

# FIRST WAVE AT OMAHA BEACH

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*While the fighting at Normandy still raged, S. L. A. Marshall began reconstructing the events of D day by interviewing men who took part. His blow-by-blow, almost minute-by-minute, account of Americans at one segment of Omaha Beach is an unforgettable chronicle of death and daring, panic and heroism.*

Few of the decisive battles of World War II have been as thoroughly reported for the official record as Omaha Beach on D day, June 6, 1944. While our troops were still fighting in western France, what happened to each unit in the Normandy landing was ascertained through eyewitness testimony of survivors. This research by field historians established where each company had hit the beach and by what route it had moved inland. Because every unit but one had been mislanded, the work was necessary in order to determine where each had fought, how it had fought, and what it had suffered.

The Army historians who wrote the first book about Omaha Beach, based on this field research, necessarily did a job of sifting and weighting the material. Normandy was an American victory; the primary task was to trace the twists and turns of fortune by which the success was won. But the effect of that emphasis was to slight the story of Omaha as an epic human tragedy which, in the early hours, came close to total disaster. The passing of the years has further tended to obscure the memory of shocking losses, failures and chaos in the Omaha landings that were the anguished prelude to victory.

On this two-division-front landing, only six rifle companies were relatively effective as units. They did better than others mainly because they had the luck to touch down on a less deadly section of the beach. Three times

that number were shattered or foundered before they could begin to fight. Several units did not contribute a man or a bullet to the actual battle for the high ground, the steeply graded and heavily fortified bluff beyond a strip of sand which was fifty to 300 yards wide.

The ordeal of these ill-fated companies, the more wretched and blood-chilling individual experiences, were largely overlooked or toned down in the official accounts. In most of what has been written about Omaha there is less blood and iron and death than in the original field notes on battalion landings in the first wave. My own fading Normandy notebook, which covers the landing of every Omaha company, leaves little doubt on this score. Let's follow along with the Able and Baker Companies, 11 6th Infantry, 29th Division, as recorded in my notes.

Able Company, riding the tide in seven Higgins boats (personnel landing craft), is still 5000 yards from the beach when it first comes under enemy artillery fire. The shells fall short. But at 1000 yards Boat No. 5 takes a direct hit and founders. Six men drown before help arrives. Second Lieutenant Edward Gearing and twenty others paddle around until picked up by Naval craft, thus missing the fight at the shoreline. The other six boats ride unscathed to within 100 yards of the shore, where a shell into Boat No. 3 kills two men. Another dozen, taking to the water as their boat sinks, are drowned. That leaves five boats.

Lieutenant Edward Tidrick in Boat No. 2 cries out, "My God, we're coming in at the right spot, but look at it! No shingle, no wall, no shell holes, no cover. Nothing!" His men are at the sides of the boat, straining for a view of the target. At 6:36 a.m. ramps are dropped along the line of boats, and the men jump off into water anywhere from waist-deep to higher than a man's head. This is the signal awaited by the Germans on top of the bluff. Already pounded by mortars, the floundering assault line is now swept by crossing machine-gun fire from both ends of the beach.

Able Company has planned to wade ashore in three files from each landing craft, the center file going first, then flank files peeling off to right and left. The first men out try to do this, but they are ripped apart before they can make five yards. The mortally wounded sink at once, and even the lightly wounded—doomed by overloaded and waterlogged packs—are drowned. From Boat No. 1 all hands jump off in water over their heads, and most of them are instantly carried down. Ten or so manage to clutch at the sides of the boat in an effort to stay afloat. The same thing happens to the men in Boat No. 4. Half of them are lost to gunfire or tide before anyone can get ashore. All order has vanished from Able Company before it has touched ground or fired a shot.

Already the churning sea runs red. Most of those who jump into shallow water are quickly knocked down by a bullet. Weakened by fear and shock, they cannot rise again and drown in a few feet of water. Some drag themselves ashore and collapse from total exhaustion, only to be overtaken by the waves and drowned. A few move safely through the rain of bullets to the beach, realize that they cannot hold there and retreat to the water for cover. With faces turned upward to keep their nostrils out of the water, they creep toward the land as the tide rises. That is how most of the survivors make it. The less rugged or less resourceful seek the cover of enemy obstacles moored along the upper half of the beach and are finished off by machine-gun fire.

