

## Chapter 19: Overlord

*June 5-6, 1944 in Europe*

### Yankees of the 116<sup>th</sup>

In late 1940 President Roosevelt had activated all of the National Guard units in the country and brought them into the United States Army. These units served as the foundation upon which the war-size army would be built. Many of the units – of various sizes and shapes -- had a lineage, and could trace their origins to state militia units from earlier wars. As units were brought into the army, and as the army grew and organized itself in 1941 and 1942, the once-National Guard units were augmented by draftees to bring the units to full strength. Thus did William Haley find himself a member of the “Essex Troop” of the former New Jersey National Guard; and Daniel Lord found himself training alongside midwesterners as a member of the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, made up from parts of the Indiana and Illinois National Guard.

But perhaps the quirkiest example of this phenomena is how five Marbleheaders – Yankees all – found themselves assigned to the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment<sup>1</sup> of the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.<sup>2</sup> The 116<sup>th</sup> had been part of the Virginia National Guard, and 82 years before had been Stonewall Jackson's Brigade in the Confederate Army. The five were: Ralph Messervey, Bill Hawkes, the Boggis Brothers, Porter and Clifford, and their cousin, Willard Fader.

Ralph Messervey was 27 when he was drafted in early 1942. Stocky, with red hair, and an outgoing personality, he was known as “Freckles” to his friends and family. Messervey had been working on the town dump truck when called up two months after Pearl Harbor. After induction and basic training he had been assigned to the 116<sup>th</sup>. And after joining the 116<sup>th</sup> he made it home to Marblehead once before shipping out to Great Britain in late September 1942. Like many of his generation, between joining the service and shipping out for Europe, Messervey married a local girl, Marie Brophy.

Willard Fader's path to the 116<sup>th</sup> was almost identical to Messervey's. Fader was born and raised in town, graduated from high school, and married a local girl, Barbara Doliber, before heading overseas.

The Boggis brothers were unique for the town of Marblehead – they were the only pair of brothers in the same army unit. When they enlisted Port was 24; Cliff was

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<sup>1</sup> In World War II infantry companies were typically made up of three to four platoons, and totaled 120-150 men in size. Three to four companies made up a battalion; and three to four battalions made up a regiment.

<sup>2</sup> The 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was composed of National Guard Units from Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia. The Division's nickname was “the blue and the gray” reflecting the fact that the division included units that fought on both sides of the Civil War. In addition to the five Headers, the 116<sup>th</sup> also included Michael Paradise from neighboring Swampscott.

two years younger. Both brothers had gone to Marblehead High, and afterwards Cliff had been a pitcher for a semi-pro baseball team in town while working as an accountant at A. W. Hilliard and Sons in Boston. Port was working as a fryer at Winslow's Potato Chips factory in town.

The Boggis brothers, Messervey and Fader all went into the service on the same day, being part of an early February call up.<sup>3</sup> The four arrived at Fort Devens together, shipped out together to go through basic training, and then went together into the 116<sup>th</sup> at Ft. Meade in Maryland later in 1942.<sup>4</sup>

Hawkes came to the 116<sup>th</sup> later than the other Headers, being assigned to the unit almost a year after the others had been shipped off to Great Britain. He was 21 when he was drafted in the fall of 1942. He was about to graduate from Essex Agricultural School, and was working as a self-described "gentleman farmer" on a tract of land in Ipswich, up the coast from Marblehead.

### **Over There**

The 116<sup>th</sup> had been stationed just outside the town of Dartmoor in the county of Devon<sup>5</sup>, in the southwest corner of Great Britain for over a year, when word finally came in late May 1944 that they were moving out. The men of the 116<sup>th</sup> didn't have far to go, traveling less than 100 miles along the southern coast of England to Weymouth in County Dorset. Hawkes, a private in F Company of the 116<sup>th</sup><sup>6</sup>, described the scene: *Every port was jammed with naval vessels of all kinds. The Germans must have known about it. They expected an invasion but they couldn't pin it down to when, and they couldn't pin it down as to where.*

### **The Atlantic Wall**

Indeed, everyone everywhere knew an invasion would come in 1944, and within certain bounds, everyone suspected the invasion would come along the French Atlantic coast. The US and its allies had been building strength in Great Britain for over two years, and by the spring of 1944, over 1.5 million US servicemen were stationed in the United Kingdom.

