



V Corps in the Normandy landings and the fight for northern France

ON JUNE 6, 1944, V Corps entered battle in France. Before World War II ended 11 months and three days later, the corps saw 338 days of continuous combat and advanced roughly 1,300 miles from Normandy to Czechoslovakia in the course of five hard-fought campaigns.

**By Dr. Charles Kirkpatrick
V Corps Historian**

At 0415 on the morning of June 6 1944, V Corps troops sat in landing craft 10 miles off the Normandy beaches of northern France, awaiting the dawn, awaiting the dawn.

At 0630, local time, "Force O," soldiers from the 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions under command of Maj. Gen. Clarence R. Huebner, commander of the "Big Red One," began wading through the surf on a beach code-named Omaha.



Maj. Gen. Leonard T. Gerow commanded V Corps for the D-Day landings of 1944 and the Battle of the Bulge.

G-1 SECTION JOURNAL							Out	To	Action taken
G-1 Reg. No.	Time Dated	From Hq	Form	Section From	Subject				
1	021800				V Corps CP + G-1 Section opened o/b USS ANCON - MAJ SLINGLUFF M/SGT SORENSON ON DUTY				
	0516Z				UNDER WEIGHT				
3	060630				H HOUR D DAY			D	
4	062700				CP ESTABLISHED ASHORE 1 MI E ST LAURENT-SUR-MERSE, FRANCE. MAJ COL LEE MAJ SLINGLUFF SGT O'ROGAN PRESENT				
5	075100				COL LEE LEFT CP TO VISIT 1ST ID			D+1	
					29 Div				
6D	0830				COL RETURNED TO CP WITH 1ST ID DIV CASUALTY ESTIMATES				
	1520				MAJ SLINGLUFF VISITED 1ST DIV				
8	1630				" " RETURNED TO CP 1ST DIV WILL REPORT CASUALTIES BY 08-0600				
9D	1900				MSG FR ARMY REQUESTING PERSONNEL LOSSES				

R.L. Slingsluff, USA

The duty log for the V Corps personnel division on June 6, 1944 shows the notation "H HOUR D DAY."

It was a hard fight from the very beginning. Expecting to find only a single German regiment defending the beach, the assault troops were instead confronted by major elements of the 352nd Infantry Division that had come through the preliminary aerial and naval gunfire bombardment with little damage to its prepared defenses on the bluffs above the shore.



One of the first waves at Omaha Beach in the invasion of Normandy, June 6, 1944. The Coast Guard caption identifies the unit as Company E, 16th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division

Heavy seas and bad weather complicated landings for the 34,142 soldiers and 3,306 vehicles of the initial assault wave. Almost three-fourths of the assault vehicles and artillery were lost when landing craft capsized or foundered, and nearly all of the amphibious (Duplex Drive) M4 Sherman tanks launched 6,000 yards out failed to reach the shore. Those tanks that Army and Navy commanders on the spot decided to land directly on the beach, rather than launching at sea, suffered heavy losses in the opening minutes of the assault.

Soldiers struggled through heavy surf and then across 200 to 300 yards of open, mined beach, and then found themselves pinned down behind a seawall or, further down the beach, a line of dunes, by unexpectedly heavy fire. Eventually, they also discovered that virtually every unit had landed in the wrong place, and that their carefully prepared assault plans, thoroughly rehearsed against terrain models in England, were worthless.

When "Force B," under Maj. Gen. Charles H. Gerhard, commander of the 29th Infantry Division, began landing its 25,117 men of the follow-on waves, most of the first two attack waves were still at the water's edge, having taken heavy casualties among officers and noncommissioned officers.

Desperate for information, V Corps Commander Maj. Gen. Leonard T. Gerow, then aboard the command ship U.S.S. Ancon, dispatched his Assistant Chief of Staff, Col. Benjamin B. Talley, to find out what was happening on the beach. Talley embarked on an amphibious truck, a DUKW, and with a detachment of troops spent several hours cruising back and forth some 500 yards off Omaha beach, ultimately landing there to serve as a liaison officer between elements of the 1st Infantry Division and the corps commander.

At first impression, the situation was a disaster, with the assault evidently stopped and follow-on boats milling about offshore. Talley, later decorated with a Distinguished Service Cross for his actions on D-Day, was eventually able to report to an anxious Gerow and Huebner that the corps attack was making its way inland, but not before several anxious hours had passed.

Omaha turned out to be the most tenaciously defended of the invasion beaches, and the site of the bloodiest fighting. Around noon, Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley, First Army commander, feared that the landings on Omaha had failed and seriously considered evacuating the beach. By the time that decision had to be made, however, the movement off the beach that Talley had observed had finally begun to retrieve the situation. Leaders of every rank began to collect groups of soldiers together and took them up the bluffs, where they assaulted the German defenses from the rear and thus, at last, began to establish a beachhead.



Maj. Gen. Clarence R. Huebner rose from the rank of sergeant in World War I to command the 1st Infantry Division on D-Day. The following January he assumed command of V Corps and led it through the end of World War II.

Gerow revised the landing schedule for follow-on waves of troops to reinforce those portions of the shore where progress was possible and coordinated naval gunfire to support the assaults to take the five draws that led away from the invasion beach. "Thank God for the Navy," Gerow told Bradley, reporting that destroyers had literally sailed into the surf as little as 800 yards from the beach to fire directly at bunkers and machine gun positions that were holding up the attack.



By mid-day, valor and leadership at all levels had resolved a dangerous situation. In the early afternoon, the corps beachhead and all five exits from the beach were secured and weary soldiers had begun to move inland. That afternoon, the corps established its first command post in Europe five hundred yards from the front line just below the bluffs along the beach at Le Rouquet.

Under V Corps command, assault troops of the 29th (Blue and Gray) Infantry Division came ashore at H-hour, D-Day. The National Guard troops from Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia found themselves in the vanguard of the Allied attack. In those early hours on the fire-swept beach the 116th Infantry Combat Team clawed its way through Les Moulins draw toward its objective, Vierville-sur-Mer. During the movement from Les Moulins the 2nd Battalion broke loose, clambered over the embankment, and a small party fought its way to a farmhouse that became its first command post in France.

The first day of war had been a sobering one. In 15 hours of combat, V Corps had taken approximately 2,500 casualties.



The corps landed the remainder of the two assault divisions and the 2nd Infantry and 2nd Armored Divisions over the succeeding days. During the next two weeks, the corps gradually expanded its shallow lodgment on the Norman coast, taking the fighting into the hedgerow country behind the beaches.

A belt of land averaging 50 miles in depth, the hedgerows, or bocage, consisted of a seemingly endless series of interlocked fields, each bounded by earthen berms on which shrubbery and trees grew thickly. The fields were natural forts that gave the Germans enormous defensive advantages and denied the allies the use of their single most important advantage — mobility. The fighting was extremely costly, and V Corps suffered another 3,300 casualties before the hedgerows were behind it.

By June 11, the corps had finally reached its D-Day objectives, and two days later occupied an eight-kilometer front that lay 30 kilometers inland from the shore. Defensive operations consumed the next two weeks as the Allies brought sufficient supplies and ammunition ashore to support a general attack.

A headline from Wednesday, June 7, 1944 tells the tale: the beginning of the end of World War II had come.