Within seven minutes after the ramps drop, Able Company is inert and leaderless. At Boat No. 2 Lieutenant Tidrick takes a bullet through the throat as he jumps into the water. He staggers onto the sand and flops down ten feet from Pfc. Leo J. Nash. The Private hears the words gasped by the dying Lieutenant: "Advance with the wire cutters!" The order is futile—Nash has no cutters. Tidrick has raised himself up on his hands for an instant. Nash, burrowing into the sand, sees him ripped by bullets. From the cliff above, German machine-gunners are shooting into the survivors as from a rooftop.

Captain Taylor N. Fellers and Lt. Benjamin R. Kearfoot never make it. They are loaded with a section of thirty men in Boat No. 6. No one saw the craft go down. How each man on board met death remains unreported. Half of the drowned bodies were later found along the beach and it is assumed that the others, too, were claimed by the sea.

Along the beach only one Able Company officer still lives, Lt. Elijah Nance. He is hit in the heel as he quits his boat and hit again in the belly as he reaches the sand. By the end of ten minutes every sergeant is either dead or wounded. To the eyes of some survivors,

this clean sweep suggests that the Germans have spotted all the leaders and concentrated fire on them. Among the men who are still moving in with the tide, rifles, packs and helmets have already been cast away in the interests of survival.

To the right of where Tidrick's boat is adrift, its coxswain lying dead next to the shell-shattered wheel, the seventh craft noses toward the beach. It carries a medical section of one officer and sixteen men. The ramp is dropped. In that moment, two machine guns concentrate their fire on the opening. Not a man is given time to jump; all aboard are cut down where they stand.

By the end of fifteen minutes, Able Company still has not fired a weapon. No one gives any orders. The few able-bodied survivors move or not, as they see fit. Merely to stay alive is a full-time job. Yet a few men are remembered for their valor.

The first-aid man, Thomas Breedin, stands out among all others in Able Company. Reaching the sands, he strips off pack, blouse, helmet and boots. For a moment he stands there, so that others on the beach will see what he's about to do and follow suit. Then he crawls back into the water to pull in wounded men before they can be drowned by the tide.

The deeper water is still spotted with "tide walkers" advancing at the same slow rate as the rising water. But now, moved by Breedin's example, the stronger among them risk making themselves more conspicuous targets—they pick up fallen comrades and float them to the shore, raftwise. Machine-gun fire is raking the water. Burst after burst wrecks the rescue attempts, shooting the floating soldier from the hands of the walker, or killing both of them. But Breedin for this hour leads a charmed life and stays with his work indomitably.

By the end of half an hour, approximately two thirds of the company is gone forever. There are no precise casualty figures for this first half hour or for the first day. Whether more Able Company riflemen died from fire than from water was never ascertained.

By the end of the first hour, a number of survivors have crawled across the sand to the foot of the bluff, into a narrow sanctuary out of the line of fire. There they lie all day, some wounded, all exhausted and unarmed, too shocked even to talk to one another. No one happens by to offer water or succor. D day at Omaha Beach provides neither time nor space for such missions—every landing group is overwhelmed by its own assault problems.

By the end of one hour and forty-five minutes, six survivors from the boat section on the extreme right have worked their way to a shelf some yards up the face of the cliff. Four fall exhausted from the short climb. They stay there through the day, seeing no one else from their company. The other two, Pvts. Jake Shefer and Thomas Lovejoy, join a group from the 2d Ranger Battalion, which is attacking Pointe du Hoe to the right of the company sector, and fight with the Rangers throughout the day. Two men, two rifles—the sum total of Able Company's firepower on D day.

Baker Company is scheduled to land twenty-six minutes after Able, on the same sector, to bring support and reinforcement. A full load of trouble on the way in destroys the schedule. The sea is so rough that the men of

Baker must bail furiously with their helmets to keep its six boats from swamping. Thus preoccupied, they do not see the disaster overtaking Able until they are almost on top of it. What they behold is either so limited or so horrible that discipline withers, the assault wave begins to dissolve, the chaos induced by fear virtually cancels out the mission. Great clouds of smoke and dust raised by the enemy fire have almost closed a curtain around the agony of Able Company. Outside this pall nothing is to be seen but lines of corpses adrift, a few heads bobbing in the water and the crimson-running tide. The British coxswains raise the cry: "We can't go in there. We can't see the landmarks. We must pull off."

In the Baker command boat, Capt. Ettore V. Zappacosta pulls a Colt .45 and shouts, "By God, you'll take this boat straight in!" His display of courage compels obedience, but it is still a questionable order. Those of the Baker boats that try to proceed suffer the fate of Able Company. Three times during the approach, mortar shells break right next to Zappacosta's command boat but leave it unscathed, thus sparing its men a few more moments of life. At seventy-five yards from the sand, Zappacosta yells, "Drop the ramp!" The end goes down—and a storm of bullet fire comes in.