In occupied western Europe, the Germans had worked feverishly to build "the Atlantic Wall:" a series of defenses from Norway to the French border with Spain. The Atlantic Wall extended over such a large area (1,670 miles) because the

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<sup>3</sup> Cliff Boggis had a very low number in the lottery, and his brother a high number. However, after being rejected by the navy because of color-blindness, Porter Boggis joined his brother as a Selective Service volunteer in the same call up.

<sup>4</sup> A fifth Marbleheader, Red Phillips, was in the same group, but was sent to a different unit after basic training.

<sup>5</sup> Dartmoor was the location of a British prison where during the War of 1812, 500 Marbleheaders were incarcerated; almost all had been captured at sea from privateers, and fishing and merchant vessels.

<sup>6</sup> When initially organized as the Virginia National Guard, companies of the 116<sup>th</sup> often were formed from a single community. F Company was initially composed of men from South Boston, Virginia.

Germans were uncertain as to where the attack would come. In early 1944 the overall command of the Atlantic defenses were put under the command of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel – the famed Desert Fox of North Africa. Rommel greatly expanded the defenses at the shoreline – building concrete pill boxes overlooking the beaches and creating vast minefields as well as water-borne obstacles that would challenge an invader from even reaching dry land. Rommel's plan was to meet any invasion, and defeat it, at the waterline.

## Normandy

The decision on the invasion site – one of the best-kept secrets of the war – had its origins in a May 1943 conference in Washington, where the senior military and political leaders of the US and UK agreed that an Allied invasion against the Atlantic Wall would be launched in 1944.<sup>ii</sup>

After weighing all the issues, the planners had settled on a 50-mile stretch of coastline in western Normandy, between the Vire Estuary and the Orne River. The location was ideal for transporting troops from the English southern coastline; and it was within range of fighter planes operating out of English air fields.

It was also just a bit out-of-the-way; and Allied planners saw that as an advantage. It was less-heavily defended than some of the more obvious landing locations, such as the area around Calais, further up the coast. Because it was less heavily defended, it was hoped that a foothold would be easier to achieve. By June of 1944 the Allies completely controlled the skies over that part of occupied Europe; and the thinking went that air power could significantly hamper the Germans' ability to respond, allowing the Allies time to consolidate and build up their foothold.<sup>7</sup>

## The Crossing

The 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment boarded *USS Thomas Jefferson* (APA-30) the afternoon of June 5<sup>th</sup>. The *Jefferson* was an attack transport, designed specifically to launch landing craft for seaborne invasions. She carried 33 such landing craft, each designed to carry 30 men, that could be loaded on-board and then lowered into the water, rather than have the soldiers climb down the ship's side. For the crossing of June 5-6, she carried 1,000 infantrymen for the initial assault.

Hawkes: *We left in daylight before dark, but most of the crossing was in dark. It was quite a highly-planned operation. They had little bitty light markers in the channel to show a path that was clear of mines and we were just slithering along there. The weather was essentially bad but that particular day it let up and that's when*

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<sup>7</sup> As the War Department's History Division explained in a 1945 publication: "... air attacks on railways and river bridges might be able to isolate the region behind the assault area from the main enemy centers of supply and reinforcement to the east."

*Eisenhower decided to go – the channel had been pretty damn rough for a few days.<sup>8</sup> But it didn't seem that bad to me; and it wasn't that bad, so we crossed.*

There was little sleeping during the crossing – and for the men of the 116<sup>th</sup>, the option never existed. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 116<sup>th</sup> – which include all five Marbleheaders – had been designated as the first infantry unit in the United States Army to land on the beaches of Normandy. The very first. And those first units were scheduled to hit the beach at 6:30 in the morning, an hour after sunrise near low tide.

### **At dawn, at low tide...**

A number of factors had gone into the date and timing of the assault. Because of Allied air superiority, the landings were planned to maximize daylight; both to protect the landing forces, and suppress German reinforcements from responding. Therefore, the initial assaults were planned to commence an hour after dawn<sup>9</sup>, and near the summer solstice.<sup>iii</sup>

Although it might seem counter-intuitive, the ideal timing of the initial assault would also be at low tide, with the tide coming in. The German defenses along the waterline had a number of wood and steel obstacles – standing, pretzel-like objects – many with mines attached to their tops. They were heavily scattered across the tidal flats – visible at low tide, but just below water at high tide. The plan, therefore, was to land at low tide, and as the initial infantry units attacked, engineering units would clear lanes for subsequent landing waves to land further up the beach on the incoming tide.

In the daylight-heavy months of late spring and early summer, there were three options to meet the tidal criteria: May 21-23; June 5-7 and June 19-21. General Eisenhower had initially chosen June 5<sup>th</sup>, but because of bad weather, the attack was pushed back a day at the last minute.

