

The Influence of the Noncommissioned Officer on 6 June, 1944
“Noncoms, Take The Men Off The Beach!”

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Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force! You are about to embark upon the great crusade, to which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty loving peoples everywhere march with you. In company with our brave allies, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world. Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking. (Gen Eisenhower's Order of the Day, 4 June 1944)

The American Army fought the climactic battle of World War II on the beaches of the Normandy coast. The battle engaged the soldiers of democracy against the soldiers of totalitarianism. It was a battle to the death, and in the summer of 1944 the outcome was anything but, a foregone conclusion. The outcome of this single battle would determine the outcome of the war. Simply put, the fate of the free world rested on the shoulders of a bunch of twenty year-olds. These magnificent warriors of democracy trained for over two years for the ultimate test of the twentieth century. They had the best equipment the American people could provide and the bravado to match. Only a few of them however had ever been in combat, or for that matter had ever killed or seen a friend killed. Most were men like Sergeants William Owens, B. McKinney, J. Storm and Julius Belcher. They had never heard a shot fired in anger. They were young men who witnessed a potential disaster in the making. Missed airborne drops, scattered and unorganized units were the norm everywhere along the Normandy Coast. On the beaches, the 116th and 16th Infantry Regiments of the 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions, landed, and within minutes many of their companies ceased to exist as fighting units. These shattered companies sustained 60-80 percent casualties, with most of their Officers

and Senior NCOs killed or wounded. In the wake of this looming disaster, the surviving NCOs and junior leaders shouldered the responsibility of leading what was left of their companies. The alternative was certain death under relentless German guns. These NCOs and soldiers rallied and led the remaining troops to storm the bluffs, assault the fortified positions, and to move on toward their D-Day objectives. During the first hours of the invasion many of these troops fought through to their objectives with as little as two or three men. The initial waves of Infantry paid for every inch of ground with the blood of their brothers. Their initial sacrifice enabled the follow-on waves to gain the Army's foothold on Hitler's Festung Europa (Fortress Europe). In one 24 hour period on 6 June 1944, the Allied Armies landed 175,000 fighting men and 50,000 vehicles at a cost of some 4900 casualties. This was the largest invasion of a hostile shore ever attempted, and the fate of the entire world hung in the balance. The role of Generals Eisenhower, Bradley, and Montgomery became very important, but paled in comparison to the critical role played by the Army's junior leaders and Noncommissioned Officers. On D-Day, the American NCOs contributions in terms of blood and leadership at the most critical moment of the battle, allowed the armies of democracy to prevail. Their influence and actions in the face of certain death and disaster was the critical aspect that allowed the U.S. Army to smash through Hitler's vaunted Atlantic Wall. The U.S. Army became battered and bloodied on the Normandy coast; but more importantly this was the exact moment in history when the NCO Corps took its first steps to becoming the preeminent small unit combat leaders in the world.

For over 225 years the Noncommissioned Officer has always played an important role in the U.S. Army. For most of the Army's history NCOs were administrators and policy enforcers for the Officer Corps. NCO roles mainly dealt with

the maintenance of good order and discipline, standards of conduct, dress, and drill.

However, their role in combat operations prior to WWII was at best a limited one. In combat the NCOs would help the officers maintain the fighting formations, relay combat orders, and help rally the troops; but the Officers were always *in charge* and had always *led the charge*! The lethality of modern warfare was about to change this, forever!

The Plan of attack for the beaches was a frontal assault. Some beaches would be easier than others. On OMAHA, the Germans had placed three belts of mined obstacles 50 meters apart along the entire length of the beach. H-Hour would come at the low tide; companies would land abreast along the entire width of the invasion beach. This would allow the maximum number of troops to be on the beach with no danger of the landing craft striking any of the numerous mined obstacles. The Infantry would assault through while the accompanying Engineers would blow holes or lanes in the obstacle belts. This allowed the follow on waves of landing craft to float in on the tide through the cleared lanes. The only problem with this part of the plan was the Infantry had to cover 200 meters of open beach just to reach the sea wall. German guns of all types and calibers from 155mm cannon to 7.62mm machine guns were all laid in with interlocking fires along the entire length of the beach. Their enfilading fires covered every inch of the beach and it would require a superhuman effort to punch through it. The 16th and the 116th Infantry Regiments were the first wave; the slaughter among their lead companies was horrific. Most of the men lost their equipment and weapons in the surf, those that made it though the murderous crossfire sought the safety and cover of the sea wall. The sacrifice of these lead companies was not in vain. The remnants of the first wave littered the beaches in the form of dead body's, discarded weapons, and equipment. This equipment would make a life and death difference for the following waves of

infantry. The 2nd and 3rd waves of infantry came in as the tide was rising and in many cases had to abandon everything or drown, in order to make their way to shore. The survivors of the first waves huddled behind a two foot sea wall, their only protection. To these men it must have seemed that they had just waded through the gates of Hell! The survivors found themselves exhausted, petrified, weaponless, and virtually leaderless. An unnamed officer from the 116th Regiment was the only officer to make it to the sea wall in his particular sector. He was immediately mortally wounded. The words he chose for his last order inspired the men around him into a surge of fury, and would never be forgotten by those that heard them. *“Noncoms, take the men off the beach!”* This was the NCOs moment of truth; lead now, or be slaughtered where the stood. At this exact moment in the battle, NCOs along the entire invasion front rose to the challenge. They rallied the survivors and started to fight back. Men like Sergeants Julius Belcher, Benjamin McKinney, and J. Storm, immediately assessed their situations. They had the men around them gather weapons and ammo, they then task organized the survivors into ad hoc assault teams. These assault teams instinctively reverted back to their training, they started to suppress the enemy positions, maneuver to his flanks, and to close with and destroy him. Slowly at first, but in ever increasing waves the infantry moved across the beaches, up the bluffs, to storm the fortified trenches and positions. The Germans fate in Normandy was set, and the long slow march into the heart of Nazi Germany would start from the Norman beaches.

The lethality of the modern battlefield during WWII required a change in tactics. No longer would the Officers exclusively lead the charge. Although the officers would always maintain overall control, the torch had passed into the capable hands of the Noncommissioned Officers. History has shown us that wars are won by fighting through

at the lowest level; by shooting, moving, and communicating; by closing with and destroying the enemy; and by taking and holding ground. The American Army's Noncommissioned Officer Corps would forevermore be the one's who would lead the assaults at the squad and fire team level; it would be their charge to motivate and lead the troops at the point of battle.

The influence of the U.S. Army NCOs in Normandy allowed the Allies to smash into Hitler's Festung Europa. D-Day was the first day of a new era for NCOs. Forever more; the American NCO would be known as the world's preeminent small unit combat leader. He came of age and honed his combat skill, on the battlefields of World War II. The Noncommissioned Officers' accepted their new role out of love of country in the 1940s; out of necessity on the 6th of June 1944; and finally, out of love for their fellow soldiers forevermore; until there are No More Wars!

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