

# RANGERS, LEAD THE WAY OFF THIS BEACH!

A WORLD WAR TWO ARTICLE AND SCENARIO BASED ON THE ACTION IN *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*  
by Mike Roberts

The icy waters of the English Channel rained down upon the tightly-packed Rangers as another wave crashed over the side of their LCVP. Captain John Miller took a slug from his canteen, noticing the nervous twitch that had manifested without warning since they were brought down for embarkation in Portsmouth. The soldier in front of him threw his head forward, spewing up what little food remained in his stomach. The noisome stench of sea water mingled with vomit invaded Miller's senses again, and he bit down on his jaw hard to prevent himself doing likewise. He could see the beach fast approaching as the LCVP raced towards its destination, the chatter of its motor adding a staccato beat to the mumbled prayers echoing around the landing craft. These sounds were suddenly drowned out by the screams of many good men as a German artillery shell scored a direct hit on one of the neighbouring landing craft. After a brief pause, the prayers all around him grew suddenly louder.

The LCVP pilot shouted above the motor's din, letting the tense soldiers know that they were moments away from their uncertain fate. German machine-gun bullets ricocheting off the raised landing ramp, Miller called to his men.

"Portside stick, starboard side stick, move fast and clear those murder holes...keep those actions clear, and I'll see you on the beach."

## SAVING PRIVATE RYAN

This scenario is based upon the action portrayed in Steven Spielberg's hit film, *Saving Private Ryan*. The film follows Captain John Miller and his squad in their search for Private James Ryan, the only surviving brother from a family of four. The Chief of Staff of the Army, General George Marhsall, has ordered that Ryan be evacuated from the front line and returned home to his mother, who is set to receive the telegrams informing her of her other sons' deaths simultaneously. Faced with the near-impossible task of finding Ryan, the squad suffers at

the hands of the German army as they wander through the countryside in search of the paratrooper. At last, after taking out a German half-track, they find the right Ryan. But in the village, where remnants of the 101st are defending the bridge, Ryan refuses to abandon his duty and his buddies to leave. Reluctantly, Miller decides to stay and join in the defence. When the Germans attack, the squad fall one by one, and of original ten men who went in search of Private Ryan, only two survive. Even Captain Miller is killed, and as he lies dying, gives Ryan a life mission: "Earn this."

The film opens with the attack at Omaha beach on the June 6th, 1944. Omaha was one of the five beaches designated as landing zones for the allied invasion of Normandy, and it was the job of the Americans to take it. It was to prove one of the toughest landings of the invasion, which cost the Americans over 2,500 casualties, and gave it the monicker "Bloody Omaha."

## OMAHA BEACH AND D-DAY

As soldiers of the U.S. Army's 1st Infantry Division leaped from their landing craft into the choppy waters off Omaha Beach, many cursed the landing-craft pilots who had deposited them too far away from the invasion beach. German small-arms fire from the bluffs overlooking the approaches raked the surface of the water, while indirect artillery fire splashed amid the landing craft in the English Channel.

On the morning of D-Day, June 6, 1944, the soldiers who headed for Omaha's four mile wide crescent-shaped beach faced a 300 yard dash to the base of the bluffs. First the landing craft and soldiers had to make their way through a mixture of German obstacles, some of which protruded above the low tide. Half-way to the bluffs at the end of the tidal flat was a raised shingle ledge of sand and smooth stones. There the Germans had placed thick belts of barbed wire. That shingle was the first spot on the otherwise open beach to offer the troops any cover from the machine-gun fire. There was still another 100 yards to go before



they reached the base of the bluffs, however, where more wire and mines awaited. As the G.I.s struggled across the sand, the Germans poured down a steady stream of fire from their elevated positions.

The bulk of the American infantry was held up at the shingle. Some soldiers dashed back to the water to seek shelter behind the German beach obstacles. Company A of the 29th Division's 1st Battalion, 116th Infantry Regiment, hit the beach and drew such heavy fire that within 10 minutes it ceased to be an effective fighting force.

