



The first wave of American soldiers coming ashore on OMAHA Beach on D-Day photograph by Robert Capa.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF
THE ALLIED 21ST ARMY GROUP
D-DAY, 6 JUNE 1944

THE GREATEST SEABORNE INVASION THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN

by Ian R Gumm MSTJ TD VR BSc (Hons)

PART EIGHTEEN – LIEUTENANT COLONEL MAX SCHNEIDER'S 5 RANGER

The landings at OMAHA Beach are too big to tell in a single article and I have split the story into suitable chunks. In this third chunk, I concentrate on the actions of Lieutenant Colonel Max Schneider's 5th Ranger Battalion [5 Ranger] at the western end of OMAHA Beach between the coastal hamlets of Vierville-sur-Mer and Saint Laurent-sur-Mer.

Lieutenant Colonel Max Schneider's 5 Ranger, with Captain Joseph A Rafferty's Company A and Captain Edgar L Arnold's Company B of 2 Ranger, were to follow up and reinforce Force A, Lieutenant Colonel Rudder's three companies assaulting the Battery location at Pointe-du-Hoc. They were to wait offshore for the signal "PRAISE THE LORD" signifying that Lieutenant Colonel Rudder's Force A had successfully taken the Battery location and come ashore at the Point. If, however, that signal did not come by 07:00 or they received the codeword "TILT", they were to proceed to OMAHA

Beach and land behind the assaulting companies of the 116th Infantry Regiment [116 IR] and Captain Ralph Goranson's Company C 2 Ranger.

When no success signal was received from Force A, the LCAs of Force C headed to DOG GREEN Sector at OMAHA Beach. Lieutenant R D Turnbull RNVR reported:

“During the run-in, the Rangers became soaked, and at least half-dozen in LCA-421 were seasick. The remainder, however, were quite cheerful and in good spirits, and were allowed to stand up in the craft until within approximately 2 miles of the beach.

At approximately 06:00, it was observed that one craft of the PRINCES MAUD had foundered, the remainder of their craft circling round picking up survivors.”¹



5 Ranger riding in the British LCA-1377 from HMS PRINCE BAUDOUIIN before the D-Day landings.

Lieutenant E H West RNVR reported:

“The run in towards DOG GREEN Beach was carried out according to plan, speed approximately 5 knots. Difficulty was experienced keeping station, owing to conditions of the sea and swell, but, under the circumstances, the craft were able to keep fairly good formation.

At 06:30 LCA-578 was noticed to be low in the water, owing to swamping, and was quickly left astern. The subsequent report by Coxswain of this craft disclosed that the engines were eventually stopped by flooding and troops were disembarked into passing LCT-88, which was proceeding towards the beach. This craft was taken in tow by an

LCVP, but when engines restarted, after intensive bailing, she was able to proceed back to ship under own power.”²

They reached Vierville and were diverted to the DOG WHITE sector of OMAHA Beach. Captain John Raaen the Headquarters Company commander of 5 Ranger recalled:

“Landing Control, the men out on the boats off the beaches, told us we could not land at Vierville and had to divert to OMAHA DOG WHITE Beach, which was the next beach over.”³



Captain John Carpenter Raaen, the Company Commander of Headquarters Company 5 Ranger.

The LCAs of Lieutenant R D Turnbull RNVR's 501st Assault Flotilla from the LSI(S) PRINCE CHARLES conveyed the Rangers of Captain Rafferty's Company A, Captain Arnold's Company B, and a headquarters boat of 2 Ranger to the beach. About 800 metres (½ mile) from the beach they deployed into line and, from there on, it was down to the coxswains of each LCA to pick their way forward. Zig-zagging through the first line of German beach obstacles, the LCAs touched down on DOG WHITE, in a foot or two of water, at 08:05. These men of 2 Ranger were the leading elements of Force C and as they came ashore, they were heavily engaged by the Germans directly in front of them.

