

D-DAY

Piercing the Atlantic Wall

Robert Kershaw

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TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

It's "D-Day" tomorrow, but we've known that for ages.
Are young lives nearly finished?
Can we turn back the pages?

[‘Ginger’ Woodcock. British Paratrooper.
Written Broadwell. 5.6.44]

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PREFACE

The invasion of Normandy, D-Day, is an event that has been exhaustively picked over by Allied historians. What is there left to say after works by Cornelius Ryan, Alexander McKee, Max Hastings and John Keegan to name just a few? *D-Day – Piercing the Atlantic Wall* has concentrated on describing the event through the eyes and oral testimonies of the survivors themselves. The Battle of D-Day was not as Cornelius Ryan suggests ‘The Longest Day’, it is rather concerned with the nine days it took for the Allies to dominate the foreshore upon which they had landed. It attempts to detect that moment when the Germans thought in terms of containing the spread of an accepted bridgehead, not in ‘throwing the Allies back into the sea’. This was the culminating and deciding point of D-Day, when it could be judged a success. Both sides believed the event would force the decision in the West. Yet paradoxically it resulted in stalemate, until the Allied break-out two months later. This book, beginning on the invasion eve, covers the conduct of the D-Day operation until that moment it achieved success. The battle of D-Day occurred broadly between 6–14 June 1944. The battle of Normandy followed.

An attempt has been made to redress the balance of an event viewed almost exclusively from British, Canadian and American viewpoints, and include the German in more detail. Detailed study of German sources does impact upon a number of previously accepted assumptions. Rather than attempt overall balance, credence or weight has been given to examining whichever side held the initiative at a given moment, or analysing issues that have been either inadequately assessed previously, or little known.

Developments are seen primarily through the thoughts, opinions and partisan views of the participants themselves. I have been mindful of the advice of one German veteran, who on being

interviewed remarked ‘bear in mind two points when you speak with these people: they were all as a minimum Lance-Corporals, and they all won the war single-handed!’ Most of the sources are contemporary by preference, as near to the events in chronological terms as is possible. Veteran accounts are offered with the caveat that they truly reflect the business of combat, a highly personalised and emotional experience; which at best can only be reviewed in the ‘snap-shot’ fashion presented in the following pages. As a serving soldier myself, I find it almost impossible accurately to recall active service incidents twenty years – even two years – ago, without resorting to a diary. Memories are sketchy and become embellished with the re-telling. Perhaps one of the most realistic accounts of D-Day I came across, were the very honest declarations of a Canadian soldier, who said:

Honest to God, I don’t remember a thing. I remember the outfit marching down those lanes in England near the coast and then sleeping in a big hall that night and then loading up next afternoon and then going across the Channel and it was dark... I don’t remember going ashore. I don’t really know how I did, whether we had to wade or if we just ran up the beach when they dropped the gate. If there was heavy fire I don’t remember...

The first thing I remember, and this is the God’s truth. I’m sitting with my back to a German tank and there’s guys all around me and we’re eating C-rations.¹

D-Day – Piercing the Atlantic Wall is really concerned with this human aspect. What was it like to drop from the skies, go ashore from a landing craft, or defend a bunker on D-Day? Accuracy is probably less important in factual data terms, than impressions, the real stuff of war. Therefore priority is given to describing and interpreting the human dimension – sight, sound, touch, smell, hearing – and the influence that such experience does have upon

men in battle. As one former American paratrooper in Normandy described it:

Like desert warfare, hedgerow fighting became associated with the land itself, so that long afterwards the sight of them in other countries recalled the mosquitoes at evening, the taste of soil, and the ammoniac smoke in the meadows where crickets piped.²

Few people today have endured warfare at the intense levels of those who experienced D-Day fifty years ago. One British officer asked forty years after the event:

How can it have been so real then, and be so remote now? What was the meaning of it, this second of history overshadowing our whole lives. With whom can one share the knowledge of what it was really like?

The answer is no one. For we all died forty years ago.

Andrew Wilson answers the question himself, because even when the veterans get together to talk 'we are middle-aged strangers to one another. Our whole conversation is a fruitless attempt to deny this'.³ The following pages attempt to provide some answers.

Every effort has been made to trace the source and copyright holders of the maps and illustrations appearing in the text, and these are acknowledged where possible. Similarly, the author wishes to thank those publishers who have permitted the quotation of extracts from their books. Quotation sources are annotated in the notes that follow the text. My apologies are offered in advance to those with whom, for any reason, I have been unable to establish contact.

I am particularly indebted to Dr Kehrig and Herr Meyer at the Bundesarchiv in Freiburg for their assistance in locating many of the German documents quoted in the text, and for being responsive to

specific requests. Much of the American material came from Major Dan Nettling and Ms Louise Arnold-Friend of the United States Military History Institute in Pennsylvania, and my thanks also to Colonel Raymond K Bluhm Jnr from the US Center of Military History in Washington. Additional material came from the National Archives also in Washington. Mr John Harding at the British Army Historical Branch at the Ministry of Defence provided many of the official histories mentioned in the text, as well as locating papers dealing with official and unit histories of both American and German formations. Magnum Photos Incorporated provided the Robert Capa material. The Imperial War Museum in London provided information from maps and photographs, while Mrs Diana Andrews of the Aldershot Parachute Regiment and Airborne Forces Museum was able to provide some previously unseen material.

Without my typist, Miss Linda Ganter, the project would never have come to fruition; she not only accurately typed the manuscript, she rarely missed inconsistencies in content. My thanks also to Simon Forty of Ian Allan, whom I thought insane for suggesting the subject of the book in the first instance. The real victims of the pressure throughout have been my long suffering wife Lynn, and my sons: Christian, Alexander and Michael, who have had to bear the brunt of meeting deadlines; which has conflicted with everything, cricket and sailing included. Lynn, as ever provided the back up that made it all possible. We are back to normal at last!

Robert Kershaw
Church Crookham
June 1993

CHAPTER 1

THE NARROW CHANNEL

‘Before their eyes as they stepped shivering from their huts each morning was the channel, the grey channel, and beyond it, the grey mist.’

A. Baron

**‘Wolves circling a wounded dog’...
Lyme Bay 28 April 1944.**

The sea was very dark with a setting quarter moon, and visibility good. Kapitänleutnant Jurgensmeyer, captain of *Schnellboot* (motor torpedo boat – known to the British as E-Boats) *S-136*, could just make out the outline of his sister craft *S-138* in the gloom, its antennae and mast intermittently breaking the horizon line as they rose and fell in the inky blackness on a gentle swell. It was chilly. Some members of Jurgensmeyer’s 21-man crew were below decks where there was some warmth. Others wrapped arms around themselves, or thrust them deeper into pockets to ward off the damp chill as they silently rode the Lyme Bay waves. Visibility was almost 15,000 metres, with Portland Bill almost due west, but there was still no sign of life apart from distant searchlights. These were of interest. As Jurgensmeyer was to report:

Searchlights in Lyme Bay in recent times had always been regarded as “E-Boat warning signs”, spiral and criss-cross light beams would show up in likely target areas.¹

Something was up, had to be.

Jurgensmeyer scanned the surface of the sea yet again, pausing

here and there, almost willing the darker shadows to stop teasing and merge into the tell-tale silhouette of an enemy ship. The tension on the bridge was palpable. The previous night's wait had also proved fruitless. As the deputy commander of the 5th E-Boat Flotilla he had had four boats stood by from dusk to dawn to intercept a convoy like the one anticipated this night. They had missed it. Poor visibility in any case had aborted the mission. One more of a series of frustrations like the maintenance problems that had plagued the 5th Flotilla, tying up an average of six boats out of ten already this month. The best they had achieved was a successful mine-laying operation off the Isle of Wight with the 9th S-Boat Flotilla, employing six boats. Tonight, however, was different. They had been galvanised into action by the short terse message from S-Boat command based at Wimereux near Boulogne. Kapitän zur See Rudolf Petersen, Führer der Schnellboote, had directed that

The 5th and 9th S-Boat Flotillas are to depart as soon as possible to intercept an enemy convoy identified 10 sea miles west of Portland Bill.²

Two nights now of enemy convoy activity. Air intelligence had reported further naval activity. Korvettenkapitän Klug, Jurgensmeyer's flotilla commander had sent them out. 'Targets are likely in square BF2398'. The Invasion perhaps, but no sign yet.

