

BEACHHEAD

After midnight the transports began to slow down until at last they were barely creeping along following the minesweepers. About 2:00 AM the ships dropped anchor. We were across the channel. So far we had met no opposition from the Germans. But now we were anchored eight miles from an enemy coast line, where Hitler swore that any Allied troops who landed would not live to the end of the day. What plans did the Germans have for destroying us? Did they know yet that we had come? It was not long till the latter question was answered; the western sky blazed with searchlights and heavy flak which kept going up and grew in violence. That would be Jerry's greeting to our airborne landing. The fighting had started.

The 4th Division's turn was next. But we had five hours yet to sweat out before the first waves hit the beach. Those were tense hours. On the USS Dickman and \_\_\_\_\_ the 1st and 2nd Bns 8th Inf., the first two battalions to land, had an early breakfast and then, an hour and a half before dawn, began loading in landing boats. On each transport, eight LOVP's were swung on davits beside the rail, four more came to the shipside and tied up at the foot of the landing nets. There was a rough sea that morning and the boats far down on the black surface of the water were jumping and bouncing dangerously. Weapons, ammunition, radios, all the equipment of the initial landing, had to be lowered to those boats in total darkness, and the men in full equipment had to climb down the nets. Here training paid off, and the disembarkation went with the smoothness of a drill; not a man was lost. Before the first traces of dawn appeared, all the LOVP's of the early waves had loaded, pulled away from the ships, and were cruising in circles, waiting for H-hour.

All this time our planes were pounding the beach; the distant thump of the bombs could be heard on the ships and in the circling boats. It was a good sound. It went on, through the dawn and the gathering daylight. Then at 5:50 the Naval barrage thundered down on the beach. The battleships Nevada and Enterprise, five cruisers, and eight destroyers turned their guns on the Heine defenses. At the same time, the twenty LOVP's of the first wave swam into line and headed for shore.

In the first wave were the four beach-assault companies — B, C, E and F, 8th Inf. These companies had been reorganized for the land (and into assault sections of

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The company contained four assault sections. Each section occupied one boat, while the company's fifth boat carried

The twenty boats carrying the four beach-assault companies moved at full speed toward shore. Close behind and on the flanks ran naval support craft, small fighting boats armed with machine guns and rockets. Out in front naval crews were already at work removing mines and underwater obstacles. Farther ahead, a line of bursting shells on the horizon marked the beach where our naval barrage was falling. There was little enemy fire in reply. As the first wave drew closer to shore, a few rocket salvos and an occasional 88 shell splashed in the water, missing all our boats. One naval patrol boat was hit; Co C passed it turned upside down. But nothing could lower the spirits of the 4th Division men now. This was action at last. This was what they had been waiting for two years. They were raring to go, and it was sure to be a tough job for anyone to stop them.

The boats of the first wave changed formation from columns forming a line which stretched a mile from flank to flank. They roared on toward the vacant beach, closing in on the naval barrage until they were within 500 yards of the line of bursting shells. Then on a smoke signal sent up by company commanders the barrage lifted. Seconds later the boats touched down about 200 yards from shore, in waist-deep water. Companies E and F hit exactly at H-hour 6:30. B and C's boats had fallen a little behind, touched down ten minutes later. As the ramps dropped, the men jumped out yelling like Indians; some, carrying the Indian act all the way, had faces smeared with paint and hair cut like Mohawk warriors. The assault companies struggled through the 200 yards of water and turned over the beach, waving rifles and shouting

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(Chapter 3) - Beachhead (U.S. 4) - Pt. 42

"We're on French soil, goddamn, we're on French soil!"

The day had not started the way the Germans intended it to. They had planned to destroy us on the water, or, failing that, to completely annihilate us on the beach. They had made elaborate preparations for receiving us. They had mined the water, the beach and the dunes. They had a lot of doodlebugs, automatic tankettes carrying 300 pounds of TNT, parked in holes in the dunes with runways sloping down to the beach; these gadgets were supposed to be launched at the right moment to charge down to the water and explode among our troops wading in. The beach was to be heavily covered by the fire of machine guns and 88's. The bulk of these weapons were grouped in fortified strongpoints spaced every 500 to 1000 yards along the coast, there being five in the two-mile stretch taken by the assault battalions of the 4th Division. (See map of the landing beach.) The strongpoints contained both concrete pillboxes and open emplacements, with machine guns, AT and AA guns, 88's and other weapons, protected by trenches, minefields and barbed wire.

