
The Round Tablette

Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)

Thursday, 8 May 2014

27:11 Volume 27 Number 11

Published by WW II History Round Table

Edited by Dr. Connie Harris

www.mn-ww2roundtable.org

Welcome to the May session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight's speaker is John McManus, author of the newly released *The Dead And Those About To Die*. He is joined by combat veterans who will discuss the events on Omaha Beach as the Allies prepare for the 70th Anniversary of the events of that day.

D-Day (June 6, 1944) – a day of superlatives: one of the most thoroughly planned battles; one of the most complicated military operations; and perhaps the most studied twenty-four hours period in the military history of the world. Whatever the superlative, it pales in comparison to the deeds of the men who fought there.

The strategic purpose of the Normandy Landings was to secure a lodgment on the Continent sufficient to serve as the logistics base for the conquest of Germany. Pas-de-Calais was more logical (closer to Berlin) but too well defended. The beaches in Normandy were the best alternative, and with the success of Operation Fortitude (convincing the Germans Pas-de-Calais was the place), were comparatively poorly defended.

Omaha Beach is five miles long, stretching from east of Sainte-Honorine-des-Pertes to west of Vierville-sur-Mer on the right bank of the Douve River estuary. Omaha gently slopes to the sea, forming a crescent with bluffs located at each end. While the other landing beaches (the British and Canadian beaches - Sword, Juno, and Gold, the other American beach to the west, Utah) were not easy, Omaha Beach proved to be a 'tougher nut to crack.' Omaha Beach was the only landings area where the Germans had recently sent reinforcements – the 352nd Infantry Division, which admittedly was made up mostly of teenagers mixed in with veterans from the Eastern Front.

Recent cinematic portrayals, such as "Saving Private Ryan" which portrayed a Ranger

platoon coming ashore, or "Band of Brothers" which focused on Airborne operations the two major assault groups, have overlooked the main infantry forces: the 1st ("The Big Red One") and the 29th Infantry Divisions (ID).

In historical monographs the emphasis has been given to the 29th ID, rather than on the 1st ID. Much of this is due to the number of after actions reports and interviews done by the Army's combat historians, who focused heavily on the 29th ID and the Rangers. This emphasis continued with Cornelius Ryan's *The Longest Day* and Stephen Ambrose's *D-Day*. Granted the 1st ID did have its own movie, the critically panned labor of love, "The Big Red One" by Samuel Fuller, an actual veteran of D-Day. Only Flint Whitlock's *The Fighting First* has specifically focused on the 1st ID.

Unlike the 29th ID, the "Big Red One" had already been 'blooded in combat. It had participated in the amphibious landings in North Africa and Sicily. In November, 1943, the division was pulled off the front in Sicily and re-located to England to train for this new operation. This was done in secret, and to the ire of many in the unit they were not allowed to wear their unit insignia. Over the next seven months the unit trained, for its role on D-Day.

The primary objective for the units on Omaha Beach was to secure the beachhead to a depth of five miles inland, between Port-en-Bessin and the Vire River linking up with the British landings to the east and the VII Corps at Utah in the west.

"No plan survives contact with reality" – Landing craft missed their navigation marks in fog and smoke, many were swamped by rough seas, others were kept afloat only by soldiers baling water, seasickness was common. When the troops did disembark, many jumped into water over their heads, weighed down with packs and gear, and drowned. The survivors immediately came under withering fire from mortars, machine guns, 88 millimeter cannon, anti-tank guns, and rifle fire, as well as encountering mines and obstacles.

No movie actor or re-enactor will ever be able to comprehend what it was like on that beach that day. After the war, General Omar

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Bradley wrote, “Thank God for the First Division. Any inexperienced division might not have made it that day.” Seventy years have past since that day on Omaha Beach and most of the men who were present have passed into history, but what they did there should continue to be honored by the living.

D-Day Special, PBS NOVA, Weds. 28 May 8 PM

Further Readings:

- John C. McManus, *The Dead and Those About to Die: D-Day: The Big Red One at Omaha Beach* (New York: NAL, 2014).
- Cornelius Ryan’s *The Longest Day: The Classic Epic of D-Day, June 6, 1944* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).
- Stephen Ambrose’s *D-Day: June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).
- Steven Zaloga, *The Devil’s Garden: Rommel’s Desperate Defense of Omaha Beach on D-Day* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, Books, 2013).
- Gary Sterne, *Cover-Up at Omaha Beach: Maisy Battery and the US Rangers* (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2013)
- Michael Dolski, Sam Edwards, John Buckley, ed. *D-Day in History and Memory* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2014).
- Joseph Balkowski, *Omaha Beach: D-Day, June 6, 1944* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2004).
- Flint Whitlock, *The Fighting First: The Untold Story Of The Big Red One on D-Day* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
- Adrian Lewis, *Omaha Beach: a Flawed Victory* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003).

Announcements:

- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - May 20, 2014 – *H. L. Hunley* - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
- St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - May 19, 2014 – Battle of Mine Creek - 715-386-1268 – rossandhaines@comcast.net
- Rochester WWII History Round Table – 507-280-9970; www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org
- Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050, <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>
- Air Show - Eden Prairie - July 19-20, 2014; <http://www.airexpo-mn.org/> - 952-746-6100
- Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - [crazyjerry45@hotmail](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail.com) - 651-338-2717
- CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org 651-455-6942
- Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523
- Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org
- Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN, 320-564-6644, <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.
- World Without Genocide, 651-695-7621, <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

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Round Table Schedule 2014 - 2015

- 11 Sept. British-Canadian Beaches at D-Day
- 2 Oct. Glider Operations (note day change)
- 23 Oct. Thai-Burma Death Railroad
- 13 Nov. Deutsch Lecture: Vatican in WW2
- 11 Dec. Battle of the Bulge - 70th Anniv.
- 8 Jan. Myth of Blitzkrieg
- 12 Feb. Logistics
- 12 Mar. Battle of San Pietro
- 26 Mar. Leyte - the Land Battle
- 9 Apr. Aerial Reconnaissance
- 14 May Origins of the Cold War



Allied Strategic Options: Invade at Pas-de-Calais or Normandy