Zappacosta jumps from the boat first, reels ten yards through the elbow-high tide and yells, "I've been hit!" He stumbles on a few more steps. The first-aid man, Thomas Kenser, yells, "Try to make it. I'm coming." But the Captain falls face forward into the waves. and his equipment and soaked pack pin him to the bottom. Kenser jumps toward him and is shot dead in the air. Lieutenant Tom Dallas of Charley Company, who has come along for reconnaissance, is the third man. He makes it to the edge of the sand strip, where a machine-gun burst blows his head apart before he can flatten.

Private, first class, Robert L. Sales, who is lugging Zappacosta's radio, is the fourth to leave the boat, having waited long enough to see the others die. His heel catches on the

end of the ramp, and he falls sprawling into the tide, losing the radio but saving his life. Every man who follows him is either killed or wounded before reaching dry land.

Sales alone gets to the beach unhit. To traverse those few yards takes him two hours. First he crouches in the water, waddling forward on his haunches just a few paces. He collides with driftwood—a floating log. In that moment a mortar shell explodes just above his head, knocking him groggy. But he hugs the log to keep from going down, and the effort seems to clear his head a little. Then one of Able Company's tide walkers hoists him aboard the log and, using his sheath knife, cuts away Sales's pack, boots and assault jacket.

Feeling stronger, Sales returns to the water and using the log as cover, pushes in toward the shore. Private Mack L. Smith of Baker Company, hit several times in the face, joins him, and an Able Company rifleman named Kemper, his right leg badly wounded, also comes alongside. They follow the log until at last they roll it to the farthest reach of high tide. Then they flatten behind it, staying there for hours after the flow has turned to ebb. The dead of both companies wash up to where they lie and then wash out to sea again. If any of them recognizes the face of a comrade, Sales and his companions, disregarding the fire, join in dragging the body onto the sand beyond the reach of water. So long as the tide is full, they stay at this task. Later, a first-aid man comes crawling along the beach and dresses Smith's face wounds, then moves on. Sales, as he finds the strength, bandages Kemper's leg. The three huddle behind the log until night falls. There is nothing else to report on any member of Zappacosta's boat team.

Only one other Baker Company boat tries to come straight in to the beach. Somehow the boat founders. Somehow all of its people—one British coxswain and about thirty American infantrymen—are killed. There is no one to take note and report where they perished.

Frightened coxswains in the other four craft take one look, instinctively draw back, then veer right and left away from Able Company's shambles. In this they dodge their orders. But such is the shock to the boat-team leaders, such their feeling of relief at the turning movement, that not one utters a protest.

Lieutenant Leo A. Pingenot's coxswain swings his boat far to the right toward Pointe du Hoe. Then, spying a small and deceptively peaceful-looking cove, he heads directly for the land. Fifty yards out, Pingenot orders, "Drop the ramp!" The coxswain freezes on the rope, refusing to lower. Staff Sergeant Odell L. Padgett jumps him and bears him to the bottom of the boat. Padgett's men lower the rope and rush into the water. In two minutes they are all in up to their necks and struggling to avoid drowning. That quickly Pingenot is already far out ahead of them. Padgett comes even with him, and together they cross to dry land. The beach of the cove is heavily strewn with giant boulders. Bullets seem to be pinging off every rock.

Pingenot and Padgett dive behind the same rock. Glancing back, they are horrified to see that not one person has followed them. Quite suddenly smoke has half blanked out the scene beyond the water's edge. Pingenot moans, "My God, the whole boat team is dead." Padgett sings out, "Hey, are you hit?" Back come many voices from beyond the smoke. "What's the rush?" "We'll get there." "Who wants to know?" The men are still moving along, using the water as cover. Padgett's shout is their first information that anyone else has moved up onto the beach. They all make it to the shore, twenty-eight strong. Pingenot and Padgett manage to stay ahead of them, coaxing and encouraging. Padgett keeps yelling, "Come on, things are better up there!" Two men are killed and three wounded while they are crossing the beach.

In the cove the platoon latches onto a company of Rangers, fights all day as part of that company and helps destroy the enemy entrenchments on Pointe du Hoe. By sundown

that mop-up is completed. The platoon bivouacs at the first hedgerow beyond the cliff.

