

## The Longest Day June 6, 1944

Across the bay, on the transport *New Amsterdam* anchored near Weymouth, Second Lieutenant George Kerchner of the 2nd Ranger Battalion was occupied with a routine chore. He was censoring his platoon's mail. It was particularly heavy tonight; everybody seemed to have written long letters home. The 2nd and 5th Rangers had been given one of the toughest D-Day assignments. They were to scale the almost sheer 100-foot cliffs at a place called Pointe du Hoc and silence a battery of six long-range guns—guns so powerful that they could zero in on Omaha Beach or the transport area of Utah Beach. The Rangers would have just thirty minutes to do the job.

Casualties were expected to be heavy—some thought as high as sixty per cent—unless the air and naval bombardment could knock out the guns before the Rangers got there. Either way, nobody expected the attack to be a breeze. Nobody, that is, except Staff Sergeant Larry Johnson, one of Kerchner's section leaders.

The lieutenant was dumfounded when he read Johnson's letter. Although none of the mail would be sent out until after D Day—whenever that would be—this letter couldn't even be delivered through ordinary channels. Kerchner sent for Johnson and, when the sergeant arrived, gave him back the letter. "Larry," said Kerchner drily, "you better post this yourself—after you get to France." Johnson had written a girl asking for a date early in June. She lived in Paris.

It struck the lieutenant as the sergeant left the cabin that as long as there were optimists like Johnson nothing was impossible.

Almost every man in the invasion forces wrote a letter to someone during the long hours of waiting. They had been penned up for a long time, and the letters seemed to give them emotional release. Many of them recorded their thoughts in a way that men seldom do.

Captain John F. Dulligan of the 1st Infantry Division, slated to land on Omaha Beach, wrote his wife: "I love these men. They sleep all over the ship, on the decks, in, on top, and underneath

## The Wait

the vehicles. They smoke, play cards, wrestle around and indulge in general horseplay. They gather around in groups and talk mostly about girls, home and experiences (with and without girls) . . . They are good soldiers, the best in the world . . . Before the invasion of North Africa, I was nervous and a little scared. During the Sicilian invasion I was so busy that the fear passed while I was working. . . . This time we will hit a beach in France and from there on only God knows the answer. I want you to know that I love you with all my heart. . . . I pray that God will see fit to spare me to you and Ann and Pat."

The men on heavy naval vessels or large transports, on airfields or in embarkation areas, were the lucky ones. They were restricted and overcrowded, but they were dry, warm and well. It was a different story for the troops on the flat-bottomed landing ships heaving at anchor outside nearly every harbor. Some men had been on these vessels for more than a week. The ships were overcrowded and foul, the men unbelievably miserable. For them the battle began long before they ever left England. It was a battle against continuous nausea and seasickness. Most of the men still remember that the ships smelled of just three things: diesel oil, backed-up toilets and vomit.

Conditions varied from ship to ship. On LCT 777 Signalman Third Class George Hackett, Jr., was amazed to see waves so high that they smashed over one end of the wallowing craft and rolled out the other. LCT 6, a British landing craft, was so overloaded that Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Hupfer of the U.S. 4th Division thought it would sink. Water lapped at the gunwales and at times washed over into the craft. The galley was flooded and the troops were forced to eat cold food—those who could eat at all.

LST 97, Sergeant Keith Bryan of the 5th Engineer Special Brigade remembers, was so overcrowded that men were stepping over one another, and it rolled so much that those lucky enough to have bunks had difficulty staying in them. And to Sergeant

were, from east and west, at St Côme-du-Mont, Chef-du-Pont and Pont l'Abbé. Thereafter the line of objectives, from Pont l'Abbé back to Exit 4, ran through the open countryside and would have to be defended, if and when captured, by grit and hope.