## THE ATLANTIC WALL AND THE GERMAN ARMY

On December 14, 1941, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, chief of *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (Armed Forces High Command), had given orders for the construction of defensive positions along the European coastline. Keitel directed, "The coastal regions of the Arctic Ocean, North Sea, and Atlantic Ocean controlled by us are ultimately to be built into a new West Wall in order that we can repel with certainty any landing attempts, even if by the strongest enemy forces, with the smallest possible number of permanently assigned field troops." Until the latter part of 1943 the Atlantic Wall was not much of an invasion obstacle, but with a stalemate in Russia and the collapse of Axis dominance around the Mediterranean, German attention was finally focused on the French shores.

The coastal defensive works resembled the West Wall fortifications along the German frontier, except that Atlantic Wall casemates had wider firing embrasures to accommodate heavier guns. Responsibility for construction of the coastal forts fell to Organization Todt (a construction group that was a paramilitary arm of the Nazi regime) along with additional voluntary and forced labour. At one point, 260,000 labourers were employed in the effort.

The defenders, of necessity, were thinly stretched. General Erich Marcks, the one-legged commander of the German LXXXIV Corps, believed that the east coast of the Cotentin Peninsula was all too accessible to landings. Marcks' corps occupied a sector 400 kilometres wide with five divisions. The 716th Infantry covered 90 kilometres of coast and was backed by the 243rd and 352nd Infantry divisions. The 716th's coastal strongpoints were 600 to 1,000 metres apart, with gaps of up to 3 1/2 kilometres. To the west, the 709th Division covered 220 kilometres of shoreline, while the 319th Division sat isolated on the Channel Islands.

The 352<sup>nd</sup>, which deployed on the coast northwest of Bayeux alongside the 716th Division on March 19, 1944, was commanded by Major General Dietrich Kraiss, who had served as a company commander during World War I and led the 169th Infantry Division during the June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union. A battalion from the 716th and the 352nd's entire 915th Infantry Regiment were held in reserve at Bayeux. Kraiss did not like the idea of his troops spending too much time in prepared defences, and he rotated his regiments from coastal to reserve duty. Those regiments stationed on the coast were run through regular battle drills, the last of which was staged on the eve of the invasion.

During the last months of the Allied preparations to invade

## THE 2<sup>ND</sup> AND 5<sup>TH</sup> RANGER BATTALIONS ON D-DAY

The 2nd Ranger Battalion, activated on April 1st, 1943, at Camp Forrest, Tennessee trained and led by Lt. Colonel James Earl Rudder, carried out the most desperate and dangerous mission of the entire Omaha Beach landings - in Normandy, June 6th, 1944. General Bradley said of Colonel Rudder, "Never has any commander been given a more desperate mission."

Three companies, D, E, and F assaulted the perpendicular cliffs of Point Du Hoc under intense machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire and destroyed a large gun battery that would have wreaked havoc on the Allied fleets offshore. For two days and nights they fought without relief until the 5th Ranger Battalion linked up with them.

The 5th Ranger Battalion, commanded by Lt. Colonel Max Schneider, was part of the provisional Ranger Assault Force commanded by Colonel Rudder. It landed on Omaha Beach with three companies of the 2nd Battalion (A, B and C companies), where elements of the 116th Regiment of the 29th Infantry Division were pinned down by a murderous cross-fire and mortar attacks from the heights above. It was there that the situation was so critical that General Omar Bradley was seriously considering redirecting reinforcements to other areas of the beachhead. And it was then and there that General Norman D. Cota, Assistant Division Commander of the 29th Division, gave the now famous order that has become immortalised in the Motto of the 75th Ranger Regiment: "Rangers, lead the way off this beach."