Another Baker Company boat which turns to the right has less luck. Staff Sergeant Robert M. Campbell, who leads the section, is the first man to jump out when the ramp goes down. He drops into deep water, and his load of two bangalore torpedoes takes him straight to the bottom. He jettisons the bangalores and then, surfacing, cuts away all his equipment for good measure. Machine-gun fire brackets him, and he submerges again briefly. Though not a strong swimmer, he heads out to sea. For two hours he paddles around, 200 or so yards from the shore. He hears and sees nothing of the battle, but somehow gets the impression that the invasion has failed and that all other Americans are dead, wounded or prisoners. In despair, strength fast going, he moves ashore rather than drown. Beyond the smoke he quickly finds the fire. He grabs a helmet from a dead man's head, crawls on hands and knees to the seawall and there finds five of his men, two of them unwounded.

Like Campbell, Pfc. Jan J. Budziszewski is carried to the bottom by his load of two bangalores. He hugs them half a minute before realizing that he must either let loose or drown. Next, he shucks off his helmet and pack and drops his rifle. Then he surfaces. After swimming 200 yards, he sees that he is moving in the wrong direction. So he turns about and heads for the beach, where he crawls ashore under a rain of bullets. In his path lies a dead Ranger. Budziszewski takes the dead man's helmet, rifle and canteen and crawls up to the seawall. The only survivor from Campbell's boat section to get off the beach, he spends his day walking to and fro along the foot of the bluff, looking for a friendly face.

In Lt. William B. Williams' boat, the coxswain steers sharp left and away from Zappacosta's sector. Not having seen the Captain die, Williams doesn't know that command of the unit has now passed to him. Guiding on his own instinct, the coxswain moves along the

coast 600 yards, then puts the boat straight in. It's a good guess; he has found a little vacuum in the battle. The ramp drops on dry sand, and the boat team jumps ashore. Yet it's a close thing. Mortar fire has dogged them all the way; and as the last rifleman clears the ramp, one shell lands dead center of the boat, blows it apart and kills the coxswain.

Momentarily the beach is free of fire, but the men cannot cross it at a bound. Weak from seasickness and fear, they move at a crawl, dragging their equipment. By the end of twenty minutes, Williams and ten men are over the sand and resting in the lee of the seawall. Five others are hit by machine-gun fire crossing the beach; six men, last seen while taking cover in a tidal pocket, are never heard from again. More mortar fire lands around the party as Williams leads it across the road beyond the seawall. The men scatter. When the shelling lifts, three of them do not return. Williams leads the seven survivors up a trail toward the fortified village of Les Moulins on top of the bluff. He recognizes the ground and knows that he is taking on a tough target. Les Moulins is perched above a draw, up which winds a dirt road from the beach, designated on the invasion maps as Exit No. 3.

Williams and his crew of seven are the first Americans to approach it D-day morning. Machine-gun fire from a concrete pillbox sweeps over them as they near the brow of the hill, moving at a crawl through thick grass. Williams says to the others, "Stay here; we're too big a target!" They hug earth, and he inches forward alone, moving through a shallow gully. Without being detected, he gets to within twenty yards of the gun, downslope from it. He heaves a grenade; but it explodes in air, just outside the embrasure. His second grenade hits the concrete wall and bounces right back on him. Three of its fragments hit him in the shoulders. Then, from out of the pillbox, a German potato masher (hand grenade) sails down on him and explodes just a few feet away; five more fragments cut into him. He starts crawling back to his men; en route, three bullets rip his rump and right leg.

The seven are still there. Williams hands his map and compass (symbols of command) to S. Sgt. Frank M. Price, saying, "It's your job now. But go the other way—toward Vierville." Price starts to look at Williams' wounds, but Williams shakes him off, saying, "No, get moving." He then settles himself in a hole in the embankment, stays there all day and at last gets medical attention just before midnight.

On leaving Williams, Price's first act is to hand map and compass to T. Sgt. William Pearce, whose seniority the Lieutenant had overlooked. They cross the draw, one man at a time, and some distance beyond come to a ravine; on the far side they bump into their first hedgerow, and as they look for an entrance, fire comes against them. Behind a second hedgerow, not more than thirty yards away, are seven Germans, five rifles and two burp guns (machine pistols). On exactly even terms, these two forces engage for the better part of an hour, with no one getting hit. Then Pearce settles the fight by crawling along a drainage ditch to the enemy flank. He kills the seven Germans with a Browning automatic rifle.