The danger to this open flank would come, it was believed, from the two German divisions which it was known had long been stationed in the Cotentin, the 709th on the east coast and the 243rd on the west, and the recently arrived 91st, which had unfortunately been positioned exactly astride the airborne area. Moreover, while the 709th and 243rd were static formations – what the Germans called *bodenständige*, 'ground holding', a euphemistic admission of their total lack of mechanical transport and the low physical fitness of their soldiers – the 91st was composed of young men who had actually been trained in air movement. Still, between them they fielded no more than twenty-four battalions against the eighteen which the Americans could parachute. Moreover, several of the German battalions were not German at all in composition, but manned by more-or-less willing volunteers from the army of prisoners whom the Germans had taken in the east during 1941–2. They were indeed known as East (*Ost*) Battalions, for to have called them Russian would have been inaccurate. They represented for the most part the peripheral and unassimilated peoples of the Russian empire, Cossacks, Georgians, Turkomen, Armenians, Volga Tartars, and Azerbaijanis, who had swapped a tenuous sense of citizenship for the guarantee of regular meals, and might be expected to waver in their new loyalty if pressed to fight for their suppers. That prospect rather bettered the odds, which the Americans calculated to yield a more or less even fight on the first day, when most of the defenders would be pinned in their fixed positions. At worst, it was thought, the Germans would be able to find five battalions to mount a counter-attack against the parachutists, and to concentrate no armour against them until the third day. The forecast was slightly optimistic. There was also in the area a scratch panzer battalion, No. 100, equipped with old French tanks and makeshift assault guns, and the 6th Parachute Regiment, counting three battalions of highly trained soldiers, whose average age was 17½ (it was 36 in the 709th Division). But even this addition of a force so closely similar in quality to that of the American need not mean that the operation was too risky to be attempted (as Air Marshal Leigh-Mallory had argued). It did mean that the Americans would have to put forth every shred of that Red

Indian bravery which, with a last-minute sprouting of Apache haircuts and smearing of red and white warpaint, many of the young bloods in the battalions were nerving themselves to emulate if they were to come through.

The approaching moment of departure evoked other rituals, perhaps made all the more necessary by the disturbing effects on frayed nerves of the invasion's postponement from June 5th to June 6th. A rash of fights broke out, as men who had steeled themselves to leave lost their tempers over minor irritations in the resulting decrescendo. The divisional staffs hastily recalled the regimental bands which had filled the encampments with music during the recent hours, replayed over the public address systems the hit records of the moment and found new films to show. When word of the renewed order of departure came, an officer of the 377th Parachute Artillery, the gunner regiment of the Screaming Eagles, recalls that he found the men to whom he was to pass it watching a Ted Lewis movie, *Is Everybody Happy?* and reflected, as he climbed on to the stage to interrupt it, that 'this was just the way it would happen in Hollywood'. There was an element of Hollywood in the round of hand-pressings and exchange of home addresses which followed, avowals of comradeship to death and promises to visit bereaved relations if a friend should not return. There was Hollywood too in the parting speech of Colonel Wolverton, who was to be killed the following day, to his battalion of the 506th Parachute Infantry: 'Although I am not a religious man, I would like all of you to kneel with me in prayer – and do not look down with a bowed head, but look up, so that you can see God and ask His blessing and help in what we are about to do.'<sup>2</sup> There was even more Hollywood in the ferocious final briefing by Colonel Howard 'Skeets' Johnson of the 501st, which he concluded by whipping out his jump knife, brandishing it above his head and screaming: 'I swear to you that before tomorrow night this knife will be buried in the back of the blackest German in Normandy.'<sup>3</sup> His men screamed back in exultation. But many more sought consolation in quiet, personal religion, making their confessions if they were Catholic, as were so many from the big industrial cities of the north and east where the divisions recruited, or simply retreating into private prayer. One of those who prayed most fervently was the commander of the All American, Matthew B. Ridgway, whose calm and handsome features and soldierly bearing concealed a nature of the

"My dear Plus," came Ocker's airy voice over the wire, "are you still alive?"

Pluskat ignored the question. "What's happening about the ammunition?" he asked bluntly.

"It's on the way," said Ocker.

The colonel's calmness maddened Pluskat. "When?" he shouted. "When will it arrive? You people don't seem to realize what it's like up here."

Ten minutes later Pluskat was summoned to the phone. "I've got bad news," Ocker told him. "I've just learned that the ammunition convoy has been wiped out. It will be nightfall before anything gets up to you."

Pluskat wasn't surprised; he knew from bitter personal experience that nothing could move along the roads. He also knew that at the rate his guns were firing, the batteries would be out of ammunition by nightfall. The question was, which would reach his guns first—the ammunition or the Americans? Pluskat gave orders for his troops to prepare for close combat and then he wandered aimlessly through the château. He felt suddenly useless and alone. He wished he knew where his dog Harras was.

