

40 years later, a memory of D-Day remains as fresh as yesterday

By W.R. Higginbotham

W.R. Higginbotham, a veteran journalist from Missouri who is now 70 years old, was a United Press war correspondent assigned to the Navy during World War II. In this remembrance of D-Day, 40 years after he describes a number of events during the historic landing in France on June 6, 1944.

You can try telling me that, after all, it has been 40 years, and if some people know the term D-Day, few will know what "H-Hour" means. Mere fragments out of history. Well, I know better. Though 40 years have passed, the date June 6, 1944, feels like yesterday — certainly no longer than the day before yesterday. D-Day, when at a dirty, windy hour, Allied soldiers by sea and air invaded Normandy in France to begin liberating Europe from Hitler's grip.

The world spun on "H-Hour," that hour when the boys were scheduled to hit the beaches, those beaches code named and still called Omaha and Utah, where the Americans landed, and Gold, Sword and Juno, where the British and Canadians went ashore. And the world still spins on that day and that hour, when our future was fixed for good and for all.

I was a war correspondent for the United Press, the outfit now called United Press International. I was assigned to the Navy aboard the USS Bayfield, which was the command ship for the U.S. Navy in the invasion.

I can still recall the big picture — thousands of large and small ships choking the English Channel, aerial fleets above, gliders unhooking from tow planes to slip silently down to the hell of the Normandy hedgerows, incendiary bombs cutting red and white streaks in a dark sky, guns blasting from battlewagons.

But within the big picture is my personal memory. Of Gen. J. Lawton "Lightning Joe" Collins running me through the huge shelf of secret logistics and plans, so detailed that they spotted the names of French residents in farmhouses and villages. Of a fat boy lining up with his platoon on the deck of Adm. D.P. Moon's flagship, the USS Bayfield, headed for Utah Beach, 90 miles from England across the open water. Fat boy has a long, metal tube weighing down his right shoulder. "What's that thing, soldier?" I ask. "Hell, Mack, I dunno. Belongs to my little buddy here," nodding to the soldier next to him. "I'm lugging it for him. He's got a bellyache thinking of what's ahead."

I notice that the tube is the barrel of a hand-held, shoulder-shot, anti-aircraft rifle.

In a smelly latrine below decks, a sergeant, pants bunched at his ankles, perches on a metal commode. His men are squatting in a semicircle in front of him. He is making each man recite instructions for his turn going against a concrete pillbox filled with the enemy, this man with covering fire, the next man with grenades to lob into the entrance. They recite, knowing their lives depend one upon the other.

These boys are from the Fourth Division. I knew they were green to war. (All war correspondents attached to the Navy had been briefed before we started out.) This division will go into Utah Beach. Over the Fourth's back will move the veterans of the Ninth, who were bloodied in North Africa and the Mediterranean. The British and Canadians are on the left flank of the broad invasion front along the Normandy coast.

How many guys are on the water and in the air that day? Tens of thousands. Some have lived in the British Isles for months, even years, waiting for this to happen.

No one who was there will forget the delay of 24 hours. The invasion is halted for June 5. At the last moment the weather worsens and Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower has to call off his Marine movement. The minesweepers already are out there working. There is silence on the radio. You watch small ships go blasting out after the sweeps to tell them to come in. Could it all have been given away?

Luckily not, and on June 6, in the

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dark eight miles off Utah Beach, the Bayfield rolls in a 22-m.p.h. wind that roils the sea. Landing craft are loosened and eased down, and heavy cargo nets flop down the ship's sides where they swing out, thumping back hard against the iron hull with each roll.

Suddenly, out of the dark and through the swirl of thin mist clinging wetly to your ears, you hear a ship's officer bawl through a bullhorn: "Now, now, now, fill the nets, fill the nets, fill the nets."

The heavily laden boys move, shifting packs and weapons. Sailors in the landing craft below hang onto the cargo nets, trying to steady the rocking craft. Two soldiers crawl over the gunwales and, at the first roll, they lose their hand grips on the cargo net ropes and they fall — whump! whump! — into the boats below. One can't get up.