The 5th Battalion Rangers broke across the sea wall and barbed wire entanglements, and up the pillbox-rimmed heights under intense enemy machine-gun and mortar fire and with A and B Companies of the 2nd Battalion and some elements of the 116th Infantry Regiment, advanced four miles to the key town of Vierville, thus opening the breach for supporting troops to follow-up and expand the beachhead. Meanwhile C Company of the 2nd Battalion, due to rough seas, landed west of the Vierville draw and suffered 50% casualties during the landing, but still scaled a 90 foot cliff using ropes and bayonets to knock out a formidable enemy position that was sweeping the beach with deadly fire.

The Fifth Battalion with elements of the 116th Regiment finally linked up with the beleaguered 2nd Battalion on D-Day +3, although Lt. Charles Parker of A Company, 5th Battalion, had penetrated deep behind enemy lines on D Day and reached the 2nd Battalion with 20 prisoners. Later, with the 2nd Battalion the unit distinguished itself in the hard-fought battle of Brest. Under the leadership of Lt. Colonel Richard Sullivan, the 5th Ranger Battalion took part in the Battle of the Bulge, Huertgen Forest and other tough battles throughout central Europe, winning two Distinguished Unit Citations and the French Croix de Guerre.

Normandy, the 352nd Division was not listed on any British or American rosters of the German order of battle. Organizationally, the 352nd was better off than most German divisions in

1944. At that time, as a result of severe personnel losses, German infantry divisions were generally reduced by one infantry battalion per regiment. The 352nd, however, retained its full complement of nine battalions. The 352nd began its coastal duty by improving the beach obstacles, emplacing mined stakes and timber structures. This involved not only cutting and hauling timber from miles inland but also driving stakes and piles deep in the sand. To fully cover the sector, they needed 10 million mines, but a scant 10,000 were available.

The first band of obstacles—about 250 yards out from the waterline at high tide—consisted of “Belgian Gates,” reinforced iron frames with iron supports that were built atop rollers. Next came a band of mined stakes and log ramps, meant to tear the bottoms out of landing craft or tip them over. Finally, there was a row of metal obstacles, including hedgehogs, made of iron rails. Although the Germans had attached mines to many of the obstacles, few of them were waterproofed, and corrosion had long since taken a toll on many of the explosive devices.

## OMAHA BEACH AND THE “BIG RED ONE”

The Allied invasion of Normandy’s coast was the result of lengthy and exhaustive planning. Although Pas de Calais was closer both to Britain and the excellent Belgian port of Antwerp, it was more strongly defended than Normandy, which had fewer extensive coastal fortifications and more defensible inland terrain. It also required more German troops to reinforce effectively. Furthermore, Normandy could be isolated from the Reich by air interdiction and by destroying the Seine bridges.

Selected for the assault on Omaha Beach were the U.S. 29th and 1st Infantry divisions. The 1st, known as the “Big Red One,” was a Regular Army division whose distinguished history included combat in World War I. The unit had participated in the Allied landings at Oran, Algeria, and Salerno, Sicily, and also fought in Tunisia. Major General Clarence R. Huebner took command of the division in August 1943. For the D-Day landings, the 1st was reinforced with elements of the 29th Division and supplemented by two Ranger battalions. The 1st Division’s 16th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) and the 29th’s 116th RCT would lead the first wave of the attack. Later waves would consist of the 115th RCT (29th Division) and 18th RCT (1st Division). Huebner had overall command of the landing force, while the 29th Infantry’s deputy commander, Brig. Gen. Norman D. Cota, would coordinate the battle on the western edge of the beachhead.

The 29th Infantry Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Charles H. Gerhardt, was originally a National Guard unit, with soldiers from Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania. It had fought in the Meuse-Argonne campaign during World War I and was one of the first U.S. divisions shipped to Europe in 1942. The 29th was part of Maj. Gen. Leonard T. Gerow’s V Corps. The division consisted of the 115th, 116th and 175th infantry regiments. The 116th RCT was reinforced by an additional 500 men in expectation of high casualties.