★ 8 ★

**B**Y now the British soldiers who had fought D Day's first battle had been holding on to their prize, the bridges over the Orne and the Caen Canal, for more than thirteen hours. Although Major Howard's glider-borne troops had been reinforced at

dawn by other 6th Airborne paratroopers, their numbers had been steadily dwindling under fierce mortar and small-arms fire. Howard's men had stopped several small, probing counterattacks. Now the tired, anxious troopers in the captured German positions on either side of the bridge eagerly awaited the link-up from the sea.

In his foxhole near the approaches to the Caen Canal bridge, Private Bill Gray looked at his watch again. Lord Lovat's commandos were almost an hour and a half overdue. He wondered what had happened back up on the beaches. Gray didn't think the fighting could be much worse there than it was at the bridges. He was almost afraid to lift his head; it seemed to him the snipers were becoming more accurate by the minute.

It was during a lull in the firing that Gray's friend, Private John Wilkes, lying beside him, suddenly said, "You know, I think I hear bagpipes." Gray looked at him scornfully. "You're daft," he said. A few seconds later, Wilkes turned to his friend again. "I do hear bagpipes," he insisted. Now Gray could hear them too.

Down the road came Lord Lovat's commandos, cocky in their green berets. Bill Millin marched at the head of the column, his pipes blaring out "Blue Bonnets over the Border." On both sides the firing suddenly ceased, as soldiers gazed at the spectacle. But the shock didn't last long. As the commandos headed across the bridges the Germans began firing again. Bill Millin remembers that he was "just trusting to luck that I did not get hit, as I could not hear very much for the drone of the pipes." Halfway across, Millin turned around to look at Lord Lovat. "He was striding along as if he was out for a walk round his estate," Millin recalls, "and he gave me the signal to carry on."

Disregarding the heavy German fire, the paratroopers rushed out to greet the commandos. Lovat apologized "for being a few minutes late." To the weary 6th Airborne troopers, it was a stirring moment. Although it would be hours before the main body

of British troops reached the farthestmost points of the defense line held by the paratroopers, the first reinforcements had arrived. As the red and green berets intermingled, there was a sudden, perceptible lightening of the spirits. Nineteen-year-old Bill Gray felt "years younger."

★ 9 ★

Now, on this fateful day for Hitler's Third Reich, as Rommel raced frantically for Normandy, as his commanders on the invasion front tried desperately to halt the storming Allied assault, everything depended on the panzers: the 21st Panzer Division just behind the British beaches, and the 12th S.S. and the *Panzer Lehr* still held back by Hitler.

Field Marshal Rommel watched the white ribbon of road stretching out ahead and urged his driver on. "*Tempol Tempol Tempol*" he said. The car roared as Daniel put his foot down. They had left Freudenstadt just two hours before and Rommel had uttered hardly a word. His aide, Captain Lang, sitting in back, had never seen the Field Marshal so depressed. Lang wanted to talk about the landings, but Rommel showed no inclination for conversation. Suddenly Rommel turned around and looked at Lang. "I was right all along," he said, "all along." Then he stared at the road again.

The 21st Panzer Division couldn't get through Caen. Colonel Hermann von Oppeln-Bronikowski, commanding the division's regiment of tanks, drove up and down the column in a Volkswagen. The city was a shambles. It had been bombed some time earlier and the bombers had done a good job. Streets were piled up with debris, and it seemed to Bronikowski that "everyone in the city was on the move trying to get out." The roads were choked with men and women on bicycles. There was no hope for the panzers. Bronikowski decided to pull back and go around the city. It would take hours, he knew, but there was no other way. And where was the regiment of troops that was supposed to support his attack when he did get through?

Nineteen-year-old Private Walter Hermes of the 21st Panzer Division's 192nd Regiment had never been so happy. It was glorious. He was leading the attack against the British! Hermes sat astride his motorcycle, weaving ahead of the advance company. They were heading toward the coast and soon they would pick up the tanks and then the 21st would drive the British into the sea. Everybody said so. Nearby on other motorcycles were his friends, Tetzlaw, Mattusch and Schard. All of them had expected to be attacked by the British before now, but nothing had happened. It seemed strange that they hadn't caught up with the tanks yet. But Hermes guessed that they must be somewhere ahead, probably attacking already on the coast. Hermes drove happily on, leading the advance company of the regiment up into the eight-mile gap that the British commandos still hadn't closed between Juno and Gold. This was a gap the panzers could have exploited to split the British beaches wide open and menace the entire Allied assault—a gap that Colonel von Oppeln-Bronikowski knew nothing whatever about.