Some boys vomit. Some need help but they are willing, and they keep moving. One by one the boats fill and the cargo nets with the gear go down, and the boats pull from the ship and the circle grows and the motors of the landing craft go louder and louder until they roar; and Fred Sondern — he was a writer for Reader's Digest — says, "Oh, God, the little guys."

All you can do is swallow hard.

Navy Lt. Johnny Tripson and Mike Halperin will lead the landing craft to the beaches. They are talking in low voices.

"Nobody goes with me except my coxswain," Halperin says, "nobody else, because we're not coming back."

We finish off the bottle passing among us, and the man to empty it pitches it over the side. We shake hands and Halperin is ready. (Halperin, the main scout at Utah Beach, was from Chicago and had played halfback at Notre Dame in 1931. He also played briefly with the Brooklyn Dodgers football team. Tripson, from Big Mission, Texas, played football at Mississippi State in the late '30s and was briefly with the Detroit Lions in 1941 — I am reading from the notes I took that day, on June 6, 1944.)

Halperin missed his mapped landing point by half a mile. Good thing he struck the beach lay just out of reach of heavy guns protected by thick concrete. A few days later, Gen. Omar Bradley heard the story and laughed over how Halperin insisted that he had hit the right place. And yes, Halperin came back.

By daylight Tripson takes a cavalry unit — with no horses — to the tiny Isle de St. Marcouf before going in to the beach. It is no refuge. It is a solid minefield. Soldiers find a place to stop or sit by spading the ground with long knives. Two men jab too hard and the war ends for them.

Just off the island, an American minesweeper makes one too many passes over a clock mine. The mine blows and the sweep explodes in a great spout of water, listing heavily, its ports on one side running blood. Big Johnny grabs the landing craft tiller from his coxswain and turns the landing craft to speed toward the stricken vessel.

Men tumble over the side of the sinking minesweeper and, as we haul up next to her, we see a tall man walking calmly, stark naked. He is blowing up a rubber float and, at the side, he pauses to tie off the rubber nozzle, and he dives with the float held above his head.

We picked up the naked man, who has turned almost blue from the water's chill, and a dozen other sailors, all dazed and shaken.

Utah Beach is going very well. I hear differently about Omaha Beach. Then I'm back on the Bayfield and I bump into an Army colonel with a medical insignia on his collar. He

has just come aboard from another ship. I collar the colonel.

"You know a doctor, a major, named James M. Higginbotham?"

"Know him?" the colonel says. "I'm damned well looking for him. Medics from the invasion teams are OK on Utah. I've got to check out Omaha Beach. Jim is supposed to be there with two teams from the Third Auxiliary surgical unit. I'm told they've given up the beach where he landed. Why?"

"He's my brother."

"Brother," the colonel says. "Let's shake down a boat from the admiral and see if we can find him."

So together we go to see if we can find my only brother, a major in the medical corps, who is supposed to have landed with his surgical team on a part of Omaha Beach given up to enemy fire in the early hours of the invasion.

We go to Adm. Moon, in command of the Navy off Utah Beach, and ask for a landing craft and a coxswain to run it. We intend to cross eight miles of open water, never sweet for explosive mines, and scout Easy Red, the far left flank of Omaha Beach. Only later would we learn that our invading forces lost 1,700 men there in the first assault.

Moon looks skeptical and waves a shaking hand east and south, saying, "You mean there?"

"Yes, sir," the medical colonel says.

"Go," Moon says, shaking his head. (Weeks later I heard that Moon shot himself in his bunk aboard the USS Bayfield en route to a Navy command during the invasion of the South of France. His death was recorded as battle fatigue.)

Somehow we reach Easy Red. There is sheer cliff all along Omaha Beach, and right under the bluff top we find some men. The first man out is my brother, Jim. He has a shrapnel cut on his forehead, but otherwise he seems OK. He puts out a hand.

"What the hell are you doing here, Bill? Don't you know any by God better?"

All I can do is grin and offer my hand.

Like all men who landed that June 6, from the sea and from the air, Jim has a story, which he recalls to me: "The mine (I assume go in) guaranteed on three landing craft. The Navy lieutenant in command of their little flotilla calls Jim back to his bridge as the ranking Army officer aboard and says, 'Major, just get a signal. This place is gone, given up. What do you want to do?'"