### **Getting Ready**

The troops began their day shortly after midnight. *We were called to breakfast not much after 1 in the morning on the boat, and it was regular navy – no chairs, Hawkes recalled, referring to the cramped standing dining format common on troop transports. I don't remember what we ate, but we ate, and there was very little conversation going on on that breakfast. Damn little.*

Following breakfast the troops readied to be loaded into the landing craft. Each man wore an assault jacket, with large pockets and built-in packs on the back. All of the clothing had been treated in case of a gas attack. It made the fabric waxy and stiff.

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<sup>8</sup> The original plan had called for the attack to take place on the morning of June 5<sup>th</sup>; but the operation had been pushed back 24 hours because of rough weather.

<sup>9</sup> The hour between dawn and the first planned landing was to allow for more accurate naval bombardment of German shore positions; and to allow the landing craft better visual recognition of landing targets.

In addition to personal weapons and special equipment, each man also was outfitted with a gas mask, a life preserver, 5 grenades, a half-pound block of TNT with primacord fuse, and 6 one-third rations (3 K-rations and 3 D rations).<sup>iv</sup> There was more, as Hawkes recalled: *We were told we were on our own for at least one whole day as far as medical help. Each man had a little package of morphine and extra bandages so we could take care of our own guys. And we were warned "don't anybody get the idea to try some of that morphine where you're going – you won't be good for anything."*

They started loading the landing craft before 3:00 a.m. Men were arranged the same in each landing craft. *The 116<sup>th</sup> assault craft were loaded so that the first to land would be a section leader and 5 riflemen armed with M-1's and carrying 96 rounds of ammunition. Following was a wire-cutting team of 4 men, armed with rifles; 2 carried large "search-nose" cutters, and 2 a smaller type. Behind these in the craft, loaded so as to land in proper order were: 2 BAR teams of 2 men each, carrying 900 rounds per gun; 2 bazooka teams, totaling 4 men, the assistants armed with carbines; a mortar team of 4 men, with a 60-mm mortar and 15 to 20 rounds; a flame-thrower crew of 2 men; and, finally, 5 demolition men with pole and pack charges of TNT. A medic and the assistant section leader sat at the stern.*<sup>v</sup>

While seemingly planned to a fine level of minutia, the loading arrangements would cause problems on shore. To load the boats with the mix of weapons desired, existing platoons were broken up, and one-time-only "boat teams" were assembled for each boat. After training with their individual units for over a year, soldiers often found themselves next to strangers, with unknown officers leading them. And the boat teams were temporary. Once ashore, original units were expected to reform. *It did have an effect said Hawkes, fowling up the normal communications and the normal command of guys that you knew.*

The entire assault for that morning had been similarly planned with exacting details – precise points of landing, precise targets to attack, and elaborate coordination between units. Each unit had dozens of objectives with timetables down to the minute.

It all went to shit in the first minutes.

## **Invasion**

By 4:30 that morning the landing craft, loaded and launched, had reached their rendezvous area several miles off the Normandy coast, where they idled in the choppy seas awaiting the dawn. The naval bombardment began a little before dawn, and pounded the coastal defenses for nearly an hour, and then changed their targeting further inland as the assault craft headed for shore.

