

Surface Warfare

JUNE 2024

DIGITAL FEATURE



Boat Coxswains and "Dodge City Shootouts"

The Surface Navy at D-Day

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Photos courtesy of NHHC





Eighty years ago, on June 6, 1944, 132,500 Allied forces stormed ashore on France's Normandy coast to begin the final liberation of Europe from Nazi rule.

It was the most extensive amphibious operation the world has ever seen. Nearly 12,000 Allied aircraft and 7,000 ships landed 132,000 troops on the beaches or by parachute behind German lines.

By the end of the day, a tenuous foothold in Hitler's "Fortress Europe" had been won at a cost of more than 4,500 Allied soldiers killed and another 5,500 wounded or missing.

It was an operation that could have gone either way. That day in Normandy, the fate of the war hung in the balance for both the Allies and the Axis powers.

"Victory is not assured, but it can be achieved," Capt. Tim Steigelman, deputy commodore of Naval Beach Group 1 (NBG 1), told a gathering of West Coast Navy amphibious units in a ceremony on the beach near Naval Amphibious Base Coronado on June 6, the 80th Anniversary of the landings in Normandy.

Those include Beachmaster Unit 1 (BMU) 1, Assault Craft Units (ACU) 1 and 5, and Amphibious Construction Battalion (ACB) 1. Still in service today, these Navy units can trace their unit and occupational lineage back to World War II and, in some cases, the Normandy landings on D-Day.



The legacy of the Sailors at Normandy now falls to the men and women of the Navy's beachmaster, assault craft, and amphibious Seabee units. These units were all male back in the day, but in today's Navy, women fill this role, too. If the nation ever needs to assault an enemy beach again, these are the Sailors and units that must answer the call.

Amphibious operations are a team sport. The Navy's role is to get the troops to the beach and keep them supplied with reinforcements and supplies to sustain the fight. But the Army must win the fight ashore. One can't win without the other.

That role starts with beach reconnaissance and obstacle and mine removal. It's then on to naval gunfire support for the troops before and during the invasion. Then, it's the Navy's job to put the Army or Marines on the beach.

There's an argument to be made that a share of the hero's accolades should go to the Navy's boat coxswains, called "small-boat boys," said Lt. Cmdr. Max Miller in his book *The Far Shore*, which describes in Sailor's terms what the Navy did during

the invasion and in the days following.

The book's title, "Far Shore," was the Navy's official word for where the invasion would take place. Miller's account, written shortly after the battle for the beaches, brings their role to light in a way rarely described before or since.

Most soldiers coming ashore that day arrived on the beach in an LCV, a Navy abbreviation for "Landing Craft, Vehicle, and Personnel." The smallest of the Navy's landing craft, these boats could carry 30 troops and their gear to the beach.

According to historian and author Steven Ambrose in his book *D-Day - June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*, the United States and its allies used 1,089 of these craft on D-Day.

These boats were also known to the Sailors and Soldiers alike as "Higgins Boats."

The name is a nod to Andrew Jackson Higgins, the New Orleans entrepreneur who invented the craft and others like it and supplied them to U.S. and Allied navies by the thousands.

According to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was in overall command of the Normandy Landings, Higgins was "the man who won the war for us," Eisenhower told Ambrose after the war.

"If Higgins had not designed and built those LCVs, we never could have landed on an open beach," Eisenhower said. "The whole strategy of the war would have been different."

Too small to cross the English Channel on their own, they made the cross-channel journey on troop transports and larger landing craft and put in the water closer to shore. The

coxswains then handled the final trip to the beach.

Some of the youngest Sailors in the Navy were driving those boats or helping as crewmen. If not for the grit and determination of these Sailors as they made the trip from ship to shore many times that day, there might not have been the resounding victory that came with the arrival of the Allies on European soil.

"[The Navy coxswains], as much as anybody, won that lengthy battle for the storm-stricken Normandy beaches of Omaha," Lt. Cmdr. Miller wrote

The legacy of these Sailors now falls to the men and women of the Navy's beachmaster, assault craft and amphibious Seabee units who does this type of work today. Back in the day, these units were all male, but in today's Navy, women fill this role, too.

Miller wrote in his description of these coxswains, "He is of high school age perhaps, or just about to become a college freshman."