Inclement weather had caused Eisenhower to recall the invasion fleet after it sailed on June 4. Twenty-four hours later the fleet steamed into the Channel for a planned landing on June 6. The fleet began to drop anchor some 12 miles off Normandy’s

coast around 2:30 a.m. on the 6th. So far, none of this activity had been detected by the Germans, whose *Luftwaffe* was grounded by the weather. Motor torpedo boats and other patrol vessels, which usually kept watch in the Channel, had been recalled by Admiral Theodor Krancke, commander in chief of Naval Group Command West. German radar finally picked up the invasion fleet at 3:09 a.m., and Krancke belatedly dispatched his boats from Le Havre to investigate.

Allied landing craft began to depart from the transports at about 3:30 a.m. for the twelve mile run to shore. Life aboard ship had been miserable for the G.I.s, some of whom had been at sea since early June 4 and many of whom suffered from seasickness. By 5:30, a good portion of the first wave’s 3,000 men had clambered into landing craft in the choppy seas and were on their way to the beaches. The 1st Division’s 16th RCT would assault the eastern half of Omaha Beach, divided into Easy Red, Fox Green and Fox Red beaches. The 29th Division’s 116th RCT would land at Charlie, Dog Green, Dog White, Dog Red and Easy Green beaches.

General Bradley observed the landings from the heavy cruiser U.S.S. *Augusta*. At 5:30 a.m., Allied Bombarding Force C, including the U.S. battleships *Texas* and *Arkansas*, British cruiser *Glasgow* and Free French cruisers *Montcalm* and *Georges Leygues*, began blasting the beaches. Meanwhile, Martin B-26 Marauders, Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses and Consolidated B-24 Liberators began bombing the coastline. The G.I.s in the landing craft cheered them on, although the bombing proved to be ineffective. As General Bradley later recalled in his autobiography, “the 2.5 million pounds of bombs fell inland...killing some French civilians and many cattle, but few Germans.” Moreover, the naval gunfire proved largely ineffective thanks to the dust thrown up by the bombardment and the low clouds.

The landing craft were tossed about in the heavy swells, 10 of the boats sinking during their dash to the shore. Worse, 27 out of 32 canvas-enclosed DD (duplex drive) Sherman tanks, which had been specially modified to swim to the beach, floundered before reaching the shore. Three others were unable to get off their barge and had to be landed much later. The Big Red One would have to make do with only two tanks—both of which were waterlogged.

## THE GERMANS OPEN FIRE

When the assault craft were 400 yards from the beach, German shells began exploding around them. At 6:36 a.m. Company A, 116th RCT, was the first to land. Three landing craft slammed into offshore sandbars. One boat took a direct hit and sank, and another simply disappeared. The water was waist-deep or deeper, and the soldiers came under a murderous cross-fire. Within 10 minutes, Company A lost all its officers and N.C.O.s, and its overall casualties exceeded 75 percent. Company E suffered almost the same fate, largely because the German defences were concentrated on the area where the first troops landed—above two draws, or ravines, leading inland toward Colleville-sur-Mer and Vierville.

Allied planners were aware that there were a total of five ravines, which they labelled “exits,” leading from Omaha inland. It seemed likely that these exits, dotted with summer houses and

roads or trails that led farther inland, would provide the easiest access to the interior of the Cotentin Peninsula. The Germans had evacuated civilians from the buildings along those routes and used the structures to house troops and create defences. The exits were further fortified with sea walls and in some cases boasted anti-tank ditches as well.

Fire from alert German troops compounded the chaos reigning just offshore. Most of the landing craft had dropped their ramps too early, and the equipment-laden troops disappeared in the water as soon as they leaped from the boats. Some bobbed back to the surface, but many others did not. Rifles, helmets, packs and other heavy equipment, as well as the bodies of dead soldiers, settled on the sandy bottom as the Big Red One doggedly continued its assault. Countless pieces of engineering equipment and explosives, meant for use in clearing beach obstacles, sank or scattered.