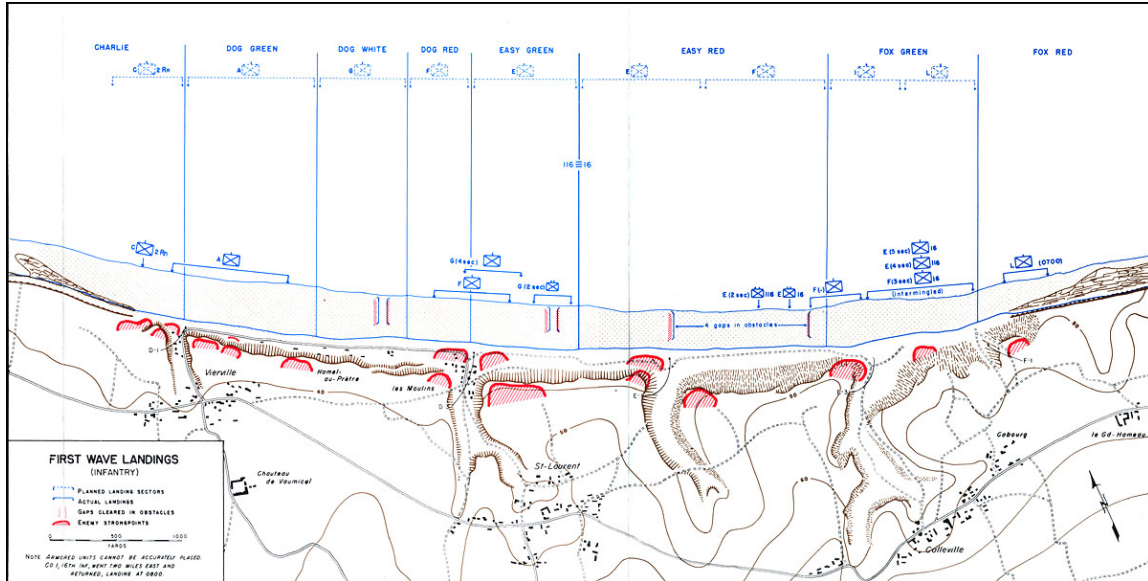
The 116<sup>th</sup> was to land in the middle of the five designated landing beaches. It had been code-named Omaha Beach.<sup>10</sup> Omaha Beach itself was six miles long, and Allied planners had divided it up into sectors and sub-sectors, with six sub-sectors being the main target of the landings. They were designated (west to east) Dog Green, Dog White, Dog Red, Easy Green, Easy Red, and Fox Green. Hawkes' company – F Company, which also included Ralph Messervey – was suppose to land on Dog Red at exactly 6:30.

While the timing of the assault made sense in the larger context, it was not much comfort to the men of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment that had been assigned to the first assault wave. Bill Hawkes, reflected on the strategy as his landing craft headed for the beach: *We never got the order to head for shore until broad daylight. And I said to myself "oh my God, here's the coast of France as plain as day," and I said "obviously, we're just as plain to them as what we see."*

It wasn't just the daylight that worried Hawkes as his landing craft headed in. The men were burdened with "super loads" – amounts of equipment and ammunition far in excess of anything they had trained with. Hawkes was part of a mortar team, and he was responsible for carrying 12 mortar rounds in addition to his rifle and other equipment. At the last minute, he was given four extra rounds to carry. As he remembered it: *It was just a hell of a load. And I knew I was in some trouble getting that into shore, and with all the other stuff. After trying unsuccessfully to get assistance, the 120-pound Hawkes took the precaution of putting the four extra rounds in a separate bag, in case he was unable to carry the entire load across the beach. It was a prudent decision: When my feet hit the sand, my knees buckled right down – just automatically –woop! So now I start up the beach and I didn't go more than [ten feet] before I just dropped the small bag [with the extra mortar rounds] and said the hell with that. If I can get the main charge up I'll be doing well.*

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<sup>10</sup> To the east of Omaha Beach, three beaches, designated Sword, Juno and Gold, would be attacked by British units. To the west, Utah Beach would be attacked by other US forces.



**Dog Red is depicted above between the third and fourth blue vertical lines from the left. Source: American Forces in Action: Omaha Beachhead; Historical Division, War Department, 1945**

## Dog Red

F Company's six landing craft touched the shores of Dog Red at 6:31, a minute later than planned. It was one of the few units to land anywhere near its target landing point that morning.<sup>11</sup>

The shelling and bombing that were supposed to soften up the German defenses had varying degrees of success across the Normandy shoreline that morning. In preparing for the assault Hawkes had been told the shelling would explode German mine fields, rip open the barbed-wire entanglements, and create shell holes you could jump into. But Dog Red was untouched. *Not one single shell hole did I see*, recalled Hawkes.

Hawkes' landing craft came ashore at one of the single worst spots in all of Normandy: a heavily-defended position named les Moulins draw. It was defended by one of the few crack German units stationed along the Normandy coast – the 352<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division.<sup>12</sup> The six landing craft of F Company were not close to each other as they came ashore, and each boat and the troops they carried were in an isolated world of their own. German mortars rained down and German machine guns raked the beach. Casualties were heavy and immediate.

It was two to three hundred yards across the beach to the first possible point of refuge – a slight sloping band of smooth, rounded sea rocks roughly the size of bricks. They were called shingles<sup>13</sup>; and looked remarkably similar to the rocks on

<sup>11</sup> Strong currents on the incoming tide would later be identified as the reason that practically no landing craft in the initial assaults on Omaha Beach landed near their target.

<sup>12</sup> The 352<sup>nd</sup> had been built around hardened veterans of the Russian Front.

<sup>13</sup> The collection of these smooth sea stones, grouped together as part of the beach topography is typically referred to as "the shingle" and sometimes "the shingle bank." As with similar formations at Usher's Beach, the shingle bank formed a slight rise at the high water mark.