"His craft would vary from [landing craft] to anything small which could be beached quickly, then backed away again before the [German 88mm artillery guns] would get adjusted on him," Miller wrote. "The usual time required for the adjustment of these guns was four minutes. This means that the small-boat boy would try to accomplish each beach assignment within three minutes."

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Miller wrote that there wasn't time to check their watches. This battle timing was instinct, born of trial and error and many trips from ship to shore. Many of those who didn't meet that timeline paid the ultimate price. Others lost their lives to mines and other obstacles.

During the opening days of the battle for Normandy, his boat became his home, battered by the sea and "grimy inside and out" with sand and grease and "with a hull bearing the bumps of many batterings (sic) and with some bullet holes," Miller wrote.

His existence was a constant motion from ships to the shoreline, which Miller described as the life of a "water gypsy," many of whom never returned to the ship that launched them at 6:30 a.m. on June 6.

To sleep, he said, these amphibious Sailors would "hot rack" in stretchers used for evacuating the wounded and the dead. They became experts at scrounging food and candy. Sometimes, they'd even manage a shower or a hot meal from the ships they'd visit after depositing the wounded and before being reloaded for another trip to the beach.

Their role and that of other Sailors throughout the D-Day armada was crucial to the battle's successful outcome that day. Many more served on the destroyers, which brought fire support to the soldiers on the beaches or scoured the beaches in the dark hours before the landing, clearing

mines and obstacles in the way of the landing force.

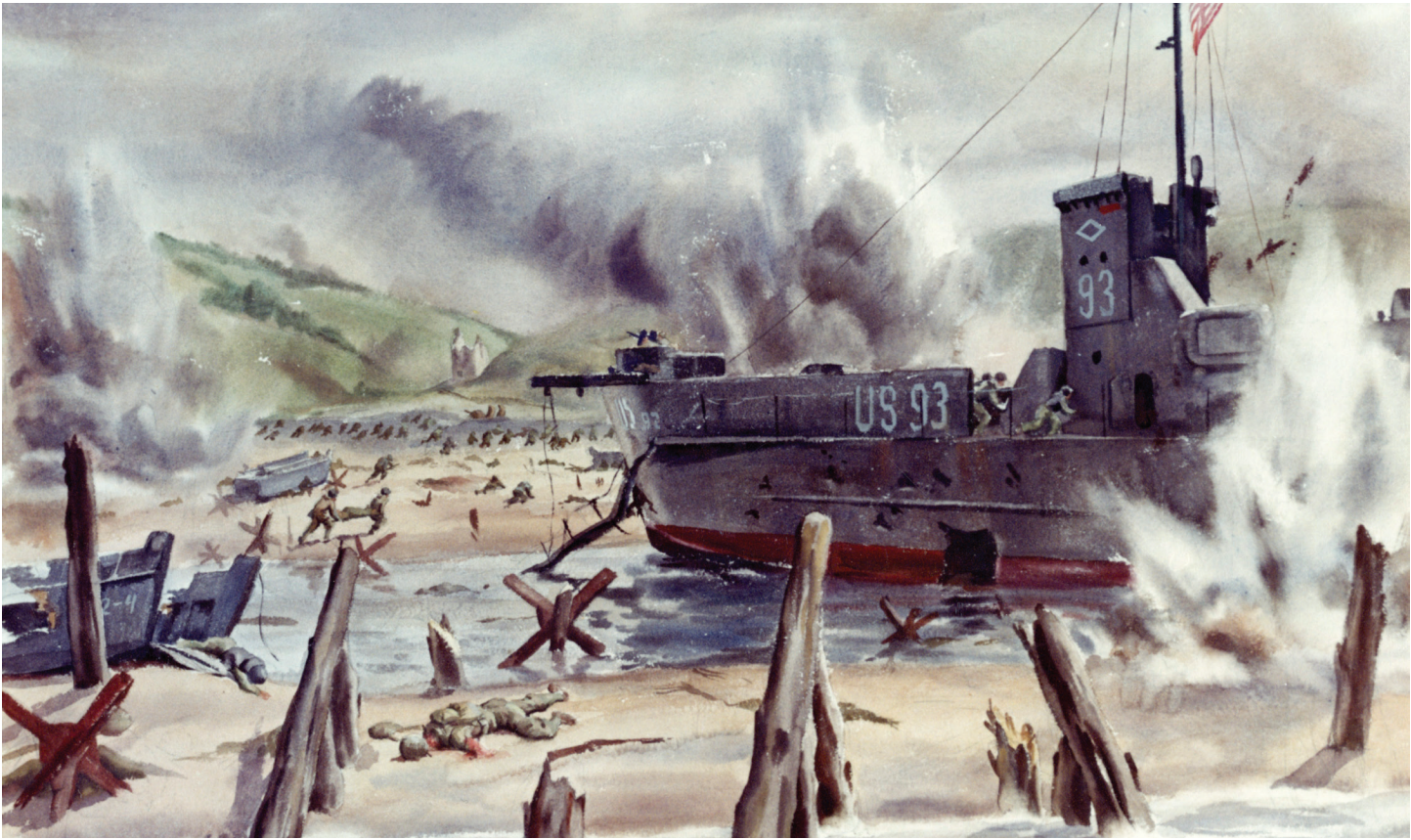
The U.S. Navy had three battleships off Omaha and Utah beaches: The Pearl Harbor survivor USS Nevada, the USS Texas, and the Navy's oldest battleship afloat, the USS Arkansas. Some cruisers were also present, but their deep drafts kept them miles offshore as they bombarded the coast in preparation for the landing.