Units of the 16th RCT crisscrossed each other and landed on beaches assigned to other units because of heavy currents that pushed the entire flotilla eastward. The first wave suffered close to 50 percent casualties. By mid-morning, more than 1,000 Americans lay dead or wounded on the sands of Omaha. On *Augusta*, General Bradley agonized over the chaotic situation: "Privately, I considered evacuating the beachhead and directing the follow-up troops to Utah Beach or the British beaches."

Despite slow progress in attaining the bluffs, by 7 a.m. the invasion force had opened six gaps through the German obstacles. General Cota landed at 7:30 a.m. and joined the 116th Regiment. His biggest challenge was to get his men off the beaches. The one clear path was straddled by sand dunes, rocky shingle, a stone and wooden sea wall and rolls of concertina wire. Urged on by Cota, soldiers from Company C and the 5th Ranger Battalion blew gaps in the wire and moved into a draw and on to the base of the bluffs, where they were protected from German fire. By 8:30 a.m. they had captured the German rifle pits at the crest of the cliffs. Their advance inland was then stopped by German flanking fire.

Meanwhile, the 116th's 3rd Battalion worked its way up the Les Moulins exit and moved toward St. Laurent. To the east, the 16th Infantry forced its way up the St. Laurent and Colleville-sur-Mer exits. German strongpoints were positioned on either side of the exits, but they had been built on the lower slopes of the bluffs, so their fire was limited to the beaches. At the intersection of the Les Moulins and St. Laurent exits, soldiers of the 1st and 29th Infantry divisions met just north of the village of St. Laurent. There, the Americans who reached the plateau above the beach faced much less resistance. The Germans in the bunkers and slit trenches found themselves surrounded and fought a confused two-hour battle until their commander and 20 men surrendered.

Near Colleville-sur-Mer, the 16th Infantry inched forward. When the 16th's commander, Colonel George A. Taylor, landed at 8:15 a.m. and found a group of soldiers bunched up on the beach, hesitant to go forward, he announced, "Two kinds of people are staying on this beach, the dead and those who are going to die. Now let's get the hell out of here." Taylor also sent a message to General Huebner that there were too many vehicles on the beach and requested that only infantrymen be landed. Huebner immediately responded by sending the 18th RCT ashore. Upon landing, they crossed the shingle and barbed wire to the Colleville-sur-Mer exit, where the 16th RCT was in the midst of a fierce battle.

Reassured by V Corps reports that forces on Omaha were moving inland, General Bradley approved the landing of additional regiments on Omaha instead of diverting them to some other beach. The U.S. 115th and 18th Infantry regiments came ashore and assumed the follow-up missions of the 116th and 16th R.C.T.s, moving inland toward Colleville-sur-Mer and Vierville.

By noon the U.S. 1st Division had cleared the Germans from the beaches and bluffs in its area, but in the 29th Division's area fire was still coming from German slit trenches and bunkers that had been bypassed or otherwise overlooked by the advancing troops.

The Germans made one more effort to destroy the Allied beachhead. The 1st Battalion of the 914th Regiment hit the Rangers at St.-Pierre-du-Mont, just southeast of Pointe-du-Hoc. Although the Rangers suffered heavy casualties, they were able to keep the Germans at bay with mortars, and they also directed artillery fire at the attackers from a destroyer offshore. The following day Kraiss finally ordered the withdrawal of his battered division, which had suffered about 1,200 casualties.

Sixty percent of the U.S. 2nd Ranger Battalion had become casualties in its two days of fierce fighting within a 200 yard perimeter. Overall, 1st Division losses for D-Day were estimated at 1,036, 29th Division losses at 743 and corps troops at 441.

Omaha Beach was secure, but the Americans still faced six weeks of fighting in the hedgerow country before they could escape the Cotentin Peninsula. Throughout that time, the G.I.s of the 1st and 29th divisions would repeatedly be in conflict with the same nemesis that first met them on Bloody Omaha; the 352nd Infantry Division.