Usher's Beach in Marblehead.<sup>14</sup> Hawkes described the first moments on the beach: *It was pretty much everybody by himself, for himself. There were no officers yelling and hollering. Not that any officers were needed to tell the men what to do. Hawkes again: Every damn man knew that his first job was to get his get his ass beyond the high water mark first. You're dumped at low tide. The tides coming in behind you, so you have no options of turning back, and you're under fire all the way going in.*

Anyone that stood up for more than a few strides was cut down. The beach obstacles afforded marginal protection, and men used them for shelter as best they could; but the tide was coming in, and to stay in one place meant drowning. And if multiple men gathered behind the same obstacle it immediately caught the attention of German gunners.

The Germans dominated the area in front of that part of Dog Red primarily with machine guns. Hawkes could not see them, but he could hear them distinctly, and he could see their bullets strafing across the beach. The German Maschinengewehr 1942 was a devastating weapon, with a range of greater than a half mile, and capable of firing over 1,200 rounds per minute. The rate of fire was so high that the sound of individual shots could not be distinguished by the human ear – instead, the MG-42 sounded like a buzz saw or a loud zipper when it fired. Anyone who ever heard it remembered it the rest of their lives.

Because of the high rate of fire, the MG-42's barrel had to be changed frequently so that it wouldn't overheat. Although, the barrel change was a quick operation, it offered brief respites. Hawkes quickly picked up on the pauses in the German machine gun fire: *I was trying to get the rhythm of the friggin' burst of machine gun fire. And I'd pick my spot not too damn far away and at the [right] moment I would jump up and run like hell to that spot and hit the sand again.*

Hawkes had no idea how long it took him to reach the shingle,<sup>15</sup> but it was the point of salvation he strived to reach that morning. The shingle was at the high water mark; upon reaching it the threat of drowning would be past. The shingle also rose ever-so-slightly, providing potential refuge from direct German fire – if you could lie flat enough. Upon reaching the shingle Hawkes moved the smooth stones as best he could to create a slight depression to lie in.

As he took stock of his situation, Hawkes realized he was alone on his own little piece of Normandy.<sup>16</sup> There were several other soldiers within talking distance, but most of the men that were in his boat team, and in boats that landed near his, lay

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<sup>14</sup> Today Usher's Beach is known as Golthwait Beach.

<sup>15</sup> In a 2001 interview, Hawkes said a "wild guess" would be it took him two hours to reach the shingles. Army records, although limited in specifics, put it closer to 45 minutes.

<sup>16</sup> Although it can not be positively verified, this sentence in the Army's official record of the Omaha Beachhead, in discussing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 116<sup>th</sup>, appears to describe Hawkes' situation: *Other elements, landing on Dog Red and Easy Green, suffered heavy losses, one boat section getting only six men to the shingle.*



behind him, dead or bleeding on the sand and incoming tide; or were somewhere else out of sight.

### **Easy Green/Easy Red**

E Company was supposed to land on Easy Green to the left (east) of Dog Red, at 6:31, but strong currents pulled the six landing craft east of their landing point by almost a mile, where they came ashore in the subsector designated Easy Red. They came under small arms fire while approaching the beach,<sup>vi, 17</sup> but the overall opposition was lighter than on Dog Red. Porter Boggis' landing craft hit shore close by another of the six E company landing craft, and the men from the two boats initially advanced across the tidal flats without being fired upon. That changed as they approach the high tide mark, where they came under fire from a pill box three hundred yards to their left. 50 men, Boggis included, took refuge behind a sea wall, pinned down by the pill box.

A bazooka team among the 50 men came forward and silenced the pill box with an accurate – and wildly improbable – shot. With the respite in the German fire, Port Boggis crawled forward to a gap in the sea wall and started cutting the wire blocking the way off the beach. It took him ten minutes to complete, where upon the massed troops crouched low and ran through the gap Boggis had cut. They were off the tidal part of the beach and into the “beach flat,” an area with trenches and minefields; beyond which were heavily-defended, steep bluffs. It was just past 8:00 a.m.

### **Battalion HQ Company**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Headquarters Company was scheduled to land on the far right hand (west) end of Dog Red at 7:00.<sup>vii</sup> There was supposed to be troops already there ahead of them, but when the five boats of the Battalion HQ Company arrived, only a handful of tanks<sup>18</sup> were there; the preceding infantry units having come in somewhere else.