Two groups of E-Boats, six from the 5th Flotilla and three from the 9th Flotilla had departed Cherbourg at 22.00 in two columns. Clearing the harbour mole, they accelerated to 35 knots. Radio silence was maintained, even radars were not switched on, to avoid being detected by the enemy.

This was a potentially powerful force. Each of the sleek, low-silhouetted craft was over ninety feet long. Armament was a 20mm cannon forward, twin 20mm amidships and 40mm gun aft, with two fixed torpedo tubes forward and a further reload pair of torpedoes on board. All boats could make 35 knots with their Daimler-Benz engines, those with super-chargers, more. On arrival

in the area of operations, the 5th Flotilla boats split into pairs (or *Rotten*) and began, with the 3-boat group from 9th Flotilla, to comb their sectors.

It was often useful, as Jurgensmeyer knew, simply to switch off engines and concentrate on the sights and sounds around them, bobbing up and down, a low silhouette, shrouded in inky blackness. Such ambush tactics were proven against British convoys. Oberleutnant zur See Stohwasser's crew in *S-138* similarly strained their ears and stared into the darkness. There were doubts but it appeared that some shadows were moving independently of the dark sea mass. Some even imagined they heard a slow rhythmic throb like a distant aeroplane. Taking his eyes off the shadowy spots identifiable only through binoculars, Stohwasser grimaced, wiped his eyes, blinked hard and rested them. Changing direction he peered intently at the nearer dark mass, that must be Jurgensmeyer's *S-136*. Had he seen it too? Forward and off the port bow was 'a destroyer with two smoke stacks, beyond that to the north west was a further destroyer in sight moving west'.⁴ 'Start engines', he ordered.

Convoy T4 preceded by the corvette *HMS Azalea* seemed an unlikely herald for an invasion force. She appeared more like a converted trawler. Nevertheless following on behind was a column of eight Landing Ship Tank (LST) vessels. They were powering through the night at between 6–7 knots, throwing up a considerable splashing turbulent wake. The column stretched nearly three miles, broken only by the fifth vessel, *LST58*, towing two pontoon causeways, to ease beach unloading operations. On board were American troops, elements from the 1st Special Engineer Brigade, rehearsing for their planned landing on Utah Beach. The ships were packed with amphibious trucks and combat engineers whose task was to manage the landing beaches and keep traffic moving smoothly. They were following the 6th Special Engineer Brigade, who had sailed in the first wave.⁶

LSTs were dubbed 'Large Slow Targets' with typical black humour by those who had already served in the Pacific and Mediterranean campaigns. Regarded individually as disposable

war-horses, yet collectively indispensable, they took on average only four months to build. The LST was in effect the forerunner of the modern roll-on, roll-off ferry. At the bow were doors and a ramp that could be lowered to let out men and vehicles. They were built to contain as much as possible so the 322-foot length lacked a proper reinforcing system of bulkheads and ribs. As one former crewman Emanuel Rubin declared it was almost all hold, 'just a big welded box', and the hull was like 'a thin piece of fabric between you and the fish'. Conditions were 'cramped and crowded'.

You lived on top of one another. When there were soldiers aboard, you couldn't move. It smelt always of people.⁷

LST 507 bringing up the rear of the convoy, carried the 478th Amphibian Truck Company, the 557th Quartermaster Railhead Company, the 33rd Chemical Company, the 1st Platoon of the 440th Engineer Company, and the 3891st Quartermaster Truck Company, 282 US Army troops in all. Aboard were two $\frac{1}{4}$ ton trucks, one $\frac{1}{4}$ ton truck, thirteen $2\frac{1}{2}$ ton trucks, and 22 amphibious DUKWs. These were also fully fuelled and carrying additional supplies. The vessel was crewed by 165 officers and men. The other LSTs carried similar loads. Soldiers on board had cumbersome backpacks with weapons slung over their shoulders. They were equipped for the forthcoming beach assault. There was sufficient space for life-belts to be worn, but only incorrectly around the waist.

Weeks of bored inaction waiting in pre-invasion assembly areas, interspersed by sudden embarkation flaps and practices had fuelled inevitable rumours. Most participants were ignorant of what was going on. German planes had appeared over Plymouth the morning before and air raid sirens had howled. But no bombs were dropped, apparently another photographic mission. These were so common as to be unexceptional. Some of the sailors had told the GIs they were on yet another dry run but the Assistant Executive Officer of *LST531*, the fifth ship in line, believed that 'most of the

men thought they were embarked on the actual invasion of France'. Another crewman thought 'Poland!' Quartermaster Eugene Carney of the US 4th Infantry Division on the lead LST had complained on arriving in Plymouth – 'not another dry run!' But when he saw that the ship's tank deck 'was loaded with small planes and trucks filled with machine guns' he knew this was 'no routine practice'.⁸

It was certainly no drill for the second S-Boat *Rotte* led by Oberleutnant zur See Goetschke. *S-140* and *S-142* had crash started engines and were on an attack run. Stumbling on the convoy from a different sector, shadows had been identified nine miles out:

Three small steamers (of 600–800 tons, with funnels to the rear) were identified running on a south easterly course.

Goetschke gave his sister vessel commanded by Oberleutnant Ahrens permission to open fire at 2,000 metres in order to cloak his own attack run out of the moonlight. Five torpedoes were launched, close in, at ranges varying between 1,400–1,500 metres. They knew they had achieved surprise; at this range they could not miss. Anticipating retaliatory fire they broke off the action and sped off into the darkness. The torpedoes ran, but nothing – no impacts.⁹

The time was shortly after midnight. Convoy T4 ploughed on oblivious to the danger. Quartermaster Wendell Hoppler on board the lead *LST515* recorded routinely in his log that the sea was 'very dark', the weather 'clear and calm' with 'a faint slip of setting moon'.¹⁰

Goetschke and Ahrens pulled alongside each other and conducted a short discussion boat-to-boat by megaphone as their vessels rose and fell on the dark mass of the swell. What had gone wrong? Goetschke subsequently reported:

It could not be ruled out that the torpedoes had undershot (Tank Landing Craft). Two torpedoes were observed exploding on land.

The feint and attack tactic was further pursued. This time the aim was 'to show the convoy's position to other S-Boats thereby creating further attack opportunities'. Their 40mm cannon began to thump out spiralling trails of greenish and yellow tracer lacerating identified convoy vessels. Goetschke described how at 01.30:

Concentrated fire was directed from all weapons on the two northerly vessels from ranges between 600 to 300 metres... 60 rounds of 40mm cannon were fired from each boat. Good strikes. No response.¹¹

This four minute attack run was discerned by the third LST (*LST 511*) in the convoy line who reported: 'firing was seen astern, believed to be part of exercise'. The fifth, *LST 58*, was not so sure, shells were passing overhead and erupting in multiple ripples, slashing the water only 400 metres to port. Nobody could pinpoint the source of the firing. Both S-Boats, low silhouettes blending perfectly with the dark sea mass, were using flashless powder. Tracer ignited well away from the guns. An occasional flare lit the sky, and jets of molten tracer flickered ominously throughout the column as American sailors gazed anxiously about, trying to discern whether this was part of rehearsal realism or mistaken identity. General Quarters was sounded and reluctantly, in some cases enquiringly, soldiers and sailors within the convoy moved to battle stations.

