D DAY

THROUGH GERMAN EYES

HOLGER ECKHERTZ

D DAY
Through German Eyes

Eyewitness Accounts by German Soldiers
Of June 6th 1944

Original Material Edited by
Holger Eckhertz

The publisher wishes to highlight that a number of the following interviews express controversial opinions which originate in the German experience of the Second World War. These opinions are not shared by the current publisher, and the publisher does not condone or promote such views. They are presented in the interests of historical understanding only.

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Contents

Introduction: Background To This Book

This book was not created by me, but by my grandfather, Dieter Eckhertz. In 1944, he held the prestigious role of a military journalist, writing articles and features for German military publications including the magazines 'Signal' and 'Die Wehrmacht,' which were widely read by German troops. Dieter Eckhertz left journalism after the war, but he continued to work on one final project, which was a series of interviews with German soldiers who had fought in Normandy on June 6th 1944, the day known to the Allies as 'D Day.'

The reason for my grandfather's interest in the German perspective of D Day was simple: shortly before the Normandy landings, he had visited several locations on the Atlantic Wall and interviewed a number of the troops there with a view to writing a feature for 'Die Wehrmacht' magazine. He was fascinated by the enormous preparations being made to defend the Atlantic coast against an invasion launched from England, and by the morale of the troops on the Wall, who were in many cases inexperienced or unfit.

Much later, on the tenth anniversary of D Day in 1954, when many Germans preferred to draw a veil over the events of the war, my grandfather made enormous efforts to track down some of the troops whose units he had visited. He encouraged these men to discuss with him their personal memories of the Atlantic Wall, their frame of mind at the time of the invasion, and their actions during the historic day of June 6th. His intention was to compile these recollections into a complete book, but the project was still in progress at the time of his death in 1955, and was never completed.

This was the state in which this material eventually came into my hands: as a collection of interviews, notes and verbatim accounts dating from 1954. Some were partial, and some included highly controversial material concerning German forces and French civilians. What comes out of this mix is a highly revealing series of factual accounts by German soldiers who experienced the full might of the Allied onslaught on D Day, especially in the bunkers and 'Resistance Points' constructed along the Wall.

I believe that these accounts show a side to the battle that is rarely seen: the motivations of individual German soldiers, their thought processes

as the invasion unfolded, and the way they sought to fight back against the Allies in the violent and chaotic hours after the initial landings.

The interviewees did not, of course, think in terms of the Allied code names for the five Normandy invasion beaches (Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword, going in order from West to East) but rather in terms of local places or the official designations of their sectors. Nevertheless, I have organised these accounts under the headings of the Allied beach names, as this is how the landings are generally discussed by historians today. I have selected one account for each of the invasion beaches, from Utah to Sword.

Throughout the book, I have included my grandfather's questions and comments in italics, as they were recorded during the discussions. The speakers, like most German people of their generation, use the words 'England/English' interchangeably with 'Britain/British.'

I should emphasise that this book does not give, and is not intended to give, any strategic overview of the landings or any tactical analysis of the engagements described. It gives a voice to several German soldiers' experiences of D Day, purely and simply, and I feel that they speak for themselves. My hope is that this book adds to the global understanding of June 6th 1944, and in a small way serves as a marker to that conflict and its many repercussions.

Holger Eckhertz, July 2015

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Utah Beach: The 'Tobruk' Soldier

Stefan Heinevez was a Gefreiter (Private First Class) with the 919th Grenadier Regiment, 709th Static Infantry Division, based on the Cotentin Peninsula.

Herr Heinevez, I visited the Atlantic Wall in May 1944, and I met some of the men in your regiment.

I think I remember some of the men talking about your visit. You interviewed several of the troops, and asked them about their hopes and sentiments and so on. The men said that you were impressed with the situation in France.

Indeed I was impressed. What about you, how did you feel about your posting to the Atlantic Wall?

In many ways, I was pleased with the posting. You see, my brothers and friends had been on the Russian front, and they had terrible stories of the conditions there. Many men returned without fingers or eyelids because of the frostbite. By contrast, a posting to France was renowned as a comfortable ride. I myself had been in Sicily in 1943, aged nineteen, fighting the Americans, and I was wounded there. This left me with a permanent limp, and for this reason I was sent to the Atlantic Wall.

Were many of the Atlantic Wall troops sent there for similar reasons?

A large number, I think, although I do not know the exact proportion. I think it was at least half of us. But of course, operating chiefly from inside bunkers and other fixed defences does not require a high level of fitness, as the activity is static; for this reason, Herr Eckhertz, people must not think that we were 'second rate' troops. I myself was a formidable operator of my 'Ringstellung' *(Ring Position* or *Tobruk bunker*).

Can you give an explanation of what the 'Ringstellung' or 'Tobruk' was?

Yes, the Tobruk was a widely-used type of small bunker for local defence; this was essentially a concrete casing set into the ground, with a concrete cupola emerging at ground level, allowing a single soldier to fire a machine gun, with only his head and shoulders showing above the ground.

The designs of the Tobruks varied, but most types I saw had a concrete box about three metres square and two metres high, dug in below ground level; the cupola was a circular opening with a concrete rim for mounting the gun. My particular Tobruk had a metal shield on the gun mount, protecting the gunner. These Tobruks were sited around larger bunkers or at significant points in the zone to be defended, sometimes they were placed almost at random in the countryside as a way of making any enemy advance unpredictable in its progress.

These Tobruks were built mostly by prisoners in the construction brigades, who would dig the hole and pour the concrete under the supervision of engineers. Some Tobruks were also brought in as prefabricated boxes and placed in the ground like that. I saw some larger types of the installation which had a small panzer turret on top instead of the cupola. In these cases, the turrets came from old French or Czech tanks, and were traversed with a hand crank, having a crew of two men. But the single-man, MG armed Tobruk was the most common style that I saw.

What was the underground concrete box used for?

This was for storage of the ammunition, and for a spare man who would take over if the first operator was killed or wounded. The concept of the Tobruk was that the men would remain down in the box with the MG during a bombardment, and then one of them would come up to the cupola, fit the MG and fight any advancing infantry like that.

The advantage of the Tobruk was its easy concealment at ground level; the disadvantage of course was that the operator himself was very low down and had limited visibility.

My particular Tobruk was sited at a crossroads of unpaved tracks on sloping ground overlooking a place called Dune St Pierre, which had an important fortified house. This house was originally a civilian beachfront

villa, which was now reinforced with extra concrete to the walls and a concrete roof, having narrow gun slits in place of windows, and fitted with multiple heavy machine guns and a PAK (*anti-tank*) gun. We simply called it 'the strong house,' and it had an excellent field of fire along the sea wall on the beach.

It was anticipated that the strong house might be attacked by paratroopers or partisans approaching from inland, and my Tobruk was a defence against this inland threat. We manned the Tobruk position in shifts of six hours, then a sleeping break of six hours, then another shift and so on. We slept in a requisitioned house about one kilometre away.

Our officer was in charge of about twenty of these Tobruks at various sites in the area, all of a similar design. Our officer was a very experienced man; he had been in the East as an artillery commander, and now was technically a training officer. We were connected to his command post by a telephone cable, but we had no radio set.

What was it like to man the Tobruk?

It required us to stand on a concrete plinth in the box, with our shoulders up out of the ground. The gun was an MG34 with canister magazines which did not require a second man as gun feeder, which would be the case with belt ammunition. The gun and its metal shield were fixed on a rail around the cupola, similar to the anti-aircraft gun rail on a panzer commander's turret cupola. Thus, the gun could be rotated around 360 degrees. We were ordered to constantly rotate the gun, watching for any signs of a threat.

The second man was officially meant to stay down in the underground box in case of attack; in reality, he would almost always be above ground, watching with binoculars or being otherwise useful, and we would change places regularly. As you can well imagine, Herr Eckhertz, the tedium of this task was not a burden!

The presence of the Tobruk was well-known locally, and French civilians would give us a formal greeting as they passed; there was a herd of dairy cows nearby, and the farmer was under instructions to give us a can of milk every second day. We rewarded this with cigarettes and boiled sweets from our ration. The farmer's daughter was a very charming girl of about our age, who had taken the sensible precaution of learning to speak some

German words and also some English. In general it can be said that we had an excellent relationship with the local people.

Were you on duty at the Tobruk on June 6th?

Yes, I was. I had entered the Tobruk at midnight, and my comrade Sepp was on duty with me. He was a Belgian with fiercely pro-German sentiments who had volunteered to serve in the Wehrmacht, and a very clever fellow.

Did you have similar motivations to Sepp?

Yes. We both considered ourselves as the first line of defence against an attack on France and ultimately on the Reich. We must remember that, after 1943, our German propaganda changed radically in tone. Where before the message had always been '*Conquer, occupy, expand'* now the idea was '*Defend the Reich against our enemies who will try to invade it.'* Now that I think about it, this significant change, from 'conquer' to 'defend' as the main message, this happened roughly after the battle of Kursk and the invasion of Sicily. Maybe that is when the commanders and the politicians realised they must acclimatise us to being permanently on the defensive. At any rate, because of these messages, we saw ourselves as the defenders of the Reich, first and foremost.

We knew that the loss of France would be a dreadful blow if it happened, because it would give the Western Allies a platform to attack German soil in partnership with the Bolsheviks in the East. We knew that the Russians sought the destruction of Germany, and this would mean the rape and enslavement of our families under communism. This was our motivation at that time.

Did you have any indication or suspicion that the invasion was imminent on that day?

The general feeling was that the Allies would try to enter France in some form during the summer. We were told by the officers that this might happen at any time. I myself was given no specific alert or warning regarding June 6th, but, having said that, it became obvious during the hours

of darkness from late evening on the 5th to first light, that something important was happening. There was a large amount of aircraft activity, even more than usual, and some continuous bombing to the south of us. The bombing was a regular occurrence, but I had never heard so many planes in the air at night before.

Our officer came to the Tobruk on his motorcycle at about one am, and he agreed that the situation was unprecedented. He told us that he had received reports of paratroopers landing to the South, and that Regimental command were 'aware of the developments.' I am sure that infantrymen throughout history have received precisely this reassurance countless times from their superiors.

The aircraft activity continued and even escalated throughout the darkness. There was a searchlight and Flak battery to the west, and this Flak fired sporadically, but the searchlights were underpowered and ineffective. I saw flames in the sky to the north at several points, which must have been burning aircraft, but no signs of aerial combat. All of this put us on edge, Sepp and me, and we awaited first light with great concern.

There began to be sounds of explosions and firing from the area South East of us, which flared up and then died away. We reported this to our officer's post on the cable phone, but the officer himself was not present.

As the light came up, it became possible to see the activity in the sky, faintly at first. There was a stream of twin-engined aircraft flying north, in a disorganised formation. These aircraft had unusual black and white stripes on their wings which I had not seen before; however, from our aircraft recognition training I recognised these as C47 types, which we were told were used for personnel transport and for paratroopers. All of this made it clear that an airborne attack on quite a large scale was happening to the south of us, and of course this was exactly the threat that our Tobruk was positioned to defend against.

What was your personal reaction to this realisation, and what was your comrade Sepp's reaction?

Well, I had been in action in Italy, and I felt the familiar sensation of dry throat, shaking fingers, apprehension. At the same time, though, I felt an excitement and a desire to be part of the combat, as this was my purpose

and my role. I wanted the chance, to be quite frank with you, to show that despite my limp I was as good a soldier as these Allied men. I cannot speak for Sepp, of course, but he had not been in action previously; nevertheless, he remained calm and professional. He scanned 360 degrees with binoculars, and told me that there was smoke to the south, with flashes of light in the air. To the north of us, the seaward side, there was a view down to the strong house itself and it was possible in daylight to observe part of the sea between the dunes. Sepp told me that this view was obscured either by mist or smoke. As he said these words, we came under a very powerful bombardment.

The first explosion was between us and the strong house, and it was preceded by a low whining sound. The explosion was huge; I deduced from the whining noise that this was shell fire, not aerial bombing, but the power was bigger than anything I had seen in Italy. The noise made my eardrums screech, and the blast wave flattened me in the cupola of the Tobruk. When I looked round, Sepp was prone on the ground with his hands over his head, and there was a massive column of smoke and dust rising over the slope down to the bunker. Neither of us was injured, but more of these huge shells began exploding around us, and we both ducked down into the underground room of the Tobruk, me taking the MG down with me as per my orders.

This bombardment went on for about twenty minutes, and I could also hear the noise of very low aircraft nearby. Our concrete box shook and the concrete cracked in places, which was alarming; at one point I opened the cupola cover and saw a large amount of dust in the sky, also vapour trails in the air. The light was coming up fully, and the sky was becoming pale, and these vapour trails were very clear; there were dozens of them. I tried to contact our command on the cable phone, but the line did not function. When the bombardment slackened, I lifted my MG back up through the cupola, put my head out of the cupola cautiously and looked around.

The sight was very strange, and I can still see it now; it is not an exaggeration to say that the details are fixed in my memory, and I believe they always will be. To the south, the inland zone where I was to expect the partisans or paratroopers to approach, I saw, instead of an advancing enemy, that the shelling had damaged the sheds of the nearby dairy herd, and many of these animals were running out of control in the fields. It was a dreadful thing; these large cows, with their full udders, were injured, bleeding, and in

some cases their hides were on fire. They were staggering or trampling in utter confusion. One began to charge towards me, obviously maddened, with its legs burning; I shot it immediately with the MG to prevent myself being trampled. That was the first shot I fired on June 6th, ironically.

Looking to the north, in the direction of the strong house on the sea wall, the shelling had created many mounds of earth and debris, and I could not see the house through the dust. However, there was a crashed aircraft there; this was an American fighter of the Mustang type, which was on its nose in the ground, on fire. Whether it was brought down by our Flak or was hit by the shell fire at low altitude, I do not know. The pilot was still in the cockpit under the bubble canopy, visibly moving, but the flames were coming from the engine very fiercely. As I watched, the wings began to burn, and then they exploded in a red and black fireball. A lot of his ammunition detonated as well, and tracer bullets shot out in random patterns all across the slope. I could no longer see the pilot.

Overhead, there were many more fighter aircraft, all with the same black and white bands on the wings and fuselage, crossing north to south at low altitude. I could not see any Luftwaffe planes anywhere, which frankly was not a great surprise to me; the lack of Luftwaffe cover was an accepted fact by that stage, on all fronts, I believe.

I did not know what to expect next, but I fastened the MG onto the shield in the cupola ring, and sighted inland towards the south where I expected an attack.

Sepp was sitting on the edge of his hatch looking down there with binoculars. I asked what he could see, and he turned to me to answer. As he did so, he was shot directly through the throat; because I was looking at him, I saw the bullet emerge from the back of his neck, causing a spray of blood and tissue. He remained upright, and another bullet hit him in the chest, causing a lot of matter to shoot out of his back, along with shreds of his uniform. He was literally shot to pieces in front of me. He slumped down, and I fired a burst from the MG to the south, although I could not see the shooters. I saw a shape appear in the air from an area of trees to one side, and from my experience in Italy I saw that this was an Allied pattern grenade. It landed short some distance from me, and although some debris hit me in the face and shoulder, it did not injure me badly.

I immediately fired on the trees, and the trunks of these trees fragmented as the bullets struck; the range was only about fifty metres. I

saw no response from there, but I did see movement from my left, near the farm buildings where the injured cattle were moving around. I thought that might be one of the cows, which were still mooing and thrashing their hooves in pain; however, I clearly saw a military helmet, green, with netting, and I recognised from the enemy troops I had seen in Italy that this was an American soldier. He was in long grass, probably trying to outflank me. I shot towards him, and I saw the helmet lift up in the air and spin over. After that, I saw a man's hands moving, in the manner as if he was clutching himself, and I fired again.

Did you have any emotion during these moments?

None, to be honest. I knew that I was being surrounded, and my heart was beating very heavily, but at the same time my eyesight seemed very acute and I was watching carefully for the next threat to my position; one problem was that my ears were still ringing from the bombardment and I could hear very little.

Were you hopeful of other troops coming to your aid?

I knew that there were some armoured troops to the south and south west, but I really did not know what would happen. I believed that these Americans were paratroopers or airborne troops who were seeking to isolate the beach, which suggested that the beach would be under attack also. Although I could not hear well, I did glance over my shoulder and see the concrete roof of the strong house down at the foot of the slope; it was damaged, with big impact marks on the roof, and beyond it, between the dunes, I could see vessels on the sea itself, being mostly green or grey-coloured craft of a type I had not seen before.

I understood much later that this was the day of 'the largest seaborne invasion in history' or 'the biggest military operation ever mounted' – but that is actually all I saw of the landing itself. Just that glimpse between the dunes, with a lot of boats on the water. I think this often happens to basic foot soldiers in a war: they are in historic battles or campaigns, but their view is limited to the fields around them.

As you see, I was in a critical position. The Americans were infiltrating around me in unknown numbers, and the situation at the strong

house, which was my whole purpose in being in my Tobruk, was unknown. I had no working telephone and I could not even hear properly. My comrade was dead; indeed, Sepp was still lying near me on the hatch, his body bleeding heavily but not breathing. I decided to stay where I was and continue to man the gun.

I reached down into the Tobruk and brought up several fresh ammunition canisters, and had these ready inside the cupola ring. I fired several more bursts into the trees, but could not see if I hit anything. Several shots came back, hitting the steel plate of my MG shield. The shield became deformed, but it stayed intact.

Suddenly – because I could not hear the approach – a man appeared next to me, tumbling through the air beside me. He sprawled on the ground beside the gun, and I saw he was shot repeatedly through the chest. He was a German soldier from the strong house, whom I recognised; he was carrying a rifle. I looked around, and saw several more of our troops running towards me from the direction of the beach. One by one, they were all hit by bullets, knocking them down in moments. One man was hit horribly in the head, and he lost most of his skull; another man was hit in the stomach and he writhed on the ground, thrashing his legs and vomiting. Two men threw themselves down next to me, and one was immediately hit in the neck and had his head partially severed. I fired a very long burst in an arc around the whole front of me, and this enabled the other man on the ground to get behind me, sheltered by the gun shield. He was a Leutnant, although I did not know him. Anyway, he had an MP40 (*sub machine gun*), and I was reassured to have an officer with me.

He shouted in my ear, and I could just understand what he was saying:

'They are landing tanks on the beach and burning out the strong house.'

I was confused at this, because I did not think it was possible to land tanks onto a beach; I assumed he meant they were cars.

He shouted in my ear, 'The strong house is lost. Bring the gun and leave the Tobruk.'

I said, 'You order me to leave the Tobruk?'

He said, 'We will take the men and go to the next bunkers, we will join the troops there.'

There was a further line of bunkers inland, about two kilometres south. I did not know what the situation might be there! It might be worse than this. However, more of our troops began to appear from the beach zone, and I fired off large amounts of MG bullets to cover them. Some were shot, but I also hit three Americans with Thompson guns whom I saw emerge from the trees, and they tumbled onto the ground. The Leutnant stood up, showing himself as a target, and no shots came. I was impressed at his courage. He shouted, 'Now, we move,' and this proved to be a good choice of moment.

We had a handful of men in addition to this Leutnant and myself; I unclipped the gun and I placed over the barrel a leather ring that we used for carrying it when the gun was hot. The group of us moved quickly towards the trees; one of the tracks that formed the crossroads continued past there in the rough direction of the second line of bunkers. I moved as fast as possible with my limp.

As we came level with the three dead Americans, one of them moved and seemed about to rise; he had a Thompson gun close to him. The Leutnant stooped down quickly and shot him in the head with his MP40, then shot the other two men likewise.

One of our men took a Thompson gun and spare ammunition magazines from the bodies. I would not have done this; I knew from Italy that if a soldier (whether German or Allied) was captured with enemy 'souvenirs' on him, then his treatment as a prisoner would be violent or even lethal; on the Eastern Front, it was an immediate death sentence, apparently. But the Thompson guns were superb items, being famous as the 'gangster guns' from the 1930s, and they were hard to resist. Armed in this way, we advanced down the earth track towards our inland bunkers. I struggled to keep up now with my limp, but I did my utmost.

After a few paces, I heard the officer curse loudly; I looked round, and saw that two of the troops had disappeared. They were literally nowhere to be seen, and there was no shooting or struggle. My hearing was recovering, and I could hear explosions from the coast and aircraft overhead, but I saw or heard no sign of those two men.

'They have deserted; they prefer to be taken prisoner,' the officer said. 'But I saw at the strong house, the Allies are not taking prisoners today, they burned the whole thing with a flamethrower, with the men in it.'

I do not know if this was true or if he said this to motivate us, but we continued, now being a few men, myself and this Leutnant.

It was very warm, and I was very thirsty. My leg was becoming painful because of my limp. We stayed in the cover of the trees, because huge numbers of aircraft were passing overhead. Some of these appeared to be twin-engined bombers, and there was a large amount of smoke rising on the southern and eastern horizons; other planes were the Jabo (*fighter-bomber*) type, and often they would swoop down and fire on the ground ahead of us. When they fired, long streaks of white light would shoot down onto the ground, which one of our men said were rockets and very dangerous. There was a strong smell of smoke, burning rubber, and aircraft fumes.

As the breeze came from the beach area, it brought with it sounds of activity: detonations, machine-gunning and many engine noises. There was the definite sound of tank tracks; I knew these were not ours, as we had no panzers on the beach line itself.

The Leutnant gave me a drink from his water canteen, because I had left mine behind in the Tobruk. Because of the need to go up and down through the cupola, it was not possible to carry the regulation water bottle, gas mask case and haversack equipment. To my surprise, the Leutnant's water was mixed heavily with schnapps, and it was very refreshing. That Leutnant was a complete contradiction in many ways. I never knew his name.

Shortly after this, we came on a small group of civilians, who had prisoner labourers with them. As we passed, the Leutnant told them all in French to go to a cellar and hide.

Who were these prisoner labourers?

It is not remembered much, but all Reich-controlled territories had substantial numbers of prisoners of war or civilian prisoners working as manual labourers and farming or construction workers. These people were mostly Russian or Polish, mostly male, but also with women among them. I do not know the numbers, but there must have been hundreds of thousands of these people in France alone. Huge gangs of them, hundreds of them, would be at railway stations, sleeping on the wasteland beside the tracks, under the guard of a few armed engineers.

These ones that we passed on that morning of the 6th, they appeared to be farm workers, all were men. As we went by, one of them said something, made a comment – I do not know what exactly. I do not even know what language it was that he spoke. I heard a shot very close, and ducked, then looked back. The Leutnant had shot this labourer in the chest with his MP40, killing him outright. The other civilians and labourers backed away from us, and we continued onward.

Did you make any protest about this shooting?

No, I did not. It was not in our nature at the time to make protests to officers. Also, the situation was very tense and uncertain, also in all the confusion there was a real danger that some of the labourers would rise up against us and try to overpower us. I am not justifying what the officer did, you understand, but I place it in context for you.

We came on from that point into a low area where the land was flooded as a defence; our commanders had diverted the local river to disgorge partly onto this plain in order to deny its use as airborne landings or for troop advances from the coast. This floodwater was about one metre deep and covered about two square kilometres, and beyond that was higher ground where our second line of bunkers was positioned. There was a wooden walkway leading across the water, but this was bombed and burning. The only other way was to skirt around the whole flood area to reach the bunkers.

At the side of the track, there was a 'Famo' type half-track, the type without armour, parked under a stand of trees, and there was nobody present with it. Possibly the crew had deserted, or been killed away from the vehicle by the airborne troops; at any rate, this powerful machine was there for the taking, with the starting lever still working and a small amount of fuel. The officer ordered us into it, with the intention of driving it around the floodwater to the fortifications. We men bundled onto this vehicle, and one of the soldiers started it and began to drive.

Of course, this was the worst thing we could have done, because the Famo was very visible from the air. Although we drove under a long line of trees which partly shielded us, it was only a few seconds before a fighter plane came down to look at us. It came in from over the floods, and I believe it was a Mustang type, although it was moving so quickly that it

was literally a blur in my vision. It fired its guns on us, and the tracer shot along the water, over the roadway and hit us in the engine and cab.

I was sitting at the back of the vehicle, and I saw the bullets smash into the sides of the cab, tearing off all the metal body plates; with no armour, there was nothing to protect the driver, and he was thrown out of the vehicle onto the road. The half-track veered around, and we ran over the driver as he rolled in the roadway, then the Famo rolled down the small embankment into the floodwater. There was nothing to be done for the driver; his body was completely crushed open by the tracks of the Famo. The engine was on fire, and this made our presence even more conspicuous from the air. I jumped off, with the officer and the remaining soldiers plus our weapons, and we continued on foot along this track beside the water. The plane returned a few seconds later and machine-gunned the vehicle again; looking back, we saw it blow up completely as we ran on.

We found there were other troops on this track, going in the same direction, and the officer grouped them together and ordered us to work as a team. We were now about twenty in number. These men were a combination of Kriegsmarine support crews from the bunkers, Wehrmacht infantry and various Eastern recruits in the ROA insignia.

Can you explain the ROA?

This was a formation of men originally taken prisoner from the Soviet and Polish armies earlier in the war, who had now sworn an oath to us and agreed to work for the Wehrmacht; I believe they were stationed on the Atlantic Wall to keep them away from their home countries where they might defect again. We in the Wehrmacht regarded them as unreliable, although I have heard that some of them fought to the death in Normandy, fearing the consequences of being recaptured by the Allies. Whatever their motivations, these fellows ran with us along the path; we were spread out in a long column, and we had to throw ourselves flat several times as planes came over.

Sometimes the planes fired on us, and at other times they simply flew along the road, firing at the empty pathway; they were at liberty to do as they pleased, with no Luftwaffe to challenge them at all. Several of our men were hit, and those that were struck were simply left by the path, as it was impossible to bring them with us. I remember that one man, one of the

ROA, was hit in the abdomen by several bullets; his body was cut in half, I am sorry to say, and the rest of us could only step over the two pieces as we ran on.

Towards the end, we were fired on from ahead of us, killing one of our group, but this proved to be another German Tobruk sited near the bunker line. When this Tobruk gunner realised who we were, he waved us on towards the bunkers and called them to warn of our approach. My leg was making it almost impossible to run, and one of the Russian men helped me by letting me lean on him. I was grateful. He did not have to do that, nobody ordered him to do it, and he probably saved me from being left behind near the Tobruk.