The boats drew little fire coming in, but upon landing in shallow water, they came under heavy and very accurate mortar, machine gun and sniper fire. The five boat teams took heavy casualties wading between the landing craft and the beach, and those that made it to dry land instinctively sought out the protection of the tanks. But it turned out to be false safety, as the Germans were trying to take out the tanks with artillery, and the shells took out most of the men massed around the tanks.

Somewhere in the carnage of those first few minutes, Willard Fader was killed by a wound to head.

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<sup>17</sup> Four DD tanks were already ashore, having arrived minutes ahead of E Company. Several were already knocked out when E Company landed.

<sup>18</sup> Ninety-six dual-drive amphibious tanks had been assigned to Omaha Beach and were scheduled to land minutes ahead of the infantry. Fifty-seven had sunk in the rough water before reaching land.

## Mid Morning

The US plan for exiting the beach was via draws – natural breaks in the beach topography that created an obvious roadway inward. The minute-specific planning had called for the initial assault wave to overtake the draws, and following waves to pass through and assault the bluffs beyond the beach.

But as was the case with les Moulin draw on Dog Red (designated D-3 by US planners), the Germans had not been blind to what the draws represented, and across Omaha Beach the draws were stubbornly defended as the morning progressed.

As succeeding waves arrived on the Omaha beaches their points of egress were not yet open, and units that they were suppose to connect up with were rarely there when they arrived. More often units landed in locations other than where they had studied and planned to attack. Engineers were behind their timetable for clearing paths to the beach, and between sunken landing craft and still dangerous obstacles, there was congestion in even getting to the beach. Bill Hawkes described the mid-morning looking back from the shingle bank: *The beach was full of people and equipment; dead, wounded, and some in shock, in semi-shock; and dazed sort-of; and disorganized.* All landings were suspended at 0830 by order of the commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Naval Beach Battalion,<sup>viii</sup> and senior US command seriously considered pulling the plug on the Omaha invasion. Things were that bad.

Hawkes and the handful of survivors from his section of F Company remained pinned down by sniper and machine gun fire on their isolated stretch of shingles. They kept their heads down and waited for the situation to evolve.

Twenty-five to thirty feet to Hawkes' left Edward Gillingham from Indiana lay seriously wounded. Most of Gillingham's jaw had been blown away coming across the tidal flat but he had somehow made it to the shingle bank. With only a piece of his jaw hanging, Gillingham still managed to call out, "Hawksie, Hawksie." Hawkes sprinted the 25 feet to Gillingham, exposing himself to fire as he ran. There was nothing Hawkes could do except administer morphine, which he did, using Gillingham's supply (as was procedure), and then scramble back to his own little depression in the shingle bank. Hours later Gillingham called Hawkes again, and again Hawkes went to his aid – the second time using his own morphine.<sup>19</sup>

## Up to the Bluffs

But there was slow progress for the Americans as the morning went on.

Units had been scattered piecemeal because of both the boat team loading plans and the inability of almost any landing craft to come ashore where intended. But in case after case groups self-organized, formed by men from different units that found themselves in close proximity to each other. Thus Porter Boggis' section from E

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<sup>19</sup> Gillingham died on the beach later that day. Hawkes didn't know of Gillingham's death until after the war.

Company of the 116/29 teamed up with an equal number from G Company of the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. The group of roughly 100 men would fight together as a cohesive unit for three days.

Across Easy Red and Easy Green the men of E Company and other units began pushing beyond the tidal beach. It was not through the draws as planned, but more often between the draws: over sea walls, and through barbed wire. Cliff Boggis was part of a bazooka team that found itself hurrying across the beach flat beyond Easy Red hoping to reach some refuge at the base of the defended bluffs. As they crossed, a land mine exploded behind Boggis, who was cut down by the shrapnel across the entire left side of his body.

### **Messervey at the crest of the bluff**

Men were pushing through on parts of Dog Red as well. Out in front was Ralph Messervey. It came as no surprise to Hawkes: *He was rough and tough... the kind of a guy that wins the battles.*

On that day, Messervey, down the beach from Hawkes, had been among a number of small groups of men that managed to get across the beach flat, and were fighting their way up the bluffs. The bluffs were defended by a series of trenches connecting dugouts that could be used by mortar teams and machine guns. Barbed wire was everywhere, and aprons of it were spread in front of the strong points.

Late that morning Messervey's group had fought their way through the initial trenchworks and were nearing the crest of the bluff. He was out in front going after a dugout at the very top of the bluff that was defended by a handful of Germans. Tangled in the barbed wire apron ten feet from the dugout, Messervey was firing away at the Germans when they tossed grenades down at him. Unable to move quickly in the wire, he was killed by the blasts.