Kapitänleutnant Jurgensmeyer and Oberleutnant zur See Stohwasser in *S-136* and *S-138* were roaring across the dark surface of the sea intent only on lining up on the dark silhouettes before them. 'Los!' ordered Stohwasser as he approached to within 2,000 metres of the rear right hand 'destroyer'. Two torpedoes ejected from his bows in an explosive discharge of compressed air. Almost concurrently two more erupted from Jurgensmeyer's boat directing a similar salvo at the lead destroyer. Taking rapid evasive action both roared off in a wide sweeping curve back into the inky blackness. No fire was returned.

Both boats stopped. Jurgensmeyer transmitted a short signal giving the convoy position. There was no reply. Peering intently at watch faces the crews counted off the seconds, willing success. The time was 02.03. Stohwasser estimated a running time of 95–100 seconds to reach the rear destroyer. All was black, until, as ‘95-96-97-98’ was counted off, there was a flash, followed after a pause by a crack and roar. Jurgensmeyer observed:

A huge fiery explosion, strongly audible in our own boat. *S-138* observed the strike in line with the second funnel... simultaneously accompanied by the detonation of both torpedoes from *S-136* after a running time of approximately 40 seconds.

The forward enemy ship ‘fired poorly directed tracer to the north east’.¹²

American Naval Corpsman Arthur Victor was on the port stern of *LST507*, the last in the column, when it was hit.

I was lifted from my feet and hurled back against a bulkhead. Although my head hit so hard I almost passed out, my helmet absorbed most of the shock...¹³

Officers and men on the bridge of *LST289* immediately ahead, saw an enormous flash, which reflected off their upturned faces. Darkness briefly intervened after the flash of the strike until a fire-ball arose, sucking in cold night air, before merging into a violently ascending light coloured bulbous column of smoke. Flames spread almost instantly from bow to stern. One torpedo slamming into the auxiliary engine room on the starboard side of the ship cut all electric power. The main engine stopped, and the ship, dead in the water, was engulfed in flames. Control at the rear end of the convoy now began to disintegrate. *LST499* third from the end began to pull alongside the port side of the LST ahead of it. *LST289* immediately to the front of the stricken *507* sheered

off to port.¹⁴ Damage control parties on *507* had no power to operate their pumps, so by 02.30 the order to Abandon Ship was given.

With four S-Boats committed, the remaining five became alerted, by degree, to the possibility of potential prey. The 1st *Rotte* (*S-100* and *S-143*) just outside Lyme Bay intercepted Jurgensmeyer's initial contact transmission: 'Silhouettes. Two Destroyers off port bow.' Oberstormann Borkenhagen reported that:

A few minutes later I observed a huge explosion at approximately 110 degrees, with two high white waterspouts. The impact could not be felt within the boat. After a while a loud sharp crack came through the air.

Shortly after, two tracer rounds were observed curving languidly 'very high into the sky'. Borkenhagen considered the possibility of aircraft attacks, and immediately radioed his flotilla chief after the explosion 'What was that?' But he received no answer, from either *S-136* or *S-138*.¹⁵

The other three S-Boats from the 9th Flotilla picked up 'a short flash of light at 70 degrees'. They attempted to close in on the source. Presently they saw 'red tracer at 40 degrees, probably enemy'. Not realising this was the colour being used by the 5th Flotilla, they moved closer. Borkenhagen could still observe nothing 'despite very good visibility'. Until the situation regarding the engagement being fought clarified, he was keeping *S100* and *S143* out of Lyme Bay. This changed dramatically with the partial intercept of *S-138*'s signals traffic. A report of 'two destroyers in square 2393' was confirmed by a similar message from C-in-C E-Boats Wimereux, that they were 'coming from the east'. Then came the electric report from Jurgensmeyer, 'Destroyer sinking'. Gaining speed rapidly, the 1st *Rotte* began to accelerate into Lyme Bay, radioing both its own position and that of the enemy convoy they had been seeking all night. This message was intercepted by the remaining three S-Boats of the 9th Flotilla, tying in with the

directional clue already provided by distant tracer fire.¹⁶ The wolves were now gathering. But the slaughter, which was to continue throughout the night, had already begun.

The stricken and burning hulk of *LST 507* guided in the captains of S-Boats *S-100* and *S-140*. Borkenhagen saw that

A larger tanker had been torpedoed by another boat in the north, which burnt brightly raising huge clouds of black smoke. The southern part of the bay lay within this dense smoke.¹⁷

They sped toward the source of the activity at full speed. Random firing in all directions by various vessels could be identified through the smoke. Roaring through the obfuscation at 35 knots, both S-Boats approached to within 1,500 metres of *LST 531*, ploughing on in the centre of the convoy. 'Los!' two torpedoes were fired from each. After a run of 76 seconds the first hit.

It was difficult to identify which vessel it was. The American bridge watch on *LST 58* following immediately behind covered beneath the explosion, but when there were no flames, realised all the damage was to the ship ahead. Emanuel Rubin, crewman on *LST 496*, just ahead, saw:

A gigantic orange ball explosion, like something from the movies, a flame like it had come from hell, with little black specks round the edges which we knew were jeeps or boat stanchions, or men.¹⁸

Two ships had now been mortally wounded within the space of thirteen minutes. The stern of *LST 507*, the first hit, was now 'wild with confusion' according to Ensign Tom Clark on board, with men yelling 'we're gonna die!'¹⁹ Soldiers and crew began leaping from the high side of a ship into a sea that was at once cold and burning with oil, dark yet already lit up in places by leaping flames. James Murdoch another officer on board later reported:

All of the Army vehicles naturally were loaded with gasoline, and it was the gasoline which caught fire first. As the gasoline spread on the deck and poured into the fuel oil which was seeping out of the side of the ship, it caused fire on the water around the ship.²⁰

But 'the greatest horror' for medic Lieutenant Eugene Eckstam, which could still give him nightmares forty years later, were the agonising screams for help of the Army men trapped in the 'high roaring furnace fire' where trucks were exploding on *507's* tank deck.²¹

Kapitänleutnant Jurgensmeyer was certain the 'tanker' was crippled and sinking. But he wanted to make certain. In a boat-to-boat discussion with *S-138* they decided to re-enter the engagement zone and finish the crippled vessel off 'in case it had not sunk, with 40mm gunfire, and pick up any crew as prisoners'.²²

The demise of the second mortally wounded vessel *LST 531*, was even more swift than her sister ship *507*, and spectacularly violent. US Naval Medical Corpsman Arthur Victor, already floundering helplessly in the water saw the ammunition explode from *531's* bow 'like 'a fourth of July celebration' and 'bodies flung in all directions like rag dolls'. Within six minutes she began to capsize and sink. He continues:

We were in a state of unbelieving shock, as we knew that there were hundreds of guys on board whose losses were even greater than ours. More men became hysterical, screaming that the Germans were going to kill us all. Most were convinced that the entire convoy would be destroyed. Others cried that the Germans would come back and shoot us in the water. I kept screaming "Don't panic! Stay put!"²³

This view was shared by those at the front end of the convoy. On board the second vessel, *LST 496*, everybody was 'petrified'. Emanuel Rubin could hear the 'men in the half-tracks and trucks crying hysterically'.²⁴ The guns on the lead three LSTs were all

firing. Two E-Boats swept from port to starboard on supercharge at 40 knots. None of the ships' guns could bear low enough to fire on this high speed threat throttling out of the darkness, sounding like approaching low flying aircraft. One passed directly in front of the third vessel, *LST 511*. The after port guns of *LST 496* ahead swept the decks of *511* wounding 18 officers and crewmen. Firing ceased when it was realised they were getting strikes on a superstructure too high for an S-Boat.