Finally, we passed through barbed wire positions and slit trenches, and we came into the second-line bunker zone itself. This was a series of concrete blockhouse structures, three of them about one hundred metres apart, well-camouflaged, on slightly rising ground, with a good field of fire over the roadway, the floods and over an area of marshy land which separated this area from the coastline. These forts had been bombed, and there were craters all around, but they were intact. There were many vehicles jumbled up around the approaches: half-tracks, Kubelwagens, motorcycles and horse carts.

These bunker structures were what we called 'Resistance Points,' and I saw that they were armed with 75mm PAK guns, which were on wheels inside the buildings, with their barrels projecting through the embrasures, and a variety of MG positions. There were slit trenches which were crowded with troops who had retreated from the beach area, and among these was a Panzerschrek (*bazooka*) crew. There was a single 20mm Flak gun behind the bunkers to cover them.

This was a strong area to defend, as the approaches were lower-lying, difficult to cross and had little concealment. I felt more confident here, and I was seen briefly by a medic who gave me a 'soldier's cocktail,' which was a mix of morphine and amphetamine against the pain and exhaustion. I went into one of the bunkers, which had a PAK gun aimed out over the marshes. They were glad to see me with my MG34; I positioned this on its bipod mount in one of the slit embrasures, and then waited.

What was the atmosphere in this bunker?

The men who manned the bunker were questioning us new arrivals frantically. '*How many? Who are they? What weapons? Are there tanks? Flamethrowers?*' And so on. But what did we know, really? We knew there was a sizeable force approaching, with tanks of some kind, and there were also American airborne troops in the area. In this blockhouse, people were jumpy, constantly calling out that they saw something, arguing with each other; the mood was nervous. A Feldwebel (*sergeant*) came in and gave us criticism for our behaviour, and we became more orderly under his command. This Feldwebel told us that reinforcements were coming up from the south and east, and that we had only to hold this bunker line for a few hours before our panzers would arrive to push the attackers back to the beach and into the sea. This was an excellent little speech and it rallied our nerves well, because we knew that there were armoured divisions dispersed to the south.

The time now was around ten or eleven am, I think; my watch was broken in the Famo crash. I did not have much desire to know the time exactly. I felt sure that these thick concrete walls of the bunker would hold out and that we would hold the line.

I had a view of the roadway and flooded area in front, and I squinted along my MG sight, wiping all the sweat and dust from my eyes. The interior of this bunker was very humid, and quite dark, with all the troops hunched over their weapons at the embrasures, whether the PAK gun, or machine guns or rifles. I am sure that everybody's heart was beating as hard as mine, and that everyone was trying to calm themselves.

Of course, we were expecting a ground attack, but the Allies were determined to deny us the chance to fight in such a way. We heard a shouted warning: 'Jabo!' ('*Fighter-bomber!*')

I peered up through the concrete slit, and saw a horizontal line of three aircraft descending on us over the marshes at great speed. These planes had very large radial engines, which from our recognition sessions I knew was distinctive of the Thunderbolt plane. I recall being surprised, because the planes appeared to be bare metal; the sun reflected very brightly off their surfaces. There was nothing that anyone of us could do, although I and several others fired our MGs up in an attempt at Flak defence. This was rushed and ineffective, because the Thunderbolts were simply too fast.

The Flak cannon fired, and I saw the 20mm cannon tracer fly up to seek the planes; the 20mm shells were very bright, and snaked slightly in

the air. Some of these shells actually hit one of the planes in the wing, knocking pieces out. This plane lifted up and banked away, but the other two continued to descend, and they released bombs from under their wings as they approached us at probably one hundred metres height.

The bombs flew out almost horizontally from their wings, and the pilots lifted each wing in turn to release them. It is strange how the mind remembers such a detail, but in the heat of the moment, the senses are taking in all this information, and it is indelibly imprinted on the memory. The small, dark bombs, two from each plane, came tearing across the marshland and into our bunker line. The bombs slapped into the flat ground in front of us, and bounced up, tumbling over in their momentum. One bomb bounced straight past us and went between the bunkers, then another hit our roof and deflected off without exploding. It detonated somewhere behind us. From my slit aperture, I could see the blockhouse on our right; this was hit by at least one bomb, and it was covered in dust and smoke, but appeared to be standing.

The Thunderbolt aircraft came down on us repeatedly; I think there were six or eight waves of them in all. Each time, these very shiny planes flew low, flipped their wings to release their bomb load, and the projectiles would race towards us, bouncing across the ground and scattering around our position. There was no pause between the attacks: as soon as one load of bombs detonated, the next wave was on the point of unloading their bombs onto us. Our Flak hit one of the planes in the early waves; I saw this aircraft lose its propeller and engine cowling, and then the cannon tracer pierced its wings. The plane exploded in a very long streak of fire, and did not lift out of its attack run. It raced straight down onto us and hit the ground to my left, where many of the vehicles were scattered. There were huge explosions from that side, which I could not see.

The succeeding waves were not hit by Flak, and I realised that our 20mm had stopped firing. The bombs kept coming at us, and I saw one of them skip across the ground and tumble into one of the slit trenches crammed with infantry. The explosion threw up many pieces of men, weapons and clothing, all mixed together in the shockwave. I gave up looking through the embrasure; all we could do was to crouch down under the embrasures and put our hands over our ears under our helmets to protect our eardrums.

The bunker shook several times, and the explosions sent many chunks of shrapnel and debris hurtling through our concrete apertures, which ricocheted around the interior. One of the PAK crew men broke down, and began screaming. His comrades punched him to the ground and he lay sobbing there, while another man took his place.

Was there much other loss of self-control?

In fact, no; the men were well-disciplined. Some of the men produced crucifixes or rosaries and said prayers, others seemed to be simply cursing; both were inaudible, but I could see their mouths moving.

This bombing lasted perhaps a minute or two, but seemed endless. Cracks appeared in the concrete ceiling of the bunker, and large pieces fell from the upper edge of the embrasures. Some of this masonry hit our troops, crushing several limbs; these men could only lie on the concrete floor and wait for the situation to end.

When the bombs stopped, there was a pause of several seconds, and I peered out. I could see, through all the dust and smoke outside the bunker, that the blockhouse on our right had been blown open partially, there was a large hole in one side. The trench that had been hit was a horrible mess, with many dismembered bodies lying around it, many smouldering or contorted and blackened. I could hear flames and detonations from the other side of our bunker too.

Then the shout went up 'Jabo again!' It seemed that the Americans had an endless stream of planes available, which were always arriving freshly armed on top of us. These new aircraft were also Thunderbolt types; however, as they approached, I saw the white streaks of light from under their wings and the descending lines of vapour which showed they were using rockets. I had never seen rocket explosions close at hand before, and did not know what to expect.

The effect of these rockets was in some ways worse than the bombs. The warheads used some kind of incendiary material which exploded with a very intense white light and then burned and expanded with a hissing noise. I saw one of the first rockets detonate in this way against the other bunker. The white flames covered the structure and entered the hole that was blown in one side, all the time making this eerie, hissing sound. Really, it sounded like an animal hissing or breathing. The other rockets hit our line in very

rapid bursts, and our zone around the bunkers was absolutely filled with the bright, pale flames.

One rocket hit our blockhouse on the wall outside the PAK gun aperture, and the explosion was completely blinding. The PAK was about ten metres away from me, and I saw many fragments of burning material pour in through the aperture and fall onto the floor around the PAK; these fragments themselves expanded and burned, until in a few moments the gun seemed to be covered in these bright, blazing pieces of material. This fire simply would not go out; it covered the PAK crew, and sank into their ammunition pile. There was complete panic and disorder at that point. The men near the PAK were consumed in these white flames, including the weeping man on the ground and several injured men nearby. The uniforms of these men peeled off in scorched pieces, and their bare skin was set alight by the fire. A round of the 75mm ammunition detonated in the flames, and the shell blasted around the interior of the bunker, glowing red with tracer. This shell smashed off the wall, off the ceiling and off the other walls – each time, it hit a man or group of men, and cut them horribly before bouncing elsewhere again.

Somebody threw open the steel door of the bunker, and I hurled myself at it. Other men were competing with me to get out of that inferno in the bunker, and we fought each other with our bare hands at the doorway. I stumbled through, over the body of a man who collapsed outside with his hair on fire, and I ran a few paces away from the structure. I made the mistake of looking back into the bunker through the door. I can tell you that the interior was a vision of hell, an obscene sight that remains with me.

The white burning material was still expanding, and burning alive the men who had not escaped through the door. Men were rolling and struggling on the floor in the flames, some were clawing blindly at the walls, trying to feel the route out, with their faces all covered in smoke because their clothing was on fire. PAK rounds and MG rounds were detonating in there, in the confined space, and the tracer was screaming from one wall to another, tearing up the bodies of men where they stood or lay. I backed away from the door, as a couple of other men staggered out after me, with their backs and legs on fire.

Finally, all I could see inside the bunker was the flickering white light of the incendiary, and many flashes of exploding rounds. All that I

could hear was the screaming and groaning of men, and the strange hiss of the burning rockets as the last salvo of them exploded in front of our line.

I shook myself, and looked around for guidance. My bunker was destroyed from inside, and I could see that the bunker on the right was in a similar state; the hole in its side was issuing white flames and smoke. On my left, the third bunker had its steel door still closed, but its apertures were streaming with the incendiary flames, and there were explosions inside.

Nearby, the jumble of vehicles was completely on fire, with the trucks and precious half-tracks thrown onto their sides, and many wheels and bits of engine debris strewn about. The wreckage of the crashed Thunderbolt plane was among them, burning fiercely, with its tail rising up above the rest. Behind me, the 20mm Flak gun had been hit by bombs, and it lay in pieces in a crater with its crew. I was one of the few survivors of the attack.

What kind of incendiary was this in the rockets?

I learned afterwards that this material was a phosphorous weapon. It is a very powerful explosive chemical that the Allies were starting to experiment with. The devastating thing about this phosphorous was that the fire kept growing and expanding, and it flowed almost like a liquid, eating into anything it touched. My God, I saw some of the bodies of our troops in the trench lines that had been hit by these rockets. The bodies were reduced to skeletons, very black and charred, as all the body material was burned off and consumed. I confess that I was terrified at the sight, not knowing how soon the Thunderbolt planes would come back and strike us again. Would this happen to me within a minute, or five minutes, or six? Would I be reduced to this skeletal state soon? I was left stunned, incapable of action for a few moments.

I suppose that the psychological impact of such weapons is part of their effectiveness.

That is true; even the survivors are left fearful and incapacitated. As for me, I had no gun, my uniform was scorched and in shreds, and the morphine cocktail was wearing off, leaving me trembling and shattered. The air was full of smoke and dust, and the sun had a very harsh glare,

which made it difficult to see around me. Two other men came up to me, both Wehrmacht troops, and we crouched down, considering what to do. There were no officers visible; a few other men were appearing from the smoke, but these were running away from the bunkers to the south east in complete disorder. A man appeared who was armed with a Panzerschrek (*bazooka*.) He had the firing tube but he had only two projectiles, which he carried tenderly in his arm as if they were prize rabbits. That is the way it looked to me, with my confused senses.

From the roadway, we could hear the sound of tank movement, which was rising and falling. Our view was obscured by smoke and dust, but this was thinning because the coastal breeze was strengthening across the zone. The two troops said that they were going to retreat, because the bunkers were destroyed; however, the Panzerschrek man insisted that he wanted to fire his two projectiles. He said that these could destroy any Allied tank at two hundred metres, and that we would be decorated as heroes when our own panzers arrived. It occurred to me that he was mentally confused, but I was also bewildered, and I was past the stage of being afraid for the future. For this reason, even though the two other men retreated on foot to the rear of the bunkers and left the zone, I stayed with the Panzerschrek man and agreed to operate as his loader. I took an MP40 from the body of one of our men, and two spare magazines.

We took up a position between two wrecked vehicles, a half-track and an armoured car, behind a concrete slab. This was near the crashed Thunderbolt, but the smoke from its flames was blowing away from us. We had a good view along the road track beside the flood water. The trees along the track were burning in some places, and there was debris of machinery scattered along the ground. The Panzerschrek gunner told me how to load the rocket projectile into the launcher tube, which was over his shoulder; I loaded one of the two rounds, and then rolled away as he instructed me so that the rocket blast would not hit me. I flattened myself, holding my MP40, and looked into the roadway; I could see the outline of a tank coming through the smoke from the burning trees.

This tank was very high in outline, and as it advanced on us I saw that it had a white star on the front plate. This made it very obvious, almost like a tinplate target at a fairground shooting stall. In my confused mental state, that is the image I had of this tank. The range was about 200 metres.

The Panzerschrek man said ‘It’s a Sherman, we can finish him,’ and before I could respond, he fired.

A huge spout of sparks and fire came out from the back of the tube, burning my face with the heat although I was away from its jet. I saw the projectile go streaking towards the Sherman, and it struck the front plate, low down between the tracks. The explosion was not large, but I saw many fragments of metal burst off the hull immediately, and the tracks stopped moving. The vehicle halted and rocked violently, and I was surprised that the machine gun in the hull did not fire; I suppose this was because the projectile had killed or injured the gunner. However, the turret machine gun fired on us, and the bullets ripped up the wrecked vehicles that we were hiding behind. We crouched behind the concrete slab, and I reloaded the rocket launcher.

The Sherman stopped shooting at us, and I heard crackling sounds which sounded as if it was burning. We peered over the concrete slab, and saw that this tank was on fire, and its crew were climbing out of the hatches. One of them had a sub machine gun, and I fired on him with my MP40, knocking him down immediately. The other crew men scattered and ran to the back of the tank. I rolled away, because I saw that the Panzerschrek man was going to fire again.

After he fired, I heard another small detonation, and I peered around the edge of the slab to see that the rocket had actually hit a second Sherman which was attempting to steer around the immobilised one. This second tank was hit on the edge of the front hull, by the drive wheel, and its track was blown off and hanging loose on the roadway. This was an incredible success for us, to have hit two tanks with two shots, and I remember feeling a sensation of great pride in this achievement. Of course, our actions were punished by the second tank, which fired on us with high-explosive. These shells blew up the vehicles near us, and showered us with debris. We were trapped behind the concrete slab, and unable to move away from its shelter.

In between the explosions, I could hear the revving and clanking of other tanks trying to manoeuvre on the narrow road. My mood changed completely. I thought that we were close to death, and close to losing our battle. The Panzerschrek man was hit by shrapnel, which hit him in the shoulder and neck, and he began bleeding heavily. He threw away his rocket launcher and took a grenade from his boot, handing it to me. I thought that he wanted me to throw it at the tanks – but what use was that?

Then he told me that we should blow ourselves up rather than be captured. He was either very fanatical, or mentally unbalanced, I believe.

Did you consider blowing yourself up?

Why would I do such a thing? There was no reason to do that. We were honest foot soldiers, defending France and ultimately the Reich from aggression. But as we crouched there behind the concrete, with these high explosive rounds smashing up the wrecked transports around us, there was the noise of another tank from the south, from the direction of our lines. My spirits lifted greatly. I believed that our panzer reinforcements were arriving, at the last possible moment to assist us and defend this bunker line. I imagined a great formation of our panzers, pushing the Americans back into the sea, as the Feldwebel had promised us in the bunker. However, all that arrived was a single, solitary Stug III gun.

This was a self-propelled 75mm PAK gun on a low panzer chassis; it was renowned as an excellent vehicle in use against tanks. I had seen these Stugs used in Italy, and they had inflicted great losses on Shermans. But this was only one, and as it advanced on our position, I expected to see others behind it. There were no others, and it turned out that this Stug commander had risked his vehicle to approach the bunker line alone and assess the situation.

We gestured to the Stug, and it presumably saw us, because it drove rapidly around us and fired several shots at the roadway. I heard impacts and explosions from down there. I tried to lift the Panzerschrek man, but I was too weak and he was too heavy, and I left him lying behind the concrete. I do not know what happened to him. The Stug, having seen the situation on the road, began to reverse away slowly, still firing its gun. It did not stop for me, but the commander, who was behind an armoured shield on the roof hatch, gestured to me to climb on.

I was able to take hold of the armour skirting and clamber onto the back of the vehicle, which was extremely hot due to the engine vents. I held on there, and the Stug reversed back from the road, pushing aside many of the wrecked transports, and moved to the south, away from these bunkers. I took a look along the side of the Stug as I held on, and saw that there were three Shermans now apparently disabled in the road: the two we had hit with the rockets, and another which was also on fire and standing in the

flood water. There were other tanks behind these three, and infantry moving around between them, but the immobilised Shermans were obstructing their progress. In this manner, we withdrew from the line of bunkers and used a forest track to retreat several kilometres to the south east, where a number of armoured vehicles were assembling into a small battle group in the woods.

What kind of force was this?

It was not impressive, to be frank. They were from an armoured Division to the South of the sector. There were several Stugs, several of the large armoured cars, and some infantry in Hanomags. Maybe ten vehicles in all, and thirty infantry, that is probably about all. The vehicles were heavily disguised with foliage on their superstructures, but even so, the crews were reluctant to move them out of the woods. We could see and hear the Allied Jabos overhead, swarming across the countryside at low altitude, and there was no mobile Flak gun in this group. Also, the command situation appeared to be confused; I fell into conversation with the Panzergrenadier men, and their view was that the Divisional commanders were slow in responding to the attack.

Was the word 'attack,' 'raid' or 'invasion'? How did the men view the landings?

We all used the word 'attack' at this stage. It was only later in the day that the word 'invasion' was used more widely; at least, that is what I remember.

Was that the end of your combat on June 6th?

It was not. At this point, which was late in the morning, there was a lull in the fighting between the two sides. Possibly the Americans were concentrating on building up forces from their sea vessels into their land pocket; certainly, the German troops used the time to organise themselves and to bring up more vehicles and troops. This lasted an hour or so, certainly less than two hours, but all the time the Allied aircraft were moving overhead, and firing into the German zone.

As I had no trace of my unit from the original bunker, I attached myself to these Panzergrenadiers. I received medical attention from their medics, and they gave me another amphetamine tablet, which boosted my energy and my frame of mind greatly. I was armed with the MP40 I had picked up, and I obtained more magazines and grenades from these men. These troops were mostly very young men with older Feldwebel commanders; they had not yet been in contact with the Americans, and they were eager to engage them. There was also a field kitchen which gave me soup, bread and boiled sweets. I was desperately hungry and I ate all they could give me, sitting on an ammunition crate under a tree, with those Thunderbolts flying back and forth overhead.

There also came into the woods a unit of SS infantry. This was a platoon of about twenty youths who were extremely young, about seventeen, and they had been cut off from their commanders by a Jabo attack on a road to the south. They were very heavily armed, with MG34 and MP40, and these weapons looked out of place alongside their boyish faces. So all these troops and vehicles were packed together in the woods, without clear leadership and unwilling to move outside because of air attacks.

Two of the armoured cars went out to do reconnaissance of the American position and intending to take prisoners for interrogation. These armoured cars did not return, and the level of explosions and firing began to increase again after the late morning lull. Going to the west side of the woods, we could see smoke and flashes in the farmland on that side, where the land was higher and not flooded; all of this led to a great concern that we were being outflanked and isolated.

In the end, I think after midday, the Stug commanders finally received clear orders from their Divisional command; they were to fall back to a fortified line about two kilometres south where there was German PAK artillery in emplacements. That line was to be held ‘at all costs’ until more reinforcements arrived. The Stug commanders told us men about this very clearly, and we began to form up into a column to retreat to the new line.

The road to the south was a route I did not know personally; it was an earth track suitable for farm tractors and so on, but it was partially sunken below ground level, and screened to the north and west by thick hedgerow of the type the French called ‘bocage.’ These low roads with

hedge screens are typical of the Normandy and Brittany countryside. The fields to either side were believed to be mined.

This was quite a strong route for a retreat, and we began to move out along it with the armoured cars first, then Hanomags with their infantry on board in the vanguard, then the SS infantry on foot, and the three Stugs in the rear. The rearmost Stug faced backward and moved in reverse gear behind the whole column, with its gun pointing to the enemy. Because of the narrow road and the number of tight bends, the vehicles could only proceed at walking pace; the Stug crews told me this might actually be a benefit, because the vehicles were covered with so much foliage that they might look like part of the hedgerow from the air, and moving at speed would destroy this illusion! The soldier's mind finds so many hopes to cling on to in a retreat. Because of my leg injury, I took up a position on one of the Stugs, crouching among all the branches and leaves on the rear hull.

The road became increasingly sunken below the countryside, until the top of the Stug was barely level with the surrounding land. This was excellent for concealment, but of course it also meant that the vehicles could not move off the road for any reason. I heard the Stug commander say that if any vehicle broke down, the Stugs would have to run over it and continue moving. The mood was very tense; it was hot and humid, and nobody knew how close the Americans might be, whether the Airborne troops or the beach forces.

There were parachutes visible on the ground beside the road at some points, and we saw several American paratroopers who appeared to be dead, still hanging from their parachutes in the trees beyond the fields.

One thing that we saw on that first stage of the retreat disturbed me. We slowly rounded a curve in the track, shielded by the hedgerow, and plainly visible along the top of the embankment were several dead American troops. They were in a kneeling position, with their hands behind their backs, and it seemed they had been shot methodically, then simply left where they kneeled. The crew of the Stug that I was riding on commented that this must be the work of the SS boys, who apparently had a taste for such things. It concerned me greatly that these Americans, who seemed to be Airborne troops, had been captured and deliberately executed in such a way.

Did you learn who was responsible for this?

No; and the events immediately following this lead me to think that the Allies themselves never learned of this act. This was only a few minutes into our retreat, but the next events happened with a terrible rapidity. As we all dreaded, the Jabos appeared from the south west direction, meaning that the planes could see us behind the hedgerows on our north side. There was nothing we could do about this; our destination was only a matter of kilometres away, and so the column continued to advance slowly. Hoping for the best as always, I reasoned that our vehicles were so well camouflaged that the Jabos would not notice us; at first, this seemed to be the case, as from this group of about six Thunderbolts, two flew over us without showing an interest. I am sure I was not the only soldier in that sunken road whose heart beat with relief at seeing this. But then the third and fourth planes dived down to look at us, and came racing over the roadway at low altitude, so low that I could see the pilots looking down at us from their bubble canopies. The crews shot up at them with small arms fire – but this had no effect.

The entire group of Thunderbolts swung around and attacked us from the north to the south, following along the line of the sunken road, one after the other.

The situation was absolutely hopeless for us in the column. I saw the long streaks of white vapour shoot down from under their wings, and there was barely time to take evasive action even if the sides of the road had permitted it. As it was, the vehicles were confined within the road, unable to leave the sunken channel, and the Thunderbolt rockets simply raked along the column while it was restricted in this way.

I jumped off the deck of the Stug, with the remaining energy given by the amphetamine tablet, and landed on the edge of the embankment under the hedges. I remained there, motionless, and from my prone position I was able to see the effect of the air attack on the entire column, as far as one of the Hanomags at the front, a distance of about one hundred metres until a curve in the road hid the rest of the column from me.

The American rockets poured along the column, many of the projectiles striking the fields on either side, and some striking short, exploding among the bodies of the American troops behind us. I saw that these rockets were high-explosive, which I had seen used in Italy, and I knew how destructive they could be. I saw the rockets devastate the

American corpses, severing their limbs and their heads, and throwing the pieces for long distances across the fields, in trails of blood and smoking flesh. For this reason, I think the air attack destroyed the evidence of the 'executions,' if that is indeed what they were. But other rockets came smashing directly into the German troops and vehicles in the sunken road. I held my hands over my head and looked through the gap between my helmet rim above my eyes and the ground under my chin as these weapons struck us.

The sunken road was turned into an absolute slaughterhouse by these American projectiles. Their high explosives fell on the Stugs, ripping off the armoured screens on their sides and blasting away the foliage they had massed on their top decks. Two of the Stugs were hit on the engine decks, and the engine grilles burst open in big spouts of fire. The last Stug, the one reversing with its gun pointing back down the road, was hit somewhere on the upper hull, and I think that the rockets went through the hatch on the top into the crew compartment. This Stug threw itself from side to side, slamming into the embanked walls of the roadway, and I saw that the entire roof of its superstructure was being blown out. I think that all the ammunition inside was exploding, because the detonation was enormous, sending pieces of the roof whirling up into the fields. Many pieces of the crew from inside were thrown up also; the whole explosion was a real tornado of bodies and steel, every piece trailing fire and smoke as it fell to earth.

This was not the end; the rockets struck along the sunken road, exploding among the SS boys who were hurrying along there. The impacts came every second, slaughtering these boys as they ran or dived for cover. The rocket explosions ripped up the sunken track, and the high walls on either side deflected the shrapnel and debris back again, so that the path was full of bouncing, shrieking metal. I saw a group of half a dozen of these SS troops torn into pieces, with their innards ripped out and their empty bodies left burning in the road. A few of them, further ahead, ran forward to escape the carnage, but in front of them one of the Hanomags was hit by a rocket, and. whether by accident or some design by the driver, it began to reverse backwards onto the SS troops behind it.

This Hanomag was blazing with fire, with all its gasoline flooding out, and it reversed out of control straight into the troops. The boys were flattened by the half-track, run down one after the other, and the Hanomag

kept reversing and trampling the bodies of the troops until it finally crashed into one of the burning Stugs and came to rest.

The entire roadway was full of flames, broken bodies, shattered machinery and exploding ammunition. Some of the SS were still alive, but on fire, and the ammunition in their pouches was detonating, which was injuring them yet further. I saw one youth struggle to his feet, with his whole body on fire, and then the grenades that he carried tucked into his belt exploded, sending his limbs in different directions. Other troops crawled or dragged themselves, struggling in the pools of burning gasoline, until they were enveloped by the fires.

I waited for about a minute, then perhaps two minutes, and then for a longer time, but I don't know how long exactly. I heard the Jabos flying off to the north, and I must say that my chest was heaving very hard, making my torso rise and fall on the ground under the hedgerow. I was at a loss about what to do, in an absolute confusion. I was also hit in the back by debris, and this made it difficult for me to breathe.