But it was the actions of multiple Navy destroyers off Omaha Beach that the Navy's Surface Warriors showed their stuff, and according to many on the beach, they saved the day for the Soldiers on that beach.

James Knight, an Army Engineer with the 299th Combat Engineer Battalion, arrived on the beach in the first wave on Omaha Beach. He said that from his arrival at 0630 to sometime after 1030, "Regardless of the time of arrival, nearly every living person on Omaha was pinned down."

His description of being on Omaha Beach that morning was published in a letter to the crew of the USS Frankford (DD 497) in the August 1989 issue of US Naval Institute Proceedings Magazine.

The German positions on the bluffs overlooking Omaha Beach allowed the defenders a commanding view of the beach and the invading Americans. The plan was that aerial and naval gunfire bombardments would neutralize these defenses before the troops landed. Once on the beach, Sherman Tanks would pick up the supporting fire mission.



"Unfortunately, things didn't go anywhere near the way they were planned," Knight wrote. "The air bombardment landed way inland, beyond the beach defenses" as did the pre-dawn naval gunfire.

Leadership told the troops that shell and bomb craters would cover the beach "to provide us cover," but they were "practically nonexistent," he said.

As for the supporting gunfire, "only one of the amphibious tanks made it in," he said, "the others were swamped and went to the bottom shortly after being launched a mile or two out."

In the first few hours on Omaha, casualties were nearly 50 percent, Knight wrote. The thousand or so who managed to survive and reach the cover of the dunes "were pinned down by such murderous machine gun, sniper, and mortar fire that any movement meant almost certain death," he wrote.

"The many desperate attempts to advance even a few yards usually resulted in a casualty from an antipersonnel mine or machine gun fire."

Soldiers couldn't retreat or move forward. Stuck with no artillery support, they needed help. With few radios surviving the landing, this word was not getting to the ships at sea.

All that changed once the reality of the situation on Omaha started trickling back to the offshore armada. Rear Admiral Carleton F. Bryant, who commanded naval gunfire off Utah and Omaha, radioed a message from the Battleship USS

Texas to the nearby destroyers: "Get on them, men! Get on them!" he said. "They are raising hell with the men on the beach, and we can't have any more of that. We must stop it."

Springing into action were Gleaves-class destroyers USS Emmons (DD 457), USS Carmick (DD 493), USS McCook (DD 496), USS Doyle (DD 494), USS Baldwin (DD 624), USS Harding (DD 625), USS Frankford (DD 497) and USS Thompson (DD 627).