Convoy T4 began now to break up and scatter. By twelve minutes after the second strike Lieutenant Mettler, the commander of *LST 289*, now last in line was running for his life. Churning along at emergency speed, the ship was steering left full rudder then right at five minute intervals. The only defence against E-Boat attack was to expose the smallest target, the rear, and keep hostile shrieking engine noises behind. Several gun crews reported torpedo wakes astern, on the starboard quarter, then another across the port bow. Then yet another, running shallow, struck the stern high above the propellers. Thirteen men were killed at once, including most officers on the bridge, and 21 were wounded. The whole of the stern area was reduced to a mangled wreck, with the rear gun tub hanging over the edge of the superstructure at a ninety degree angle to the deck. The entire ship shuddered and reverberated following the flash and crack of the explosion. Small fires began to break out as the ship lay momentarily dead in the water. *S-145* from the 9th Flotilla, despite receiving random fire from enemy ships, roared jubilantly off into the darkness. Its commander reported

Hitting with a surface runner, despite pronounced evasive manoeuvring by the Landing Craft... In technical shooting terms, this launch could be counted as the best of all.²⁵

The crew of *LST 289* restarted their propellers but were only able to turn to port. She was crippled.

The E-Boat assaults had now virtually engulfed the whole convoy line. *S-150* and *S-130* attacked a single LST, while *S-145*

went after some small 'armed escorts'. The action could be likened to a shark feeding frenzy, command and control was lost as the E-Boat pairs strove to capitalise on individual successes. *S-100* and *S-142* were on the point of torpedo release, when their intended target, probably *LST 531*, burst into a fiery conflagration, hit by another boat. They themselves had difficulty keeping track of target 'steamers' that 'disappeared in dense smoke and mist'. At the height of the sinking Borkenhagen, commander of *S-100*, complained:

I could not run at speed because of our other boats in the immediate vicinity. Two boats from the 9th Flotilla were actually in sight. I decided therefore at 02.42 to retire.²⁶

Thirty-five minutes later he collided with his sister boat *S-143* during an attack run, damaging the latter's superstructure. Borkenhagen understandably decided enough was enough, and broke off the attack to return to base. The convoy had been totally cowed. It was clear to one crewman on the third ship in line that the E-Boats had them 'trapped and hemmed in like a bunch of wolves circling a wounded dog'.²⁷

Darkness and relative inactivity descended once again after 03.20. The glow of the burning vessels was snuffed out as they slipped scalding, bubbling and groaning beneath the surface of the sea. By 04.40 the E-Boats had broken off the action and were returning to Cherbourg, which they reached shortly before dawn, under the threat of retaliatory air-strikes. Only *S-100* and *S-143* were straddled by a stick of bombs as they made good their escape.²⁸ It had been their most successful mission to date.

It was not the invasion, but it did produce a scare along the German-occupied Normandy coast. The 9th Flotilla boats had been closer to assessing the significance of the action, and the first to identify and report landing craft at 03.25. German coastal defences had immediately been placed on alert. *S-100* eventually radioed during its return to base that 'beyond reported destroyers, nothing of significance'. 9th Flotilla reported an enemy destroyer

‘bringing a landing craft under heavy fire’. It was evident to the German commander ‘that the destroyer was not aware of the whereabouts of the landing craft in its sector, and that therefore it was more likely they were stragglers from a unit on an exercise’. The commander of the 9th Flotilla, Kapitänleutnant Freiherr von Mirbach assessed that his men had attacked a landing craft unit, sinking two LSTs, one of 4,600 tons another of 3,000, and hitting a further smaller vessel of 200 tons.²⁹

The fact that this heavy skirmish had not heralded an anticipated Allied Second Front came as no surprise. There had been so many false alerts and alarms during April that, with the passing of favourable tide, moon and weather conditions, it was becoming increasingly likely that the Allied invasion would be coincidental with the anticipated Soviet summer eastern offensive.

Dawn on 29 April 1944 exposed the tragic failure of Exercise ‘Tiger’, the final dress rehearsal for some units before Overlord, the invasion of Europe, which was actually scheduled for 5 June. Julian Perkin aboard one of the rescue ships, the destroyer HMS *Obedient* reported:

We arrived in the area at daybreak and the sight was appalling. There were hundreds of bodies of American servicemen in full battle gear, floating in the sea. Many had their limbs and even their heads blown off... Of all those we took on board, there were only nine survivors.

Doctors were pushing those pronounced dead back into the sea. Not as callous as it appears because Perkin added that by this time ‘small American landing craft with their ramps down were literally scooping up bodies. It was a ghastly sight’.³⁰

‘It will be all right on the night’... England, spring 1944.

The successful outcome of the invasion was dependent upon the ability of the Allies to project military power across the narrow

channel. Tiger had shown palpably that this might not be possible. The exercise debacle summed up the problems of D-Day. Nothing on this scale had ever been previously attempted. This final dress rehearsal for the Force U, US VIIth Corps' landings on Utah Beach had not gone well in other respects also. General Bradley, commander of the US First Army, asked General Collins to assign a new beach commander to the engineers, based on their inadequate beach landing performance. He was not aware at that moment that the 1st Special Engineer Brigade alone had lost 413 dead and missing with 16 wounded. One unit, 3206th Quartermaster Company, had been completely wiped out. Total deaths were in the region of 749.¹

'Tiger' and the following 'Fabius 1' exercise with Force O were held at Slapton Sands on the coast of Devon. Fabius 2 with Force G was held at Hayling Island, Fabius 3 with Force J in Bracklesham Bay and Fabius 4 with Force S to the west of Littlehampton. These large scale exercises were designed to test assault techniques and co-ordination between the joint US and British armies, smoothness of staff work in all phases of the operation, and techniques of mounting, marshalling, loading and unloading. With only six weeks to go before the actual invasion 'Tiger' revealed a disturbing and depressing spectrum of unresolved problems. Postponement of H-Hour ruined the air and naval bombardment programme. Units landed in the wrong place, there were insufficient maps, communications between landing craft and engineers on shore were non-existent. Traffic direction on the beach was chaotic, vehicles bogged down, medical evacuation and resupply were poor. Naval craft were motionless and bunched off the beaches, a potentially inviting target for coastal artillery. Perhaps worst of all, troops were 'unenthused' during the landings, to them it was 'just an exercise'.

US and British liaison revealed serious shortcomings. The fault lay on both sides, and both blamed each other for the tragic massacre that resulted in Lyme Bay. Convoy T4 had only a single British escort, which could not communicate directly with the American LSTs it was tasked to protect. The naval security screen

had been penetrated by the E-Boats, and radar reports of impending disaster were passed on too slowly. The division of guilt for the disaster has been debated endlessly since.² It inevitably led to bitterness and recrimination. Coxswain Joseph McCann of *LST 515* was enraged whilst searching for survivors when

We observed three British motor torpedo boats moving very fast from the north to the south. I felt sure they would move out and around all of the bodies and debris in the water, but they did not. Instead they cut right through and were churning up bodies in their screws.