I had been through a series of battles that day: the initial Tobruk fight, then the second bunker line, and now this attack on the column. Each time, the German forces were overwhelmed by vast superiority of numbers and weaponry, especially in artillery and attack from the air. I had a feeling of great despair, doubting that we could ever resist this enemy that had such machines and such resources. I was in a bad condition, physically and psychologically. The morphine and amphetamine were declining, I think, in my system, leaving me weakened and confused. The pain in my back, my chest and my leg was very severe. I struggled with myself to decide what to do.

Part of me wanted to surrender and give up the fight. But another side of my mind said that to give up now was meaningless, after so much effort, when I was close to the next line of defence. In the end, I slid down into the sunken road and made my way along its length, intending to reach our next positions. A few other survivors were doing likewise, and we had to climb over the many shattered corpses in this roadway, with many severed limbs and heads strewn around among the burning vehicles. In some cases, the fallen men were still alive, and panting or groaning miserably, and this sound was added to the crackle of the flames.

What was done to help these wounded men?

I think that nothing was done. We had no morphine or bandages, and the wounded men needed doctors, nurses and medical equipment. I had difficulty walking at all, and my breathing was very painful, so I could not carry any of them. One of these wounded was hit especially badly, with much of his stomach hanging out into the road, but he was still conscious and moving his hands. After I stepped over him, I heard a shot behind me, and I saw that one of the other survivors had put him out of his suffering with a single bullet to the head. That was a merciful thing to do, in these circumstances.

Finally, we left the destroyed column behind, and we reached the fortified line that we were aiming for. This was a strong point of bunkers with PAK guns, and it was organised much like the previous one that we had just seen destroyed by the Jabos. There, I was seen by a medic who said I had several broken ribs, and I was sent to the zone behind our lines in a horse-drawn cart which was being used to transport the wounded. I was the least wounded man in that cart. The others had lost ears, hands or eyes; many were burned, with their scalps gone or their charred uniforms stuck to their damaged skin. I felt guilty, being so lightly wounded, it must be said.

Was that the end of your war?

No. I was given several weeks recuperation at a convalescent centre in the south of our zone, although being among the able-bodied patients I was also tasked with stripping and repairing rifles and machine guns that were jammed or out of order in some way. This was not arduous work, and I found that it kept my mind occupied. I had many unwanted memories of my experiences on the 6th June, which prevented me sleeping and affected my concentration.

In the convalescent depot, of course, we followed the progress of the invasion and our defence in as much detail as possible. The mood of us recuperating men was quite pessimistic, as we had all seen the enormous power of the weapons that the Allies used, and their superiority in the air. As we became aware that the beachheads were linking up, and then the Cherbourg peninsula was cut off from our zone, most of us began to accept that the Allies would create a permanent occupied zone in France. Some of us said that this could be contained, and it would allow our forces to grind

down and destroy the enemy forces over time, preventing them from attacking us further. Most of the men, though, did not believe that the pocket could be contained for long, and that if the Allies broke out and spread across the eastern plain, they would surround Paris quickly. This turned out to be an accurate prediction of what eventually happened.

Did you fight against the Allies again?

In July, I rejoined the Division, which was reorganising a lot of the men who had retreated from the coast in the first days of the invasion. My role was as a transport driver of an Opel truck carrying ammunition and grenades. However, I was taken prisoner in late July, when the Americans overran our rear echelon areas quite rapidly. We were ordered to fight, but we had rifles and grenades against groups of Shermans, and we surrendered willingly. After surrendering, we were kept in a prison compound near the coast; there were about two thousand Germans and other nations in this camp. Everybody was in there: officers, foot soldiers, marine troops, Panzer crews and Luftwaffe mechanics. The Americans took little interest in us and allowed us to organise the camp as we wished.

How was it to be a prisoner of the Americans?

Well, even those of us who believed that the Allies could be thrown out of France fell silent when we saw the way the Americans were organised, and the resources they had to work with. Their planes were constantly in the sky. Everything was mechanised, all supplies were carried by truck or train, with seemingly no concern over the amount of fuel used. If a jeep or a truck broke down, it was neglected rather than repaired, and a fresh one was used, still shiny from the factory. Instead of using local food, they ate from tins and cans of food that were made in America. We found this fascinating, and we formed an impression of an unstoppable power that would simply roll over any obstacle. And this is what eventually happened, as we now know, both in France and in Germany.

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Omaha Beach: The Resistance Point Gunner

Henrik Naube was an Unteroffizier (Corporal) with the 325th Infantry Division, stationed near Vierville.

Herr Naube, I did not meet you when I visited the Wall in 1944, but I stopped in your sector several times. It was only after the end of the war that I thought back over those events, and I realised that the sector was located on what the Allies called Omaha Beach.

Yes, I have also heard the terms Omaha, Utah, Sword and so on, in the years since the war ended. I think the first time I heard these codenames was in late 1946, when I was working in a car factory that was being managed by British engineers in Germany. I got to know some of these British people very well, and when I told them where I was taken prisoner by the Americans, they said, 'Oh, so you must have been on Omaha Beach. I was on Sword Beach.' Or, 'My brother was on Juno Beach,' and things like that. Of course, these terms meant nothing to me; we Germans had no knowledge of Allied terminology until recently. The first time I heard the phrase 'D Day' was also after the war ended, of course; during the war, we Germans referred to it as 'The Invasion of France' or 'The Normandy Attack.'

May I ask, in your mind now, do you think of that place as 'Omaha' or 'Vierville'?

To me, it is Vierville. That was the name of our position, which was a Resistance Point. I was posted there in April 1944 and we were inspected by Rommel himself shortly after my arrival.

Did you see Rommel personally?

Yes, he was a very energetic and active man; he walked very briskly and spoke rapidly. I did not have any dialogue with him, but he came to our position and spoke with our officer. He asked very factual questions about the amount of ammunition we had in the post, how old the weapons were,

what we knew of the design of Allied ships and so on. He was quite a short man, but had a very powerful presence, although, as with all famous leaders, how much of this was due to our expectations and preconceptions, it is difficult to say.

What was the mood among your unit in the days and weeks before the invasion?

There was a feeling of great tension, because we were constantly watching and waiting for a possible attack. We all believed that the Allies would try to attack Europe in the summer of 1944, and the summer was reaching its height, so a landing of some sort seemed inevitable. The amount of bombing by aircraft and strafing by Jabo type planes was also building up enormously in May and early June, and this had to be a prelude to some kind of event. Our warning level went up to level 2 on the weekend before the invasion, but, if I remember correctly, it came down again to level 3 on Monday 5th.

The waiting was very unnerving, and also the issue of constantly worrying about what form the attack would take. Would it be by air, or by landing boats, or in conjunction with the Communist fighters in the French Resistance, or a combination of all these? Would it be against us in the North, or also on the Western coast of France? All these questions plagued us, with no answers. And every day, the sea in front of our 'Widerstandsnest' (*Resistance Point*) looked exactly the same, giving us no clues at all.

Can you describe the Widerstandsnest, the Resistance Point?

This was an area of about thirty metres width and ten metres depth, set on the top of some cliffs beside one of the ravines that led down to the beach wall. The Point had a trench across its width, and several running to the rear, in jagged lines. Inside, these trenches were faced in concrete and had wooden floors with drainage points. Outside, there was a raised concrete parapet about one metre high, in which there were firing points, which were vertical slits. There were two machine gun points at either end aiming through these points. It was about three hundred metres down from the cliff to the nearest part of the sea wall, and there was a long,

uninterrupted line of fire along the beach to the northwest. The guns were MG42 types, which were extremely powerful.

The Resistance Point was surrounded by barbed wire with a single exit point at the rear, and the dunes on top of the cliffs around it were mined. There were also mines hanging on cables down the cliffs, which could be dropped on any attackers from the beach. The position was open to the air, but steel covers were available to drag across the trenches in case of a bombardment; to be honest, we also used these if it rained heavily. The position had a searchlight between the two guns, and a reinforced area for ammunition and grenade storage.

Our team there was ten men: two men on each gun, the others being observers, sentries, and men intended to fire from the trenches onto the beach with rifles. A second team of ten men were either resting or working nearby; we had a small villa as a headquarters adjacent to the officer's post. We were commanded by a Feldwebel, and our officer commanded four such positions along the high ground in the area.

On the other side of the ravine that went down to the sea wall, the cliffs continued, with further Resistance Points built along there.

What were your orders in terms of defending the beach?

We were to keep a constant lookout, of course, and make regular reports by cable line to our officer's post, which was about one kilometre behind us. In case of an attack, we were told specifically to hold our fire until any enemy troops were four hundred metres from the edge of the beach; although the MG42 could fire effectively beyond 2,000 metres, this instruction was intended to ensure that we had the largest possible target area on each attacking soldier. We were told to fire at their chests when their torsos were above water, that is to say when they reached the shallows and were wading.

We were trained constantly on the importance of our task. If the Allies were allowed to gain a foothold in our sector, however slender, their huge material resources would allow them to build it up and threaten the whole of France. This in turn would give them a puppet state to use in order to harass and blockade Germany itself. The concept of the Allies actually invading Germany seemed unimaginable at the time, it must be said.

Our officers sought to educate us very thoroughly on this matter. They emphasised that if an attempted landing could be defeated by us on the shoreline, and thrown back, it would take years for the Western Allies to recover, allowing us to consolidate a defensive line against the Soviets in the East. Its effect on Western public opinion might even force the English out of the war altogether; that idea was constantly emphasised. All in all, we were fully aware of the great burden of responsibility resting on us, as the first line of defence against an attack.

What is your memory of the 6th June and the preceding days?

The preceding day, the Monday, was very blustery and wet, I remember, and we were on duty in blocks of two hours, on duty and then off. The tension was very noticeable, because of the intensity of the bombing. Throughout the weekend and the Monday, that is, the 3rd, 4th and the 5th, there were heavy raids overnight to the south east, and Jabo attacks during the daytime. The Jabos usually flew over us, and went inland, they only occasionally strafed the beach. This is something I found strange when I thought about the invasion afterwards: the level of attacks on our beach were very intense at the last minute, but very low in the previous days and weeks. I suppose this was to prevent us deducing that an attack was impending on our specific beach, but the Jabos could have caused much more disruption to us than they did before the landing.

On the 6th June, I was on duty in the Resistance Point, at the Western corner MG slot, from two am onwards. As we went up to the point in the dark, there was heavy bombing to the south again and a very high level of aircraft noise. There was Flak fire from points in a semi-circle inland of us, and further explosions in the distance. We all agreed that something was up, something was going to happen soon.

Did this cause you alarm, or fear?

I think that most of us were simply sick of the tension of waiting, waiting. An event of some kind, even an attack, would at least break the tension, the silence, the sense of foreboding that we had. For this reason, some of our men said, ‘Let them come soon,’ which made other men wink

and laugh. But I think we all preferred to have the situation clear, to let us start fighting at last, rather than waiting.

What happened from two am up to the landing itself?

The level of noise and explosions rose and fell. As the moon was full, we could see large numbers of aircraft in the sky at times, between the rain clouds, and there were various flames and explosions in the sky on the inland side. Several times, we saw an aircraft on fire, heading out across the sea towards England, and in some cases these burning planes descended and appeared to hit the sea in the distance.

On our gun, I was the gunner, and my loader and I both had good quality binoculars. Using these, I saw that many of the aircraft were twin-engine types, and we debated whether these were bombers or something else. I know today that we were seeing the parachutist transports returning and scattering over the sea. I recall seeing one of these planes at low altitude followed very closely by another plane, which we thought appeared to be a glider under tow. These two planes descended rapidly and disappeared into the sea.

All this went on, and we became increasingly convinced that an attack from the sea would come soon, as some kind of assault was evidently already happening inland. Our officer appeared at about four am, bringing with him the 'spare team' whom he had woken, and he ordered us all to be completely prepared for a possible sea landing.

I think that first light came at about five am, and it slowly revealed the beach to us. Nothing was changed there; the sand was studded with large numbers of steel obstacles, and these were very prominent as the tide was out. The sky was overcast and the offshore wind was quite strong. As time passed, with my binoculars, as I scanned the horizon, I began to see many shapes materialise. The sea was slightly foggy out there, but I could still see first a handful of shapes, then more, and finally an absolute wall of these grey outlines stretching almost across the whole horizon.

All of us men who had binoculars stood and stared at this apparition, while the other men demanded to know what we were looking at. We handed the binoculars around for a few seconds, and many of the men took a look. Their reactions varied, ranging from curses to a kind of apprehensive laughter, or just silence. In the meantime, our Feldwebel was

on the cable phone speaking to the officer's post. He came to us at the parapet and said, 'Men, they're coming now, they're coming in strength. We must be ready,' or something straightforward like that.

The whole situation was unfolding in a way that seemed almost like a dream, detached from reality. This great assembly of ships was simply looming out of the sea mist, just getting bigger and bigger, closer and closer, and nothing at all was happening on our side. I could not hear any firing from our coastal batteries further along the coast, and no Luftwaffe aircraft were visible overhead. The sea between us and the ships was completely empty, there was not a torpedo boat or a seaplane or anything.

I had a great sensation that we were on our own in front of this colossal force. It was a strange sensation: it felt like a great challenge, almost a superhuman challenge. It was unnerving but I also felt a certain relief, even excitement, that at last we would meet this enemy that threatened us. At the same time, like soldiers everywhere, I busied myself with my gun, and with getting our position as ready as possible.

At this point, a very large formation of enemy bombers came over us. These were the big, four-engined bombers, I think they were the Lancaster type. We saw them streaming towards us over the ships on the sea, and a nearby 20mm Flak gun fired on them, but they were too high in altitude. They bombed us, and we threw ourselves under the steel covers, fearing the worst. These bombs came down at an angle from the sky, diagonally out of the sky, and the explosions made the whole cliff shake and sway under us. But we realised that they were missing us, if we were the target, and the bombs hit the inland areas behind us. This was a great relief, and we laughed in a nervous, apprehensive manner as the sound of the planes moved away inland too. We climbed up and prepared ourselves, with the massive fleet of ships on the sea getting closer by the second.

The slit in the concrete parapet gave a wide arc of fire, and I practised sweeping the gun left and right, which I had done countless times in drills. Just as I was doing this, the sea bombardment began.

You must have expected the bombardment, surely?

Yes, but the intensity was astonishing. It was heavier and also far more accurate than the bomber planes that had just hit us. I had been under artillery fire on the Eastern Front, of course, where I learned to brace myself

against it, both physically and mentally. That was difficult enough for me and for most others. This bombardment, however, was by warship cannons. That was obvious from the flashes that we could see on the horizon, among the many outlines of the advancing ships, and then the noise of the shells approaching us in the air. These shells made a noise similar to a gas blowtorch being run at full strength, and at first they passed right overhead. We could actually see them as bright shapes flying inland over the beach – huge shapes too, the size of a car engine or similar. They exploded a few hundred metres behind us, and then the next salvo came down much closer to us. We dragged the steel plates over our trench covers and we huddled underneath them with our guns.

The power of the explosions made the concrete of the trench ripple and fracture, and if I glanced up, I could only see enormous spouts of earth and sand hanging over the dunes and the beach. The shockwaves punched all the air out of our lungs, and made our eyes bleed. The shrapnel that flew around us was monstrous in size; I saw one piece of shell case as big as my arm, which simply fell down out of the air and jangle at the end of the trench, still smoking. But other pieces were flying left and right horizontally, screeching and smashing off the parapet and the steel roof plates. It went on and on, for salvo after salvo, with absolutely no pause in between the impacts. It was as if a gigantic hammer was falling on the beach, trying to pound it flat – that is how it felt to me.

How did the men react to this bombardment?

Most of us remained calm and disciplined. My loader was trembling as he crouched there, and as I noticed this, I realised that I was also trembling. One man, near me, could not take the stress, and he tried to run by ducking outside of the trench zone which was covered overhead by the steel screens. I saw him try to run. He was caught by an absolute storm of shrapnel, and his torso was ripped across and broken open. Absolutely ripped open, from front to back. He fell in the open part of the trench, and countless other bits of debris fell on him, mutilating him further. His body produced a lot of steam in the cool air, which filled the trench for a while. This was a terrible, shocking sight for those of us who saw it.

At one point, the end of the concrete trench was blown open by one of these shells, showering us with earth and debris. When the smoke from

this cleared, it meant that we could see out of the end of the trench and down to the beach for some distance. It was possible to see the shells landing in salvos of three; each salvo made very tall plumes of smoke and debris that slowly fell to the ground.

I saw one of the shells explode inside one of the other Resistance Points about five hundred metres from us. That Point was similar in design to ours, but with a single machine gun in a concrete Tobruk bunker. The whole installation was destroyed, and pieces of concrete were thrown high into the air, with the bodies of the men who were in it. It was terrifying to watch those men flung out, knowing that the same thing could happen to us if we were hit directly. In the end, however, there was a final intense fall of shells, and then the shelling stopped altogether.

The cessation of the noise and blast waves came as a great relief, as you can appreciate. My ears were ringing, and I had blood on my face from my eyes. We knew that the halt in the shelling meant that the landing must be imminent, and so we washed our eyes in water from our canteens, and slid away the metal covers, and we slowly emerged from the bottom of the trenches. One by one, our men put their heads up over the lip of the trench they were in, or over the parapet. I lifted the MG42 back up and re-sited it in the firing slit.

I remembered that my father had told me many times that he did this as a machine gunner at the Battle of the Somme in the first war; he and his comrades hid deep in their dugouts with their guns and then emerged to fix their guns in place again before the British attacked. Now here I was, doing the same thing.

In the time that we had been under cover, the ships and boats of the attackers had come very close to the shore, and now we could see vessels which I would have called ‘invasion barges’ but later I learned were ‘landing craft.’ I did not yet know what nationality these troops were. There were very many of these landing craft approaching the beach; there were at least ten directly facing me, coming through the initial swells of the waves off the beach. They were about one kilometre from my position, I would estimate. But all down the beach, we could see more of these craft approaching. The sea was absolutely alive with these vessels, which all seemed to be the same design and colour. Behind them, there were small warships and all manner of other ships covering the sea. The sea was completely covered with this huge collection of vessels.

What went through your mind, seeing this force approaching you?

I don't recall having any conscious thought or emotion, other than anxiety that my gun might have been damaged in the shelling. I fired off a one second burst to test it. The other MG crew shouted at me to hold fire and remember our orders. I shouted at them to test their gun too, which they then did. I could hear similar short bursts up and down the cliffs, as the survivors of the shelling all quickly tested their machine guns. Then our heavier guns opened fire. These were 88mm PAK guns sited in concrete positions further along the cliffs. There should have been three in our zone, but only two fired, I assume because the other one was destroyed. These 88mm gunners were very accurate, and shot into the landing craft straight through the tall vertical bow. They fired high explosive, and the shells pierced the bow and exploded inside.

I saw one of the landing craft opposite my location being hit in this way. The 88mm shell detonated beyond the bow, and the bow door, which I then realised was a ramp, was thrown up into the air. Inside the craft, I could see a large number of troops who had been injured in the explosion, surrounded by men who were still able-bodied. They were clambering and scrabbling over each other, because the craft began to tip forward as water entered the open bow. I saw then from the shape of their helmets that these were Americans.

The 88mm gunners fired another shot into the mass of men, and this threw several of them directly out of the craft into the water. The whole craft began to sink from the bow, which made the stern of the craft lift into the air, and this movement tipped the men into the sea immediately. Wounded, or otherwise, they all slid down the inside of the craft as its tail rose and into the water. Such events were being repeated all along the beach, as these craft were hit or made to sink, or in some cases set on fire.

At that point, the warships behind them began to fire onto the beach to suppress our artillery, which had some effect. Once again we began to keep our heads down, and our 88mm guns stopped firing. But I continued to look through the slit of the parapet, and in that way I could see that, despite the losses, these landing craft were starting to lower their ramp doors and the men inside were starting to emerge and enter the water down the ramps.

What was the manner of the men's exit from the landing craft? Was it rushed or orderly?

It was orderly, very orderly. The craft were stopping at a point where the water was about chest or neck height, and the men were running down the ramps and stepping into the water, holding their guns, plunging down and then bobbing up again, with the sea up to their shoulders or chests. In most cases, the men tried to advance in the water one behind the other, with each man holding or reaching for the back pack of the man in front. It was as if they were conducting a drill or an exercise.

As the last man stepped off the ramp, the craft would reverse and hoist up its bow door, and more craft would approach the beach around it. The discipline and the skill in the way the craft were handled was impressive. And so the first of these lines of men began to trudge – that is the only word I can use, they walked slowly and deliberately – they began to advance in this way into shallower water, and the waves came to their chests, then their waists. That is when we opened fire on them, as our orders stated.

You fired your machine gun at this point.

Yes, exactly as we had planned. These troops were about four hundred metres from us. I did not sight on them individually at first, but I began firing and I swept the gun from left to right along the beach. This knocked down the first few men in each line of men; you must remember that the MG42 was so powerful that the bullets would often pass through the human body and hit whatever was behind. So it was that many of these men were hit by a bullet which had already passed through a man in front, or even two men in front. After that, I aimed more selectively, to make the ammunition last as long as possible. I fired short bursts at small groups of men and hit them that way.

What was the reaction of the Americans to your fire?

The Americans began to run, wade or stagger forwards, trying to get out of the water and onto the sand itself. They still moved quite slowly, and because of that and the close range they were easy targets to hit. In some

cases, they tried to remain in the water up to their necks, perhaps hoping to be less conspicuous, and I did not fire at those men, because they showed no signs of advancing. In other cases, these troops tried to take shelter behind the anti-tank devices on the beach, which were triangles of girders sticking up from the sand. Those devices were too narrow to give any real protection, though, and those men were also hit. There were other troops who I could see removing their back packs and equipment and running onto the sand, attempting to surge up the beach towards the sea wall. I paid particular attention to these men, of course, and made sure that none of them advanced beyond a few paces.

Our other machine gun was operating in the same way as me, and between us we held back any Americans who tried to advance onto the sand in front of us. I also fired along the beach at other troops who were coming ashore further down the sand. Throughout this time, we were being shelled intermittently by the warships, and there were boats behind the landing craft which were firing multiple rockets at us in the dunes. These rockets made huge explosions, but they were falling wide of our position.

At the same time, one of our 88mm guns began firing again, and sank several more landing craft. The whole zone of the sea in front of us was now clogged with these craft, and the ones that had deposited their soldiers were colliding with the burning or drifting ones that had been hit.

If I may ask a question, how many Americans do you think you killed in this phase of the landing?

I am honestly unsure. I can say that the shallow part of the sea immediately in front of us was full of bodies, probably at least a hundred bodies, and this amount was repeated up and down the beach in front of the other gun positions. The tide was starting to come in, and these bodies were rolling and swaying with the movement of the water, and there were such things as helmets, rifles and equipment floating and rolling with them.

After the initial burst of energy and determination that I felt when the attack started, I began to feel pity for these troops, because they kept arriving in landing craft. The craft would deposit them in the shallows, and they would walk towards us through the water in the same way as the first set of troops. We fired at them in the same way, causing the same deaths

and injuries. My loader was moved by this, and he shook his head, saying that the Americans should not sacrifice their men in this way.

You mentioned a short time ago your father being at the Battle of the Somme in the First War. At the Somme, it is said that some German machine gunners shouted at the advancing British to save themselves and retreat. Was there any such communication from your men to the Americans?

I am not aware of any such communication. The only time we stopped firing was when the gun barrel began to overheat, and the mechanism showed signs of misfiring. We did not want to risk the gun breaking down, so we rested it to let it cool. We took up our rifles and used them, aiming at the Americans coming out of the water. This meant exposing our heads and arms above the parapet, and it was only at this point that I noticed we received the first shots aimed at us by the American soldiers themselves.

They did not fire at you before this?

Perhaps they did, but I did not notice them firing at us before this point. The sand had various ridges in it from the shelling, and there was some natural undulation in the ground, especially a low ridge of shingle up against the sea wall, and some of the Americans had managed to take cover in these places and were firing sporadically from there. Their warships ceased their shelling at this point, I suppose because they were observing the beach and expected the combat to be at close quarters now. They began to shell behind us, blowing up the zone behind our cliffs. But the Americans who had taken advantage of the shingle ridge found it impossible to move out of them, as we fired on them as soon as they emerged. At the same time, the tide was coming in fully, so there was less and less space available on the sand for men to find cover at all. This meant that the soldiers arriving behind them had less potential space to take cover, and so the intensive killing began again. We used our machine gun again from this point on.

Was there a moment when you thought the Americans might be forced to withdraw from the beach? When you thought you might defeat the landing?

I did have such a thought, yes. I remember that one of the landing craft came close to the shallows, and whoever was in charge of it seemed to hesitate. The craft slowed and steered carefully between other craft and the obstacles, as if selecting a place to land, but it did not make a final approach. Then it turned away, making a manoeuvre as if it was trying to turn around and leave the scene. I could hardly criticise the man in charge for that. To see the situation of such carnage on the sand, with all the bodies jumbled together, and the obvious lack of cover for the men, I am not sure that I would have pressed on.

But as this craft turned away, it presented its flank to the 88mm guns, and it was shot immediately, below the waterline. The explosions tore off large pieces of its side, and the craft began to capsize rapidly as the water flooded in. I could see the troops inside as the hull rose up, the whole interior of the vessel was exposed to us. There were various vehicles in that craft, Jeeps and trucks, as well as troops. These vehicles were falling onto the troops as the floor became almost vertical, crushing many men. Other men were jumping from the sides into the sea.

The 88mm fired again into the middle of the interior, and this exploded the vehicles as they lay crushed together. I saw that whole landing craft go up in flames within seconds, and sink very quickly, surrounded by men struggling in the water. I thought, *'If many more try to turn away like that, there won't be enough Americans to replace the dead ones on the beach, and so we will win this dreadful fight.'* However, this feeling did not last for long, as we then came under heavier fire, and tanks began to appear on the beach.

Were these amphibious tanks?

I did see, in the distance, one single tank emerge from the sea. It was a Sherman type, very recognisable. I had the impression that it was coming up from the sea bed, that is how it looked to me. That was an incredible sight. I had no idea it was even possible to make tanks travel under water. I never heard of our forces being able to do such a thing. But this single tank was on its own, and it was fired on and halted by PAK guns further down the beach.

