the Army and its reserve components. They remember the actions of their forbears due to Unit Citations and Campaign Streamers that are carried on their Unit's colors. These are part of their battle heritage, a heritage of valor.

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<sup>31</sup> No comprehensive allied total of casualties from all nations and services has been compiled that includes all elements engaged.

<sup>32</sup> Balkowski, *Omaha Beach*, pp. 350-352. V Corps had estimated its losses at 2500 in its early report.