

Memories of D-Day, June 6, 1944  
By Everett M. Woodman

Our top secret Navy orders at US Naval Advanced Amphibious Base 11 in South England took us on May 20 to LCI (Landing Craft Infantry) 492 in Weymouth, thereby joining Operation Neptune.

Weymouth Harbor was jam-packed with invasion craft, diesel motors churning monotonously, day and night.

Soldiers and sailors gathered in prayer groups on the decks were reassured by the chaplains that "God is on our side," which made me uncomfortable, knowing that the German soldiers on the far shore were confident that "Gott mit uns." I went off alone to make a prayerful promise – should I survive, I would spend my life thereafter helping prevent this lunacy from ever happening again.

Within an hour or so after leaving Weymouth on June 4, strong winds and rain turned us back for overnight. Again on June 5 the channel was foreboding as we took off in mid-afternoon into the long, surging swells of a heavy, rolling sea. This time there was no turning back – it was now or never.

The fleet of mine sweepers had gone ahead, followed by small craft to mark the freshly-swept channels to the beaches with greenish-blue fluorescent buoys every half mile.

Our 492 and two identical LCIs soon were in the van, followed by long lines of other LCIs and attack vessels steadily falling out of sight behind us under the low sun still shining over England. Ahead, facing East toward the "far shore" of France, the skies were gray and heavy above the intermittent cold rain.

As night came on, wave after wave of our Allied aircraft dipped their wings in encouragement to us down below. Looking up at those tiny twinkling salutes high in the sky, one's whole being surged in rhythm with the heavy, steady, ominous cadence of the drone of a thousand engines.

I still think of our enlisted men, kids seventeen and eighteen years old from the New York area, so nice, so innocent. They wanted to talk to an officer about their parents, their girl friends, baseball, the movies. I was a substitute father. Many got seasick or drowsy from dramamine, and the metal deck was slippery in the dark and rancid with vomit.

They were scared – so was I. We were on strict radio silence, running lights low or covered, everybody quiet, part of an enormous, silent Armada moving into history over the long waves of a surging English Channel. We sensed something, profoundly and permanently – a destiny kind of feeling, I suppose.

My memory of much of that June 6 morning 61 years ago is permanently blurred, but the clear recall of the first message to break our radio silence is still vivid – and devastating. "Entire first wave foundered." Forty-seven of our 50 top-secret amphibious tanks had gone to the bottom, and minutes later our sister ship was hit, tilted, and went over sideways. But most of these images were forfeited to the obliteration and confusion of an unraveling order of battle being battered into chaos in an overwhelming, incessant din.

D-Day was a terrifying, thundering bedlam of chaotic confusion in choppy surf and a turbulent sea, and soldiers trying to hide at the water's edge. I must have suppressed much of it. You can handle only so much fear and so much anger for only so long. There is a limit to what your mind can manage and your memory can accommodate. After that you

keep going, but you don't register much.

Two days after our heavy losses on June 6, tons of ammunition off-loaded on the beach were needed desperately by our soldiers a few miles inland. Some German prisoners were in small clusters waiting for us to ship them to Britain. They had had time to wash up, eat our rations, get warm and dry. They knew they were safe and they were already cocky and arrogant again.

I ordered a group to load some boxes of shells onto a truck. One of them, pointing to his watch, growled "Heil Hitler." In a fury of rage I leveled my revolver straight at him. But somehow, who knows why, I didn't pull the trigger. The real drama of that awful moment is still deep within me. I didn't fire. I didn't kill him. Maybe God was with me.

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