After that, I saw a very large landing craft approach several hundred metres away, and as it lowered its ramp I saw a Sherman tank come out and roll down into the shallows. This tank had some kind of screen or tubing around it, and it travelled slowly but effectively through the shallows and onto the sand, and immediately began firing up at the Resistance Points on the cliffs down there. Other tanks came out of the craft behind it, I am not sure how many, but several. At the same time, we began receiving very accurate mortar fire onto our position. So the moment when I thought that we might win was very brief.

How did the fighting develop from this point?

My memory of the closing phases of that battle are rather disjointed. My position was struck by mortar fire, which I think was coming from a mortar set up in a crater along the beach. These rounds were small calibre, but they produced a lot of splinters which flew around and ricocheted off any surface. My loader was hit in the back of the neck, and he had to withdraw from the gun slit. He had a large piece of flesh hanging loose from his neck, and it was bleeding very profusely. A replacement loader took over, bringing a new pair of ammunition boxes, and we continued firing through the slit. But these mortar rounds made it difficult to see the targets on the beach, as they produced a lot of smoke and dust, and to some extent I was firing blindly into the beach zone. I don't know if this was a deliberate smokescreen, but it certainly made us less effective in our firing.

In addition, heavier calibre shells began to hit us again, and I think these were tank rounds coming from the Shermans. Our position was hit by one of these, and many of the men behind me in the zig-zag trenches were injured.

I then saw flashes and gunfire for the first time on top of the cliffs on the other side of the ravine that we were close to. This was a terrible moment, because it suggested that the Americans on the beach had somehow climbed up and broken through onto the cliffs, or that they had airborne troops who had joined up from inland. However this had happened, the presence of Americans up among us on the cliffs was a great threat.

At times, when the sea wind blew the smoke aside, I also saw the use of flame-throwers up on the cliffs. There were long, very bright orange

spurts of flame visible through the smoke, and a strong smell of gasoline. I had a terror of flame-throwers, as my brother had told me about them from the Russian front. Therefore, when I saw through the smoke a man approaching from the sea up the beach, moving from one obstacle to another, approaching the cliffs, I was alarmed to see that he seemed to be carrying a flame-thrower gun and back pack. I shot him with the MG42 at once, and the bullets evidently ignited the fuel tank on his back. There was a very large explosion, and he disappeared completely in a fireball which went up into the air in a mushroom cloud. Both sides stopped firing for a moment, perhaps because we all saw what happened to this soldier. But then the shooting began again, more intensely than ever.

I could see hand-to-hand fighting on the cliffs directly across the ravine from me, with our troops and Americans so close that I could not fire into them because they were mixed up together. The ferocity of that fighting astonished me. Men were lunging at each other with fixed bayonets, and with their rifle stocks, and even with entrenching tools or shovels. The Americans were charging upon our German gunners in the barbed wire entanglements up there. Some men were in flames, and other men were shooting or stabbing them as they staggered on fire. I could no longer see which men were from which army, as the smoke and flames made them all a similar outline as they fought.

I was hit and wounded at this point, by shrapnel from a tank round which hit the parapet next to my firing slit. The shrapnel hit my helmet and shoulder, and the machine gun was blown out of my hands altogether. I was stunned, and I slumped down into the bottom of the trench to try to get the gun back. The gun was damaged and could not be used. The amount of shrapnel and debris flying around at this point was devastating. We could not put our heads above the top of the parapet or the trench, because splinters were constantly smashing across the top of our point. My new loader was killed outright when a splinter came in and pierced him through the ribs. This was a large piece of metal, the size of a knife, and it stuck out from his torso as he lay dead beside me.

What did you think your fate would be?

In my mind, I accepted that I was going to die. I had seen the ferocity of the fighting on the adjacent cliff, and I knew it was only a matter

of time before those Americans worked their way around the ravine to where my position was. There seemed to be nothing we could do about it.

Also, I knew that we had surely enraged the attackers by killing so many of their comrades. The beach was literally piled up with corpses that we had shot. So what chance was there of the Americans showing us any mercy now?

You expected the Americans to kill you if you offered to surrender?

When I thought about the beach, the piles of bodies down there . . . yes, I thought the enemy would kill us all regardless of the Geneva Convention or anything like that. Would we have shown them any mercy, if the roles were reversed, if we were the attackers? I doubt that our troops would have shown much compassion in such a situation.

Our position was hit again by shells or mortar rounds, and that is the last thing that I remember of the fighting. I recall that many pieces of concrete were tumbling around, and some of these fell on top of me.

After that, I do not remember anything else until I found myself lying on my back. My ears were ringing very painfully. It took me a long time to fully realise where I was or what was happening. My head and body were very painful, and I felt very cold. When I opened my eyes, I could see the overcast sky, with smoke billowing through it, and I could hear shooting and explosions very distantly. I turned my head, which was horribly painful to do, and I saw that I was lying among the debris of our Resistance Point. There were pieces of concrete on top of me. By moving my head, I was able to look down onto the beach over the edge of the ravine and cliff. The first thing that I saw down there was a long row of dead American soldiers. This row was so long that it stretched a very long way across the beach. They were obviously placed there carefully. I could also see wounded American soldiers, on stretchers or sitting on the sand, and there were medics moving from one to the other. They had red crosses painted on their helmets.

I now became aware of other men crouching on the cliff near to me. I saw from their boots that they were American; their boots were the only detail I could make out from my position on my back. As I became fully aware of the situation, I expected these Americans to take reprisals against me. For that reason, I tried not to move my limbs, even though the debris on top of me was very painful. I was hoping they had mistaken me for a

corpse, and I wanted them to continue believing that. Of course, this could not go on for long, and after some time one of these Americans came over and stood looking down at me. He was holding a Thompson gun, I remember being able to see that, and he watched me for some time. I don't know whether he was considering killing me or what else was in his mind. Then he seemed to be discussing me with someone else, but my hearing was damaged, and anyway I could not understand English.

How late in the day was this?

I think this was some time after midday on the 6th. I had been knocked unconscious by an explosion and the Americans who initially overran our Resistance Point had left me in the rubble. Eventually, the men who were discussing me called a medic, and a medical orderly came and removed me from the rubble. There were two German prisoners who were carrying stretchers, and they took me down the ravine path and put me on the beach with the wounded. In this way, drifting in and out of consciousness, I spent the rest of the day lying on the beach. In the evening, some more German prisoners carried me to a ship which transported me to a prison centre in England. I was repatriated to West Germany in 1946.

What was your last sight of the beach on the 6th?

The beach was a terrible sight on that evening. There were still many bodies in the water, and medics were trying to retrieve them. The edge of the water was a red colour from the blood, I could see that distinctly. There were many landing craft vessels half sunk and on fire, and a lot of vehicles which were abandoned or stuck in the sand – Jeeps, tracked vehicles and tanks. There was a Sherman tank which had been blown up and was in pieces, with the turret lying on the beach and the tracks scattered around. There were many aircraft overhead, and smoke drifting everywhere. But it became clear to me, seeing the amount of troops and vehicles that were being unloaded from the large landing craft, that the Americans were secure in this beach head and were moving off inland now.

Were any reprisals taken against you?

No, there was no reprisal. Apart from the initial interrogation, which took place in England, the Americans took little interest in us. While I was a prisoner, I spoke with a couple of other German troops who survived in a different sector of that beach. None of them had heard of any reprisal or mistreatment against our troops from the beach.

Do you think that this battle, from what you experienced of it, could have had a different outcome?

Well, it is easy, and tempting, in hindsight, to say that *this* thing could have happened differently or *that* thing could have happened. My belief, as a foot soldier, is that we were close to throwing the attackers off the beach at that one brief moment, at least in my sector. It was the renewed heavy bombardment and the arrival of tanks which prevented that happening, I think.

I am also puzzled as to why the Americans did not damage our positions more fully before the landing. I imagine that there is a balance for an attacker to keep, between a lengthy bombardment which does a lot of damage but also signals that an attack is coming soon, and on the other hand a last-minute preparatory bombardment which forces the defenders to take cover but without letting them prepare for the attack. Nevertheless, considering their capability, I am surprised that their aircraft did not attack us more fully overnight on the evening of the 5th June or at first light on the 6th, when the bombs from their heavy bombers fell wide. I think that would have disrupted our defences and still prevented us from reacting in time by bringing up reserves and so on.

How do you regard your involvement in this fighting, with the passing of ten years?

The fact is, Herr Eckhertz, that we Germans were sent there to defend the beach and the Americans were sent there to attack it and occupy it. If our roles were somehow reversed, would the Americans have chosen to fight any differently from the way that we fought? I think that they would have applied themselves to their tasks and followed their orders with the same determination that we did.

On a wider scale, now that we have time to look back and reflect on it, it seems to me that the whole situation in Normandy was really the fault of our regime in the Reich for involving the Americans in the European war at all.

What I mean is that I remember after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, the American declaration of war was purely against Japan, not against their ally Germany. This made sense, of course – Germany did not bomb Pearl Harbour. We all said at the time, '*This is good, the Americans will not be involved in our war, they will keep their distance from the English in Europe*.' But then, I think it was the next day or forty-eight hours later, Adolf Hitler took everyone by surprise when he went on the radio and declared war on the USA! Why he did such an insane thing, I cannot begin to understand, even today. But that act made the Normandy invasion inevitable, because the English and Canadians could never have invaded alone, and we in the Reich could have focussed our efforts purely on the war against Russia.

If we could imagine how our lives would have been if Hitler had not done that – well, the destinies of so many people would have developed in completely different ways and forms.

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Gold Beach: The Bunker Lookout

Marten Eineg was a Soldat (Private) with the 726th Infantry regiment, 716th Static Infantry Division, stationed in the area of La Riviere.

Herr Eineg, may I start by reading my notes of the interview which I did with you when I visited the Atlantic Wall?

That would be very interesting. Because of the disruption caused by the invasion, I never actually read your article.

In the end, because of the changed situation, it was not published. But I wrote that:

"Marten is the sort of soldier that makes the Wehrmacht tick like a machine: twenty years of age, the battalion boxing champion, tall and widely-read. In his look-out post in the concrete dome above an artillery bunker, his wide shoulders scrape against the reinforced roof as he constantly scans the seas for signs of Allied aggression.

'They may come at any time,' he says to me, with a wink. 'With their finances, their gold and oil, they have the luxury of using England as a harbour for their ships and weapons.' Something tells me that Marten will be ready."

That was what I wrote about you in 1944.

I see. I do not actually remember saying that, but it sums up the mood of the time.

It was a strange time, in my view. If I may ask, what do you remember of the occasion when I visited your battery and conducted certain interviews?

I believe it was in April or May of the invasion year. I recall it very clearly, as if this was yesterday, in fact. You arrived in a civilian car and you had a battery-operated recorder, something I had never seen before. You

also made notes in shorthand. I recall that you presented me with a small bottle of cognac as you left.

But I must say, Mein Herr, that in the passage which you just read to me, you changed some of the background information about me. I was not a boxing champion at all, although I certainly liked boxing. And although I was tall, I had a chronic lung condition which technically classed me as unfit for active service. Nevertheless, I was sent to France to man the Atlantic Wall.

Please forgive the journalistic licence that I showed. As you can appreciate, I was under pressure to present our forces in a certain way, with a lot of embellishment. Now that we have more liberty to speak, can you give me an account of your arrival on the Atlantic Wall and the events of 6th June?

Well, I was classed unfit when I was seventeen, in 1943. I had been a member of the Hitler Youth, like all the young boys, but I was rejected from the Labour Corps because of my problematic breathing. Nevertheless, the army doctors correctly noted that my eyesight was slightly above average, and so I was a valuable asset all the same. For these reasons, I served as a Flakhilfer (*Flak gun crew*) for several months around Munich, and was then transferred to the Wehrmacht in the west. My family were most relieved that I was sent to France, which we imagined as a true 'land of plenty.'

On arrival, I joined a beach battery sited near La Riviere. We distinguished between beach batteries, which were intended to fire at targets in the shallows or on the beach itself, and coastal batteries, which were the much larger guns intended to fire long-range at naval targets. My bunker was a concrete structure armed with two 88mm guns in embrasures, with the guns sighted on the beach itself. The bunker was positioned on a steep slope about one hundred metres back from the sea wall, giving an enfilade fire along the beach, the sea wall and the esplanade road behind the wall. My rank was Soldat and my function was to be an observer and, if an attack came, to assist with manning the MG34 machine gun which was sited in the bunker to prevent infantry assault.

We soldiers were housed in a fortified farmhouse several hundred metres from our bunker, this house being strengthened with concrete

blocks, sandbags, earth ridges and corrugated iron; it was intended as a second line of defence, with a view down the slopes towards the sea front.

Our life, by the standards of what most German soldiers experienced, was frankly very soft. Our military rations were basic, but these were amply supplemented by produce from local farmers and retailers, who had no compunction about trading food with us in exchange for cigarettes, gasoline and even leather for boot-soles, none of which were available to civilians. When I read today about the French Resistance, I am impressed at their tenacity, but if the readers of such books could see the trading that went on between us and the local French, they might form a different view of life in France at that time. Well, but this is perhaps a case of history being written by victors.

When you visited us, for your interviews, I had been assigned to the bunker for about six weeks.

Now that we can speak openly, what was your motivation in defending the Atlantic Wall?

I must say to you that the views I expressed in the interview in 1944 were definitely my views at the time.

It is overlooked, perhaps forgotten, by almost everyone today that we were there to defend Europe against the multiple threats represented by the Allies. We saw the British as an outdated Imperial force, organised by freemasons, who sought to turn the clock back one hundred years to the days when their word was the law around the world. Why should they be entitled to install their freemason puppet, De Gaulle, in France, to rule as a proxy? The Vichy government had three consistent points in its propaganda regarding the threats to the French people: these were De Gaulle, freemasonry and communism.

As for the American state, we perceived that as controlled by the forces of international finance and banking, who wished to abolish national governments and have the world run by banks and corporations. And there was the definite sentiment that both these countries, England and the USA, were being manipulated, controlled, by the Bolsheviks in Moscow. I stress that these were my views, and they were very common views, at the time. Of course, I have since changed my opinions in this regard, as I have learned more about the Third Reich, as we all have.

Did you have any personal animosity towards the Anglo-Americans?

My brother and cousin had both been killed in the East, at Kharkov, so my animosity lay more in that direction. Ironically, we had a large contingent of Russian troops with us on the Atlantic wall, who were defectors now serving in the German forces, but I had no real contact with them.

As for the English, my father had been in France in 1917 to 1918, and he confided to me that the English were surprisingly similar to us Germans in personal character, but that as a fighting force they were inconsistent, with many brave men but also a big element of shirkers and black market operators. Regarding the Americans, I think that most of us soldiers made a distinction in our minds between the American government, which we believed was a pawn of international finance, and the Americans as individuals. After all, we had all seen US films and magazines before the war, we had read about cowboys and heard jazz music, and all this was exciting and very attractive to us. But despite all this, we knew that the Americans too were intent on attacking France and destroying the unification of Europe under German protection that our leadership had achieved.

This is interesting. The phrase 'Fortress Europe' is still widely remembered today, I think, as part of Reich propaganda at the time, but you have reminded me that the phrase 'United Europe' was equally common.

Of course it was. Of course. 'United Europe' was a universal slogan. We should remember that both the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS had huge recruitment campaigns in all the countries under Reich control, with the emphasis that people from all the countries of Europe should unite under arms and defend European unification. If we look at the Waffen SS, we see these very effective non-German units from all over Europe: the French, the famous Belgian-Walloon people under Leon Degrelle, the Dutch, Norwegians, the Croat Muslims with their 'SS' emblems on their fez hats, and so on and so on. There was a definite sense that Europe was united

under the Reich, and an attack on France would be an attack on the whole structure.

One question I have received differing answers to: did you in the local German forces expect an attack or an invasion at that time, or was it a surprise, a lightning bolt and so on?

I can say with certainty that we all thought the Allies would try to enter France in the North. Some of us said there may be another small scale attack similar to the fiasco at Dieppe, perhaps attempting to capture another port such as Cherbourg or Calais, while others believed there would be a mass rebellion by the French Resistance groups, armed and equipped by the Allies. But although the phrase 'The Invasion' was widely used after June 6th, especially by the French, we did not really use it much before then. The scale of the June 6th landings when they actually happened was beyond what we had imagined possible.

For my local bunker team specifically, our officers drummed the idea into our heads that the beach was a potential target for landings and it must be defended, but at the same time they liked to tell us what a disaster the English and Canadians had made of trying to land on the beach at Dieppe in 1942. We were often shown the newsreel films of Dieppe, with all the dead Allied troops and all their wrecked tanks and so on.

There was also the danger of small-scale 'commando' type raids along the coast, which we did expect at any time. We knew the British especially were very unprincipled in these raiding parties, for example the St Nazaire atrocity in which they massacred a large number of unarmed German officers and French civilians. Incidentally, this is one point in which I have *not* changed my thinking since the war. The St Nazaire raid was a deliberate massacre by the British.

At any rate, I think our general feeling was that something would happen, but I for one certainly did not expect a major landing exclusively on the beaches, without the capture and use of existing ports or harbours. I thought that a pure beach landing was impossible, especially considering all the anti-landing obstacles which were built on the tidal range of the beach.

What were these obstacles?

These were metal girders welded in cross formations, and among them timber posts set in concrete at about 45 degrees, intended to hold up boats or other craft approaching the shore. Most of them had a Teller mine or an artillery shell attached to the obstacle at some point, being primed to detonate if a craft touched it. The artillery troops manning the two 88mm guns in my bunker regularly fired shells along the beach to ensure their ranging was accurate. Their orders were to fire on craft approaching from the sea, prioritising boats which had not yet hit an obstacle or any that had touched the beach itself. They could also fire along the esplanade behind the sea wall if any attackers managed to climb over that wall into the town.

My bunker had a substantial magazine of 88mm high-explosive ammunition, which was kept in a central pit behind the gun platforms. The MG position in which I was assigned was a concrete slit fitted with an MG 34 on a gimbal mount set into the floor.

Behind us, there was our fortified farmhouse, and then there were further inland defences, chiefly consisting of villages which were fortified and linked together with bunkers, Tobruk emplacements and Resistance Points.

What is your memory of June 6th 1944?

I would like to be able to boast that I was the first to sight the allied ships, the 'invasion armada' as the English press called it, but in fact I was not on observation duty at the time. On the Monday evening, I had accompanied two of my comrades to a small bar in the nearby town, which was friendly to Germans, and we had stayed there for several hours. They served a very light red wine which we were very fond of, and there were young ladies who would sit at our tables and speak with us.

Of course, the amount of activity in the air overhead was very noticeable. The amount of bombing had become very intense over preceding weeks, but that night the noise of aircraft engines was constant, and there was bombing to the south and west of us. All this caused the bar proprietor to close his premises early, and we went back to our barracks, under all this plane noise, with a bottle of wine which we drank in our bunks.

All these things being the case, we were asleep in the fortified farmhouse building until, at about five am, our Feldwebel stormed in and

began kicking us out of bed. I am not sure of the exact time, as the situation was confused. But the Feldwebel was shouting, 'Angriff! Angriff!' ('*Raid! Raid!*') so at this early point we were thinking of the event as a 'raid,' not as 'invasion.'

We dressed and took our rifles. In all there were about two dozen men assembling in the hallway and corridors.

When we came out of the farmhouse, the light was still grey, and the air was very cool. The first thing that I experienced was the increasing noise of aircraft, which was mounting and getting louder literally with every second that passed. Overhead, there was a large volume of planes visible and coming north-south, I would say fifty or sixty aircraft, which I think were medium bombers. There were also smaller, Spitfire type aircraft behind them and several of these also at low altitude. I had not seen a fighter plane so close before; they were perhaps one hundred metres high. I experienced all of this very quickly, in a confused way, as we ran with our rifles along a sunken road which connected the farmhouse to the bunker. None of us spoke, we only followed our Feldwebel and reached the bunker quickly. We entered through a steel door which was then shut behind us, and a steel locking pin was placed across it. I began to go up to the observation point, which was my normal post, but the artillery officer ordered me to the MG position, saying that all men were needed to work the guns.

I remember that I ran into the position, which was a concrete room set into the walls, where the MG 34 was positioned at the embrasure; the embrasure was a concrete slit about one metre wide at head height, and the gunners stood on a platform to work the gun. Two men were already there, talking in an agitated way, manning the gun. I jumped onto the platform, and looking through the slit I saw the situation in the channel.

I was astonished at the number of craft; I would not like to estimate how many, but I recall that the foremost was possibly a few kilometres from the low tide obstacles, while the furthest were literally on the horizon. These craft included destroyer-type warships, tugs, and numerous low vessels which seemed to be invasion barges. There was a great variety of other boats. I was struck speechless at this sight, which I had never imagined possible. The sheer volume of craft was what amazed me. Even as I stared, more ships came into view, endlessly filling the sea. I remember, if I may be honest, that I began to tremble, and I broke out in a sweat. I know

I am not the only soldier in history to experience such a reaction when faced with the enemy, and so I feel no shame in describing this to you.

The MG gunner, who was a middle-aged man, looked at me and laughed in a bitter fashion, and he said, 'Are we sorry we started this war now?'

Then he and his loader went back to checking and readying their gun and the belts of ammunition, which were fed from metal cases from the left. I brought up more cases from the store area and I got ready to pass these to the gunners so that there would be no break in their firing. I was also trained to fire and load the gun if necessary. As I looked out of the slit again, I saw a fighter plane, I think a Mustang, coming towards us extremely low over the beach; the propeller was simply filling the visible sky in front of us. Before we reacted, this plane fired a short burst, and I heard the bullets impact on the concrete exterior of the bunker. Then the plane lifted up and disappeared over us; it was so low that I could smell its fumes.

It may sound strange, but I thought to myself, 'He wanted to kill us!' This being the first time I had seen a shot fired in earnest.

Just as I thought this, I saw many flashes of light from the ships on the sea, a huge number of white and red flames all beginning at once. Some of these appeared to be cannon from the warships, with a dense plume of light and smoke. I heard a number of these shells pass over the bunker with a loud, roaring sound and explode somewhere in the land behind us. Other weapons were a type of rocket launcher, and these rockets fired one after the other very quickly, reeling off left and right from their vessels. In moments, these rockets were landing on our bunker, and the structure vibrated as they detonated on the roof or the outside walls. Some of these weapons hit the ground in front of our post, and the explosion sent many fragments of stones and shrapnel against our embrasure, some pieces entering inside and ricocheting off the walls.

Our reaction was to duck, which I assume was the exact intention of this opening bombardment: to force us to keep our heads low, to prevent us manning our guns or observing the beach. It was effective in this respect, because the sheer number of these explosions deterred us from standing at full height on the platform. The intensity of the bombardment was agonising for me; every second there was another explosion, then another, and every one made the bunker vibrate, and sent debris in through the

aperture, and the smell of explosive was very strong in the air. I put my hands over my ears and crouched on the platform, and I found the two gunners doing the same. One of them had the presence of mind to lower the MG on its mount, so that it was below the embrasure and not exposed to the shrapnel.

I thought that this bombardment would be over soon, but I found that it continued on and on. It became impossible to react, or even to think clearly, because there was no pause between the explosions, they followed in fractions of a second all the time. Frankly, I began to lose track of time, and my only thought was that I wanted this shelling to be finished. I assure you that I was not afraid to fight, but to be subjected to these colossal, ceaseless explosions was not the same as fighting. The man who was the gun loader reacted even worse than me, and he began to scream and bang his hands on the concrete wall; I could not hear his voice, but I could see his mouth and fists moving.

The steel door in our room opened, and one of the artillery officers stumbled in. As he entered, a rocket or shell exploded exactly against the aperture of our position, and a large amount of debris came in through the slit. This contained stones, shrapnel, and clods of earth. The stuff whirled around inside the room, smashing off the walls. I saw several pieces hit the officer, and pierce him in the face, going through one eye and also breaking his teeth. He flew back against the wall and slumped down. Outside in the corridor of the bunker, I could see other troops crouched against the walls, in the same position as me, enduring this bombardment.

The explosions stopped very suddenly, and the noise echoed around in our concrete space for a long time. I recall that I laughed in a crazy way, because I felt that the fighting was over. Then, of course, I realised that it had not yet begun, and I got to my feet. In the corridor, the other men were doing likewise. The injured officer lay on the floor, and we had no time to give him assistance. I raised my head over the edge of the aperture, and I saw a sight that made me almost lose hope.

The ground in front of the bunker was on fire, and full of huge craters that went all the distance down to the beach. There on the beach, a large number of troops were already coming ashore, jumping out of flat-bottomed barges that came up to the shallows. Those craft were lowering their ramps, and many men were jumping and running out. A lot of these

craft had struck the obstacles, and were sinking or burning, and men were jumping from these craft into the water, some of them on fire.

To my right, I heard the *boom–crack* sound of our 88mm guns beginning to fire onto the beach. The gunners had practised so often, they were finding targets despite the numbing effect of the bombardment. I saw red tracer from our 88mms streak out repeatedly to the beach zone. The shells struck landing craft as they were lowering their ramps, in one case blowing off the steel ramp door and throwing men over the sides into the sea. That craft began to sink from the nose down, and our tracer moved onto other vessels approaching.

The two MG men raised their gun on its steel mount, both of them trembling and gasping just as I was. The gunner had great character, however, and he calmed himself and fitted the gun, and began to aim at men on the beach. The loader was not capable of doing more, though, and he went back to crouching and clutching his head in his hands. Because of this, I took over the function of loader, and I stood beside the gunner, feeding the ammunition belts, as he aimed the MG34. He said to me that these were English troops, judging from their helmets and uniforms, which were a dull brown colour. Then he began to fire.

We were firing to our right, with a clear view along the beach line. There were many men scrambling onto the sand, and a lot of smoke and explosions still happening. There was tracer coming from the other end of the beach and knocking these men down; this was a smaller MG bunker in the rocks at that end. That gunner was very precise in his selections: he put a short burst into groups of men as they exited the landing craft, sending them tumbling down the ramps, and then moved to the next one.