He had not had a chance to check them for life. 'We were very unhappy with the British Navy and that feeling still persists' he stated.³ That the survivors were handled insensitively is indisputable. Infantryman Eugene Carney's experience was typical:

We were told to keep our mouths shut and taken to a camp where we were quarantined. When we went through the mess line we weren't even allowed to talk to the cooks.⁴

In the build up to D-Day, the Americans and British could allow no serious rift to open between them. Nothing – whatever the nature – could be allowed to weaken the Anglo-American alliance. But the strain of the impending operation was beginning to tell. The strategic decision that American forces were to attack on the right flank of the invasion had a profound effect upon the ordinary GI, now usually based in south-west England, and the civilian population that lived there. Units were relocated as required to the coastline fronting the English Channel from the eastern tip of Dorset to the far edge of Cornwall. US sailors took over ports like Falmouth and Plymouth, Dartmouth and Weymouth, and, almost overnight it seemed, the small towns and villages in Dorset, Devon, Somerset and Cornwall, felt the full impact of the American occupation. As one US battalion commander wrote to his wife,

shortly after arrival in England. 'The British people seem very queer to us, and I suppose we seem just as queer to them.' He continued:

There are so many of the . . . ordinary everyday things of the American way of life that I miss a great deal. Funny papers, magazines, cokes, just any one of the million and one things that we accept as the usual thing are gone, and I have suddenly realized that I don't know when I'll see them again.⁵

Lack of understanding caused frictions. Lieutenant John Downing an American infantryman felt the underlying tensions. The British he felt:

Outwardly retained their quiet courtesy, but there were signs that they were becoming testy about being crowded out of their pubs, their buses, and their cinemas and having their girls monopolised by Americans.⁶

Americans were strange to the British. Not only were there divisions between Allies, there were racial divides within the US Army. White and black American soldiers were segregated. Quarters were separated on troop ships sailing to Europe. Black soldiers and white soldiers often could not even go to the same pubs or cinemas or dance halls when off duty in England. Timuel Black, a coloured (as the expression of the time would put it) GI in the Quartermaster Corps, commented paradoxically:

The ordinary British were absolutely amazed, looking at these two armies. I guess they hadn't thought about their two armies, too: the colonial and the regular. But they were chagrined by this racial situation, which they'd never seen.

White soldiers would say 'Don't have anything to do with those niggers'. Blacks seemed to be given the least desirable towns to go to. British girls were encouraged to accuse young blacks of rape if

they had developed a relationship. Black remembers the outcome of such cases: 'We had one in our outfit who was hanged'.

The longer the troops waited for the invasion, the more complicated life became in England. There were differences also with the Canadians. As one Canadian soldier commented 'initially we didn't like the Americans.' The British found this difficult to believe, since to them all the newcomers came from the same continent and shared the same language and similar culture. The difficulty was principally over money, the same problem dogging Anglo-American relations at the ordinary soldier's level. Combat pressures were subsequently to mellow differences, which were all too apparent within the restricted confines of troop concentration areas. The same Canadian soldier complained:

It used to brass us off to see some Yank come into a pub flashing five-pound notes, and try to buy the one bottle of whiskey in the place plus a place in the dart game plus the barmaid plus everything. I'd say most of the fights occurred because the Yanks had too much money and didn't understand the climate of England in those days, and they often got their faces pounded in for it.⁸

American feelings were perhaps summed up by the final verse of a poem that appeared on the company bulletin board of a unit in the US 18th Infantry Division one day in May 1944:

This Isle's not worth saving, I don't think
Cut those balloons loose – let the damn thing sink.
I'm not complaining but I'll bet you know
Life's rougher than hell in the E.T.O.⁹

The flow of American men and supplies into Britain accelerated markedly from January 1944 onwards. In July 1943 it had already reached a rate of 750,000 tons per month, this now rose, in 1944, towards a D-Day peak of 2 million tons. To handle this vast flood,

the supply organization – Com Z or Communications Zone – expanded to 31,500 officers and 350,000 enlisted men representing one quarter of the maximum 1,526,965 US troop strength (excluding sailors) in the United Kingdom¹⁰ just before D-Day. Nonetheless, in the final months, a high proportion of the new arrivals were combat troops.

These men were immediately swallowed up in the large scale manoeuvres conducted during the last few months, a grim and weary business. One British helper in a Red Cross club in Exeter remembers how, at this time:

Men would arrive on the Saturday night, with no bookings... muddy, tired and glad of a rest. As soon as eleven o'clock came and the dance was over mattresses would be laid on the floor in the main rooms, even in the cloakroom, and along the wide passages, so that there was somewhere for them to sleep.¹¹

Some of these men were veterans of North Africa, Sicily or Italy but the majority had never heard a gun fired in anger, having just completed six months training in the United States. Two months before that they had been civilians. Their usual age was 18–20 years. They were insignificant cogs in a remorseless build up that was to reflect the American way of waging war. There were to be no unnecessary, wasteful or superficially glorious heroics. The war was to be won surgically by an overwhelming preponderance of hardware and manpower, utilising technology to the full. George S. Patton the future commander of the US Third Army complained the anti-heroic impulse had been overdone 'that in our attempts to prevent war, we have taught our people to belittle the heroic qualities of the soldier'.¹²

Nevertheless these soldiers were human and subject to normal frailties; one of which was fear of the unknown. The large dress-rehearsal exercises unfolded in an atmosphere of dread and foreboding, which deepened as the winter of 1944 turned into spring, and with it the prospect of the invasion. Hitler's Atlantic

Wall propaganda attained significance because its aura of invincibility, however unlikely, could not easily be laid psychologically to rest. Ralph Ingersoll, an American liaison officer on General Montgomery's staff, wrote:

Everything across the Channel was mysterious... what we were doing had no precedent. The veterans of Africa and Sicily – and even they were a small minority – had no comfort to offer. The more they knew, in fact, the less reassuring they were – for they seemed only to remember the confusion and the wreckage and the terrible dependence of the amphibious operation on chance, on the luck of weather and the enemy's mistakes after the landing.¹³

General Bradley felt, however, that such experience was indispensable. When the American beachhead was expanded during the Overlord planning to include Utah as well as Omaha, he decided to include the only veteran assault division he had 'rather than chance a landing with two inexperienced divisions', the 4th and 29th Infantry. He chose the 'Big Red One':

By this time the 1st Infantry Division had swallowed a bellyful of heroics and wanted to go home. When the Division learned that it was to make a third D-Day assault, this time in France, the troops grumbled bitterly over the injustices of war. Among the infantrymen who had already survived both Mediterranean campaigns, few believed their good fortune could last them through a third.¹⁴

Many were to be proved correct. The veterans understood the odds, and did not share the enthusiasm of those seeking their first combat ribbon. The 29th Division who, in Bradley's words, 'had staked out squatters' rights on Omaha Beach' having been in England since October 1942, did not impress the 1st Division's old sweats. 'Twenty-nine, let's go!' was the 29th Division battle cry, often

earning the 1st Division response ‘Go ahead, twenty-nine, we’ll be right behind you!’¹⁵

Gloomy rumours about what fighting would be like began to permeate the 29th Division. Platoon and company level leaders, the gossips argued, would not last long in combat. Bradley felt he should visit the unit ‘infected with a despondent fear of the casualties it was predicted they would suffer in the assault. Some talked of 90%.’ He tried to be realistic, referring to casualty experiences in the Mediterranean.

“This stuff about huge losses is tommyrot,” I told them.
“Some of you won’t come back – but it’ll be very few.”¹⁶

The unit was to sustain some of the heaviest casualties on D-Day. Lieutenant Bentz Carroll of the 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division made no secret of his preference:

If I was going to be in combat I would rather be with combat-hardened troops than with people who were mostly untrained and inexperienced.¹⁷

The Americans were not alone in their despondency. The British had been at war since 1939. Following milestones such as Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and Alamein, the forthcoming Second Front was an emotional event. Its delayed start had begun to oppress both civilians and soldiers. They shared the forebodings of their allies. Waiting had gone on for so long. The inevitable mystery and secrecy of the operation added to the difficulties. As war correspondent Alan Moorehead expressed it:

Although there was a general certainty that the landing would occur, people were without any technical knowledge of how it would be done; they had no means of estimating the chances; and as the talk and conjecture continued the fears increased. All that one could see ahead was a deliberately planned massacre.¹⁸

A dead, heavy mood settled over the country, and this was communicated to the army. It would have been easier if more people were aware of the minute detailed preparation that had gone into this vast undertaking. Submarines had charted the coast, commandos had landed on beaches to gather information, hundreds of ships were collecting in the ports, five thousand aircraft were preparing for the day. Science in all its complexity and mystery was being applied to solve the assault problem at the minimum cost in lives.