They were supported by artillery and screaming minis from many inland positions; prepared artillery concentrations covered the water's edge, the beaches and the area just behind the dunes. Farther north were large forts with 150 mm. and 210 mm. guns capable of firing far out to sea.

As an additional precaution, to make sure of holding us on the beach until they could wipe us out, the Heinies had created a big swamp just in from the shore. By damming the drainage ditches in that <sup>flat</sup> country, they had flooded an area one to two miles wide down the whole length of the coast. There were but few roads across this flooded area, by defending the exits of which the enemy expected to hem us in on the beach and slaughter us there.

The Allied Command understood this scheme of the Heinies and <sup>made</sup> the play to beat it. The 101st Airborne Division landed before daylight and seized the exits of the causeway on the inland side of the swamp. The 82nd Airborne Division landed farther west and took the town of Ste. Mere Eglise which controlled the main roads leading toward the landing beach, which threw a wrench into the movement of German reinforcements.

By the time the 4th Division landed the Germans were terribly confused. Units had lost

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contact with each other and with higher headquarters. The German Supreme Command did not know all day what was happening. The beach garrisons in front of the landing knew nothing except that they were cut off from the land and attacked from the sea. Stunned by the terrific bombardment, they had no time to recover their senses before they were overrun by a long line of howling soldiers coming up out of the sea. Some of the strongpoints never got a chance to fire. Some machine guns and a couple of 88's fired on the first wave crossing the beach, but were soon knocked out. The doodlebugs were never launched; they stayed in their holes until our engineers removed them. Everything was moving too fast, and the Krauts on the beach didn't have the guts to take it all. They folded as the assault battalions hit them.

All the vast work of the Atlantic Wall, which the Heinies had been building for two years, lasted hardly two hours. Before 9:00 the 1st and 2nd Battalions 8th Infantry had destroyed all resistance on a two-mile stretch of the beach. By that time, the 3rd Battalion of the 8th, as well as the 3rd Battalion 22nd and the 70th Tank Battalion, had landed. CT 8 and the tanks crossed the flooded area on three roads and drove to the west, slashing through the scattered and unorganized enemy resistance. At the same time the 3rd Battalion 22nd began an attack northward along the coast, knocking out pillboxes one by one.

When the other two battalions of the 22nd landed they had to wade two miles across the swamp because the roads were jammed with other traffic. The water, waist deep in most places, was full of holes and ditches where men disappeared over their heads. The enemy on both sides kept firing machine guns across the water. It was a slow difficult march, taking all afternoon; but when it was completed, the 1st and 2nd Battalions 22nd continued to advance northward until dark.

CT 12 landed in the afternoon and moved at once into line between the 8th and 22nd.

While the combat elements were pushing inland the rest of the division and attached troops were steadily landing. Wave after wave the small boats, LCT's and LST's hit the beach with the regularity of breakers. The Germans, partially recovering in the late morning from their confusion, began to shell the beach. For the rest of the day, that beach was the hottest spot on the peninsula, and there were many casualties in the middle and later waves. The

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(CHAPTER 5) - Beachhead (cont'd) - Pt. 5.

Whole of Battery B 7 29th ~~74th~~ Field Artillery was lost in one blow when their LCP hit a mine. But neither mines nor shells delayed the landing. All afternoon and evening a steady stream of vehicles poured inland over the middle causeway (U5). And while the Germans kept pounding the beach all day, the dumbkops never dropped a round/<sup>on</sup> that vital road.

When the score was counted that night, the 4th Division had established a front 4 to 6 miles inland, which with the points occupied by the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions, gave VII Corps a powerful position for further operations. All the combat elements of the Division, except the 20th Field Artillery, were ashore, in addition to great numbers of service troops. Many supporting elements of the airborne divisions also landed over the 4th Division beach. On this day the 4th successfully accomplished one of the most important missions ever assigned a U.S. division.

Two other Allied beachheads were established simultaneously, east of the VII Corps. The American V Corps (1st and 29th Divisions) landed near Bayeux and the British near Caen. The Nazis realized the terrible danger to them of the Allied landings. Hitler issued orders that day to Rommel and Rundstedt that the beachheads must be annihilated not later than that night.\* Even Hitler never spoke emptier words than those. The German commanders knew that such a thing was utterly impossible. They had a somewhat more practical plan. If they could delay us long enough to rush in their reserves and build a strong defensive line, they would confine us on narrow beachheads, as they had done once before at Anzio, and let us rot there. The way this would have worked on the VII Corps beachhead can be seen on the map.

\*Official Journal German Seventh Army.

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