My gunner began to do likewise, and fired on the nearest craft, which was lowering its ramp. There was a line of men in the bow, and as they came out onto the ramp they ran straight into our tracer. One after the other, they fell over the edge of the steel plate into the sea; I think we hit six or seven men in two seconds.

What was your feeling, this being your first time in action, and participating in the killing of these men?

I was not aware of feelings. I knew that we had to stop these troops getting onto our territory, and we had the weapons to do this. Frankly, I felt

a certain pride in the skill of the MG gunner, who used his gun very effectively. He was able to pin men down on the beach, forcing them to hide behind beached craft or the vehicles which were coming off the ramps, stopping them forming up and moving. In some cases, these isolated men were then hit by our 88mm fire, and the sand was thrown up a great distance into the air where the shells struck; also many pieces of men and machinery.

I remember that one landing craft was hit by 88mm as it approached the shore at speed; for some reason it then could not stop, and it crashed up onto the sand burning from the rear. Its hull struck a group of men wading ashore and crushed them down completely, utterly demolished them. I felt sick at that sight for the first time, but I continued to feed the ammunition belts to the gun.

The vessels further out at sea began to fire on us again, and more of the naval shells came down on us, the large warship rounds which we could hear approaching. I saw one of these rounds hit the ground in front of our bunker and bounce off without exploding, tumbling end over end up over our roof. But other shells hit our bunker exactly, and I believe one of them hit our 88mm positions, because those guns ceased firing for some time. I heard shouting and yelling from inside the bunker, and men calling for fire-fighting equipment. There was nothing I could do about that, so I remained at my post feeding the belts to the gun.

From your viewpoint, in your particular zone, was there ever a moment when the Allied troops might have been driven back into the sea? Was this ever a possibility?

I think that in our case this was not a possibility, because of the scale of their numbers. If we had eight or ten 88mms instead of two, or heavier guns, then perhaps the assault could have been broken up on the beach and held there. But with our 88mm guns disabled, the landing craft were able to surge up and unload, with only the MG fire to oppose them for some time.

The craft were unloading tanks at this point, and these were Churchill types. We had been trained to identify Allied planes and tank types, but these Churchills had very short, wide guns that I had not seen in our training pictures. Three of these Churchills flopped down onto the sand and began to move along up the incline to the sea wall. One of them hit a

teller mine, and its track was blown off. That tank revolved in circles hopelessly, spraying sand. When it came to a halt, one of our 88mm guns opened fire at last, and hit it through the side with an armour piercing shell. My God, that caused a huge explosion in the tank; the top of the hull split open, and burning fuel poured out from the engine decks. I saw a crew man try to escape from a hatch, but he was on fire and he became wedged in the hatch opening; he burned there with his tank. The other two Churchills were also hit; one was knocked over on its side when it ran over the edge of a sand dune. The other was hit repeatedly on the turret, but it progressed to the sea wall and it fired its gun repeatedly at the concrete.

It caused huge explosions there, and the sea wall disintegrated and collapsed, forming a mound of rubble. This was presumably what the British wanted, because their men began to rush up this pile of debris and emerge onto the civilian esplanade that ran along the rear of the beach. This meant that they were now on the point of entering the town itself.

My gunner hit many of these men as they came up the debris onto the street. Several were knocked over backwards and fell onto their comrades below; others just lay there on the cobblestones. I saw some of the men who came up lose their nerve and back down again, and I am sure that I would have done the same, faced with this MG fire which was moving up and down the esplanade wherever they appeared.

I saw a large explosion among the rocks at the other end of the beach, and the German MG fire from there ceased abruptly. I think they used a bazooka or a mortar on that position. Now our bunker was firing alone, with our MG and the single 88mm operating from our embrasures.

Our MG34 was running very hot by then; the breech was glowing and it was difficult to lift the mechanism to insert the fresh belts of ammunition. The British began to fire on the bunker with rounds from their Churchills; this was very inaccurate, with the shells landing haphazardly around us, but the explosions were enormous. In effect, we were blinded by smoke and dust from this shelling, and we decided to cease firing, to conserve our ammunition and let the gun cool until the smoke cleared. We also needed more MG ammunition from the pit.

I went out into the corridor, having to step over the unconscious body of the wounded officer; his teeth were scattered across the floor. As I exited, an officer out there pointed his pistol at me and demanded where I was going. He ordered me back inside, and sent ammunition to me carried

by one of the medics. I heard shots inside the bunker itself, and I guessed this was the officers firing in warning because men were leaving their posts, so I was determined not to do that. The smoke was clearing, and we could see again down onto the beach and esplanade, so immediately the MG gunner began firing.

I must say that he killed many of the British soldiers in the next few seconds. A large group of them was moving in single file down the esplanade towards us, possibly believing that our guns were knocked out. Our bullets passed right through the leading men and hit the men behind; then as they fell, the men behind were hit and so on. In moments, they all threw themselves behind a low wall beside the street, but the pathway was full of dead troops, whose bodies were issuing smoke from the impacts.

May I assume, from your earlier remark, that you had no feeling for these dead men in front of you?

I still felt numb, but at the same time, let us remind ourselves, we the Germans were not attacking England! We were not invading America. It was the Allies attacking France, and we were there to defend the country against their assault.

Did you have other thoughts, about the progress of the battle, and how it would turn out?

I began to doubt if our position would hold. For one thing, we were being bombarded again, with accurate artillery being fired from offshore. These shells were causing the roof of our bunker, which was very thick, to flex and send fragments down onto us. Also, the British sent a tank up over the debris on the sea wall and this advanced along the esplanade towards us. This was a Sherman tank, a very tall target, and our 88mm hit it immediately on its front plate. However, the shell was obviously high-explosive, not armour-piercing, and it blew away various brackets and hooks on the front of the hull, but the tank continued to advance on us. I could see their infantry forming behind it, using it as cover, and although my gunner fired down the sides of the tank hull, he could not hit the men behind it.

Our ammunition belt finished, and because of the heating of the breech, the new one did not insert properly at first; also my hands were shaking, and I had grit in my eyes, so it was difficult to work on it. The gunner said, 'Come on, be quick, boy, because those troops will kill us for sure after what we've done. There's no point surrendering, do you see?'

That was a shock to me: that my actions could cause other men to take revenge on me even if I offered to surrender. The Sherman was firing on the 88mm embrasure as it advanced now, firing very rapidly with explosive, and I could see the shells detonating along the bunker wall where the 88mm was positioned. That 88mm got off one more round, which hit the tank on the right track, blowing it loose. The Sherman skidded to one side, so that its hull flank was exposed, and the 88mm fired again with armour piercing. This went into the hull above the tracks, near the engine, and that tank began to burn almost immediately.

A tall column of flame spurted up from the rear deck, and many pieces of machinery came flying out of the engine grilles. In just a few seconds, this tank was surrounded by a pool of burning fuel, literally a circle of fire. The hatches opened, and two crew men climbed out. My gunner shot them at once, and they fell off the tank into the gasoline flames. This was an unnecessary thing for our man to do, but I think he was desperate to keep the English away from our post.

Our 88mm shot the Sherman again, and this smashed a piece off the turret, sending it flying off across the beach, rolling across the sand a long way. I could actually see a crew man in the turret, apparently immobile, as the flames in there grew bigger. I began to understand what the gunner meant when he said these English would kill us for sure now.

Out of the smoke behind the Sherman, another tank advanced on us; this was a Churchill of the type with the very short, wide calibre gun. This Churchill simply stormed up the roadway, bulldozing aside the Sherman, went through the burning fuel and drove straight up to us without slowing. It was trailing burning gasoline, and although our 88mm hit it on the turret front, the round deflected off and went into a nearby house, ripping a hole in the wall.

This Churchill driver was evidently in a furious state, because he took the tank directly up to our bunker, literally a couple of metres from it, and lowered his gun to the area of the 88mm position near me. I saw the big

cannon in the turret fire, and with that the whole area of the 88mm embrasure was demolished, in many fragments of concrete and debris.

I heard the explosion through the corridor of the bunker, and the amount of smoke blinded us briefly. My gunner continued firing tracer into the smoke, pouring a whole belt of ammunition into the roadway area left and right. But there was another explosion, and it was evident that the Churchill was firing his rounds repeatedly into the damaged embrasure.

I began to change the ammunition belt, and I heard the gunner curse and reach for his rifle. I looked up, over the edge of the concrete slit, and I came face to face with an English soldier who was outside. He had run at us through the smoke, and he was covered in grey concrete dust – except for his eyes, I clearly recall, which were very bright blue, and bloodshot. He was in a total rage, that was obvious. He essentially had a desire to kill us written on his face. He threw a grenade into our post, which bounced through into the corridor and exploded there. My gunner was still fumbling with the MG belt. The Englishman then fired in through the slit with a sub machine gun, the type they called the Sten gun. This produced a huge amount of fire, and the soldier must have used a whole magazine, because my gunner was hit in a devastating way in the chest and head. I was crouching down on the platform, and looking up, I saw the Sten gun punch holes in his chest, and the bullets emerge from his back. The bullets ricocheted flew wildly around the concrete walls, and several hit me, but their energy was spent and they deflected off my steel helmet and my boots, so I wasn't injured.

Were you thankful for this escape?

I had no time to think at this point. Outside the slit, there was an explosion, which was the British soldier either being hit by a shell or treading on a mine, I do not know which. Pieces of his tunic came flying in over the edge of the embrasure, burning and smoking. I left my gunner lying on the floor, as he was clearly dead; I ran out through the door and into the corridor.

Here, I saw that the whole bunker was being destroyed around us. The steps that led down to the 88mm posts were strewn with debris, and several of the 88mm gunners were crawling up them, badly injured. There were still explosions at the front of the bunker, from that Churchill or other

tanks, as I thought. The officer who had threatened me with a pistol was there, and he gestured for me and another man who was running from the ammunition pit to follow him. I thought that he meant us to leave the bunker, but he directed us back into the MG room. He went in first, and as soon as he entered there was more sub machine gun fire, and also a huge explosion. I saw a very white light from inside the MG room, and a flickering glow that subsided slowly.

I looked into the MG room, and the scene was terrible. The officer and my gunner were on fire, with their limbs burned away, and the room was full of a burning powder which coated the walls and was dripping from the ceiling. I was sickened by the sight.

I believed the bunker was being overrun completely now, so together with the other soldier, I exited the building through the steel door in the rear, holding my rifle.

Outside, the situation was confused. There were still many Allied aircraft overhead, with black and white stripe marks on their wings and fuselage. I saw no Luftwaffe aircraft at all. There were several of our troops firing with rifles and MP40 from the sunken path that went to the farmhouse, aiming at the front of the bunker. These were not gunners, but cooks and so on from the accommodation staff, and they were being hit badly by returning fire. I jumped down into this sunken path. I looked around at the bunker, and saw the roof starting to sag and crack as the explosions kept striking it.

One of the soldiers said, 'The bunker is finished, we should surrender.' He threw away his rifle and raised his hands, but he was immediately shot in the head, and his skull fragmented even while his arms were stretched out. Then large numbers of the English troops began to storm up towards us from the bunker, with rifles and fixed bayonets. Our men shot down two of them, but the others kept charging, and they fell on us with their bayonets.

There was a dreadful few seconds of hand-to-hand fighting there around the sunken path. I saw one of the Englishmen stab a German through the stomach with his bayonet, and throw him aside like a sack, then move onto the next German, whom he stabbed in the neck. The soldier with me clubbed this man over the head with his rifle butt, then stepped back and shot him in the chest. The Englishman slashed at this soldier even as he slumped down, blinding him in one eye with his bayonet. An English

soldier came up the slope with a Thompson gun, and shot down many Germans before he was hit by MP40.

Together with the blinded soldier, I ran low down into the sunken path, and ran along it away from the bunker. I am not sure that we had any plan, but the bunker was obviously lost as a position. Behind us, I could hear terrible screams, which I think was the hand-to-hand situation, with the English using their bayonets. Some shots came past us, but no English followed us.

We came up from the path at the farmhouse building, and immediately we were surrounded by a squad of our German troops, with one officer, demanding to know what the situation was on the beach and esplanade. I reported that the British were in the bunker and were bringing tanks up over the sea wall and esplanade. Indeed, we could hear tank engines rattling and revving on the coastal side of the farmhouse.

The officer and troops present were men I had not seen before; from their Waffenfarben (*service insignia*) I saw they were from a Panzergrenadier unit. They were armed with Panzerfaust rockets and had an MG42, rifles and MP40, so they gave me a sense of security, if such a thing was possible. The troops also assured me that a 75mm PAK was just behind us; it was only a matter of minutes, they said.

In readiness, the Panzergrenadier officer ordered us all to take up positions on the coastal side of the farmhouse, the house that we used as a barracks. We took up posts along a low ridge which had been built up as a defence with sandbags and barbed wire. It gave us a good view down the rolling slope, which was dotted with dunes and grass, to the sea defences. The slopes here were mined with anti-personnel and anti-tank mines in random patterns. The bunker was visible; this was now largely demolished, and a lot of smoke was rising from it. We saw a Sherman tank emerge from over the mounds by the ruined bunker, and this was an astonishing sight for us all.

This Sherman was fitted with a revolving drum on the front, held by two girders, on which were tied a large number of heavy chains. The drum was revolving, and the chains were crashing onto the earth with a deafening noise, raising clouds of dust and soil.

I had never seen a machine like this, but the officer shouted that this was an anti-mine vehicle, and indeed I saw several explosions under the chains as the tank came forward, these being mines that were being

detonated. I was fascinated by its clever design, despite my apprehension. I could just see, behind the mine-clearing tank, two other Shermans also with these revolving drums, following it on either side; the lane they were clearing was thus about twenty metres wide.

One of the Panzergrenadiers fired a Panzerfaust, but the range was too great and the rocket fell to the ground without striking.

The officer shouted for us to hold fire, and said that the PAK gun was coming up to defend the slopes. However, the English began to fire mortar rounds on us; these small bombs fell without warning, and caused bursts of flame with a large amount of shrapnel as they exploded. Several of these mortar rounds hit the farmhouse behind us, knocking pieces off the roof, and then began to fall among us men on the ridge. A Panzergrenadier soldier a few metres from me was hit badly, and he lay quivering on the earth with blood shooting from his chest; the partially blinded soldier who came with me from the bunker was hit in the back and was unable to move any further.

What medical help was there for these wounded men?

At this point, there was none. We had to leave them as they fell, because we expected a full assault at any moment. I was sprayed with blood from the wounded Panzergrenadier, and this added to my unease. Another soldier was hit by shrapnel in the head, and his skull was completely opened above one ear, with his brain matter visible. I tell you all this because this was the experience that I had and these were the things I saw.

As the mine-clearing tanks came closer, the noise was incredible, and the pounding of the chains on the earth could be felt under us. Several times, a chain came loose from the spinning drum after a mine explosion, and the chain flew up into the air a great distance, and then came falling to the ground. One of these huge chains, which was about three metres long, fell in this way onto two of our men and knocked them both unconscious where they were crouching.

One of their comrades leaped up and aimed his Panzerfaust over the ridge, and the weapon fired, sending a jet of flame back behind it. I looked over the ridge, and saw the rocket head strike the revolving chains; the projectile was simply knocked up into the air and it went away across the slope. However, other men were stationed at the extreme ends of the ridge,

and they were able to fire on the sides of this leading Sherman. The angle was acute, but they chose the target well, aiming the warheads at the wheels and tracks along the sides, and I saw the tank hit in its running gear. There was a large orange flash, and suddenly the chain drum slowed, and then stopped revolving. The tank itself stopped completely, and smoke began to pour from the rear decks. Our other men did not need a second chance, and they aimed a Panzerfaust directly onto the Sherman's front, now that the chains were still. The rocket struck the lower turret, which was turned to the rear, and blew a hole in it which disgorged sparks.

We thought that we had stopped this tank, but the machine gun in its front plate fired on us, shooting all the way along the ridge and blowing out puffs of earth wherever the bullets hit. Also, the two similar tanks behind it came level, and continued to advance, even though that leading tank was now burning. I saw pieces of metal and tubes shooting up from the back of the burning tank as the engine burned up fiercely. The hull hatch opened, and a crew man emerged. The Panzergrenadier MG42 team immediately shot him. Again, I had the sensation that we would pay for doing such things to these people.

By this time, we had about a dozen able-bodied troops left on this ridge, including myself and the officer. We had no Panzerfausts left, but the PAK gun then arrived, towed behind a Hanomag (*armoured half-track*) which used the cover of a hedgerow. This was a large 75mm PAK gun, and the crew flew into action like devils, hauling it around and positioning it on one side of the ridge where it could fire down the slopes. The Hanomag had an MG in a shielded mount too, so we were now better armed. The PAK crew began firing within a minute, I was astonished at their speed. They immediately hit one of the two mine-clearing Shermans, striking it on the revolving drum. The drum separated from the vehicle, and crashed off onto the ground, while still revolving at high speed. This great metal cylinder raced off among the dunes, sending out bits of chain and debris that flew long distances on both our side and the English side.

The tank was undamaged, though, and it halted and began to traverse its turret around onto us, moving the main gun around very quickly. Our PAK fired again, but the round deflected off the angled front plate and went off to one side. The PAK fired another shot, and this one struck the Sherman in the tracks, causing the drive wheel to break off and spin away. However, although this tank was now immobile, its turret was fully rotated

onto us, and it fired on the PAK, using high explosive. The shot went wide, but the blast lifted the gun up and rocked it, and the crew then struggled to operate it. They worked on it like devils with their hands, but nothing came of it. The Sherman fired again, and this round hit the PAK crew directly.

This was a dreadful sight, because much of the 75mm ammunition also exploded, and the debris was blasted out all around us. I am sorry to say that this was debris of the gun, its barrel and so on, but also debris of the crew: their limbs and clothing, and boots, water bottles, everything they had with them. Everything was torn apart in front of us.

The Sherman continued firing, and it landed high-explosive shells on the farmhouse, which began to burn, and on the ridge which we were sheltering behind. Some men shouted that we should surrender, but the opportunity to do this was not there, as the Sherman kept firing all along our line. Also, I had seen what happened to the man who tried to surrender at the bunker, who was shot in the head, and I was afraid of that same treatment.

In all this confusion, I heard shooting from the sunken path that led to the bunker, and I heard bullets that came from down there hitting the farmhouse walls. A moment later, a handful of English troops emerged from the path, with their bayonets fixed or with Thompson guns. They were barely twenty metres from us, and they were evidently filled with a furious energy; their eyes were staring, and they roared out incomprehensible shouts as they fired on us and charged at us.

Our MG42 team turned around on them, and shot down three soldiers in a moment. The 42 was such a powerful gun, and the range was so short, that these men were blown to pieces, almost as if by shrapnel. Pieces of their bones and flesh came streaming out behind them, and their uniforms caught fire from the heat of the bullets. I fired my rifle, and hit a man as he ran towards me. Someone shot me, and the bullet deflected off my steel helmet, making me stumble and fall on my back.

I saw one of the other English with a Thompson gun shot up the MG42 machine gun team, and he fired like a madman into all of us, knocking many of us down. Other English men came up behind him, and they charged into us, stabbing and slashing with bayonets. The Sherman held its fire, and the English troops overran the whole position. I myself stayed on the ground, with my hands visible, until an English soldier came up and pointed a Sten gun at my face.

All I could do was to spread my hands and shake my head, in an indication that I did not intend to resist any further. This man kicked my rifle away, then called for other men to come over. These men searched my pockets, then put metal handcuffs on me with my hands behind my back, and then left me lying on my side, completely disregarding me after that. I could hear the awful noise of another mine-clearing tank approaching, and of course that meant that soon their other tanks could come up from the beach and move inland past the farmhouse. The house was completely on fire, and large numbers of English troops were now grouping around it, coming up from the sunken path. I think there were almost a hundred of them, waiting to move ahead.

I assume this was the end of the fighting around your particular bunker?

Well, the German activity was at an end. What did happen, however, was that an aircraft came over the bunker zone a few moments later. I never actually saw it, because I was lying on the ground facing the house, but I heard it pass over us very low, at high speed, and I heard firing of cannons or guns. I saw many of the English troops collapse, and I realised that this plane had shot them up, strafed them, and then flown on inland. I never learned if that was a Luftwaffe plane, or an Allied plane which mistook the troops for Germans; I think it was probably the latter. But I believe that the short burst of guns killed perhaps ten men in that dense throng of soldiers around the house.

After that, I was led back down the sunken pathway to the beach zone and placed with other German prisoners in a small paved square near the esplanade.

What was your feeling at being captured?

I felt that I had held out to the last possible moment, and I did not feel ashamed of being a prisoner.

How were you treated as prisoners?

I recall that the character of the English seemed to change very quickly. When they attacked us, they were very ferocious, eager to use their bayonets. But after we were taken away to the square, we were well treated; our handcuffs were removed, we were given water, the wounded were allocated a medic who in turn asked for German volunteers to assist him. Our treatment was very humane in that respect. Having said that, many of the local French people emerged from their houses and looked through the railings of the square at us, and made insulting remarks; but of course, these were the same people we had been bartering and trading with twenty-four hours beforehand.

Some of our troops cursed the French and promised to take revenge when the English left the area – because, you must remember, we still did not know if this was a permanent occupation, despite the huge army the allies had. Some of my fellow prisoners were sure that this was a Dieppe-style raid, and they threatened the French with retaliation when German control was restored.

Was this a widespread belief, that the landings were in fact temporary?

Some of our men seemed to believe this. 'Dieppe' was said repeatedly among us. 'This is just another Dieppe, they will be gone tomorrow,' and such comments. Others pointed out the incredible resources the Allies had used, and they said that such an investment of troops and materiel would not be expended on a short-term raid. I myself agreed with this view; the number of ships and planes involved was colossal, as I had seen myself from the bunker.

One of the men there had been to Dieppe in 1942 after that raid, and he told us that the Allies had dropped thousands of leaflets by air during that attack, which said '*This action is a coup de main, not an invasion. Civilians must not risk themselves,*' or some such thing. Very sporting of the English! But on June 6th, no such leaflets had been seen, which further suggested that this was a permanent incursion into France.

Also, of course, we prisoners discussed the very obvious question of why the Allies would want to capture this particular beach, which had no harbour or port facilities. Some said that this proved it was a *diversionary* attack, and that a main attack would be made against Cherbourg, Granville

or Calais. You must remember that we had no information, of course, about any other landings that morning, or the wider Allied operation. For all we knew, this was a single attack on an isolated beach.

While all this was being discussed among us, some of the exchanges that our men had with the French civilians through the railings became very angry, and the English guards fired shots into the air and dispersed the French quite roughly. One of our troops tried to take advantage of this confusion, and attempted to climb over the courtyard wall to escape; he could not swing himself over, and remained clinging to the top. One of the guards (who had impressed me as a very humane man, giving us water and supplies) well, this guard walked up to the man and shot him in the back. This was quite unnecessary, but I think he did it to keep control over us. At many times afterwards, I noticed this trait in the English: they changed rapidly from being friendly or so-called 'gentlemen' to being very ruthless, even brutal, and they could turn these different sides of their character on and off very quickly.

At this point in the day, it was still only before noon. All this had happened in one morning; it was very difficult to accept that the situation had changed so much and so quickly. Throughout the day, more prisoners were put in among us, and these men told us that they had been captured some distance inland. All the time, streams of Allied aircraft flew over us, heading inland, and others returned out to sea. One by one, the men who said that this was a temporary raid gave up the idea.

In the afternoon, the English, I recall, insisted for some reason on sending a German-speaking English army priest in among us to listen to any spiritual concerns we had; this was met with derision. I still recall the face of the army priest, who was very angry at his reception. We heard explosions and detonations from inland and from the beach throughout the day, and naval bombardments from offshore, the shells of which travelled over us with a sound like an express train going past, and always the sound of engines: planes, tanks and trucks, never stopping for a moment.

In the evening, we were taken out of the square and led to the beach. The guards made no attempt to blindfold us or to prevent us seeing the situation. The scale of the operation then became clear to us all, and most of us fell completely silent at what we witnessed.

The sea wall area was being worked on with armoured bulldozers, creating a huge ramp for vehicles to drive up. There were many destroyed

vehicles and tanks, some still burning. I saw my bunker, which was collapsed in the frontal part, over the 88mm embrasures; there was smoke drifting from the rubble.

The beach was completely full of transports, including many vehicles we had not seen and we did not even know how to describe: amphibious trucks, tanks with flotation screens, enormous landing craft that were unloading whole columns of jeeps and tanks, directly onto the sand. The English had already cleared a wide lane through the beach obstacles – how they did that so quickly, I have never understood, perhaps with linked explosive charges – and this lane was an absolute highway on the wet sand and out into the sea itself. There were still many bodies, which were lined in large groups on the sand and partly covered with tarpaulins; despite our lack of religion, many of our men crossed themselves as we passed these.

One thing in particular struck many of us as amazing: all along the beach, there were no horses!

This was a surprise for you?

Yes, we found it astonishing. This huge army had brought with it not one single horse or pack-mule! All their transport was mechanised. It may sound bizarre today, but this impressed us greatly, showing that the Allies had no need of horses anymore, as they had such huge oil resources and production capacity. Because, of course, the German armies used horses for transport on quite a large scale right up until the end of the war, due to limited fuel and constraints on mechanised vehicle production. Every German unit had its stables and veterinarian officer, and here were these English without that need at all. For us, this symbolised the Allied capabilities.

We were put into a landing craft and told we were being taken to England for processing. Out to sea, there was a multitude of boats, many wrecks half-submerged, some still on fire, and in places there were bodies still floating on the water, with their clothing inflated by water. There were enormous warships simply standing stationary in the distance off shore, flying their flags as if the whole war was now concluded. In fact, the last thing I saw of the landing force was a British sailor on the prow of a battleship, scrubbing the deck with a broom. We passed underneath this great vessel, in its shadow. As we moved away, it began firing its guns

inland, over and over again. The noise was deafening. Those were the last shots I heard in my war, which lasted a few hours in all.

You have given me a very frank and clear account of your experience on that day, and I must thank you.