The British 79th Armoured Division was, for example, an entirely new creation equipped with tanks specifically designed to meet particular invasion problems. So odd and diverse were they that the 79th was called the 'Funny Division', and the tanks themselves 'Funnies'. Lieutenant Ian Hammerton found himself commanding a Crab, or Flail tank. This had a large drum mounted at the front with stout chains attached with a metal end. Its task was to advance through minefields, chains flailing the ground. General Sir Percy Hobart, commander of 79th Armoured, briefed Hammerton's Regiment on its new role, leaving behind

A sad and disillusioned collection of men. No sweeping across the fields of France at cavalry speed in our Cruiser tanks – just sweeping mines. But surely, came the thought, after we have cleared a few mines, we will be able to be let loose and Tally-ho! after the foe? Surely, after all our training...

Of course their training had to be shrouded in secrecy. As Hammerton's name was connected to that of a famous brewer – Hammertons' Stout – their activities became known as 'stouting'.¹⁹

Concrete pillboxes could hold up armoured advances, so a flame-throwing variant of the Churchill tank, the Crocodile, was developed, able to drive right up to a target and neutralise it by drenching it with flaming jelly. Lieutenant Andrew Wilson, soon to be a troop leader in such a unit, mystified as to why so many of his colleagues in C Squadron 141st Regiment RAC were 'on a course'

he knew nothing of, asked for further information one mess night. He had heard of AVREs, Congers, and 'other devices' but was mystified by Crocodiles which

Sounded dramatic – like a vast machine weighing thousands of tons which advanced with steel jaws to scoop up battalions of infantry.

His curiosity overcame all else, and he asked 'Can someone please tell me, just what the hell is a Crocodile?' He was immediately invited to sign the Official Secrets Act.²⁰

AVREs (Armoured Vehicles Royal Engineers) were modified Churchills fitted with demolition mortars instead of guns and provision for a wide range of special fittings from bridges to the 'Congers', rocket propelled mine clearing hosepipes. Others were equipped with huge 'bobbins' designed to lay hessian carpets reinforced with steel tubes to cross soft patches of clay. Turretless Churchill ARKs with ramps at each end could be driven into wide ditches to allow other vehicles to drive over them. 79th Armoured would be a vital factor in victory from Normandy all the way into Germany. Other specialist armour included old Crusader tanks with twin 20mm AA guns to provide protection from the expected air threat and little Tetrarch light tanks to be dropped in specially designed Hamilcar gliders. Above all however, there were the amphibious versions of the Sherman. Lance Corporal Patrick Hennessy of 13th/18th Hussars remembers:

The notion that we would swim our tanks across the water was difficult for us to understand. A tank is a solid steel object and very heavy. "Surely," we said, "it will sink like a stone?" "Not so," said the Boffins, "consider this stone of which you speak. If you place it in a canvas bucket, and put that bucket into the water, it may go down an inch or two, but it will float."²¹

A canvas screen supported by struts was the bucket, and Duplex

Drive (DD) propellers provided the propulsion for the D-Day tanks. Underwater escape training was provided, but even during exercises ‘panic was not far off’. All this was ‘fine in theory – but we had grave doubts!’ Like many of the other projects, the development of DD tanks was shrouded in obsessive secrecy. They were to provide the Germans with an unpleasant technological surprise.

A Canadian Lieutenant, W.D. Little of the Fort Garry Horse, described the impact of the first DD tank he saw, soon to be issued to his unit.

This little barge turned and headed toward us, and as it rolled you could see it struck the bottom of the pond or lake, and started to roll up. Lo and behold – tracks! This was a tremendous surprise. Then as it rolled forward the tracks kept coming higher; and then as it got to the edge of the water, down came the screen and there was the gun. This was a terrific surprise and shock.²²

Hennessey, Little and their crew members were well aware of the risks, as was also the chief petty officer at Gosport responsible for the escape equipment; who said ‘Rather you than me, mate!’²³

As with the Americans there was a desire to bolster the inexperienced units within assault divisions by veterans. The 7th Armoured Division, ‘The Desert Rats’, had been returned from overseas to participate in the forthcoming invasion. These men had few idealistic or romantic notions of what lay ahead. Some were war weary. Norman Smith, a tank crewman in the 5th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR), joined 22 Armoured Brigade on its return to England. The desert men he remembers:

Felt they had not been exactly generously treated with home leave passes after all their years fighting so far from home ... Graffiti began to appear on walls and railway carriages, “no leave, no second front”. As someone said, “They can put us in

prison if they like but someone else will have to do the fighting.”²⁴

There were inevitably problems with wives, who had been left at home alone during years of overseas service. ‘Jacked me in for a civvy,’ said one soldier. ‘I got home; no one there, no furniture, nothing.’²⁵ These soldiers were inevitably unimpressed with morale-raising visits by senior officers, unlike some units as yet untried in battle. Alan Moorehead, listening to General Montgomery’s pre-invasion addresses, felt that:

Monty was all right. He didn’t talk a lot of cock about courage and liberty. He knew what it was like. And perhaps one had been taking the whole thing a bit too seriously. It wouldn’t be so bad.²⁶

‘Montgomery is a bit of a bull-shitter’ was the unsolicited view of one old regular army desertman in B Squadron 5 RTR. Private Norman Smith was dubious that ‘This “party”,’ referred to in Montgomery’s speech, ... ‘was not going to be too bad’.

“Not too bad, for those who are going to be dead?” muttered someone close to me.

The General’s rousing speech ‘served only to increase our suspicions’. They knew what was required of them. ‘We would rather have had someone just tell it straight.’²⁷

Part of the problem of waiting was over-training. Men were confident and ready. By May their kit was packed to assault scales, with pouches full of ammunition ready to go. Frustrations were not eased by the ‘flaps’ or test embarkation exercises that were conducted in late May. Startled villagers and citizens of seaport towns would suddenly see columns of infantry trudge down to the docks and file aboard landing craft. A rumour would spread through the town that ‘it’ had started. Troops would then return

and civilians would argue in groups at their front doors, declaring it had been called off yet again, or it had all been done to fool 'Jerry spies', or that it was only a practice. Trooper Duce of the 8th Hussars remembered:

We had one false alarm at the end of May when we were paraded in Battle Order and marched down to the seafront to our respective vehicles with the intention of moving off, but after having mounted up and kept hanging about for orders, it was suddenly cancelled. So back we went to our billets.²⁸

Lieutenant Colonel Moulton CO of 48 Commando, part of the initial assault wave, felt:

We could certainly do with some more training but we could never recapture the old intensity; there is a limit to the time you can train the way we had been doing, and the tension would now be snapped better to go and have it over.²⁹

There was still a nagging doubt whether they would pull it off. General Eisenhower observed on the eve of the invasion 'the whole mighty host was tense as a coiled spring'.³⁰ Yet having prepared so long, so thoroughly, so intimately, it appeared at times the spirit to put the plan into operation might be lacking. It was a hot May, and still the waiting continued. Alan Moorehead declared: 'One felt only an emptiness and a mental weariness and overburdening ennui.'³¹

Convoys roared through the countryside day and night moving men and supplies into areas, from which in indeterminate stages, they would move to the embarkation ports and then into loading zones. Successive manoeuvres rehearsed every aspect of the invasion. Constant practice brought with it less tolerance of the everyday mundane mistakes that add up to what Clausewitz described as the friction of war. Even so, errors such as those exposed on 'Tiger' were dismaying. There would not be another opportunity on this scale

before they went to put it right. Ralph Ingersoll wrote of a mood of gloom and pessimism before the invasion:

With every amphibious exercise, through the winter and early spring, we seemed to get worse at it instead of better . . . vital equipment got lost, plans seemed forgotten and all sense of coherence disappeared . . . Demonstrably it could not be done.