There is a destroyer behind them sending continuous fire toward the beach, and the beach is answering, some of the shells falling in the water.

Jim is 15 years older than the sailor, Jim puts a hand on the youth's head and says, "Son, you see that lead hitting the water ahead of us and behind us?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, get our asses in there," he said, pointing to a spot on the beach, "where we can at least dig into the ground. Go, dammit, go, go."

The three little landing craft fall in line, racing at top speed. And just as shells find the lead craft, officers and men jump and splash, some going in over their heads. Surgical gear is smashed and lost in the surf, but the men crawl to the bluff and start climbing. Halfway up they dig in with shovels and hands. Some are middle-age surgeons. One is a Hollywood society doctor. Another is a university professor. Here they are simply bodies hoping to survive.

Now, after Jim and I meet, the medical colonel satisfies himself about the condition of the teams, and arranges for replacement of lost gear. Then an officer in one team takes me aside to say, "Bill, we're going to cite your brother Jim for at

least the Silver Star, and all of us are going to sign it. Will you help us write the citation?"

I help and later, over a strong drink from a tin canteen that Jim has found, I say to him, "They say you're a hero. What about that?"

"That's crap, Bill," Jim says. "Those guys, they're not country boys like we are. They're damned soft city boys who can't swim or are too old to be here and I had to haul them out of the water and kick their butts to keep them moving. That's all."

Jim is about half the size of some of his fellows, and that isn't the story they tell. The story is this: At the peak of the firefight on the beach, Jim collects the few medic kits they've salvaged and goes man to man among the wounded strewn along the waterfront, patching them where he can, moving those who can be moved. (Jim finally did receive the Silver Star for his bravery on the beachhead.)

While the whole, I write stories. Two never did come out of the censors' hands. One was particularly intriguing. It was a yarn about the ingenious way the military collected men of the 101st Airborne in Cherbourg who, by the time that city was taken, were scattered throughout Normandy. The military reopened a whorehouse there that had formerly catered to German soldiers. An old movie theater in the middle of a single block of row houses, it could be quickly isolated by military police standing across both ends of the street.

Word had spread that a soldier who wanted a woman could buy a ticket at the box office of the old theater. Then, when the soldier emerged, he was grabbed by an MP, who took his name and outfit and gave him orders on where to report. As a collection point, the whorehouse got results.

I catch up with Jim again as the battle for St. Lo, a Normandy hinge-point, is developing, and we ride a few miles together in a weapons carrier loaded with hospital gear. I ask whether he has heard from our mother in Bowling Green, Mo. She is the only other living member of our family. She has five battle stars in her window at home — one for each of her family in the service. (That custom of putting a flag in the window showing a star for each member of the household serving in the armed forces seems to have been unique to World War II.)

Our mother's stars were for Jim and other kids she raised — orphaned relatives — but none for me, because I'm only a war correspondent.

Jim says, "Yeah, one letter. She saw the piece you wrote in a St. Louis paper. She said, 'Oh, I'm so glad your father is not alive to go through this because with both you boys there together he simply couldn't have taken it.'"

"Of course," I say, "she can."

(Mother's letters to Jim were lost when he had to abandon a hospital, taking out his patients in the Battle of the Bulge during the following winter. Jim died a few years ago in Chattanooga, Tenn., after a distinguished career as a surgeon.)

No, 40 years doesn't begin to dim the memory. On the first few anniversaries of D-Day, people could remember exactly where they were and what they were doing that day, whether they were in the midst of battle or hearing of it from afar. By now, D-Day has passed into folklore.

Experts separate World War II from later wars by saying, "They knew what they were fighting for." Of course, that belittles the dogfates who took it in Korea and Vietnam and elsewhere.

Still, J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote the books about the Hobbit, remarked that it is well to take it into account whether there is a dragon in the neighborhood. Well, there was one, and on June 6, 1944, many little guys were hungry for the dragon, and from that day, the dragon was doomed. Who can forget it?

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U.S. troops secured Omaha Beach, hundreds of ships brought men and equipment ashore as the liberation of Europe began.