### **Afternoon**

Just before noon, at high tide, Marblehead's Elliot Roundy steered his 115-foot barge onto Omaha Beach -- *the beach was a mess, recalled Roundy, there were bodies all over.*<sup>ix</sup> Roundy's slow-moving barge – LCT (5) 413 – a Landing Craft Tank – was making its second run of the day, bringing in additional men and equipment of the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division to the rough and dangerous shores of Omaha Beach. It was mayhem along the waterline. *The beach obstructions were terrible. How we ever got through I'll never know,*<sup>x</sup> Roundy noted.

Roundy's day had started before 4:00 a.m. when he rendezvoused his LCT with an attack transport ten miles off the French coast. As the name suggests, the landing craft tank, was a shallow-draw boat designed to bring heavy equipment directly onto to beaches. The morning of the 6<sup>th</sup>, Roundy's first cargo was three amphibious assault vehicles called DUCWs loaded with elite Army Rangers, and firemen's ladders. Roundy's target was the cliffs that separated Omaha Beach from Utah beach. The cliffs were called Point-du-Hoc, and the Germans had positioned the high point with artillery pieces capable of raking both Omaha and Utah beaches.

1/8 of a mile from shore, Roundy's LCT launched the DUCWs, that then dashed to shore. By 7:30 the LCT was pulling away from the coast and headed to pick up men and material for their next run – which was to Omaha Beach.

At noon on Omaha Beach, Roundy quickly unloaded and headed to sea to repeat the operation. It amounted to an obstacle course under fire – a course Roundy would run all afternoon and into the evening. Somewhere in his trips to and from Omaha Beach that afternoon a long strand of barbed wire somehow managed to entangle itself in one of Roundy's propellers, forcing him to shut down one of the three engines that powered a propeller each. But LCT (5) 413 continued to operate – as an even slower target. There was never any thought of stopping for repairs so long as the boat could float and be steered.

### **The Long Day Wanes**

Sunset was after 9:00 p.m., with the day's second high tide coming two hours later. When the long day drew to an end US force held Omaha Beach, but it was barely a foothold. They had advanced inland as far as a mile and a half on one part of the beach, but in some places the perimeter was less than a mile inland. Plans had called for all of that area to have been captured relatively early in the morning, and for US forces to have been considerably further inland by nightfall. But it had been a desperate struggle to gain what they did hold.

While almost all of the infantry that were scheduled to be landed on the first day had made it ashore; only small percentages of equipment and material did. Plans had called for 2,400 tons of material to be unloaded on Omaha Beach, and by nightfall only 1,000 tons had been.<sup>xi</sup> Ammunition was in critically short supply, and tanks and artillery were scarce<sup>20</sup>. Over 2,000 US servicemen had been killed on Omaha Beach – the highest proportion of casualties being to the elements of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment that had made the initial assault.<sup>21</sup>

The beach was a mess – the Navy had lost 50 landing craft and 10 larger vessels, with a much larger number of all types damaged. Getting to the beach, especially with ammunition and heavy weapons, was problematic at best. Elliot Roundy's boat was one of 36 LCTs that made up Flotilla 18 that morning. Only nine, including Roundy's damaged LCT (5) 413, were fit for duty by day's end.

### **Medics**

Medical units had been late in getting to the beach. It hadn't been until 2:00 in the afternoon that elements of the 61<sup>st</sup> Medical Battalion had come ashore on Easy Red, and set up collecting points on the beach and begun collecting casualties and administering first aid to the wounded.<sup>xii</sup> As night came, many of the planned

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<sup>20</sup> Over 50 tanks and 25 artillery pieces had been lost on Omaha Beach and its seaward approaches.

<sup>21</sup> The highest casualty rate for the day was A Company of the 116<sup>th</sup> that along with Companies E, F and G had been the first assault wave on Omaha Beach.

locations for initial medical facilities and field hospital were still in German hands, and much of the medical equipment had yet to reach shore.

While the medical battalions were too late for many of those wounded in the initial assaults that morning, an amazing number had survived because of the skill and bravery of the medics assigned to the infantry units<sup>22</sup> and to Navy beach medical parties. In those first few hours, medics administered first aid, and as quickly as humanly possible put the wounded men on any available landing craft headed back to a larger vessel off shore.

Because of the actions of army medics and navy and coast guardsmen manning the landing craft, that evening, as night fell, Cliff Boggis was alive and under doctors' care on a ship off the coast of Normandy.