For Pearce and his friends, it is a first taste of battle and its success makes them giddy. Heads up, they walk along the road into Vierville, disregarding all precautions. They get away with it only because the village is already in the hands of Lt. Walter Taylor of Baker Company and twenty men from his boat team.

Taylor is a luminous figure in the story of D day, one of the forty-seven survivors of the landings on Omaha who, by their dauntless initiative at widely separated points along the beach, save the mission from total stagnation and disaster. Courage and luck are his in extraordinary measure.

The Taylor story begins when Baker Company's assault wave breaks up just short of the surf where Able Company is in ordeal. Taylor's coxswain swings his boat sharp left, then heads toward the shore about halfway

between Zappacosta's boat and Williams'. For a few seconds after the ramp drops, this bit of beach next to the village called Hamel-au-Pretre is clear of fire. No mortar shells crown the start. Taylor leads his section, crawling across the beach and over the seawall, losing four men killed and two wounded in this brief movement. Some yards off to his right, Taylor has seen Lts. Harold Donaldson and Emil Winkler shot dead. But there is no halt for reflection; Taylor leads the section by trail straight up the bluff and into Vierville, where his luck continues. In a two-hour fight he whips a German platoon without losing a man.

The village is quiet when Pearce joins him. Pearce says, "Williams is shot up back there and can't move."

"I guess that makes me company commander," says Taylor.

"This is probably all of Baker Company," Pearce remarks and takes a head count; they number twenty-eight, including Taylor.

Taylor says, "That ought to be enough. Follow me!"

Inland from Vierville about 500 yards lies the Chateau de Vaumicel, imposing in its rock-walled massiveness, its hedgerow-bordered fields all entrenched and interconnected with artillery-proof tunnels. To every man but Taylor, the target looks prohibitive. Still, they follow him. German fire stops them 100 yards short of the chateau. The enemy is behind a hedgerow about fifty yards in front of them. Taylor's men flatten, open fire with rifles and toss a few grenades, though the distance seems too great.

By sheer chance one grenade glances off the helmet of a German squatting in a foxhole. He jumps up, shouting, "*Kamerad! Kamerad!*" Thereupon twenty-four of the enemy walk from behind the hedgerow with their hands in the air. Taylor pares off one of his riflemen to march the prisoners back to the beach. The

brief fight has cost him three wounded. Within the chateau he takes two more prisoners, a German doctor and his first-aid man. Taylor puts them on a "kind of a parole," leaving his three wounded in their keeping while moving his platoon to the first crossroads beyond the chateau.

Here he is stopped by the sudden arrival of three truckloads of German infantry, who deploy into the fields on both flanks of his position and start an enveloping movement. The manpower odds, about three to one against him, are too heavy. In the first trade of fire, lasting not more than two minutes, a rifleman lying beside Taylor is killed, three others are wounded and the Browning automatic is shot from Pearce's hands. That leaves but twenty men and no automatic weapons.

Taylor yells, "Back to the chateau!" They crawl as far as the first hedgerow; then they rise and trot along, supporting their wounded. Taylor is the last man to go, having stayed behind to cover the withdrawal with his carbine until the hedgerows prevent fire against the others. So far the small group has had no contact with any other part of the expedition, and for all its members know, the invasion may have failed.

They make it to the chateau. The enemy moves in closer. The attacking fire builds up. But the stone walls are fire-slotted, and through the midday and early afternoon these ports serve the American riflemen well. The question is whether the ammunition will outlast the Germans. It is answered at sundown, just as the supply runs out, by the arrival of fifteen Rangers, who join their fire with Taylor's, and the Germans fade back.

Already Taylor and his force are farther south than any element of the right flank in the Omaha expedition. But Taylor isn't satisfied. The battalion objective, as specified for the close of D day, is still more than one half mile to the west.

So he leads them forth, again serving as first scout. Eighteen of his own riflemen and fifteen Rangers follow in column. One man is killed by a bullet while they are getting away from the chateau. Dark closes over them, and they prepare to bivouac. Having almost reached the village of Louviers, they are by this time nearly a half mile in front of anyone else in the U.S. Army. There a runner reaches them with the message that the remnants of the battalion are assembling 700 yards closer to the sea; Taylor and his party are directed to fall back to them. It is done.

Later, still under the spell, Staff Sergeant Price pays the perfect tribute to Taylor. He says, "We saw no sign of fear in him. Watching him made men of us. Marching or fighting, he was leading. We followed him because there was nothing else to do."

Thousands of Americans were spilled onto Omaha Beach. The high ground was won by a handful of men like Taylor who on that day burned with a flame bright beyond common understanding.