Captain John Raaen recalled:

“We diverted to DOG GREEN Beach in front of Vierville and landing control, which were small boats about 1000 yards out, that checked you off and allowed you to land. Now, many people, let's face it, it was fairly stormy, and many boats slipped by landing control without getting the word. But we had very experienced sailors and these Brits they'd landed in Africa, they'd landed in Sicily, they'd landed twice in Italy, and they were very combat-wise. So, they found landing control, landing control said DOG GREEN Beach is closed, the casualties are too high, land on WHITE.”⁴

Lieutenant E H West RNVR reported:

“I deployed the flotilla approximately ½ mile off beach, and after that, it was a question of each craft finding its own way into beach independently. Craft had to zig-zag their way through beach obstacles for a matter of 50 yards, and all obstacles had teller mines attached to topmost stakes. I would like to say that officers and coxswains all showed utmost presence of mind and kept a cool head in beaching their craft in these extremely difficult conditions.

All the craft found their way to beach and the Rangers were disembarked at 0805 into between one and two feet of water: I must say that after a very rough passage and a certain amount of seasickness, the Rangers went ashore in exceptionally good spirits.

As flotilla touched down there was considerable mortar fire and fairly heavy machine gun fire directed on and across the beach, and LCI(L) No 91 which had beached just ahead of my craft was hit forward and commenced to burn furiously; this entailed a certain amount of manoeuvring on the part of three of my craft in order to touch down clear of her.”⁵

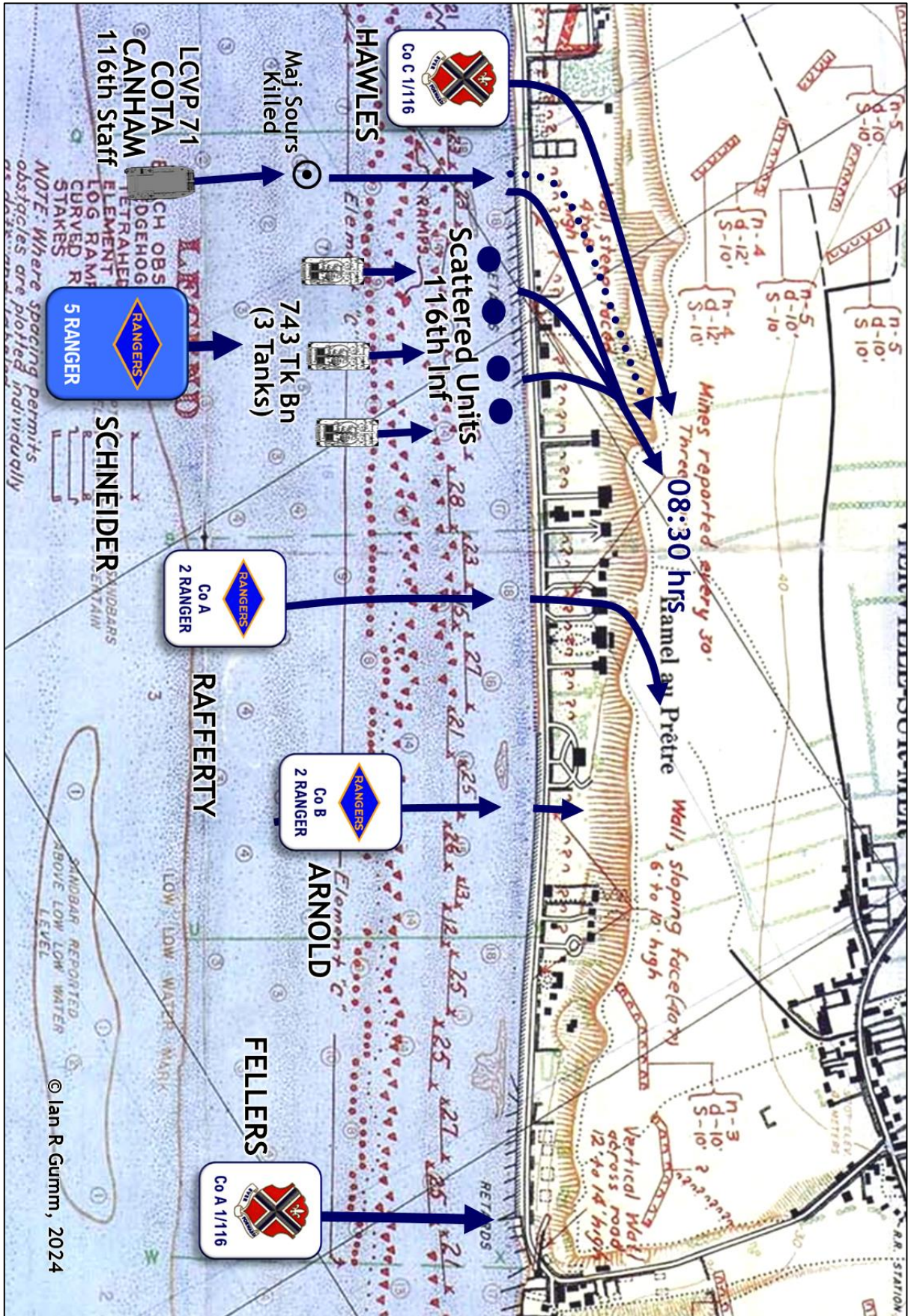
The two Ranger companies from 2 Ranger had come ashore directly below WN-70, the Widerstandsneester on top of the cliffs above the smouldering ruins of several beach villas. Company A and Company B 2 Ranger sustained very heavy casualties and Lieutenant Colonel Schnider seeing the carnage ordered the 5 Ranger to head eastwards further along OMAHA Beach. Captain John Raaen recalled:

“So, the Battalion Commander said, “I’m not going to lose the rest of my force on that beach”, and he was experienced. He landed in Africa. He’d landed in Sicily, and he’d landed twice in Italy.”⁶

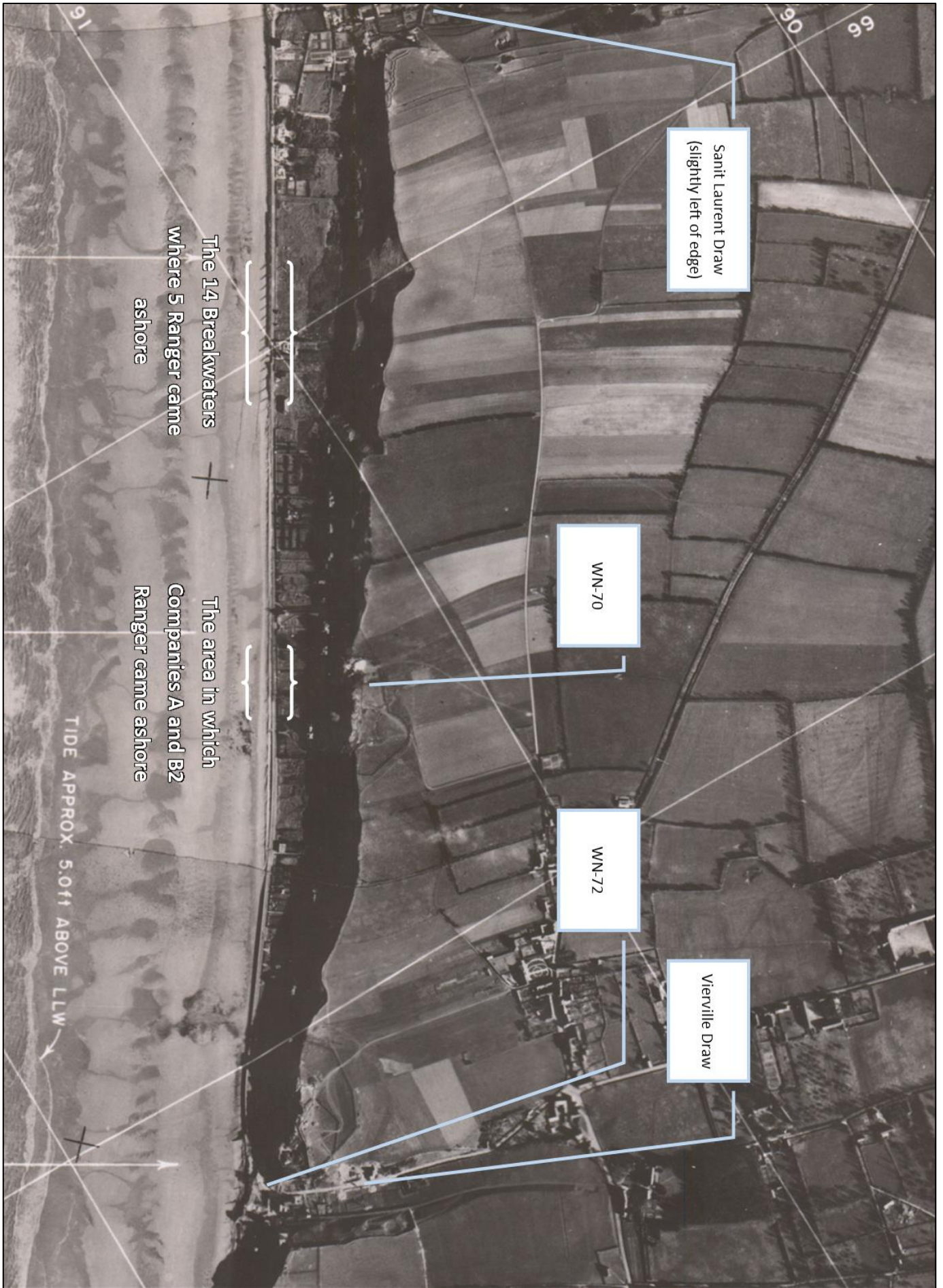
The 5 Ranger landings took place on a rising tide and by the time they came ashore, the beach was about 60 to 70 yards wide between the sea and the seawall. The 5 Ranger moved about 800 yards eastwards, towards the Saint Laurent-sur-Mer draw, where 14 breakwaters were jutting out across the beach. They disembarked from their LCAs and used these breakwaters as cover as they crossed the sand. The bluffs behind the beach were on fire and the smoke obscured the Americans from the Germans on the bluffs, and vice versa. It was probably due to this natural smokescreen that the German defensive fire was lighter here than it had been further to the west. Captain John Raaen recalled:

“So, we diverted another 800 yards, and we came in on DOG RED Beach. At DOG RED we had just the most marvellous luck you’ve ever heard of. It was the only dry landing I ever had. Well, it wasn’t quite dry, but my boat took me in, the water was not over my boots and parachute boots aren’t very high. So, it was a dry landing. There were on that

beach a whole bunch of breakwaters, 14 breakwaters, and they were about 4 to 4.5 ft high of huge rocks, and it gave you, it was like going into a little fort.”



The landings of Force C. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]



An aerial photograph annotated with the locations of the Force C landings. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

Captain John Raaen described the scene on the beach between Saint Laurent-sur-Mer and Veirville-sur-Mer where 5 Ranger landed:

“There was the seawall at one end, the breakwaters on your right and on your left, and water behind you. So, once we got off the boats and got up to those breakwaters, and the small arms fire, which was pouring down the beach, couldn't hit us. Protected by about 4 feet of rock, so, the whole battalion took only 4 [or] 5 casualties, I think it was, crossing the beach and getting up to the bluffs. Whereas other places were getting 50% killed. Here we have less than 1%.

So, we lucked out and further we lucked out because the brush or the bluffs was on fire and that generated a lot of smoke and a lot of flame, and it blinded the Germans in front of us so they couldn't shoot at us. And that was where, of course, they were, that was the defence. The defence couldn't shoot at us. It was only the people down the beach that would shoot at us.