## THE SCENARIO

After Miller's Rangers make it onto the beach, chaos ensues as the Germans flood the beach with machine-gun and mortar fire. Soldiers huddle behind the beach obstacles for cover, and Miller orders them forward, realising that they will be cut to pieces if they stay on the beach. They make it to a sand dune which offers some cover against the German fire, but the way forward



is blocked. As mortar shells fall all around them and men are picked off one by one, Captain Miller decides to move. Detonating a gap in the wire, the Rangers reach their first bit of appreciable cover. Here, Miller plans his next step, which is to take out a German machine-gun nest currently pouring fire down onto the beach.

## CAPTAIN MILLER'S RANGERS

You are Captain Miller, commanding officer of a company of the 2nd Rangers Battalion. Your men have landed on the beach only to be badly mauled by German fire. It is your priority to clear the German machine gun nests before they kill more of your troops. You have several men under your command, mostly troops from your own company, but there are others who have become lost and attached to you in the confusion of the landing. You've cleared a path to the base of a cliff upon which rests a machine gun post. Without armour support, it is up to you to clear the nest and secure the rest of the landing ground.

You can only put up a limited amount of covering fire with your weapons, but there is a machine gun nest nearby that may contain useful weaponry that you may be able to use. You are also aware of a small team of German riflemen advancing under cover towards the machine gun nest in a bid to turn the guns against you once again.

## SERGEANT HANS GRUEBER

You've been strafing the beaches with gunfire for what seems an eternity, but still the Americans advance. Your machine gun post is the last between the beaches and the rifle pits at the top of the heights, and you have little option but to stand your ground and hold off what seems to be an overwhelming tide of enemy infantry. If you can aid your comrades in stalling this attack, it is possible that you may be reinforced, thus driving the Americans back into the sea. However, you have no choice other than to stay put and hope for the best at the moment.

A small group of riflemen are nearby, and they too are trying to pick off the invaders. They seem to have spotted an advance group of American soldiers that seem to be preparing to assault your position, and you realise that if you can halt this advance, you may deter the enemy from trying this approach up the heights again. There is also an old machine-gun nest lying fur-

ther down the heights, and you are determined to stop the Americans from using any equipment they may salvage from there against you. If your riflemen can make it to the nest, they may be able to utilise the L.M.G. against the Americans and put an end to their advance.

## THE FORCES

The American force consists of Captain Miller (armed with an S.M.G.), Sergeant Hovarth (armed with a carbine), Private Daniel Boone Jackson (armed with a sniper rifle) and eight riflemen.

The German force consists of Sergeant Grueber (armed with an S.M.G.), an MG42 team and eight riflemen.

## DEPLOYMENT AND TERRAIN

The destroyed sea wall and various impact craters offer good cover for the advancing Americans, but the Germans are in superior dug-outs and are in an excellent defensive position. The table does not need to be large if you can place enough terrain on it to prevent clear fields of fire; most of the action should be confined to a 3' x 3' or a 4' x 4' table with plenty of places to hide.

## SPECIAL RULES

There is a machine gun nest halfway across the board that can be used by troops from either side. Two soldiers from either side can form an L.M.G. team (statistics as for a German MG42 L.M.G.) if they occupy the former nest. For the purposes of this scenario, the L.M.G. can not be moved from the nest, and to fire it, there must be two soldiers from the same side alive in the nest (designate one as a loader and one as a gunner). The leaders of both forces can not be used to make this team.

Private Jackson is a sniper, and a very good one. He can only use his sniper skills if he is good cover, and gains a +2 bonus to all dice rolls for firing while in cover.

## VICTORY CONDITIONS

The battle between the L.M.G. group and the G.I.'s will be a bloody affair. This scenario ends when 75% of the troops on one side are dead or suffering from serious wounds. This side is the loser.