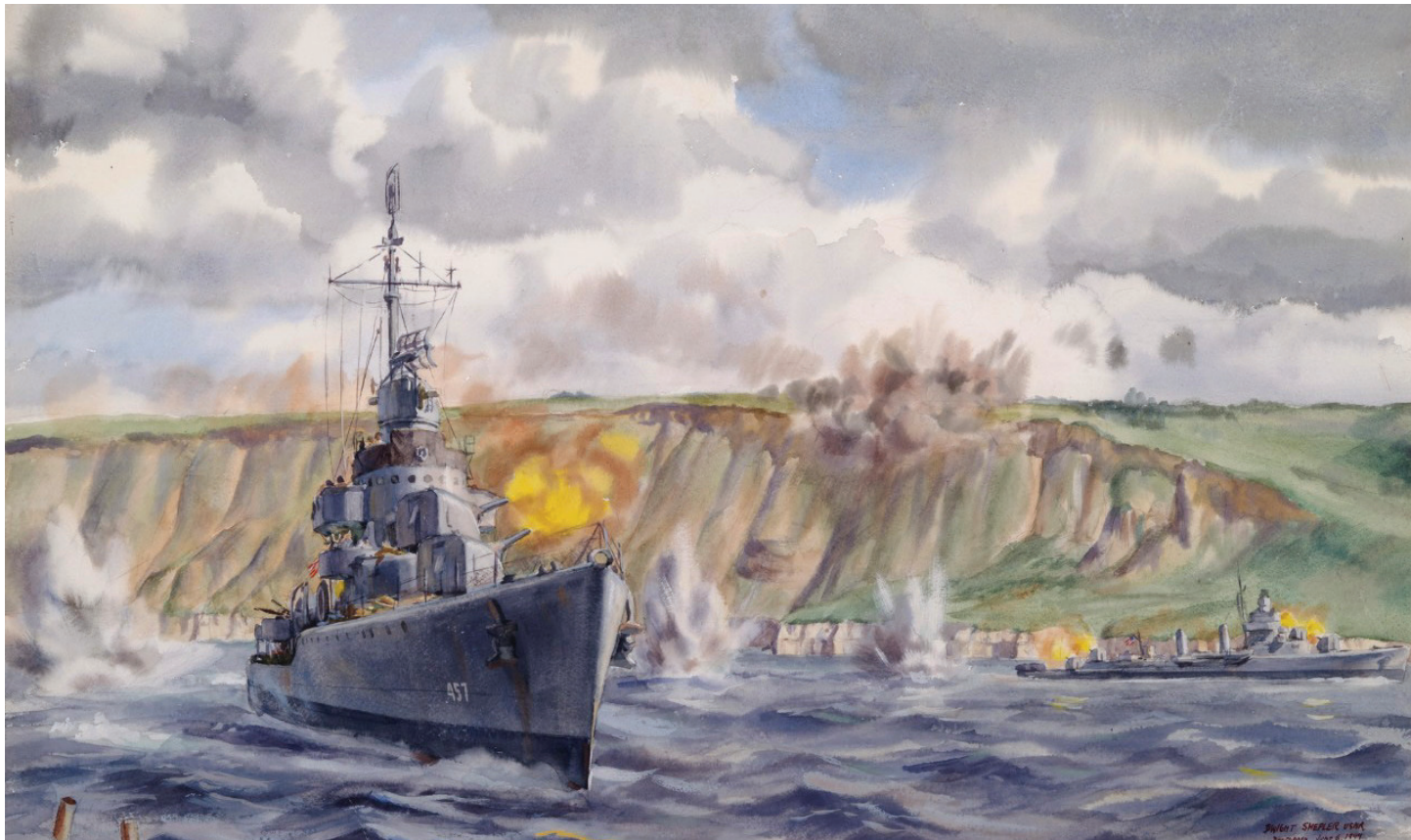
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All the destroyers closed on the beach responded and provided gunfire support at different locations. What Knight saw Frankford do stuck with him for the rest of his life.

Between 1000 and 1030, Knight saw the ship headed straight for him, going fast. Initially, he thought the ship had struck a mine and was trying to beach itself, though he saw no smoke or damage.

"[The Frankford] started to turn right and, before she completed the turn to be parallel to the beach, all her guns opened fire. At the same time, I saw smoke leave the gun barrels; shells landed a few yards above my rock cover. As the destroyer proceeded toward the western end of the beach, I watched her go farther and farther from me and expected to see her pull out to sea at any minute, when suddenly I realized she was backing up and her guns had yet to pause since commencing fire."