And the third thing was that the fire on our left was on another beach. I mean, it was a long way away. There was a nose, and the forts defending that area were on the other side of that nose, they couldn't see us, so, nobody from our left could shoot at us. So, we got across the beach in very good order, up the bluffs and fought our way inland from there.”⁷

The 5 Ranger had come ashore behind the men of the 116 IR and, along the beach, they could see the tanks of the 743 TB doing their best to provide cover for the infantrymen. Captain John Raaen recalled:

“I looked down the beach and what did I see but tanks driving back and forth from the water to the dunes, and they too were protecting infantrymen from the dreadful fire on the right, because the tanks would drive down to the water's edge, the men would climb out, use the tanks for shields and get up to the dunes where they would be safe, and then the tanks would back up, there were three or four doing this about 200 yards away from me.”

To the left of the Rangers, an LCI(L) burst into flames; this was LCI(L)-91. Captain John Raaen recalled:

“I looked to my left there was an LCI, landing craft infantry coming in, and they started to unload the men down the side gangways, and at that point a man with a flamethrower, it's the only explanation I have for it, was hit by artillery and the whole LCI burst into flame as the jelly gasoline spread all over the place.

Actually, most of the men got off that thing unscathed, but quite a few died in the fire on the gangways.”



Infantrymen of the 116th Infantry Regiment advancing behind tanks of the 743 TB on DOG RED Beach.

Once on the beach behind the shelter of the breakwaters, Captain Raaen looked for the 5 Ranger Executive Officer, Major Sullivan. He recalled:

“At that point, I knew where I was, knew what I had to do, and the first thing I did then was to locate Major Sullivan, who was in the next bay to me of the 14 ritards, and reported to him. He said you stay here, and I’ll go see the Battalion Commander.

The way we found the Battalion Commander was quite interesting. We just yelled, “Rangers, where is Colonel Schneider?” and it came back within 30 seconds that he was three bays from us, over by that little ... what became a cemetery, talking with the Company Commander. Sullivan went over, got the orders, and came back and gave them to me. My orders were to follow a machine gun section of C Company and follow them through a gap that would be blown in the wire.”⁸

On reaching the wire, one of his Rangers pointed out a soldier calmly walking up and down the beach with a cigar in his mouth. The soldier was shouting at the soldiers sheltering in the dunes and behind the seawall to push onwards, to get off the beach. That soldier was Brigadier General Norman D Cota, the Assistant Divisional Commander of the 29th Infantry Division.

Captain Raaen recalled:

“One of the men -- and rangers are very curious, they are always looking around trying to gather information. He said, Captain, look at that guy down there. Well, about 150, 100

yards away there was a crazy man, sort of plump wandering up and down the beach, shaking his hands at the people and yelling at the soldiers in the dunes and against the seawall. And we speculated, wondered who he may be, a photographer who doesn't know any better. Maybe he's a newspaperman that doesn't know any better or he could be a high-ranking officer just trying to exert leadership. Well, as he approached, he came around the edge of my bay. I ran down to see him, I didn't want him to mix up my men, as I approached, I saw a nice little star on his shoulder, could have been on his collar I don't remember specifically where they were on that uniform.

I reported to him, said "Sir, Captain Raaen 5th Ranger Infantry Battalion." He said "Raaen, Raaen, you must be Jack Raaen's son." I said, "Yes sir" and General Cota asked the situation. I gave him the situation that the 5th Ranger Infantry Battalion had landed on the beach intact and that we were spread over a 250 hundred yards front, approximately from where I was, and 250 yards down the beach. He said, "Where is your Battalion Commander?" I told him and he started off, then he turned around and said something that became very famous. He said, "I know you men are Rangers, I know you won't let me down." Then he proceeded off to see Schneider."⁹



Brigadier General Norman D Cota, the Assistant Divisional Commander of the 29th Infantry Division.

