

D-Day: Bernières-sur-Mer (Juno Beach)
A Lonely Landing, an Objective Achieved
Jun 6, 1944, 03:15 hours to 24:00hours

[...]

We had boarded our LCAs slightly before five in the morning. [...] We had practiced getting men down the loading nets and into assault boats, but always in calm weather. On this morning the waves were high, and the assault boat...was tossing around like a cork. [...]

Each man had heavy boots and a [at least a] fifty-pound pack [...] One error and he might drop like a stone between the hull of the ship and the LCA. Worse, even if a man in the water did succeed in unloading the extra weight, he could be crushed if the LCA came slamming against the hull.

We managed, but it took time. [...] As I was commanding my LCA, I was last in. I went down the net as fast as I could. The LCA had already cast off. When it came to making my jump, I nearly became our first statistic. Buck Hawkins and Jamie McKenzie caught me just in time.

While I was the leader for our boat, the LCA was actually commanded by two Royal Navy men [...] We sat in two rows facing each other. I was in the lead seat. Right across from me sat Jack Simpson, a sergeant and very close friend. [...]

Ten assault boats were loaded pretty much in the same way.[...] My boat had most of the men from my old original section in 9 Platoon. We had all joined up in 1940, had trained together, had lived together and had just been together every day of the last four years.

[...] The shore was approximately five miles away, and as we approached it, we could see the rockets and naval guns firing through the night sky. We thought most of this would be softening up our beachhead, but when we got there we would find no signs of bombardment. Our navy guns, in fact, had overshot the beaches. [...]

[When we were about a mile from shore,] it came as a shock to realize that the assault fleet just behind us had completely disappeared from view. Suddenly there was just us and an awful lot of ocean [...] Later depictions of D-Day...would typically show support planes overhead, the Channel crowded with destroyers and battleships, the shore full of assault boats... Not so with us. All that remained within sight was our own fleet of ten assault craft [...]

Daylight. We had never felt so alone in our lives.

There was mist and rain. Bernières-sur-Mer became visible. Fifteen hundred yards of beach stretched from the far left to the far right. Everything was dead quiet [...] But we were all confident. There was a job to be done, each seemed to feel. Let's do it.

Ten boats stretched out over fifteen hundred yards is not really a whole lot of assault force. The boats began to look even tinier as the gaps widened, with more than the length of a football field between each. Our initial concept of a brave attack began to seem questionable, though none of us would admit it. We could see the houses and buildings of the village. In between the village and the shore were the expected embedded obstacles and barbed wire with mines attached. In the

centre there was a formidable fifteen-foot wall with three large, heavy cement pill-boxes. The entire beach was open to murderous fire from machine guns positioned for a full 180-degree sweep.

[...]

Our first experience of action under fire started with a nervous gunner in one of the pillboxes; he opened fire prematurely and a piece of metal cut Rfn. Cy Harden on the cheek. The navy chap slapped a bandage on the wound and said, "If that's the worst you get, you'll be lucky." He was lucky. [...]

The engine purred steadily and didn't seem to disturb the silence. [...] "Take us in as fast as you can," I ordered. "Don't slow up, keep us going!" It was better to move directly and at high speed than to chance drifting as easy targets or broadsiding obstacles or mines. [...]

Everyone seemed calm and ready. [...] The order rang out: "Down ramp." The moment the ramp came down, heavy machine-gun fire broke out from somewhere back of the seawall. Mortars were dropping all over the beach. [...]

The men rose, starboard line turning right, port turning left. I said to Jack, across from me, and to everyone: "Move! Fast! Don't stop for anything. Go! Go! Go!" We raced down the ramp, Jack and I side by side, the men closely following. We fanned out as fast we could, heading for that sea wall.

None of us really grasped at that point, spread across such a large beach front, just how thin on the ground we were. Each of the ten boatloads had become an independent fighting unit. None had communication with the other...We were on our own and in our first action. Every single one of us, from Elliot Dalton, our commanding officer ... and the other A Company boat leaders – Jack Pond, Peter Rea, and Dave Owen – to the ordinary soldier, was on the run and at top speed. We were all riflemen on the assault and there was nothing ordinary about any of us.

[...] That first rush – racing across the beach, scaling the wall, crossing the open railway line that ran parallel to the beach, all under heavy MG fire – claimed a lot of us in the first minute or two.

The section and platoon commanders were primary targets and fast became casualties. [...] It was low tide and we had a wide expanse to cover. [...] Of the men from our boat, Jack Simpson was killed on the beach and Jack Culbertson was wounded. Jamie McKechnie, who only hours earlier had helped grab me into the LCA and doubtless saved my life, was killed and so was Ernie Cunningham and Sammy Hall.

[...]

As we raced across the beach, we had no time to think much. Our training did that for us. We were men who could run sixty miles with a twenty-five pound pack, first class marksmen, about 30 percent in the sniper class, and all of us drilled in the credo of don't stop for anything.

Our part of the beach was clear, but there were mines buried in the sand. On the dead run, you just chose the path that looked best. Bert Shepherd, Bill Bettridge and I were running at top speed and firing from the hip. To our left, we spotted a small gap in the wall. [...] {The Germans} had placed a belt-fed machine gun there [and the one man on it] was waving his arms furiously, as if calling for others to come up and get on the gun. It would take two to operate it [...] [Bill] took his aim and that

seemed to be the bullet that took the gunner out [...] We got to the wall and over it, then raced across the railway line. [...]

To both sides of use we had minefields. The machine-gun fire and mortars never let up, a barrage of shelling that seemed to come from everywhere. Once over the railway we had some grass cover, but we ran into heavy barbed wire. Shep and Bill looked a little surprised that we had got this far. [...]

I cut the [strands of wire blocking our way] and bent them back, making an opening just wide enough for a man to belly through. The grass gave us cover. The enemy knew we were somewhere and likely on the move, but they could not pinpoint us. We crept through. By this time there were about fifteen of us.

Then we came to the minefield. [...] I advanced about ten paces and stepped on a jumping mine. When this goes into the air, it spreads old nails and buckshot – whatever its makers have put in it – over a large area, maybe 150 or 200 feet. But if you keep your foot on it, it won't go off. So I held my foot in place and got everyone to the far side, over the fence and in to the gardens by the houses. To avoid the spray effect, you drop to the ground quickly right down beside the mine.

Perhaps I stood a second or two too long on the mine, and as I leaned forward, ready to flop, a bullet somehow hit the inside of my helmet. It spun round and round on the inside and took the helmet right off. I released the mine. It exploded, jumping five feet or so in the air, but I had flattened myself on the ground. Seconds later I leapt up and left the scene, proceeding across the rest of the minefield, with some relief but no helmet, at what you might call top speed.

[...] It was about a quarter to nine – less than half an hour since we had hit the beach – when [we] took our objective, which was the road through the village at its southwest point. [...] We'd made it, done what we were supposed to do. Everyone seemed somewhere between surprised and puzzled. Now what?

Battle Diary: From D-Day and Normandy to Zuider Zee and VE

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