Operation Overlord

A First-Hand Account of the D-Day Invasion from a 5th Ranger Company Commander

A Landing Craft Assault on display at Utah Beach in Normandy, France. These landing craft were used extensively in World War II, including the invasion of Normandy.

General John Raaen.

By Nick Van Der Linden, Director of Communications, LeadingAge Florida

Dressed in their olive drab fatigue uniforms, two riflemen of the 5th Ranger Infantry Battalion stood on the bridge of the British Landing Ship Prince Baudouin to shoot at, and explode, floating mines in the cold, stormy, pitch-black night. Their only source of light was the occasional fluorescence of breaking waves.

When the time came to board their seven Landing Craft Assault (LCA), the Rangers of the 5th Battalion crammed into three rows with no shoulder or knee room as they made their way to the beaches. The LCA rides low in the sea and easily takes on water from even the smallest waves. This day, waves of six to eight feet battered the seven tiny transports. Drenched and seasick, they had two hours to go before reaching shore.

As dawn approached, forms of other ships slowly appeared in the morning twilight, and the horizon began to take shape. In the distance, they heard the rumbling of bombs battering the coast one last time in preparation for their landfall.

Years of meticulous planning and training all came down to this. The boat ramp opened, and men were already blanketed by artillery fire. They jumped, ran and crawled trying to make their way to the nearest area of cover, all while carrying 80 pounds of equipment.

For most, the scene is impossible to fathom, but this was the reality for the more than 150,000 Allied service members on June 6, 1944, known more commonly as D-Day.

The generation who knows D-Day beyond the black and white photos – a generation that saw it with their eyes, heard it through their ears and experienced it firsthand – is shrinking. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that fewer than 2 percent of the 16 million Americans who served in World War II are still alive.

Major General John Raaen of the 5th Ranger Battalion is one of those service members who landed on Omaha Beach as part of the first wave on June 6, 1944.

He is one of the last surviving officers of that invasion.

A Life of Service

Born on April 22, 1922 at Fort Benning, Georgia, John C. Raaen, Jr., describes his background using one word: military.

"My father was an Army officer, and I served all of my life with him," Raaen said. "I lived on Army posts for most of my early life whenever there were quarters available, and if there weren't, we lived in the nearest big civilian town. It was a very good life."

Most of Raaen's adolescent years were during the Great Depression, but he said his family was fortunate not to have suffered, due in part to their military service.

"Those of us in the Army who were able to serve on Army posts had it made during the depression," Raaen said. "When they stopped paying the military services, they allowed you to go to the

post exchange, the post commissary, the quartermaster store, the special services, movies, haircuts, whatever it was, and you just signed your name. And then after the depression was thought to be over, you had to gradually repay those chits back to the government, but you didn't have to worry. We had stores and we had money, so it was a good, good life. I never suffered during the depression, and I don't know that my father and mother did. They never discussed it with me. Everything seemed to be happy and healthy."

At age 17, Raaen entered the Military Academy at West Point and roughly three months later, the war in Europe started.

In 1943 Raaen was accepted into the Ranger Infantry Battalion, training at Camp Forrest in Tennessee before moving to Fort Pierce, Florida, for amphibious training. Raaen's Battalion later moved to Dorchester, England, where they were in pre-invasion mode and went on a major multi-division maneuver.

"Sea landing ground maneuver was very interesting, and we had cliff climbing training because of the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc where we were going to land, so we had to learn how to climb the cliffs. After that, we waited for the invasion," he said.

"One day, they said, 'This is it.' And we took our trucks down to Portland Harbor."

The Decisive Battle

The weather on the morning of June 6 was foul with a biting wind. In the water, in front of the beaches, the Germans placed row upon row of obstacles designed to either prevent boats from reaching the shore or to disorganize the landing craft formations so that any troops reaching the shore would be scattered.

The beach contained 14 strongpoints all heavily protected by minefields, barbed wire and trenches. Trenches were armed with artillery, mortars, machine guns and infantry.

Because of the heavy assault and casualties experienced by troops making initial landfall at Pointe de Hoc, Raaen's unit had to adjust and land further down the beach than initially planned.