It is important, I feel, that these things are set down somewhere. I would not wish these things to be forgotten. These things were ten years ago, and I am not yet thirty years of age today, I am still a young fellow. And yet I feel in some ways like an old veteran, describing all these events, because they are not spoken of among either the Germans or the English. It is as if these actions never happened.

Could you describe your experiences in life to me after D Day, up to the present?

Well, here you find one of the ironies, Herr Eckhertz. I was taken to a Prisoner of War camp consisting of huts in Yorkshire, England, where the guards treated us well. We were able to send letters, although we did not receive any in return. Various neutral inspectors from the Red Cross, who were Swiss and even Brazilian, visited occasionally. Of course, this was all too good to be true.

After a few months, I was in fear of my life there, but this was because of the other prisoners. Many of the prisoners were mentally ill, and some were SS or Hitler Youth type people obsessed with prolonging the war. Incidentally, I hope that one day the story of the POW camps in England is written; I think that there were half a million Germans and Italians in those camps, and the English, of course, never discuss them. The things that went on in those camps were completely insane. In my case, I was under pressure to join a team of ex Hitler Youth boys that had been captured in Normandy, who had a plan to break out of the camp and take control of an air base on the eastern coast. My poor physical fitness was of no interest to them; they wanted people to distract the guards with a staged rebellion to cover their escape.

This was in winter 1944/45, when it was clear that the war was essentially lost. My refusal to join this plan led to threats against my life. Some prisoners were being offered work outside the camp, and I joined this

group, being assigned to work on vehicle repairs at a depot in a nearby town. After some time, I was allowed to live outside the camp in return for an oath of good behaviour; I took lodgings with an elderly lady in the town who treated me as one of the family. I still correspond with her at Christmas time. In fact, I remained in England voluntarily for two years after the war ended, working on vehicles, and then I returned to Germany where I now have a small mechanics workshop.

Have you ever returned to Normandy?

I have not done so up to now. Possibly this is something that I will do in the future.

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Juno Beach: The Goliath Engineer

Cornelius Tauber was an Oberleutnant (First Lieutenant) of engineers attached to the 736th Infantry Regiment, 716th Infantry Division, based in a unit close to Courseulles.

I believe that I met some men of your unit, Herr Tauber, when I wrote an article about the Atlantic Wall in May 1944. This was at Courselles, which is on the beach which the Allies called Juno Beach.

Yes, I was stationed near to Courselles from early 1944 up until the invasion itself, when I was taken prisoner by the Canadians who attacked the beach. I was posted to France from the Russian front, where I had been involved in building fortified positions, although I had not been in combat. My role was a military construction engineer, and this meant that I worked on many of the static beach and inland defences in the Normandy area. Static defences meant obstacles such as anti-tank devices, anti-tank ditches, walls and the concrete bunkers, in addition to fortifying buildings in the coastal and inland villages.

How did you regard your posting to the Atlantic Wall?

It was said of the troops in France that they 'lived like the Gods.' All my comrades slapped me on the back when they heard where I was going, and called me a lucky swine and so on. And you know, when I joined the 716th Infantry Division in France, I realised what a lucky swine I was. The food was excellent, and it was possible to buy virtually anything that you wanted on the black market. The weather was very mild and our barracks were remarkably comfortable, being a requisitioned house which had a heating stove, a well for fresh water and even proper beds. Every morning I thought of my brother in combat in Russia, and I felt extremely guilty. I thought it would be difficult to face him, when I knew he had been fighting in all the mud, the snow and the summer heat.

Of course, I found later in June, July and August 1944 that even such a beautiful place as Normandy could be turned into an absolute nightmare by battles between men. When you see a hundred men in a field

who have been killed by artillery shells, and you cannot tell which head goes with which body, or which arms and legs; well, after that I was able to face my brother in the knowledge that I had experienced as much as him. But those spring months of 1944 felt simply too comfortable for me, despite the tension in the air from the impending invasion.

Did you feel that the invasion was imminent?

I think we all felt that it would happen over the summer. Logic dictated this. The uncertainty was over where it would fall, and what form it would take. All I could do, as a junior officer, was to lead my teams and carry out my tasks as thoroughly as possible, and to rely on all the other teams up and down the Wall to do the same in their zones. The Atlantic Wall was still unfinished in June 1944, despite Rommel's attempts in the winter and spring to accelerate the building programme.

What part did you play in this?

I was brought in as part of a programme to improve and intensify the building of the defences. The task involved strengthening the existing defences and deciding on the location of the new fortifications, having them built, and fitting them with the equipment that was available. In particular, I was tasked with creating networks of strengthened houses and buildings in the inland sectors, and constructing the concrete bunkers ranging from small, Tobruk types to the larger installations for naval artillery. I was also involved in creating new types of anti-tank ditch, which had an angled floor inside the ditch and could be armed with explosives or incendiaries when a vehicle fell into it, and new anti-tank ramps made of curved concrete shapes.

Another feature we introduced was the Goliath type of tracked explosive unit, being a small vehicle on caterpillar tracks which was operated remotely and filled with a powerful bomb. We were building landscapes which would channel an enemy attack into places where the attackers could be damaged by these Goliath vehicles. A lot of this work was still in progress when the invasion actually happened on June 6th.

Were you involved in the combat of the 6th?

Yes, indeed. My barracks was located close to a defensive sector designated B19 at Courselles, where we had started to construct defences which could be exploited by using the Goliath.

Forgive me, but can you explain this Goliath more fully? I am not familiar with the machine.

Goliath was a small vehicle about the size of a wheelbarrow or similar. It had a petrol engine and ran on tracks like a small tank. Its body was packed with explosives equivalent to a Stuka-type bomb, and it was operated by wires which trailed from behind it, connected to a control unit held by a soldier. The operator would start its engine and control its speed and direction through the wires, sending it close to a target and then detonating it remotely. Although it was designed for offensive purposes, it was felt that it could be used in defence also, for example by sending it out from bunkers against formations of tanks or assemblies of troops, where a bomb of that size would cause a very destructive blast wave.

We actually had large numbers of these useful machines in readiness; in that particular sector of B19, we had a store of about twenty-five of them.

We had built a quite complex defensive belt around that zone, with several Resistance Points between civilian villas, armed with PAK which fired down onto the beach. Any tank trying to exit the beach would need to skirt a series of anti-tank ditches in the dune area, and this would bring them into the arc of fire of the PAK guns. It was intended that, as tanks bunched up on the beach waiting to move out, being delayed by the PAK guns, we could then send out Goliath machines from a concealed bunker point built for that purpose, destroying the enemy tanks on the sand.

At Courselles, the Goliath bunker, as we called it, was thus positioned on the beach. It was incomplete, but it had a roof on it and was perfectly concealed from the sea by concrete shapes which were painted to resemble the local rocks. It was in this Goliath bunker that I saw combat, in my capacity as an engineer officer.

What happened on June 6th?

I had returned from a site inspection of a new bunker which we were planning in the north, and I got back to the officers' barracks around midnight. Even then, there was substantial aircraft noise overhead, and I stood outside the barracks for some time with some of the other officers who were based at the barracks, discussing all this. It didn't sound like a heavy bomber raid, because the aircraft were lower and their engine noise was lighter. There was a constant drizzle, and the clouds were lit in part by the moon, I remember. Shapes of aircraft were noticeable moving under the clouds, going north to south. Flak fire was shooting up at the aircraft, in a sporadic way.

To some extent, we were accustomed to aerial bombing, but this was the largest movement of aircraft that we had experienced. In the end, we went into the barracks; one of the officers opened a bottle of cognac, which we shared. The mood was philosophical, in the sense that if this was an attempted invasion, or some form of initial attack, this might be our last night of comparative peace. This proved to be correct, of course. We began to receive communications by messenger that attacks were happening to the south west, involving gliders. The officers with me were a mixture of infantry, engineers and artillery men, and everybody went off to their unit at that point. None of us knew what was happening exactly, but the situation was evidently escalating. I think we were all glad of that cognac.

I myself collected ten men of my team from the nearby men's barracks, who dressed hurriedly. We went to the zone of fortifications at B19, which was about thirty minutes on foot. There, I spoke briefly to the commander of the PAK guns which were sited in the Resistance Points between the houses, and we agreed to have the Goliath bunker on the beach ready for possible use. I left five of my men up in the main fortifications, and took five down into the Goliath bunker on the beach. The bunker was accessed by a tunnel shielded by a concrete casing; this casing was camouflaged with foliage and stones to make it seem part of the seafront. The concealment of the whole Goliath bunker was extremely effective. The bunker itself was a concrete circle with a domed roof, at the lower end of the tunnel, and because we had surrounded it with our painted 'rocks' it was impossible to see from the beach side.

In the bunker, we had three Goliath machines ready to operate. There were a further five lined up in the covered tunnel. Each Goliath was armed with its bomb and filled with enough gasoline to enable it to travel

about a kilometre. The bunker had a narrow opening onto the beach, shielded at the front by the rocks, and we could send the Goliaths out onto the beach through this. We could observe the beach through a vision slit and also through a periscope we had built into the roof, giving good visibility of the beach forward and partially to the sides.

Did you have any other armament other than the Goliath devices?

The men had their rifles. We had intended to equip the bunker with a machine gun, but this had not been fitted as yet. The real purpose of the post was to be a hidden launching point for the Goliaths, rather than a machine gun point.

It was now about three am, and with my five soldiers I checked and double-checked each Goliath, and we started the engines to warm them. This filled the bunker with fumes for a while. We were all quite calm, although I myself was filled with uncertainty about what would happen if a landing came onto the beach. My feeling was that any landing would have to be repulsed almost immediately. If the Allies built up men and vehicles on a beachhead, especially tanks, it would be difficult to ever dislodge them, because of the very weak level of Luftwaffe cover and the strength of their air forces. I knew that my Goliath machines were a key part in this rapid repulse of any attack.

Were you confident of victory?

I simply had no idea of what would happen. Would a force even come from the sea? I didn't know. Perhaps it was an airborne attack, or perhaps the sea landings were happening elsewhere on this coast, or even elsewhere in the country. There had been rumours for several weeks that the Allies would try to take over Paris as a propaganda coup – perhaps this was in progress? In the Goliath bunker, we had no radio set or telephone, and had no understanding of what was in progress elsewhere.

But I did feel confident that my bunker and my team would give a good account of themselves if the enemy arrived. We were not politically sophisticated, any of us, but at that time we trusted the state message that an attack on France was an attack on a united Europe and on the Reich itself.

What was the feeling towards the English, Americans or other forces that you might meet?

I myself had little understanding of them as a culture. I think there was a grudging respect for the English after the North Africa campaigns were lost, but on the other hand their performance in Italy was quite slow and cautious. The Americans we were more afraid of, possibly, because of their industrial power. It was said they waged war the way a rich man wages war, with lots of machines and no worry about the gasoline or the amount of ammunition. But almost all of us had lost someone in the Allied bombing attacks on German cities, and this made us bitter.

To be frank, though, when you are in a bunker in the dark, waiting for a possible attack, your thoughts are focussed on immediate concerns.

How did the time pass?

The bunker was cold, and the exhaust fumes of the Goliaths hung in the air, stinging my eyes. It was a relief to put my face to the vision slit and get some fresh air into my eyes. The mood was tense, and I made what encouraging comments I could to the men. They were all either older men in their forties or inexperienced youths below twenty. Our engineering teams were made up of these men from 1943 onwards. These men tried to joke and reassure each other, but this was half-hearted. We could hear aircraft passing continually over us, both low-level fighters and bigger planes which sounded as if they were higher up.

First light was starting to break, and through the vision slit I could see the beach, which was looking very wet and pale in this light. The sand extended about three hundred metres down to the sea, and our anti-tank girders were set every two or three metres in this zone. There was a light mist hanging on these girders, and also on the sea itself. This was a time of extreme tension and waiting, as the light grew stronger, helping to illuminate the inside of the bunker and my men's grim faces. I took the opportunity to remind them of their tasks, which were to prepare the Goliaths, bring further Goliaths down from the tunnel, and to defend the bunker with their rifles if needed. As I spoke these words, which were intended to build confidence, a massive barrage of explosions began on the beach and on the dunes above us.

I heard the sounds of falling shells, which was a roaring noise very different to a falling bomb from an aircraft. This roaring was unusually loud, sounding like a heavy engine being accelerated. When the explosions began, I realised that they were of an enormous calibre, much bigger than any artillery I had heard before. I had been bombarded before in Italy, but this was a different order of magnitude. The explosions made the ground shake and they pummelled our ears with shock waves, which appeared to pass through the slits in the bunker and travel through the inside spaces. The best we could do was to crouch down and put our hands over our ears. The flashes from the explosions were very bright, and they lit up the bunker walls as if they were lightning bolts.

One of my men, who was the youngest and least experienced, broke down under this attack and began to weep sorrowfully. We all heard his sobs in the occasional pauses between the shell detonations. Another man also suffered, and he tried to run out of the bunker, into the covered tunnel. A Gefreiter (*corporal*), who had his wits about him, tackled this man and threw him back onto the floor of the bunker. However great the pressure, we could not tolerate men acting like that. All this went on for an extended time, and several times I looked through the periscope on the roof to see the beach. There was a vast amount of smoke, dust and debris flying around, and some of the steel defence posts were blown over or in pieces. It was difficult to make out the sea itself, but the water appeared at times as a green band at the edge of the beach. It was close to sunrise at this point and there was more colour visible in what I could see.

Looking along the beach, I could see the PAK Resistance Point between the houses near us at a higher level, and this appeared to be damaged but intact. At this point, one of my troops from that upper bunker came running down the tunnel into our bunker in a breathless state. Over all the sound of the shelling, he yelled,

'They're coming, Herr Leutnant.'

He brought the information that a large formation of ships was sighted off the coast and was advancing on our beach. He had no specific details about numbers or strength, but this appeared to be a very large attacking force. I ordered him to go up and return with any more information that was available. In the meantime, the shelling paused, which felt suddenly strange after all the noise. The men who had lost control pulled themselves together and apologised for their behaviour. This was the

least of my worries, but it was a sign that they might pull through psychologically. I ordered one of the Goliaths to be brought to the exit door, the door onto the beach which was shielded with rocks.

We started the Goliath's engine to warm it again, and the rattle of the little device was almost comical after the great bombardment. The unintended amusement was a way of breaking the tension, the stress. Our grins were wiped away, though, when we heard aircraft coming over the beach very low, and the sound of cannon fire.

Through the vision slit, I could see aircraft overhead; they appeared to be Hurricane types. They were strafing the beach, dunes and buildings. We heard many of the cannon shells hit our bunker, but they did not penetrate the concrete. I heard a single Flak gun respond to them, but this fell silent very quickly. These Jabos came back repeatedly, and it would have been suicide to step out of cover at that point. I saw that their cannon shells were tearing the beach up and breaking pieces off the surrounding rocks. When these planes left, there was a second or two of calm, literally no more than that. I used the bunker periscope to try to observe the sea.

I could make out various flashes offshore, and lines of light which were evidently rockets. These rockets were flying over our bunker and exploding behind us, or in some cases smacking onto the beach and blowing up there. They burst with a bright orange light and spread many shrapnel pieces at very high speed. I saw one rocket bounce off the sand without exploding and sail off up into the rocks, turning end over end like a stick.

Finally, when the beach was absolutely covered in debris, and the smoke began to clear, I saw tanks approaching from the sea. I was very surprised at this, because I knew that the Wehrmacht could adapt tanks to cross rivers and lakes underwater, but these tanks seemed to be entirely amphibious. They were Sherman class tanks, this was clear from the rounded turret. They were fitted with what seemed to me to be canvas boxes or screens around their hulls, and they were literally swimming towards the shore. I was astonished to see this – they were not on rafts, or being towed, but somehow swimming under their own propulsion. As an engineer, I simply could not understand how the Allies got these tanks to do that. But of course, this was also the exact situation that my Goliath machines were intended to counter.

I could see three of these tanks, although my view was limited. Our PAK guns were firing on them from the Resistance Points. I ordered my men to move the first Goliath to the beach outside the exit door. The Goliath was controlled by a man with a unit built onto a plywood holder, and I gave him directions as I looked through the periscope. I ordered him to drive the Goliath out onto the beach, and I looked down from the periscope to see the machine rattling off through the door. It unwound its control cables behind it from a drum, which allowed us to steer and detonate it remotely. It disappeared from the doorway, and through the periscope I could see it advancing across the beach towards the edge of the sea. This was exactly the plan: that we would detonate the machines as tanks came onto the beach and engaged the PAK guns or were held up by the PAKs.

I could see splashes in the water as our PAK gunners in the Resistance Point shot at the Shermans. I saw one PAK round deflect off the nearest tank's turret and actually fly up into the air for a great distance. Then another round hit that same tank, and pierced the armour of the turret by the gun mantle. The tank continued to advance, but it was trailing smoke, and it fell behind the other two tanks, which were now coming up out of the shallows onto the beach itself.

Several more large shells began falling on us at the seafront line, not from the tanks but from offshore. I could see the outlines of many ships behind these Shermans – a huge number of ships, and some of them were firing large calibre guns. One of these shells struck the rocks in front of us, and shook our whole bunker to the core. The blast wave knocked me over, and I lost sight of the Goliath through the periscope. When I looked again, I saw that the Goliath was stationary on the beach, and appeared to be damaged, with one of its tracks missing. Then the operator told me that the machine was not responding. He tried repeatedly to make the device move with the controls, but the shell blast must have severed the control cables. This meant we could not steer or detonate the device, and all this time the Sherman tanks were advancing on the beach.

The one that had been hit by PAK was now capsizing and burning, and crew men were climbing off it, several of those men were also on flames as they jumped into the water. Our machine-gunners were firing now, but I could see their bullets bouncing off the front plates of the Shermans, making bright sparks.

I ordered another Goliath to be sent out, and this one disappeared out of the doorway in the same manner as the previous one. The men watched it go with very tense faces. They could not see the beach outside, but through the periscope I could follow the progress of the new Goliath towards the Shermans. I gave directions to the operator, '*Straight ahead, turn right, now straight again*,' and in this rudimentary way we steered the device towards the tanks among the flying debris. I was hopeful that we would knock out at least one of these attacking tanks, but as the Goliath approached them, it tipped into a shell crater and did not emerge. The operator tried to move it forwards and back, but I think it had fallen on its side and was immobilised. It was about twenty metres from the nearest Sherman, which was firing on the Resistance Point and the dunes, and machine-gunning along the beach. I gave the order to detonate the Goliath, as there was nothing else to be gained from it. It made a substantial explosion, and all its machinery went whirling out across the beach for hundreds of metres. The blast made the Sherman rock from side to side, but the tank kept firing and moving.

Did you have doubts about your Goliath system at this point?

Yes, I began to see that we would need to be quite fortunate to make it effective against tanks, because it would need to be completely adjacent to them to blow them up. It might be more suitable against landing barges, and in fact I could see several barges approaching on the water. I told the men to start up another Goliath, and to bring more down from the covered tunnel in readiness. The men were actioning this when the situation changed and we found ourselves under infantry attack.

Because the periscope only gave a forward view of the beach, I did not see where these infantrymen came from. I think they must have landed from the sea some distance to my left, and were now moving along the beach towards the Resistance Point and the houses. There were about twenty of these troops, in British type uniforms, armed with rifles and Thompson guns. I found out later that all these men were in fact Canadian in origin. They passed about ten metres in front of our bunker without seeing us, because we were so well concealed among the rocks. One of my men, without my order, fired through the vision slit, and he shot down one of these Canadian troops. This was a grave mistake, because it revealed our

location. The shot soldier was writhing on the sand, and he was producing a lot of blood. The others took cover and pointed at our position. I took in these details in a strangely detached way, although my mind was racing, thinking what we should do next. One of the Canadians who came into view had a flamethrower unit, which was a tube attached to a tank on his back – it was very obvious to see.

We had no time to react to this. I began to give the command to fire again through the vision slit and the doorway, to hit the man with the flamethrower, but this flamethrower operator turned straight onto us and fired his unit.

What was the experience of being under flamethrower attack?

The experience was terrifying, I must say. The unit produced a long sheet of flame which shot directly towards us in the bunker. The light of the flame was blinding, and the speed of its action was astonishing. In a second, the flame hit the doorway onto the beach and the fire entered the bunker. The flame was based on some kind of gasoline mixture, and this liquid splashed wildly as it poured in, and it burned fiercely. It caught two of our men immediately, and set them on fire. Their uniforms went up in thick flames and smoke, and they threw themselves about, crashing into the other men and flailing their arms. They screamed as they thrashed about. I can still hear these screams in my mind, Herr Eckhertz. The flamethrower fired again, and the flames raced in directly through the door, soaking the nearest wall in the burning liquid.

Many of the flames splashed onto the waiting Goliath, and set that on fire. All the men who could still move leaped for the exit door to the exit tunnel, and I was in no state of mind to resist their retreat, frankly. The flames were pouring down the wall, and the whole bunker was full of smoke and the stench of this gasoline. The two men who had been hit were enveloped in flames, still moving but no longer screaming. I jumped for the doorway to the tunnel, and behind me there was the noise again of the dreadful flamethrower shooting its flames in from the beach. I ran into the tunnel, where our stored Goliath machines were lined up, and I followed the men as they ran like rabbits up the tunnel to the bunker area at the top. The light, noise and the smell of the flames was behind us all the way.

I think the Canadians burned that bunker out completely. The Goliath down there did not explode, though, or at least I did not hear it explode. Everything was now confused and dislocated. My memory is of arriving at the top of the covered tunnel and stumbling out into the light, not really knowing what was happening. I had my pistol in my hand, and I ran straight into a Canadian soldier who had a rifle with a bayonet fixed. We literally collided with each other. The shock of this stunned me, because I thought I would be in a strong position up at the Resistance Point. This Canadian gave a shout and swung at me with the stock of his rifle, and smashed me in the face across my eyes. I fell back onto the ground, blinded.

Was this the first time you had been in hand-to-hand combat?

Yes. I was not prepared for it, mentally or physically. This man was determined to kill me, that was clear. It may sound strange, but the realisation that he wanted to kill me suddenly filled my mind, with the knowledge that I therefore had to kill him first. This all lasted barely moments, just fractions of a second. I could barely see him, but I knew he was raising his rifle over me, either to shoot or to stab me with the bayonet. I fired up at this figure with my pistol, not aiming properly but just pointing it at his outline. I fired twice, and sprays of blood from him blew back at me. Then his shape disappeared, and I could see the open sky, which was completely criss-crossed with aircraft trails. I became aware that fighting was taking place all around me, with men fighting at close quarters around the entrance to the main PAK point. The Canadian that I had just shot was lying beside me, apparently dead.

I could not understand where these Canadians had sprung from – they must have traversed the sea wall at a point along the beach, and charged up to the PAK here. They were attacking us like men possessed by devils, I can tell you that. They had blown open the door of the main PAK bunker, and they were firing inside and throwing grenades in there. Others were shooting down our troops who were appearing from trenches on the other side, and there was frantic shooting between the two groups. Everything was very confused. In this chaos, I rolled over and threw myself into one of the slit trenches that ran back from the bunker. I landed on top of two bodies: a German soldier and a Canadian soldier, who had shot and stabbed each other with their rifles. They were both very young, and their

dead faces looked quite similar. I saw this as I crawled over them along the trench.

Didn't the Canadians pursue you here?

The situation was very uncertain on all sides. There was a lot of shooting and tracer going over the top of the trench, and shrapnel flying across as well. I didn't know where I was going, but I still only had my pistol and my vision was blurred with blood from where that soldier hit me in the face. I rounded one of the corners of this trench, and came into contact with three German soldiers who were also retreating away from the Resistance Point. They were well-armed, with MP40 machine pistols and grenades. Together, we hunched down and scrambled along this trench to its furthest point, where it met a path that led away from the beach sector and went inland towards our next line of defences.

These men told me that there was a force already assembling at the next Resistance Point. I told them that we should get up out of the trench and join this force, and fight from there. Being an officer, I went up over the top of the trench first and scrambled down the path to a point where it was not visible from the seafront area. The man who followed me was hit by a mortar burst, and his arm and face were torn off. He died in a few seconds. I confess that I took his MP40 immediately and shouted to the others to follow. That was the nature of this combat, we had to keep moving quickly, regardless of losses.

The other two men jumped over the trench and came with me, and together we crouched and ran off along the path towards the next Resistance Point. I knew this Point well; it was a Tobruk-type installation with an old French tank turret mounted on a concrete ring, and several machine gun points. The approach was mined, and in our haste one of the two troops with me went off the path and onto the minefield. There was a small explosion and he fell forward, making horrible sounds. I saw that his legs were blown off below the knee, and his trousers were burning, showing his shin bones in the smoke. His whole body was convulsing in response to the injury, and as he thrashed about he set off another mine under his body. This blew a large piece out of his chest, and he went still. I did not even have time to react to this dreadful sight.

With the remaining soldier, I reached the Resistance Point in a few minutes. We were almost killed by a Tobruk machine gunner who fired on us, injuring the man with me very badly. I managed to carry this man the last few metres to the Point, and left him in a trench at the rear face.

What was the time at this stage?

I think it was about eight am. So this was about ninety minutes after the initial landings. The Resistance Point had a phone cable, and a Feldwebel there was relaying information to a command point deeper in the defensive belt. I added my information: that the Goliath and PAK bunkers were destroyed, and the Allies were bringing tanks directly onto the beach.

Throughout this time, mortar and rocket rounds were landing in our vicinity. We could also hear the sound of tanks on the breeze from the dunes, and many explosions along the beach side. All this suggested that the attackers were to some extent in charge of the beach, and they had tanks preparing to move out towards us.

There were about thirty men at this Resistance Point, including a local infantry officer, a man whom I knew well. We agreed that this Point could be held if we made great efforts and rallied the men. We tried to motivate the men by reminding them of the need to push the Allies back into the sea, and the danger to us all if they gained a foothold on the coast.

How did the men respond?

Most were very positive. A minority, who were mostly older German troops or Eastern troops, were quiet, and I suspected their hearts were not in the fight. On the other hand, some of the men aged forty-plus, and some of the Eastern men, were also positive, so it was not a simple distinction of '*all* the older/eastern men had no appetite for the combat.'

Who were these Eastern troops?