### **F Company**

Bill Hawkes finally met up with other men from his unit shortly before dusk, as the devastated F Company tried to re-group. One of the company's South Boston Virginians had been sent out to scavenge for men and ammunition, and a small group of them grabbed what they could and headed up the bluffs where they were placed in defensive positions in German trenches. There were dead Germans in the trench. *They just tossed them out, and we rolled them down the hill*, Hawkes remembered.

It was a sleepless night for Hawkes – his second in a row. *I didn't get any sleep -- didn't even have a place to lay down. We were just crouched in a fairly deep trench with an open top.* But Hawkes, along with the remainder of the 116<sup>th</sup> was on French soil, and they had no intention of being pushed off.

### *Epilog*

For their actions that day, the 116<sup>th</sup> would receive the Distinguished Unit Citation.<sup>23</sup> It had been almost two and a half years to the day that Germany had declared war on the US. There were 330 days of fighting ahead of them in Europe.

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<sup>22</sup> In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 116<sup>th</sup> IR, there was one medic for roughly every 25 riflemen.

<sup>23</sup> The criteria for the Distinguished Unit Citation is “for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy.” The Army Distinguished Unit Citation (there are others for other branches of the service) is awarded to units that display the same degree of heroism in combat as would warrant the Distinguished Service Cross for an individual (The DSC being second only to the Medal of Honor). Years later the citation would be re-named the Presidential Unit Citation.

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<sup>i</sup> Quotes by Bill Hawkes throughout this chapter are taken from an interview with Bill Hawkes in Marblehead, Massachusetts, August 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> Information on selection of the landing location is taken from *Omaha Beachhead, (6 June – 13 June, 1944)*, American Forces in Action Series, War Department, Historical Division, Washington 25 D.C., September 20, 1945

<sup>iii</sup> Details on the initial landings is taken primarily from *Omaha Beachhead, (6 June – 13 June, 1944)*, American Forces in Action Series, War Department, Historical Division, Washington 25 D.C., September 20, 1945

<sup>iv</sup> Details of the equipment of the landing forces is taken from *Omaha Beachhead, (6 June – 13 June, 1944)*, American Forces in Action Series, War Department, Historical Division, Washington 25 D.C., September 20, 1945

<sup>v</sup> From *Omaha Beachhead, (6 June – 13 June, 1944)*, American Forces in Action Series, War Department, Historical Division, Washington 25 D.C., September 20, 1945, p 43

<sup>vi</sup> Details of E Company's actions on June 6<sup>th</sup> are taken primarily from two sources: *E Company Group Critique Notes, 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion*, published on the American D-Day web site at: <http://www.americandday.org/index.html>; and *Omaha Beachhead, (6 June – 13 June, 1944)*, American Forces in Action Series, War Department, Historical Division, Washington 25 D.C., September 20, 1945. Additional details were provided by Jay Boggis, son of Porter Boggis in a 2013 interview.

<sup>vii</sup> Details of the HQ company actions on June 6<sup>th</sup> are taken from *2<sup>nd</sup> BN HQ 116<sup>th</sup> Critique Notes*, published on the American D-Day web site at: <http://www.americandday.org/index.html>; and *Omaha Beachhead, (6 June – 13 June, 1944)*, American Forces in Action Series, War Department, Historical Division, Washington 25 D.C., September 20, 1945

<sup>viii</sup> From *LCT(5) Flotilla 18 at Omaha Beach, D-Day, June 6, 1944*, by Robert D. Blegen, May 1998, published on line at <http://ww2lct.org/history/stories/>

<sup>ix</sup> From "Marbleheaders Remember D-Day" by Bonnie Weinberg, in the *Marblehead Reporter*, June, 1994. Additional details on Roundy's experience is taken from (1) "Je Me Souviens," a video by Pascal Foley and Henry Christensen, *Marblehead Community Access Media, Inc.*, 1994; and (2) Personal papers of Elliot Roundy, courtesy of the Roundy family.

<sup>x</sup> From "Je Me Souviens," a video by Pascal Foley and Henry Christensen, *Marblehead Community Access Media, Inc.*, 1994

<sup>xi</sup> End-of-day statistics are taken from *Omaha Beachhead, (6 June – 13 June, 1944)*, American Forces in Action Series, War Department, Historical Division, Washington 25 D.C., September 20, 1945

<sup>xii</sup> Details of the first medical units on Omaha Beach are documented in *First United States Army Report of Operations 20 October 1943-1 August 1944*, Annex No. 16 Medical Plan