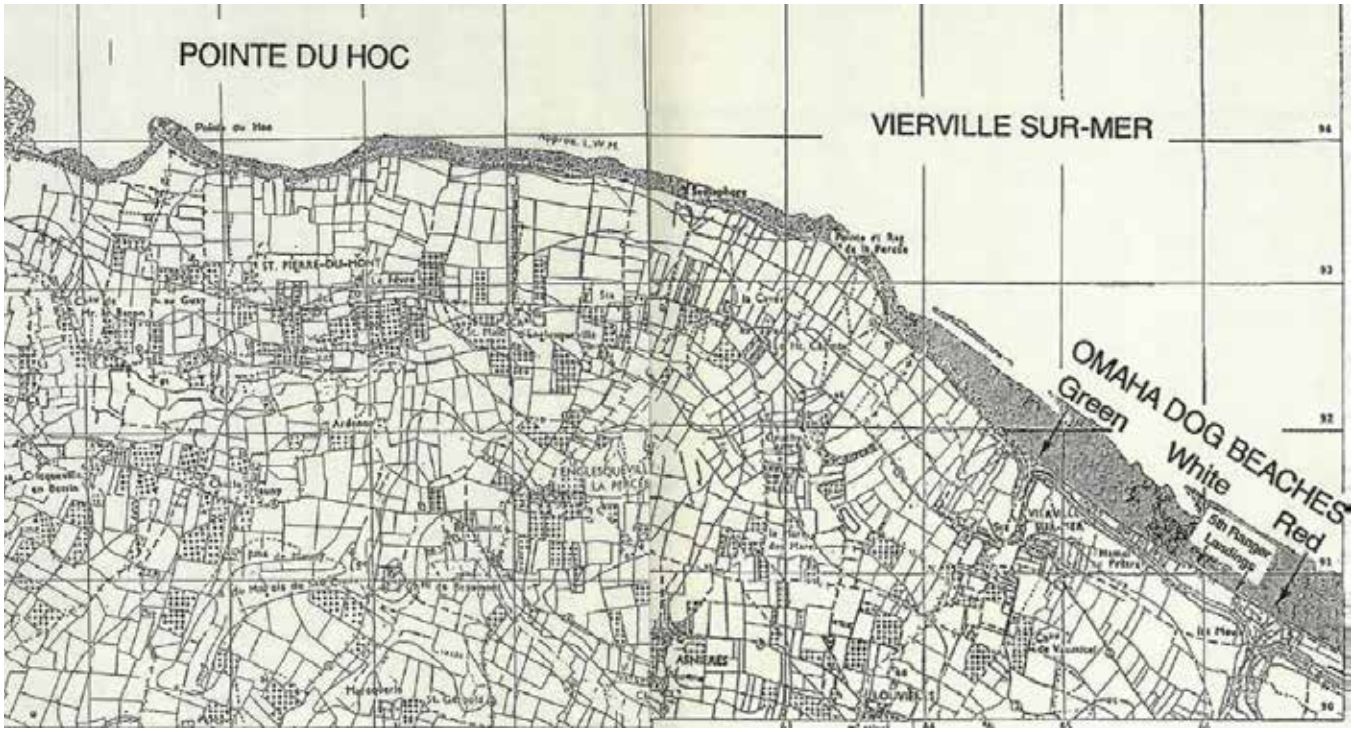
"My particular wave was waved off," he said. "We were told not to land at Pointe de Hoc. We then went to Vierville and were waved off there by landing command and control. So we went to the juncture of Omaha Dog White and Omaha Dog Green. The first of our three waves landed and was butchered. They had over 50 percent casualties."

The scene on the beach was surreal. Ammunition of all kinds was hitting at the water's edge, machine gun and rifle fire left and right. As Rangers were pouring out of LCAs, men were being hit as they left the craft and struggled across the beach. Dead and wounded lay in the water and across the sand. Those who could crawled out of the water before the advancing tides on all sides. The wounded were screaming for medics. The noise was deafening.

Raaen's battalion commander decided to move the landing down another 800 yards where the beach was comparatively calmer than the other sections because of the breakwaters. At 7:40 a.m. they landed on Omaha Beach.

"Because of the breakwaters, we were not subject to as much fire that could incapacitate our unit, and we landed two waves, the entire 5th Ranger Infantry Battalion, on Omaha Dog Red. You'll hear that we landed on Dog White – wrong. I was the only boat that landed on Dog White."