These were not the official ROA troops, who had their own leaders and insignia. These were Polish, Ukrainian or Baltic men who had been enlisted or had volunteered for the Wehrmacht, and wore the same uniforms as the German troops, serving under the same officers. We must remember

that at this stage in the war, the German armed forces were a kaleidoscope of European nationalities and languages. This to some extent bolstered the idea of the 'United Europe.'

How soon did you expect the next wave of attack to come? And how strong was this Resistance Point?

I expected to see the Shermans within minutes. The clear path to the beach zone between the minefields was just wide enough for a tank to pass; this was deliberate, in order to force tanks onto this passage so that they could be destroyed and the access would then be blocked, holding up any advance. The distance from the beach sector to this Point was about four hundred metres.

As for the Resistance Point, the old French tank turret at the centre was a very solid 'Char B' type, with thick armour, mounting a medium-calibre anti-tank gun. It was crewed by men in an underground chamber who had extensive supplies of ammunition. There were two MG42 machine guns in emplacements at each corner, connected by a series of trenches, and all these guns had an arc down the path and the slight incline towards the beach zone. The approaches were mined, other than the track, and there were entanglements of barbed wire around the perimeter. So this was not a bad position to hold, at least in the short term. I took up a position in one of the trenches beside the tank turret, armed with my MP40. I took over an informal command of the fifteen men, approximately, in this trench, and I urged them to be watchful.

Did you think this would prove to be a short-term engagement?

My hope was that the forces in the deeper zone would come forward to reinforce us, or that we would delay the Allies long enough to enable us to fall back to the next defensive line, having done a good job here. I myself was in an aggressive and positive frame of mind. I felt that I had done my utmost in the Goliath bunker and in the hand-to-hand combat, and I had the feeling that I might make a name for myself in this battle. I exhorted the troops to be ready, and the men lined the slit trenches with their weapons aiming down the slope. We had a few seconds, no more than that, of expectation, and then the Canadians came up from the beach.

The first thing they sent was a Sherman type tank, which came onto the edge of the path through the minefields and fired on our Point immediately. Its first shell exploded beyond us, but then a second shell hit the French tank turret and blew up there. The French turret still functioned, and fired back. This turret crew had been training constantly to land their shells exactly where the Sherman was positioned, and they hit that tank immediately. The shell deflected away across the minefield, but the impact made the Sherman rock on its wheels, and it began to reverse.

Our French gun fired again, and this hit the Sherman on the front plate, somewhere near the tracks. I saw the track fly off to one side, and the whole tank jolted and moved very slowly. Our gun fired again, and hit the Sherman on the front plate, which caused a shower of debris and sparks.

By now our men were cheering. The Sherman turned its flank as it jerked around in reverse. Our gunner shot it through the side of the hull, and flames leaped up from its rear deck. I saw the engine covers blowing up into the air, and the rear wheels went spinning off into the minefield. Several crew members emerged from the hatches, and at once our machine gun teams opened fire on them. The machine gunners shot wildly at first, and three of the crew were able to jump clear. But then our gunners focussed their fire and hit the tank, and the last two crew who climbed out were shot down on the front of the hull, with their bodies draped over the gun barrel.

Our gunners in their enthusiasm kept firing, and those two tank men over their gun were ripped to shreds, with their limbs falling off and their bodies exploding with spurts of flame. I shouted to the machine gunners to stop firing, but in their eagerness they shot off unnecessary amounts of ammunition, spraying the whole area with fire before they stopped.

Behind this wrecked Sherman, I could see columns of fire rising into the sky, which I guessed were from the work of the flamethrowers on the bunkers. I was glad that we did not have to face those flamethrowers anymore. I shouted encouragement to the men beside me. I felt very confident at this point. I almost considered taking a group of troops back towards the beach, so that we could make contact with the sea again and become a focal point for reinforcements coming up from the inland sector. I must admit that I had a mental image of myself leading this heroic counter-attack, and becoming famous due to our resilience. I was very excited, full of energy, full of hope.

How long did this last?

Perhaps a minute. Perhaps less. Then another tank came out to attack us. This new tank that emerged from the bunker area was a different model. I recognised it from films of the Dieppe raid as a Churchill series, with heavily armoured covers over the tracks, and a squared-off turret. This tank edged past the burning Sherman tank, pushing it aside. It set off some mines beside the track, but these were anti-personnel mines and they did not break its tracks. Our French gun turret fired, but the shell bounced off the Churchill's front plate and tumbled away into the dunes. Our French gun fired again, but again the round ricocheted off, and this worried me, because this Churchill was advancing on us quite quickly, and firing with its main gun. It fired high-explosive shells which blew up one of our machine gun emplacements at the corner of the Resistance Point. The crew of the machine gun were thrown out of their trench, and they lay badly injured on the barbed wire in front of us. They were moving and crying out for help, but of course there was nothing we could do for them in the situation.

Our French gun kept firing, but I think the gunner was panicking by this point, because he missed that Churchill twice. The Churchill fired once again, and this round exploded directly on the French turret. It knocked the whole turret off its concrete base, and the thing went rolling away to one side. The gunner remained in the open concrete ring, with his whole body emitting smoke and flames. I think he was alive, but stunned and unable to move.

At this point, looking from this poor man to the British tank, I became aware that this Churchill was different in some way from the photographs we had seen in our training sessions, in which we were taught about the strengths and weaknesses of the different Allied tanks. The training lectures had made no mention at all of what I saw next, as the tank halted: there was a burst of flame from a point in the tank's hull plate at the front.

So you were facing the type of tank known as the Churchill Crocodile?

After the war, I learned that 'Crocodile' was the official name for the thing. We came to know it as a Flammenpanzer (*flame tank*), and it had

a hugely demoralising effect on our troops.

What form did its attack take in this situation?

This initial burst of flame from its front hull was only a few metres long, and it set fire to the ground in front of it. The range by now was about two hundred metres from us. One of the troops in the slit trenches fired a Panzerfaust, but this fell short and failed to explode. The Panzerfaust in June 1944 was still the earlier model with a very limited range, you see. You had to be one hundred metres or less. Now, after that initial burst of flame, the Flammenpanzer began to fire at full power – and the effect was completely horrific.

It produced a jet of fire, which was a burning liquid of orange-yellow colour. This roared out towards us at a very high speed, climbing perhaps ten metres up into the air. The front of this flame jet spread out to left and right, so that it produced an absolute curtain, or a solid wall, of flames. We all watched, stricken dumb by this apparition. The flamethrowers I had seen before were hand-held devices, such as the one at the Goliath bunker, and they were bad enough! This machine was a hundred times more powerful. This huge wall of flames collapsed down onto the ground in front of our position, so that it fell onto the two wounded machine gun men who were stranded on the barbed wire. They were swallowed up in this inferno of flames.

The heat burned our skin and hair, and the smell of the gasoline fuel was sickening. The flames poured all over the front of our position, and they went gushing into the slit trench there. There was quite a row of men in that trench, with their rifles at the ready, and this all happened so rapidly and in such an unexpected way that they had no time to escape. I think there were a dozen men there, and they were set alight at once. I saw that the whole trench was filled with this burning liquid, and the men in there were incinerated where they stood. The heat was so intense that I couldn't breathe properly, as these flames were about twenty metres away from me.

How did the other men at the resistance Point react to this?

There was a panic, which seized us all, including myself and the other officer. We saw the spout of flame die down, as the Churchill ceased

firing, but I was gripped by a terror of what would happen if it fired its flames again. We would all be swallowed up in that orange-yellow fireball. I leaped from my trench, as did all the other men around me, with no thought for rank or discipline. Some of these men were cut down by machine gun fire from the Churchill, and they tumbled around us as we, the surviving men, either threw our hands in the air in surrender or ran to the back of the Point away from the tank.

I was among this latter group, which was about half a dozen men, and we ran to the Eastern side, getting away from the Flammenpanzer. I still had my MP40, but some of the men had dropped their guns and were simply running like civilians – no weapon, no helmet, just fleeing that wall of fire. Two of us were hit by machine gun fire from the Churchill, and in the end it was only myself and three men who managed to jump down into a sunken track and run along that, intending to reach the nearest German line to the rear. At one point, I looked back, and I saw a huge column of smoke rising from the area of the Resistance Point, which I assumed was now burned up completely.

The three men with me, who appeared to be inexperienced, were very shocked by this encounter, and they asked what chance they had of fighting against such machines. I told them that the Flammenpanzer was a panzer like any other, and we could have destroyed it with a PAK gun or if we had got closer with a Panzerfaust. But these men remained very low in morale because of what they had seen.

How did the day develop and end for you?

After several minutes running along this track, we came around a curve and ran into several German troops on a Hanomag (*armoured half-track*) under an overhanging hedgerow. They shot at us before they realised who we were, and killed one of the men with me. Such killings were regrettable, but inevitable when troops are rushing blindly in such a situation.

These Hanomag troops were dressed differently from us: they had camouflage uniforms and their helmets were coated with foliage. They were armed with the most modern weapons, including the MP44 sub machine gun and a Panzerschrek weapon, in addition to Panzerfausts. They were a reconnaissance group from an SS Panzergrenadier regiment to the south,

and they quizzed us at length about the situation on the coast and what we had seen. They exuded confidence, and this gave heart to me and the two surviving men with me, even though the body of our third man was still lying in the road in front of their Hanomag. They offered us drinking water, which we took eagerly, while their NCO spoke on a radio set with their command.

There was now a strange calm. The skin on my face was burning painfully from the heat of that Flammenpanzer. I leaned on the embankment of this sunken road, and composed myself mentally after the action I had been in. The time was mid-morning, and the day was becoming brighter and more humid. There was a constant noise of aircraft overhead, and through the branches of the hedgerow, which concealed the Hanomag, I could see large formations of Allied bombers moving south. There were also numbers of planes towing what appeared to be gliders. All these aircraft had conspicuous black and white stripes on their wings, and it was obvious that there were no Luftwaffe planes in the sky, not a single one to be seen.

At frequent intervals, Jabo type planes raced along the fields beside us at low level, strafing the sunken tracks. To move out of the cover of this hedgerow, even on foot, would be virtually impossible because of these planes. From the coastal sector, there was substantial shooting and the noise of explosions, but this did not seem to be getting closer.

What went through your mind in this lull?

The reality of the situation now sank into my mind. I accepted that this was the major invasion that we had thought might come, with the full resources of the Allies in all spheres, air, land and sea. My duty in the midst of this historic battle was to find the remnant of my unit and fight onward with them, whether as an engineer or in some other capacity. But the confusion of the whole situation made this unrealistic for the time being. And so I waited with this SS reconnaissance group, while they observed the coast and made reports on their radio. The two men I had brought with me seemed to be very glad of the pause. But this lull only lasted about ten minutes.

The Panzergrenadiers began to prepare to move out from under the hedgerow, by piling more and more foliage onto their vehicle to try to

camouflage it. They planned to move East along this sunken track, to observe the Allied advance in that area. However, one of their men returned on foot from that direction and said that three Allied tanks were advancing on a sunken road that intersected with our track. In fact, we could see a blur in the air about three hundred metres distant over the fields at the top of the embankment, which looked like exhaust fumes or dust from tanks.

I cautioned these troops that there were Flammenpanzer tanks in the area. The soldier who had seen them insisted that these were normal Sherman type tanks, which were advancing inland in a line of three, with about fifty metres space between each one.

These Waffen SS men became very enthusiastic about the prospect of engaging these three tanks with their Panzerschrek. The difference in mentality between these SS troops and the troops I had led at the bunker was remarkable. These soldiers were very eager to attack the tanks, and when one of them was ordered to remain with the Hanomag, he was highly indignant. I left the two men from the bunker with him, and I accompanied these Panzergrenadiers, because by this stage I was determined to fight back in some way against the invasion, after the series of defeats I had been involved in already. These troops did not want me to accompany them, but I insisted, and they agreed to hand me a Panzerfaust.

There were six of these troops plus me. There was the two-man crew of the Panzerschrek, plus four SS troops with automatic weapons. We had three Panzerfausts with us. We advanced along the sunken track, until a point where it bisected a larger road, which was also partially sunken. The Panzerschrek team positioned themselves to fire along the track towards the crossroads, and the other troops concealed themselves among the ferns and foliage that were growing along the sides of the raised walls of the track.

The idea was for the Panzerschek to fire on the leading Sherman, blocking the crossroads, and then for the rest of us to enter the crossroads and fire on the following tanks with the Panzerfausts. All this was decided in a very cool manner, in just a matter of seconds. We could already hear the noise of approaching tanks from the bisecting road, and we took up positions among the ferns and foliage along the side of the sunken track. We primed our Panzerfausts with the firing lever, being careful not to touch the trigger blade underneath as we waited. A few moments later, the noise of tank tracks became very loud, and a Sherman tank appeared in the crossroads, advancing quite slowly, with its gun pointing straight ahead.

Our Panzerschrek team fired as soon as it appeared, and the rocket gave out a huge trail of gas and sparks as it shot forward. This rocket hit the Sherman just above the rear set of running wheels, and there was a sizeable explosion as it detonated. It appeared to penetrate into the engine compartment, because the rear deck of the Sherman immediately lit up with an orange fire, and various pieces of metal flew into the air behind it. The whole tank ground to a halt, rocking on its wheels, making a shrieking noise of metal and a hiss of flames. The SS men rushed forward at once, and without hesitating they ran into the edges of the crossroads and looked left to where the other tanks might be. I joined them, and kneeling at the edge of the crossroads I saw another Sherman, looking very clean and dripping with water, starting to reverse back down its road. I remember wondering why it was dripping water, and then I realised that it had come straight from the landing craft on the beach, presumably without even stopping.

The machine gunner in the Sherman's hull evidently saw us, because he began firing, but this was quite wild, and the bullets smacked into the earth walls of the track, and even into the rear of the burning Sherman behind us. I sighted on the retreating Sherman and squeezed the trigger blade. The heat of the Panzerfaust rocket scorched my already burned face, but it flew directly onto the Sherman and exploded on his front plate.

An SS man beside me fired likewise, and he hit the tank slightly higher up. The two explosions caused the Sherman to go out of control, and it slammed into the side of the earth wall, covered in smoke from the impacts. It tore down a whole landslide from the embankment, and this blocked the road very effectively. The Sherman came to rest across the sunken road, with its track broken and its front drive wheel racing around at high speed, throwing out bits of the track. The third man with a Panzerfaust fired into its side, and this projectile blew a hole in the edge of the hull.

We three men who had fired the Panzerfausts threw the spent tubes away. We all looked at each other, and then there was a massive explosion which made us all retreat out of the crossroads. From around the corner of the sunken track, we took a look at the Sherman we had hit, and the machine was exploding to pieces in front of us. It was rocking back and forth, and the turret was partially blown off the hull. From inside, I could see huge explosions in the crew compartment, as the ammunition in there blew up. I imagine that it was fully loaded with shells, and coming straight

from the beach it had possibly not even fired a shot before it was hit. Everything was blowing up in there, and sparks from it were setting light to the hedgerows on either side. Beyond this tank, I could just make out another tank reversing away, through the smoke.

I felt extremely elated at this success. I felt that I had contributed to throwing back the invasion, and that we might have a chance of resisting the entire attack if we could use our precious weapons in the way they were intended. The Panzergrenadiers began to run back to their Hanomag, saying that they would drive quickly into the cover of a wood to the south, and from there make their way east to do their reconnaissance as planned. As I turned to leave, though, I saw a sight which shocked me and made me doubt what we were really trying to achieve in this fighting.

What was this sight?

It was beside the first Sherman that we had hit, the one that was knocked out with the shot from the Panzerschrek. That Sherman was on fire very heavily, with a stream of flames blasting up from its engine deck. I wanted to get away from it, in case its ammunition exploded, but I also saw two crew members lying by the tracks on the road. The tank men appeared to be unarmed. They were lying face down, with the backs of their heads severely damaged. I thought at first they might have fallen from the tank, but the Panzerschrek crew were putting their pistols back into their holsters. They winked at me and said it was time for us to leave. It was clear to me that the Panzerschrek men had shot the tank crew as they came down from the tank, in the back of the head.

This disturbed me greatly, as it was against the way that I thought we should conduct the war. I knew the reputation of the Waffen SS as very ruthless fighters, but this was an unnecessary and brutal action. Of course, there was nothing that I could do after the event.

Did you criticise the SS men for this, or did you protest?

No, I did not. Everything was happening too quickly. That Sherman began to explode, and shells began to fly out of the open hatches and spin around in the hedgerow overhead. I retreated from it, and I joined the Panzergrenadiers in their Hanomag.

We raced along the sunken track to a point near a forested area. I remember being amazed at how fast this big half-track could travel with a full crew. We shot up out of the sunken track using a farmer's gateway, into a field at ground level, and went straight into a wood so that we were barely out in the open for any length of time. The SS men knew the area extremely well, and one of them told me that they had been training here for several weeks.

In the woods, we crossed on a forestry path and moved over to the Eastern side of the battle sector. There were several Jabo aircraft, which were British Typhoon class planes notable by their large radiator intakes, circulating over the woods, as if they knew we were in there. One of these planes fired rockets down at random into the wood, and this caused huge explosions which set off fires among the trees, and made the tree trunks crash down near us. With their knowledge of the area, the SS team steered into a thick part of the wood, and although the going was slower, we must have been completely hidden there from any pilot in a plane overhead.

We finally arrived at a small base on the edge of the trees, which had a sunken road leading inland and a large number of troops dislocated from their units seeking to rejoin their brigades. I recognised several men and officers from my regiment , and I disembarked to join them. By this time, it was around midday, and there was talk of a coordinated counterattack using the armoured units dispersed to the south. I actually saw a line of Panther tanks on the edges of a neighbouring copse, all being armed and refuelled by their crews. There was a definite feeling that our resistance to the attack was being organised fully.

With the various troops from my unit, I joined a truckload of men which was being sent South to reform in the afternoon of the 6th. On the way South, we passed small groups of panzers and Stugs concealed among the trees or in the sunken roads, and we shouted encouragement to them. Our progress was constantly interrupted by Jabo aircraft overhead. We always had to jump from the truck and run into ditches or under trees to take cover. I think it took three hours to cover ten kilometres. There were many shells bursting in the fields, which seemed to be coming from offshore guns, and large numbers of dead and injured cattle around. There were also homeless French civilians who were moving about with their possessions, and obstructing the progress of the military.

I remember that all of this was taking place in the perfectly beautiful landscape of the Normandy valleys, with their sparkling streams, ripe corn, apple orchards and pear orchards. Here and there was a perfect little French chateau or villa, and then around the corner was a group of German trucks that had been bombed, with body pieces spread all over the road and evening hanging from the trees. All this was on the still, warm evening of the 6th June as we went South. Truly, this was an instance of paradise being turned to hell by the hands of mankind.

If I may return to the case you mentioned, of the executed British tank crew. How common were such events in Normandy, do you think?

I really cannot say how common certain things were. I did not have an overview of the campaign. The situation was changing so rapidly, and was so intense, that I did not have the luxury of reflecting on what happened that day. I fought on with some elements of my Division up until the nightmare at Falaise, and then I was able to retreat eventually across the Seine and join an engineering unit working on the West Wall, where we were much needed.

But, since you have asked the question, let me give you an example from the other side. Around the time of the retreat towards Falaise, when we were being hounded by the Allied Jabos in every daytime hour, I was sheltering at the side of a road under some trees. Along the road came a German ambulance truck, which was an Opel wagon, clearly marked out with huge Red Cross signs painted on its roof and doors. These signs were perfectly clean and clear, as if the crew had recently cleaned them to avoid any misunderstanding. I watched this ambulance come slowly down the valley, and I watched two Mustang aircraft swoop over it. They went over twice, so they could not have failed to see the Red Crosses. The third time that they came over, they machine-gunned that ambulance truck. The bullets blew the truck apart, and the truck tipped over. The wounded men inside were thrown out across the road. There were female nurses in that truck also, who were blown apart with their wounded. I can tell you that, after dark, for the sake of decency, we put all the different body parts into a ditch at the roadside. Perhaps they are still there today.

I ask you, Herr Eckhertz, how different that was from the event I saw at the crossroads in the bocage country on June 6th? Was it better or

was it worse, as an example of human behaviour? I do not know the answer to that question.

You have told me very explicitly about your experience on June 6th. I am grateful for the candour you have shown in describing these events.

These events should not be forgotten; that is my main concern. The experience of the soldiers on all sides is recorded quite rarely, other than in commercial cinema films and so on, which are a mockery of what we experienced. I hope that my experiences can be kept on record, and I fervently hope that none of our children's generation will have to experience what we on all sides experienced in Normandy. That is my most fervent wish.

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Sword Beach: The Battery Officer

L.T.J. Wergens was a Leutnant (Second Lieutenant) of artillery with the 716th Infantry Division based at Merville near Franceville.

Herr Wergens, you were stationed at one of the larger gun batteries in the Normandy sector. Can you give some background to the German batteries in the sector?

Indeed. The static Atlantic Wall defences were generally speaking in two classes: coastal fortifications and beach fortifications. The coastal fortifications were large fortress type batteries equipped with heavy calibre guns usually of naval origin, being guns of up to 21cm calibre as one would find on a light battleship. These coastal batteries were either in cliff top locations or slightly inland, and they were in some cases quite large fortresses, containing ten or more sub-bunkers of varying designs.

These sites were supplemented by the beach or land sites, which were intended to fire on craft approaching at much closer range or at targets actually on the beaches. These sites were mostly equipped with 88mm or 75mm PAK type guns, and supplemented by machine gun positions to prevent infantry assault. These bunkers sometimes extended some distance inland in layers or belts, with the additional use of flooded land, obstacles and minefields to break up any attacking force and manipulate its progress to the defenders' advantage, by pushing attackers into the fire of the PAK guns.

The Merville Battery was somewhat unusual in that it was some distance inland from the shore, and was equipped with comparatively light guns because the heavier guns it was intended to house were not yet ready for installation.

So it was that I was assigned to the Merville battery as a gunnery command officer in early 1944, while it was still being completed. My role was to command the use of one of the guns in a heavy concrete casemate.

Can you describe the battery, its organisation and construction?

The battery consisted of a group of reinforced concrete bunker buildings on a plateau facing towards the sea in the distance. There were

four main gunnery bunkers, each one originally designed to be equipped with a 21cm naval gun, with an arc of fire of ninety degrees. In reality, from my arrival to the invasion itself, the bunkers were equipped with much smaller guns of only 10cm calibre. This was an interim measure. We were still waiting for the 'real guns,' as we called them, to be fitted when the invasion happened. As things stood, we would be able to fire on the beach zone forward of us, and against any movement inland from the beaches over the plateau. That was our role.

These guns were sited in concrete casemates and fired through a horizontal embrasure. They had a steel shield on the gun itself. In addition, there were ten other bunker buildings, which had various uses including range-finding domes, Flak guns of 88mm and 20mm calibre, ammunition storage, water supply, mess hall, power generator, command centre and so on.

The bunkers were connected by trenches covered with concrete or steel slabs, and the artillery bunkers had underground chambers intended for use in prolonged siege-type situations as medical centres. The concrete used for the walls and roof of the bunkers was about one metre in thickness, reinforced with metal rods. The bunkers had a rounded design intended to offer optimal resistance to blast forces. In the rear, facing away from the sea, the bunkers had access doors of armour plate and electric fan ventilators ducted to the outside.

The battery had a complement of some one hundred men in all. These were chiefly gunnery crews, of course, such as my team, but also included staff officers and their assistants, medics, cooks, observation teams, maintenance teams and guards with side arms. It was intended that the battery could remain under siege for up to three months, with sufficient rations and generator fuel kept on site for this event; the water supply came from an aquifer and could not be interrupted. It was a remarkable structure, and it featured prominently in propaganda of the time, which is where I think you became involved in 1944.

Yes, I was able to visit the battery and see some of the bunkers; we took some photographs which did not reveal any important information, and these were intended to be used as generic public images of the 'Atlantic Wall' and 'Fortress Europe.' I remember being astonished at the scale of the battery structure and the resources that went into its construction.

It was built in early 1944 by enforced labour, of course. The bunkers were very well planned and constructed, and gave us all great confidence. It is no exaggeration to say that we felt impregnable there on the plateau. The danger in such a feeling, obviously, is that a fortress itself may be impregnable, but if it can be surrounded and isolated; there is the risk.

What was the morale, the spirit in the bunkers in the summer of 1944, just before the invasion?

We were eager to take delivery of the larger guns and install them in the bunkers. We were rather embarrassed about the smaller guns we had, but this was in hand. The spirit was very positive. Our troops at the bunker were not front line soldiers, but morale was excellent. We took care to keep the battery troops fully educated on their mission, both tactically and in terms of the direction of the war.

What message did you convey to them about their purpose in manning the fortress?

Before I answer that simply, let me give you, Mein Herr, some background to the morale issue. Let me say firstly that, contrary to what some people may believe today, the mood in early to mid-1944 among the German forces was not disheartened. Far from it. It is true that we had lost the North African oil supplies, but, equally, the American arrival in Tunisia had been unimpressive. Italy was holding firm, and the Allies were expending huge resources on the war there for no great purpose at all. The Allies showed no signs whatever of doing the logical, rational thing and invading the South of France. There was certainly concern about the Eastern Front, and we all knew dreadful stories about the intensity of the fighting there, but the disastrous collapse of the central Army Group in Russia had not yet happened.

Above all, we in the officer class were well-informed enough to know that the underlying trends in the war situation were far from discouraging. Industrial production was not only holding firm under the air bombing, but actually rising in early 1944. The air bombing itself had hardened the men's anger at the Allies and their resolve. Everyone had lost

civilian relatives, friends and neighbours to the bombing, almost without exception.

Most importantly, however, was the matter of the German weapons and machines. The regime had shown us photographs and films of the platoons of the enormous Tiger B panzers, and the Messerschmit 262 jet aircraft, and we knew about the new, super-sized U Boats entering service. The regime had also deliberately spread rumours about the presence of futuristic rocket weapons which could cross entire continents or oceans; we found out later in June that these existed and were actually stationed close to us in France, and were called V1. These weapons were more advanced than anything the Allies possessed, we were sure of that, and there were constant themes of 'Wunderwaffen' (super weapons) in the state propaganda, hinting that these machines which we already knew about were simply the forerunners of what Germany would soon produce.