Resolve, nevertheless, had to be kept up at all costs. In the final resort, whatever the problems it was 'to hell with everything except getting on the beaches'.³² Or as the theatrical profession might say: 'It will be all right on the night'.

All along the Channel coast lived the soldiers of the great Allied hosts. Most wrapped in their thoughts, listened day and night to the undertones of the wind, to the crack and groan of corrugated iron roofing and the mutter of loose doors in the camps, or the slap of canvas in their tents. Every morning as they awoke they saw the problem, the narrow Channel, the embodiment of their fears. Alexander Baron described the feelings of one such unit waiting pensively for the invasion:

Before their eyes as they stepped shivering from their huts each morning was the Channel, the grey Channel, and beyond it – the grey mist.³³

CHAPTER 2

THE FAR SHORE

**'The day will yet come when the bells herald
German victory, and we'll have peace again'**

German soldier

...The German Army in the West.

On the far shore, across the grey Channel, Grenadier Robert Vogt of the 1st Battalion 726th Regiment was hard at work, constructing so called 'Rommel Asparagus' on a strip of sand, soon to be called Gold Beach, next to Arromanches-les-Bains. This was the visible manifestation of the Atlantic Wall so feared by the Allied soldiers waiting on the southern coast of England. Vogt and his comrades worked hard on the beach obstacles. Like their enemies, German soldiers generally believed in the effectiveness of their Channel defences. Fed a diet of invincibility via impressive newsreel reports of massive coastal batteries in the Pas de Calais area, there was little reason to doubt that the Atlantic Wall was truly formidable. Indeed reassurance that, despite massive losses in the east, at least the west was secure enough, was what the Germans were seeking. Vogt was hard at work thickening up these defences, because unlike soldiers inland who had not seen it, those occupying the line were aware of its shortfalls. The obstacles were designed to ensnare landing craft. As Vogt recalled:

We did all this at low tide when the sea retreated a few km. We put in a wooden stake and then, at a distance of, I'd say four to five metres, another stake. On top of these we attached a third stake with clamps – all of it done by hand – and

secured by more clamps. Teller mines were attached to the tips of the stakes or beams, so that, at high tide, the mines were just beneath the water's surface, so that even a flat-bottomed boat would touch them and be destroyed.¹

The invasion was anticipated, but when and where nobody knew. Meanwhile as Vogt recalled: 'We worked in shifts around the clock'.

The German Armies in the west were commanded by Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt. Forward and right, on the Channel opposite the Straits of Dover was the Fifteenth Army, stretching from the Scheldt eastwards almost to the river Orne. To the left and west stood Seventh Army covering Normandy and Brittany. This element – *Heeresgruppe* (Army Group) B – was commanded by Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel. In depth in the French interior was *Heeresgruppe* G consisting of the First and Nineteenth Armies.

German strategy for 1944 rested on the realization that decisive offensives could no longer be mounted in the east and that the growing strength of the Western Allies made a major invasion attempt almost certain before the end of the year. But those in the front line were aware that should the blow fall soon, they might not be ready. As Grenadier Vogt said:

All this construction went on under great pressure because there were virtually no bunkers at our location, only dugouts. Generalfeldmarschall Rommel said at the time in his famous statement "You must stop them, here, forward, on the first day, if you don't, it's all over for us."²

The invasion would prove a turning point. If an Allied landing could be deflected from the heart of Germany, and the beachheads annihilated, it was unlikely a new attempt could be made for a long time to come. As many as fifty German divisions might thereby be released to pursue the struggle against the Soviet Union.³

By early 1944 it had been acknowledged by the German Armed Forces Supreme Command (OKW), that no matter how critical the defence of the west was declared, there could be no question of withdrawing forces from the hard-pressed Russian front to strengthen it. The best that could be hoped for was to hold onto forces already in the various occupied territories outside of Russia, and devote the bulk of new resources in men and equipment that became available to the west, in the time before the Allies attacked. Originally they thought that France alone would be the target. If so an eight division force was to be raised from Norway, Denmark, Italy and the Balkans to repel it. However, by January 1944 OKW began to suspect that, although indicators pointed to an invasion across the narrowest part of the English Channel, it might be supported by subsidiary thrusts from other directions – Portugal or the Balkans. If so, the Germans could not afford to weaken sectors not immediately under attack in order to prepare for one main invasion. This belief was reinforced by Allied landings at Anzio, which resulted in the transfer of the highly mobile 715th Infantry Division from France, when this formation had formerly been included with the reserve armoured force. Supreme Command West (OB West) by this time had had its original eight-division reinforcement force diluted by a new policy providing support from within certain Replacement Army units in Germany. The new concentration consisted now of a corps HQ, two reinforced panzer-grenadier regiments, one reinforced infantry training regiment, combat teams (*Kampfgruppen*) of those infantry regiments providing cadres for new divisions, a motorised artillery training regiment, five *Landeschützen* (infantry) battalions, and one *Nebelwerfer* (automatic mortar launcher) training battalion. In effect a compromise solution born of strategic uncertainty, and certainly less than the original eight divisions.

A succession of crises on the Eastern Front further dissipated the original aspiration to grant the west priority of resources to face an inevitable challenge. On 10 March the 361st Division was ordered out of Denmark and replaced with a division of inferior combat

value. Two weeks later the 349th Division in France was substituted by a new weak 331st Division from the Replacement Army (under training) in Germany. Four further divisions under OB West were ordered to give up their assault guns to the Eastern Front. On 26 March the complete IIInd SS Panzer Corps consisting of the 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions was despatched from France to assist First Panzer Army in Russia. This departure left OB West with only one fully mobile division (21st Panzer) .

The end of March 1944 marked one of the low points of preparedness in the west, but during the following six weeks, and a stabilisation of the Russian Front, the west did much to recoup its losses. An opportunity may have been missed to launch the Invasion at the moment of least resistance, but the Allies as witnessed by Exercise Tiger were still not ready. By the end of the month the Panzer Lehr Division returned from Hungary and the 1st SS Panzer Division from the Eastern Front: both units were attached to OB West for rebuilding. Further the XLVIIth Panzer Corps under the very experienced and able General der Panzergruppen Hans Freiherr von Funck was also transferred from the east to serve under Rundstedt.

As was to be demonstrated again later during the war, the recuperative powers of the German forces in the west were remarkable despite the strain of supplying transfusions to the east. Between November 1943 and June 1944, the total number of combat divisions under von Rundstedt's command was to actually increase from 46 to 58. This increase was achieved in part by the transfer of burnt-out units from Russia but mainly by the formation of new units. Sore pressed for manpower, by autumn 1942 the German Army was already adopting a policy of combining training with occupation duties. As the operational responsibilities of these training units increased, they also came under pressure to provide fillers for regular units before eventually being re-designated as infantry or armoured divisions. Six of OB West's reserve divisions, including all three reserve panzer divisions, had been thus upgraded before the Invasion.⁶

The steady drain of units from the west to other theatres, primarily the Russian Front, had an impact upon the organization and character of the remaining units awaiting the invasion. It produced broadly two kinds of units: old divisions which had lost much of their best personnel and equipment, and new divisions, some of potent combat value and others only partially equipped and trained. The rationale influencing the organization of the new units was to use the fewest possible men to produce the maximum firepower.