Because boats were scattered during the landing, units had to reorganize on the beach. Once reorganized, Bangalore torpedoes were



A map of Pointe du Hoc and Vierville, two focal points of the amphibious assault carried out by Allied forces during the early morning hours of June 6, 1944.

General Raaen in Toul, France.

used to blow holes in the barbed wire, allowing men to move through the gaps, across the flat, and begin their climb up the bluffs.

On their way to the top the men had to pass through thick smoke from brush fires.

"The smoke was so heavy that I'd say about 50 percent of the people finally had to put on gas masks just to get to the top," Raaen said. "Of course, when you were in the smoke, you were not a target for the enemy. So that was pleasant. But when you had to put the gas mask on, it became very unpleasant."

Just before clearing the top, Raaen looked back and took in the scene below once more. Nothing had changed. Boats were still landing troops. Artillery was still hitting near the water's edge. Small arms fire was pouring in from the west flank, and infantry troops were struggling through the gaps in the wire to join in the climb up the bluffs.

Despite the carnage of the beach landing, the hard part was not yet over. The farmland and fields of Normandy were crisscrossed by countless forest-like hedgerows, which made for tough troop navigation, while creating a perfect setting for defense. The Germans had filled those hedgerows with mortars and machine gun nests, as well as their tanks and special camouflage uniforms, which allowed the Germans to blend in perfectly. The Allied had to engage the enemy meter by meter, hedgerow by hedgerow. Unlike previous battles, success wasn't measured by miles of land taken, but rather the number of hedgerows put behind them.

As they were sitting along the side of one of the many hedgerows, one of Raaen's men asked him "What do you think of it so far, Captain?" To which Raaen responded, "Kind of exciting, isn't it?"

The Ranger Force would then make its way up the coastal road toward Vierville before their final destination of Pointe de Hoc, where they would reconnect with troops and carry out their mission of establishing a beachhead.

"As we fought through to the other side of Vierville we ran into fortifications, German fortifications," Raaen said. "We pulled back a little bit, reorganized so that we could proceed on to our Ranger mission. And we were told, no, the beachhead is too fragile. We want you to stay where you are and strengthen the beachhead until we're sure

General Raaen presents a framed photo to President Donald Trump at the 75th anniversary of D-Day in Arromanches, Normandy, France on Thursday, June 9, 2019.

General Raaen during his retirement ceremony.

this counterattack can't push us back into the English Channel, which we did very resentfully because our buddies were out there five miles away from us with no support from anybody. Period.

"A little later, they were able, through signal lights and signal flags, to get some naval gunfire support. But at first they were just sitting there on top of those cliffs that they just climbed and were under counterattack by the Germans. And it was nip and go for them. We didn't rescue them until two days later. It was, I think, the ninth of June that we finally were able to get to them."

The days thereafter were spent securing and taking out coastal fortifications from Grandcamp-les Bains to Isigny and in patrolling the battalion bivouac area.

In five days of fighting, the battalion had 23 men killed, 89 wounded and two missing. Approximately 850 German prisoners were taken, and some 350 Germans were killed.

Lasting Impact

D-Day, code-named Operation Overlord, was the turning point in the war that began to shift the control of Western Europe maintained at the time by Nazi Germany. Less than a year after the invasion, the Allies formally accepted Nazi Germany's surrender.

To this day the Allied invasion of June 6, 1944, remains one of the biggest and most significant military campaigns in history.

After World War II, Raaen also served in the Korean and Vietnam Wars and would go on to have major commands in both the Army and Defense Department. Major General John C. Raaen, Jr., retired in 1979 after 36 years of devoted service.

He now lives at the Mayflower Retirement Community, nestled in the picturesque city of Winter Park, enjoying the more peaceful and quiet parts of life.

Raaen says he enjoys reading and stays busy as the subject of a lot of interviews, sharing his D-Day experience with news outlets from all over the world.

"I share my story through both phone interviews and in-house interviews, some taking as long as four hours," he said. "My interview with BBC took four hours and of course I got about 30 seconds in the documentary they ended up putting out."

Raaen recently celebrated his 100th birthday.

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A signboard indicating the location of sectors Charlie and Dog Green, two of the ten Omaha Beach sectors.