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Frankford then, Knight said, "backed up almost to where she had started, went dead in the water for the second time...and again headed toward the other end of the beach, with all guns still blazing. When she reached the western section of the beach, she pulled out to sea."

Lt. Owen Keeler, Frankford's gunnery officer, filled in some details from their side in a letter answering Knights' letter of gratitude to the ship and crew.

When the call came to help those on the beach with gunfire, the Frankford was 1000 yards out, he said, but the German camouflage was so good that "from that distance, we could not see who was where or pinpoint anything to shoot."

Cmdr. James Semmes, Frankford's skipper, then, "navigating by fathometer and seaman's eye, he took us in... to within 300-400 yards," Keeler said, but still it was tough to "see who was where or pinpoint anything to shoot."

Keeler said he soon got help from the beach but not by radio calls or traditional signals.

"One of our light tanks that was sitting at the water's edge with a broken track fired at something on the hill," Keeler said. "We immediately followed up with a five-inch salvo. The tank gunner flipped open his hatch, looked around at us, waved, dropped back in the tank, and fired at another target. For the next few minutes, he was our fire-control party. Our rangefinder optics could examine the spots where his shells hit."

Knight wrote that the effects of Frankford's daring charge were felt immediately on the beach. "Not long after you swung out to sea," Knight wrote. "There was movement on

the beach."

Frankford's pounding of the bluffs enabled the infantry to advance up the slopes to clear the fortifications.

"Before your 'cruise, there had been only dying and scratching for cover for several hours," " Knight wrote. "There is no question, at least in my mind, if you had not come in as close as you did, exposing yourselves to God only knows how much, that I would not have survived overnight. I truly believe that in the absence of the damage you inflicted on German emplacements, the only way any GI [Soldier] was going to leave Omaha was in a mattress cover or as a prisoner of war."

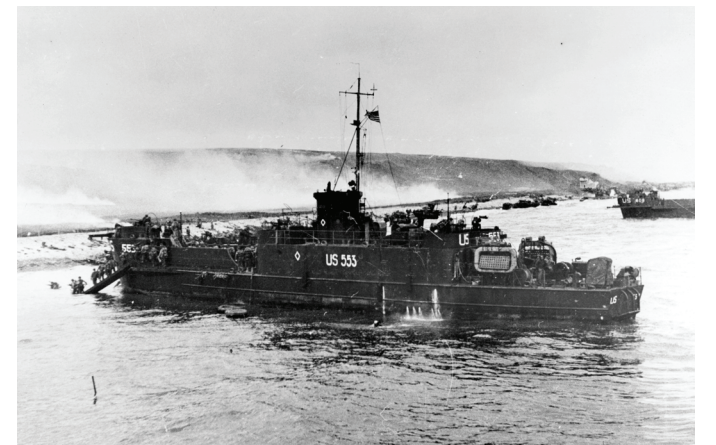
The other destroyers made their passes, firing at nearly point-blank range at the bluffs. Lt. Joe Smith, a Navy beachmaster, recounted to Ambrose what he saw during another destroyer's run.

"The destroyers came right up to the beach firing into the cliff," Smith said. "You could see the trenches, guns and men blowing up where they would hit...there is no question in my mind that the few Navy destroyers we had there saved the invasion. Believe me, I am a destroyer man from that day on."

One Sailor on the beach described the destroyer's actions as a "Dodge City shootout." The Navy's action got those on Omaha moving, allowing the Army to secure the beach by sundown.

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THANK GOD FOR THE UNITED STATES NAVY!

— Maj. Gen. Leonard T. Gerow

According to Ambrose, each destroyer off Omaha Beach fired between 500 and 1,000 5-inch shells. Some returned to England after their work off Omaha Beach with few or no rounds remaining in their magazines.

From the lowliest private on Omaha Beach to senior officers who came ashore



later and saw their handiwork. Among them was Major General Leonard T. Gerow, who set up his headquarters on Omaha Beach at 1900 on June 6. He radioed a message to General Omar N. Bradley, who was in overall command of the U.S. landings, saying, "Thank God for the United States Navy!" ⚓