Captain Raaen led his group, now about the size of a Platoon, along the seawall to Lieutenant Colonel Schneider's location. Company D had blown a gap in the wire and he and his men waited until the machine guns of Company C passed in front of them and before following behind. He recalled:

"All the time there was an awful amount of rifle and machine gun fire from the right, and we used those ritards, the breakwaters, we used the breakwaters as protection against

that. So, it was not just walk over there, you rushed around the end of the breakwaters to get protection and things like that.”¹⁰

Captain Raaen’s Rangers climbed over the seawall and crossed the road to the gap in the wire. Once through the gap they began making their way up the bluff behind the machine gun section of Company C. Captain John Raaen recalled:

“Climbed up the seawall when we finally got the word. Crossed little road, there was barbed wire beyond it, but the barbed wire had been blown and we were able to pass through without any hesitation whatsoever. ... We moved across the road and about 50 to 100 yards got to the base of the cliffs, the bluff, they’re very steep bluffs about 105 to 110 feet high. We started up the bluffs and I noticed there were six stone steps that we went up first on this little path, and again, we were following the rest of the Battalion that’s in front of us. The Battalion had blown four gaps in the wire. So, ahead of me, were only D Company, C Company, and myself. The other Rangers went through the other gaps and were on parallel courses to us.

Got up to the top of the bluffs, and there was a little wall there, I sat on the stone wall and looked back over the beach, and I could see the boats were still coming in, men were still going through the holes we had blown and following us.”¹¹

From Captain John Raaen’s account, one can get a good idea of what it was like for 5 Ranger to get off the beach, climb the bluffs, and begin their fight to move inland.

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944 at OMAHA BEACH Captain John Carpenter Raaen was awarded the Silver Star. His citation reads:

“The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Captain (Corps of Engineers) John Carpenter Raaen, Jr. (ASN: 0-25486), United States Army, for gallantry in action while serving with the 5th Ranger Infantry Battalion, V Corps, in action on the coast of France on 6 June 1944.”¹²

Look Forward

In Part Nineteen of D-Day, 6 June 1944 — The Greatest Seaborne Invasion The World Has Ever Known, I discuss the actions of the remaining elements of the 29th Infantry Division that came ashore to the east of Vierville-sur-Mer on D-Day.

Published by In The Footsteps®

In The Footsteps Tours Limited, 5 Abbots Close, Greytrees, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire HR9 7GQ

If you are interested in a tour following in the footsteps of The Allied 21st Army Group on D-Day, please visit <https://www.inthefootsteps.com/d-day-tour.html>.

If you are interested in a tour following in the footsteps of an individual, or indeed any specific Allied formation or unit, that took part in the Battle of Normandy that followed, please contact us via our Tailor-made Tours page, <https://www.inthefootsteps.com/tailor-made-tour-service.html>, telling us where you want to go, when, for how long, and the standard of hotel you would like, and we will put together a proposal for your consideration.

© Ian R Gumm, 2024

¹ Report on Operation Normandy, Lieutenant R D Turnbull RNVR, dated 8 June 1944.

² Report on Operation Normandy, Lieutenant E H West RNVR, dated 8 June 1944.

³ John C Raaen's interview, The digital collections of the National WWII Museum, recorded on 9 June 2019.

⁴ John C Raaen's interview with Alex Thorp, recorded on 1 June 2016.

⁵ Report on Operation Normandy, Lieutenant E H West RNVR, dated 8 June 1944.

⁶ John C Raaen's interview with Alex Thorp, recorded on 1 June 2016.

⁷ John C Raaen's interview with Alex Thorp, recorded on 1 June 2016.

⁸ John C Raaen's interview, The digital collections of the National WWII Museum, recorded on 9 June 2019.

⁹ John C Raaen's interview, The digital collections of the National WWII Museum, recorded on 9 June 2019.

¹⁰ John C Raaen's interview, The digital collections of the National WWII Museum, recorded on 9 June 2019.

¹¹ John C Raaen's interview, The digital collections of the National WWII Museum, recorded on 9 June 2019.

¹² General Orders: Headquarters, V Corps, General Orders No. 2A (June 20, 1944).