Today, of course, we know that this was mistaken, and that the practical ingenuity of our engineers had already peaked in mid-1944 with the V1 and the V2; from then on, everything was purely designs on paper. But we must remember the great boost that these weapons and hoped-for weapons gave to our morale at the time.

All of this we condensed into our messages to our artillery troops who manned the battery bunkers. We did not have 'political education' in the way that the Red Army had this, but we included these ideas in our address to the teams at inspection and training times during the day. The troops were very receptive, very motivated, and discipline was good. I am not exaggerating when I say that the general spirit of the bunker was first class.

With such a large garrison, was there a relationship with the local French civilians?

Well, that is a difficult question. The battery was intended to be a sealed unit, and obviously no civilians were allowed near its perimeter; I think the exclusion distance was five hundred metres. But a hundred men must be allowed a certain relaxation, and there was a tendency for some men to visit the local towns. Not at night, that was not permitted, but in their leave periods in the day, they would visit. Our guards would double as police and patrol these towns, and any drunkenness was punished.

Nevertheless, there were cases of venereal disease associated with the towns, and we learned that certain men were forming 'relationships' with French women that they met in their leave hours. This was an obvious security risk. For this reason, from March 1944, leave visits to the towns were blocked. To compensate for this, we installed a cinema facility in the mess hall and a football pitch behind the battery.

And was this an effective compensation?

There were grumbles and wisecracks, of course.

And so, from what you have explained, I have the idea of well-motivated, well-informed men, in a well-engineered battery, quite heavily armed and well-prepared. That is the impression I had at the time when I visited. Can we now come on to the events of June 6th, and what happened on that day?

June the 6th, yes. You must give me a moment to collect my thoughts, because the day was so revolutionary, if that is the right word.

Did you have any indication, any warning, of the impending invasion?

Well, there was no specific bulletin from the commanders saying, '*Prepare for invasion on the 6th*,' if that is what you are thinking. Our alert level was raised to level 2 (level 1 being the highest) on the weekend before the invasion, but this had happened before without consequent attacks, and so it was somewhat ambiguous.

What we were informed of, and this was very useful, was the high level of allied bombing along the northern French coast and inland at transport junctions. This bombing had been visible to us locally throughout the April/May period, with large fleets of aircraft overhead and the noise of bombs to the south and east. We were informed daily of the increasing intensity of this bombardment, and we drew our own conclusions that this suggested an attack would be made imminently.

At the same time, in the first days of June, the sea in front of us became surprisingly low in activity; we noticed a definite reduction in

reports of enemy shipping passing between England and France. This seemed suspicious rather than reassuring, as if the Allies were concealing something. With all these things put together, the evening of June 5th was tense and expectant, just like June 4th and 3rd and the days before that.

Were you on duty in the night of the 5th/6th?

Yes. My bunker was the most westerly of the four heavy gun bunkers. The bunker was actually quite cramped inside, because the walls were so thick and the ceiling was low. Its interior space was about ten metres by twenty metres, and the breech of the gun took up a lot of this space. This gun was installed on a turntable which rotated left and right in the concrete floor. The shells were kept behind metal shields on the wall beside the gun; there was a mechanical lift to hoist ammunition from the underground chamber up to the firing platform. There was also a metal trap door giving access by steps to the underground rooms, which were equipped for a siege.

I had a control section in the rear of the bunker, equipped with a phone to the battery's central command, but my preference when on duty was to be at the embrasure, observing the plateau and the sea with binoculars, and then moving around the interior checking on the men's readiness.

We had machine gun teams in concrete and sandbagged circles at the perimeter of the battery, and these reported to us at intervals. The slopes in front of us were mined with anti-personnel mines and protected with barbed wire to prevent infantry assault.

The 5th of June was a cool evening, and there was some mist on the sea. It became a rainy night and the moon was full. At about midnight on the 5th/6th, that is the Monday night, we were bombed for about twenty minutes by aircraft at high altitude. Our Flak gun's searchlight could not locate the bombers. Fortunately, these bombs did not damage our bunkers other than throwing debris in through the apertures, which was soon cleared away. After that, the noise of aircraft, which had been noticeable, became very conspicuous indeed. The noise suggested even more air activity than on the previous nights.

I have heard people say that 'there was no Luftwaffe' or 'the Allies controlled the air' but in my case I clearly saw, through the embrasure, a

twin-engined night fighter pursuing an Allied bomber out over the sea, and shooting it up with tracer. Both aircraft went off into the clouds, firing at each other. After that, there were long pathways of aircraft going in both directions overhead, far more intense even than the regular raiding formations.

We also had a phone contact from a battery to the East saying that gliders and paratroopers were being seen behind the coastal zone. When I heard that report, I put my men on maximum alert and brought up the second shift of men from the barracks behind the battery, to act as external guards and replacement crews. I also ordered ammunition to be brought up from the underground chamber, gas masks to be ready and the periscope rangefinders to be raised, which were projecting up looking over the embrasure. All this was in place by about one am, so we were well prepared. The men ate a meal at about that time, being soup in canisters from the canteen, cheese and the excellent French bread which was brought in each day.

I remember that meal well. The sea wind was coming in through the embrasure, and our interior lights were all off, so we were lit only by the moonlight through the concrete slit. The men ate in an eager way, as if they wanted all possible energy for the fight that we all suspected lay ahead of us. That is the way it seemed to me at the time.

You yourself did not eat this last meal?

I had some soup in a flask, I remember. I also took a minute in the command post at the back of the bunker to write a few words to my wife, and I placed this letter in a metal cigarette case in my tunic left chest pocket. Like many troops, I partly hoped that, in the event of my death, my wife would somehow receive the letter. I also partly believed the old soldier's story that the power of such a letter, being placed over my heart, would deflect shrapnel or bullets. Just as I buttoned that inside my pocket, we heard firing from outside the bunker.

The sound was only distant, but it was definitely there. It appeared to be coming from the land side, not the sea or the plateau. At the same time, I received a phone call telling me that paratroopers were landing and moving outside the battery, to the South East.

I told the men that action was imminent, and to remember their training and responsibilities. They saluted as one man, and went to their posts.

Did you see anything of these paratroopers at that point?

I was able to extend our periscope up over the top of the bunker roof and turn it around to the inland side. It was difficult to make out anything there, but I kept watching. I also had my men watching the seaward plateau with binoculars, of course, and reporting to me on what they could see. The tension was very great, as we all knew it was now a matter of time before an attack came. There was Flak fire from the South, and there were flares going into the sky on the horizon.

Then, after some time, as I looked through the periscope towards the rear of our site, in the moonlight I could see a descending shape which did not appear to be a parachute. This was a large shape, and it appeared to be emitting fire and sparks from the tail end. I believed at first that this was a large rocket of some kind, or even some form of jet-propelled aircraft. Then I realised that it was in fact a simple glider, which was on fire, presumably from being hit by the Flak. It slowly reared up and flopped down directly onto our position, still on fire. It landed so close that it went below the line of sight of my periscope, but immediately there was gunfire from that side of the position. Our guard troops there were fighting against these glider attackers, whoever they were.

Out to sea, there was nothing unusual to observe in the dark, and there was no report of activity on the plateau. I had the men send up a white flare to illuminate the plateau, so that we could be sure. I therefore considered that this assault might be a localised, commando-type raid, rather than part of a full scale invasion – but of course, there was no way of knowing what eventual form this would take.

What did you know of the situation outside the bunker?

I telephoned up to the observation room, and received a report of close quarters fighting between airborne troops and our men in the battery positions to the rear. It was reported that these troops appeared to be English, and they were causing and receiving substantial casualties. I said,

'*It was only one glider, and how many troops can they carry in a glider?*' But what was happening, I later learned, was that the glider troops were creating a gap in the defences for the paratroopers outside the position, and these paratroopers were storming in onto the battery itself and surrounding the bunkers. So we were to some extent under siege from that point on.

What was your feeling, to be besieged in this way?

It was an agonising feeling, because our whole purpose was to fire onto the plateau and the coast, which was still empty. The twenty men locked inside my bunker were simply unable to fight back against this assault from the land side. I could hear explosions and shooting near the back of our bunker itself, coming through the metal door at the rear. At the same time, when I tried to use our telephone again, I found the line was dead. We were not equipped with a radio, and so we were cut off from information. I listened at the steel door, and I could hear debris from explosions hitting it repeatedly. This was a great shock to me, because, if the enemy troops got onto the roof of our bunker, or close to the embrasure, they would be able to fire in onto us or throw grenades in at us.

I ordered several men to come to the door with rifles and be ready to force back any attempted entry here; at the same time, I shouted from the seaward embrasure for troops to come to our assistance. However, there was no answer or signal from troops on that side of us.

In this way, we had to endure several minutes of waiting, as fighting took place outside our bunker, without knowing the real situation. The men became frustrated, and offered to break out through the rear door to clear the approaches. I did not permit this, as opening the door during action was forbidden by orders, and we did not know the enemy's strength outside.

The situation was brought to an end very violently, when the enemy began to fire their guns into the ventilator system at the rear of the bunker. This caused pieces of the ventilator fans to smash off, and a large number of bullets came out of the ventilator ducts and ricocheted around the inside of the bunker. These bullets hit two of our men, one of whom was killed instantly, and the other was blinded.

I ordered sandbags to be brought to block off the ducts. As the men were bringing these across from under the embrasure, two small bombs came out of the duct tubing, evidently having been thrown in by the enemy

outside. My men shouted warnings and threw themselves flat on the floor away from these bombs. I took in the situation with a heart that, frankly, was pounding with sheer dread. In appearance, these bombs were like large grenades, grey in colour. One of my men had the intelligence to throw the sandbag that he was holding onto one bomb and cover it. However, the other bomb remained on the floor. I went to grab a sandbag from another man, who was backing away from the bombs, when both bombs exploded.

The one under the sandbag did not detonate properly, and caused only a lot of dust and smoke; however, the loose one on the floor exploded fully, and caused a very white flash which spread an incendiary material out, in a ball several metres wide. This incendiary ball was horribly blinding, and it hung in the air for what seemed like a long time. I was transfixed at the sight, as I had not seen an explosion like this before, and I did not know what it meant. Then the fireball collapsed onto the floor, and spread out in a manner I would describe as volcanic. This white burning matter enveloped several men nearby, who were flat on the floor, and it took hold of their bodies completely. Their uniforms were burned off in moments, and their bare skin was blackened and charred. Whole pieces of their flesh became black in moments, and began to disintegrate.

These men screamed and convulsed in a dreadful way, and the other men backed away from them in a rush. I shouted for order to be restored, and for a fire extinguisher. I also had the men throw more sandbags onto the ventilator ducts to prevent more bombs coming through them.

Your ammunition was not set off?

Our immediate ammunition was kept in a steel-clad unit on the opposite wall, so fortunately it was not detonated. The trapdoor to the lower chambers, where there was the main ammunition store, was also not touched by the flames. There were two hundred rounds of high-explosive down there, and an explosion would probably have demolished the entire battery.

Were the men who were burned saved?

This was not possible. The extinguisher was used on them, but they were severely burned. I think that two were dead, and a third was alive but

moving in a terrible torment. His neck and chest were completely burned open, and his skin was smouldering even after the extinguisher was applied. It was inconceivable that anything could be done for him. A Feldwebel asked my permission to put him out of his suffering with a merciful shot, and I gave the permission for this, so he was shot cleanly in the head. I would have wished the same thing for myself in such a condition.

What was the effect on the men?

There was much cursing and denouncing of the English. We could hear the attackers outside, kicking or beating at the steel door to gain entry, and there were other explosions in the air ducts from explosives that they threw in there, but these explosions were muffled by the sandbags. The air inside the bunker was now full of smoke and charred particles, and the men who were away from the embrasure donned their gas masks. All this happened in the space of a few seconds, perhaps twenty seconds.

What was your state of mind?

I was in an absolute fury at this situation, as we were being steadily choked and suffocated instead of fighting properly as we were intended to. I tried to look through the periscope to see the situation, but the optic was cracked and not operable.

I ordered two men to climb out of the main seaward embrasure with MP40 guns, in order to shoot down any enemy who were on the roof or trying to reach down to the embrasure. As soon as they climbed out, there was shooting and they were both hit by shots from the roof area. They fell out of the concrete slit, onto the minefield area underneath, and they were blown up badly by the personnel mines there, which were positioned to stop the enemy getting close to the front of the bunker. I took an MP40 and went over to the embrasure to see the situation.

Just as I approached, I saw two hands appear from the upper edge of the slit. These were the hands of the enemy, surely, because these hands were holding a Thompson sub machine gun, which was clearly silhouetted against the sky outside. The gun muzzle was smoking slightly. This soldier was presumably lying on top of the roof and reaching down with his gun. I can tell you that an absolute storm of fire was directed at this man, from my

gun and the men's rifles, and before he could fire, the gun was shot out of his hands and it went flying off into the minefield.

I could now hear the enemy troops outside, talking and shouting in English. I could hear them saying the words 'bomb, man, fire' which sounded like the words we have in German. The fact was that, if we did not have infantry remaining outside to guard against a close attack like this, there was nothing that we could do to drive off these assailants. We had a small supply of stick grenades, and I took one of these and primed it, then attempted to throw it out of the slit up onto the roof.

As I reached out, I was shot through the forearm, and I dropped the grenade, which exploded below. I was stunned from this wound and the explosion, and as I gathered my senses I saw one of these English soldiers reach down and throw in another of the grey-coloured incendiary bombs which they had used on the air ducts.

This bomb exploded against the gun shield, and it covered the shield in that bright incendiary material. The shield was thick enough to withstand this, but some of the incendiary fluid shot around the edges and hit the men in the gun crew, causing terrible burns. I knew that, with one or two more of those bombs, our whole bunker crew would be wiped out. I decided that the gun position was simply indefensible in the current state of the combat.

Did you decide to surrender?

No. I hated the idea of surrendering to a lightly armed force. I knew that the German infantry around our sector must surely be arriving imminently to fight off the attacking troops. It was inconceivable that they would not come to assist us against a small airborne force. I therefore ordered the men to open the trapdoor which led down to the lower chambers, and to take cover in there. I ordered the firing mechanism from the gun to be removed and brought with us. The men obeyed rapidly, and in a few seconds they were moving down into the underground space. The wounded were brought down as carefully as possible, and medical supplies were available in the underground rooms.

As I followed the men down the steps, I saw the English attackers jump down from the roof onto the ledge of the embrasure and begin shooting wildly into the interior, absolutely spraying the inside with bullets.

There were two of these men, and they had sub machine guns which they simply jerked left and right, filling the whole bunker with shots.

I caught sight of their faces, and I can tell you that the glimpse alarmed me as much as anything I had seen that day.

Why did their faces alarm you?

Their faces were set rigid, in an expression of absolute hatred. Sheer hatred. This worried me. Why would men, who were the same race as us, who were physically similar to us, why would they hate us in this way? Why would they want to burn us alive, when we were protecting Europe? What was the origin of this hatred? I had no answer to such questions.

I dropped onto the top step of the underground chamber, and I secured the steel door over us. I could only use one hand because of the wound in my forearm, which was extremely painful. The steel plate was echoing with bullets which were deflecting off it. Below the door, we had a concrete block which rolled on two girders to sit across the trapdoor entrance. I operated this block across the steps. We were now sealed into the underground chamber, with the enemy running loose in our bunker overhead.

How long could you last out down there?

Oh, a very long time. There was dry food stockpiled there which would last many weeks. Water was limited, but there were medical supplies. There was a single electric lamp which gave a feeble light, worked by a hand crank dynamo. There were two air vents which ran to concealed covers outside the bunker, and as long as these were not blocked we could breathe. But my hope was that we would only have to wait an hour or so until the surrounding German troops counter-attacked and took back the battery.

Of course, above us, we could hear the sound of the enemy moving about in the bunker now. It was a dreadful sensation, knowing that they were in our superb bunker, no doubt intent on destroying our guns. The immediate danger was that they would use explosives to open the steel trap door and drop their incendiary bombs down into the chamber. The walls down there were lined with ammunition for the gun. I think there was

probably twenty tonnes of explosives in there. These shells were unprotected, and might be set off by an incendiary or even a bullet. We had extinguishers ready, and the men pressed themselves back against the walls.

We crouched there and looked up at the roof over us, as the English up there began to set off explosions and smash our equipment. We heard their voices in a muffled way through the steel door. It was extremely hot and smoky in the chamber, and sweat ran down my face as I crouched there, wrapping a bandage around my wounded arm and looking at the trap door.

Several times, we heard the enemy soldiers treading on the trap door, or stamping or kicking at it. They must have known that we were underneath, because where else would we all have gone? At one point, we heard an explosion directly above us on the steel plate itself, suggesting that the enemy were trying to blast it open to get at us. The thought of those incendiary grenades coming down into our confined space was horrifying. Some of my men began praying, while others kept up a stream of muttered obscenities directed at the enemy, vowing a dreadful revenge for this humiliation.

All this went on for about fifteen minutes in all, and then the explosions above us stopped. I listened at the steel plate, and could not hear footsteps or impacts up there. Some of the men asked me not to open the door, while others told these men to shut up and begged to be allowed up there to fight on. I told all the men to shut up, and I rolled aside the concrete slab on its girders, then listened again before opening the trap door slightly.

What did you see out there?

The bunker was so full of smoke that it was impossible to see anything except a faint blur which suggested that first light had come, if not dawn. It was close to five am. I could hear shooting from the distance, and also German voices shouting closer at hand. This told me that we had been relieved by a counterattack and that the English were being driven off. I opened the trap door fully and climbed up into the bunker. Slowly, the smoke and dust cleared and daylight came in through the embrasure. It became apparent what had happened.

The enemy had set off several explosive charges around the gun breech, and had tried to detonate the bunker ammunition also. There was an explosive pouch stuck between the 10cm rounds, with electric wires, but

this had not gone off. This was fortunate, because it would probably have blown the floor down on top of us in the chamber. It was clear that the gun was damaged and needed extensive repair work. As we examined this, we opened the rear doors to ventilate the bunker, and found a large group of German troops outside, firing into the distance.

The attackers had essentially completed their mission, if that was to disable the guns for the time being. Now they were retreating down the slopes towards the nearby village, exchanging fire with our men as they went.

I saw one of our quadruple 20mm Flak guns on a half-track carriage that had been brought into the battery site, and this was firing below horizontal at the retreating enemy.

Around the bunker, there was a lot of destruction. The glider which had come down was crashed very close behind our bunker, with its tail part burned off. There were two dead English troops visible hanging out of the glider, and many more scattered around the battery, between the bunkers and even on the roofs of the bunkers. They had black paint on their faces and wore red berets. They were armed with the 'Sten' type gun which we knew to be very effective at short range, but liable to jamming. In fact, some of these English troops seemed to have picked up German MP40 guns during the combat. There were also many dead German troops, both our artillery men and the infantry which had relieved us.

I took all this in within a few seconds, and then my attention was drawn to the air overhead. There were huge numbers of aircraft in progress across the sky, which was still a grey-white colour. These were both bombers and what appeared to be transport planes.

We were immediately strafed by a fighter plane which dived on us from over the headland, and our Flak cannon with great versatility raised its barrels in an attempt to fire back at this aircraft. This plane, which was a Spitfire type, shot up the Flak cannon and smashed open its half-track bed, so we were without air defence. We went quickly back into the bunker.

What kind of order was restored at the battery?

Our men were already working on the guns in each of our four bunkers. Of the four guns, the enemy had driven off the gunners from three of them. We were the only ones who had remained with our gun in the

underground chamber, which I was proud of. The damage done was serious. Our gun and one other were badly damaged and would have to be extensively re-machined. Two others were less seriously hit, and work was underway on them already to try to bring them back into action. At this stage, I was seen by a medical orderly who examined the wound in my arm. By this stage, it was impossible for me to move my arm at all. This was bleeding heavily, and the diagnosis was that the bones were broken, hence my inability to use it. I was urged to retreat from this sector to a field dressing station inland, where the wound could be treated.

As my gun was out of action, my commander ordered me to go to the dressing station and then return later in the day, taking with me the various walking wounded from the battery. A truck was found to take us, and as I waited for the wounded men to board it, I used binoculars to scan the sea in the distance beyond the plateau.

At that point, the full dimensions of the attack became clear to me. The horizon of the sea was filling up with vast numbers of ships. Anyone who was present will confirm that the horizon was literally filled from East to West with vessels. I could not make them out, but there appeared to be a huge variety of types, including substantial warships. Above them, this constant stream of aircraft flew inland, making the air itself vibrate with their noise. There was the sound of heavy bombing from further inland.

We were all struck speechless at this sight for several seconds, as we had not envisaged the full scale of the onslaught that was about to hit us. Above all, there was no sign of our forces fighting back on sea or in the air. The sea between us and this oncoming horde was completely empty and featureless, and there were no dogfights or aerial battles taking place overhead.

I tried to remove myself from the ambulance truck, because my natural inclination was to be present in combat when this massive force arrived. But my commander ordered me again to leave, and to return later when my gun was in a state to be operated. Reluctantly, I went to the field hospital and had the bones in my arm set. This journey, of a few kilometres, was full of risks in itself, as the Allied Jabo aircraft began to strafe continually along all the inland roads to disrupt the defending transports. We were constantly taking refuge under trees or in ditches as these aircraft, apparently without any opposition, roved across the inland landscape.

Did you rejoin the battery that day?

To my great regret, the events at the battery overtook us all. Although we held the battery on the 6th itself, later in the day it was cut off by the Allied troops, and those of us in the hospital zone were unable to rejoin it. In effect, the front line was between us and the battery. The battery held out for some time until later in the month, remaining as a fortress-type installation behind the Allied lines until it eventually surrendered.

I myself was ultimately reassigned to a series of batteries further west, on the Brittany coast, and these were in turn isolated and cut off by the Allied advances in July. I was eventually taken prisoner at a point near Cap Gris Nez, and went into captivity under the Americans.

How important do you think it was for the Allies to capture your battery?

I think they overestimated the capacity of the guns at the battery. These were 10cm guns, not the long-range warship guns which some of our installations were equipped with. Our guns would have been a danger to them in their landings in our area, but not to the extent that we could have obstructed the landings completely.

Nevertheless, I can appreciate that they saw a need to eliminate the guns at that early stage for the sake of security, considering they would have to be eliminated sooner or later in the campaign anyway. It was certainly a brave and audacious assault, to use a glider and paratroopers in that way in the darkness; but remember, we did in fact retake the position and defend it from then on. Like so many things in war, the real significance of this battle is rather hard to judge in retrospect.

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Postscript

By Holger Eckhertz
June 2015

I very much hope that the reader has appreciated these translated accounts, and found in them some new insight or perspective of June 6th 1944. For me, detached in time from both the interviews and the events themselves, I find that there are several main themes to these statements, which I would like to briefly highlight.

Firstly, there is the *motivation* of the German troops, which repeatedly returns to the question of 'defending France' or 'defending a united Europe' against various international forces. I found this surprising when I first read the interviews, but, when I investigated German propaganda of the late war period, I found that this was in fact a very common message. The presence of the idea in the interviewees' statements shows, probably, how effectively this idea was communicated by the regime's propagandists.

Secondly, and connected to this, is the *surprise* described by some interviewees when they were confronted by the Allied troops' aggression and determination. This is partly a tribute to the professionalism of the Allied soldiers, many of whom, of course, were in combat for the first time. But it also reveals a certain lack of understanding among some of the German soldiers being interviewed, who seem to regard their mission in France as non-threatening to the Western Allies. How widespread such an attitude was at the time can only be a matter for conjecture today.

The third element which I notice very strongly is the *lack of resources* available to the first-line German defenders of the Atlantic Wall when confronted, especially, with the newest weaponry and air superiority of the Allies. It is possible, of course, that the speakers are in some ways dramatizing the reasons for their own defeat, but we are left with an impression of overwhelming force. We know that as the Normandy campaign progressed, the land battles became more even-handed, especially as German armour arrived in strength.

One last thread which strikes me is the role that *luck* plays in a soldier's survival or death. Those of us who have never been in action

surely cannot imagine the stress which comes from knowing that the path of a bullet or shell, falling almost at random, might immediately kill you, or might pass you by. Such stress must surely be common to all combatants, whatever their motivation or uniform.

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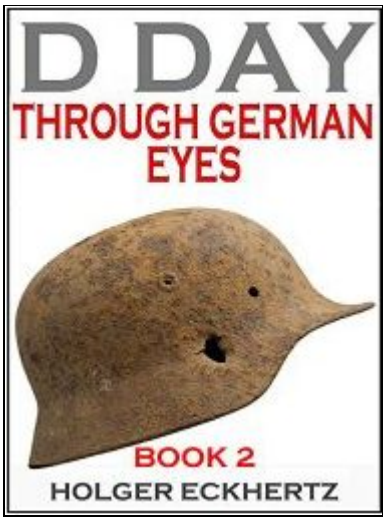

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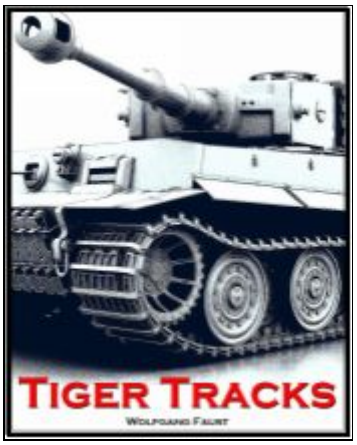

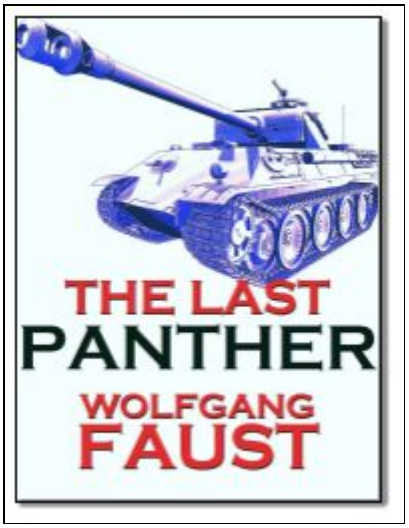

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