It would be to these units that the focus of German expectation would swing in the event of 'Der Invasion' or as the Allies referred to it: 'The Second Front'. Even as early as the summer of 1943 Generalfeldmarschall Rommel had declared:

The West is the place that matters. If we once manage to throw the British and Americans back into the sea, it will be a long time before they return...⁷

Hope was still not lost so far as the German soldier was concerned; particularly the impressionable teenagers, schooled in National Socialist ideals, who had yet to experience combat. Fanatical Nazis were considerably more numerous among NCOs and particularly junior officers than the rank and file, and these represented the backbone of fighting power. A young 18-year old, Grenadier Kurt Maier under training in Bessarabia, wrote to his mother during the spring of 1944:

The war to be sure is not over for us yet. You see, the day will yet come when the bells herald German victory, and we'll have peace again.⁹

'As for as the Atlantic Wall...It was sheer humbug.' The Defence Debate.

Despite setbacks in the east, the German soldiers still broadly believed in the professional ability of the generals who led them.

The coming battle in the west was, however, producing a conflict between two schools of thought – Rommel versus von Rundstedt – over the way this future decisive defensive battle should be planned. Successful defence with the means available was going to be difficult. All accepted that the armoured divisions with their great mobility and striking power were the decisive weapon, and the outcome would depend on the manner of their deployment. In addition the high ranking commanders agreed that in theory the optimum defence should be to smash the Allied attack before, or when, it reached the beach. The dilemma was how to reconcile the design with reality.

Neither von Rundstedt, von Sodenstern (C-in-C Nineteenth Army in southern France) nor Geyr von Schweppenburg (C-in-C Armoured Forces West) believed this was possible. Their plan was to cause as much attrition as possible during the landings by coastal artillery and a thin cordon of troops stationed on the coast. Enemy forces were bound to gain beachheads which would be counter-attacked by local reserves. Even this resistance it was anticipated would be overcome by the enemy, but he would then be thrown back into the sea by concentrated motorized and panzer forces. There were still differences within this school of thought over the conduct of the decisive phase. Von Rundstedt envisaged an invasion battle near the beach, von Schweppenburg planned it further inland, with his panzer divisions hidden in the forests of southern Normandy and around Paris. Von Sodenstern saw the counter-stroke occurring between the Seine and Loire, luring the Allies into a trap north west of Paris.

Rommel, with more recent experience, particularly of Allied air power, disagreed completely with this. He looked for ways of defeating the landings on the beaches, thereby achieving a strategic respite that could be exploited politically. He saw the imminent possibility of the V-1 flying bomb bombardment of England 'creating particularly adverse conditions for the enemy's attack'.¹ German coastline defences as presently configured would suffer severely from the overwhelming Allied material superiority, which

would also negate the effectiveness of counter attacks by the few German reserves. With such a thinly held coastline the enemy would succeed in creating bridgeheads. Once on land the Allies would be difficult to remove. Rommel reflected pessimistically:

Bearing in mind the numerical and material superiority of the enemy striking forces, their high state of training and tremendous air superiority, victory in a major battle on the continent seems to me a matter of grave doubt.²

Therefore he concluded it was essential to fight the decisive battle from a fortified coastal strip. This involved the dual task of both defending the coast against amphibious landings and holding a strip 5 to 6 miles inland against enemy airborne troops. Rommel felt the number of direct fire weapons forward on the beaches, in particular machine guns and anti-tank guns was too small. Reserve panzer divisions would need to be deployed a short distance from the coast.

The conflict between Rommel's and Rundstedt's defence theories were never to be resolved definitely in favour of one or the other, and led to troop dispositions on D-Day which were not suitable for the practice of either theory. Von Rundstedt was to be even more emphatic after the war. 'As for the Atlantic Wall itself,' he said:

It had to be seen to be believed. It had no depth and little surface. It was sheer humbug. At best it might have proved an obstacle for twenty-four hours at any one point, but one day's intensive assault by a determined force was all that was needed to break any part of this line.³

An ineffective command network added further complications to the nuances and compromises that characterised the defence plan. Rommel had been tasked by Hitler specifically to review and improve upon defences in the west at the end of 1943. Initially he

had right of inspection only, able to give advice, but not orders. This inevitably caused delays in the enactment of policies accepted eagerly at low level, but not palatable to superior staffs. Rommel was subsequently given command of Heeresgruppe B, which included Seventh Army in Normandy, Fifteenth Army in northern France and LXXXVIIIth Army Corps in Holland. Under command of von Rundstedt, Rommel could still only inspect the defences of other areas outside his command. Von Schweppenburg, C-in-C Panzer Forces West, was directly under von Rundstedt, parallel to Rommel, as was Generaloberst Blaskowitz for the south west and south of France. Neither von Rundstedt nor Rommel could give any orders to Generalfeldmarschall Hugo Sperrle, C-in-C Third Air Fleet, or to Admiral Theodore Krancke, C-in-C Navy Group West, nor were they permitted to move any of the armoured and other divisions without asking Armed Forces High Command (OKW). To add to the difficulties, the *Kampfgebiet* or fighting area and with it the jurisdiction of Army Group B and the armies defending the coast, did not reach more than 20 miles inland. All the interior was under a military governor who resided in Paris and received orders partly from OKW and partly from von Rundstedt. There was no recognised supreme authority, apart from Adolf Hitler, able to coordinate the coming decisive battle. Elements on land could not jointly interact with those at sea and in the air. It was a recipe for confusion.

‘It is essential to prepare for hard times here...’ Normandy Defences. Spring 1944.

The German High Command did not know where or when the blow would fall. Normandy began to be considered an option only in terms of second guessing. The stronger the defences in the Pas de Calais, the less sensible it appeared to attack there. But the strategic advantages to the Allies of a short dash to Germany appeared to transfix the German mind and attract it to this area. It therefore became the *Schwerpunkt* or ‘main point of effort’ so far as defence

resources were concerned, attracting the best quality units and equipment, and heavier fortifications. Alternative options could not, however, be ignored. It is in such a context that the defences of Normandy should be considered. They formed a part, albeit a subsidiary section, of the Atlantic Wall.

Forward on the Normandy coast were so-called 'static' ground-holding divisions. The war seemed far away to many of these soldiers, who as in the case of the 736th Infantry Regiment, had been manning defences in front of St Aubin since 1942. Oberleutnant Gustav Pflocksch thinking back on his 60-strong garrison reminisced later in halting English:

St Aubin was a happy place for us. The soldiers were young people. They had their girlfriends and made music in the private houses, they danced even, and they drank. I think that the soldiers were rather happy...'

The 736th Regiment formed part of 716th Infantry Division, soon to be subjected with the rest of Seventh Army to the main weight of the Allied assault. To their right was 711th Division, the most westerly formation of Fifteenth Army, to their left was the 352nd (an infantry line division) and 709th Division covering Cherbourg. Also on the Contentin Peninsula was 243rd Division, a further static ground holding formation, and 91st Airlanding Division in depth.

The 'static divisions', which made up the bulk of von Rundstedt's infantry, had first been formed in 1942 in order to retain a nucleus of divisions not subject to transfer to the east. They were a triangular organization of nine rifle battalions, but substantially weaker than a line infantry division (such as the 352th), because they lacked a reconnaissance battalion, and had only three battalions of artillery. Although designed as permanent western garrison troops, by the end of 1943 many had lost their third regiments, sucked in by manpower crises on the Russian front. Generalmajor Dr Hans Speidel, Rommel's Seventh Army

German dispositions on the eve of D-Day. Each number represents one division. The Germans held 58-60 divisions to match the Allied invasion potential of 37. The bulk of the anti-invasion effort was concentrated within the Fifteenth Army sector in northern France, easily visible by the lighter cluster of divisions shown north east of the Seine. It was felt the Allies would attack across the Pas de Calais.

