

Detroit Free Press

The Way We Live

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LOCAL FLAVOR

Highland Park coffee company brews a robust cup.

TUESDAY IN FOOD,

ONLY IN THE FREE PRESS

SUSAN AGER'S COLUMN WILL RETURN



PORTRAITS OF WAR

By JEFF SEIDEL &
RICHARD JOHNSON

FREE PRESS STAFF

A LIFE ON BORROWED TIME

60 years after D-Day, a Normandy veteran from Michigan recalls the horror of war and his struggle to cope with the memories



Warner family photo

Bill Warner, who joined the Coast Guard in 1941, is a D-Day veteran.



Warner likes to watch ships pass



ROCHELLE RILEY

Benefactors should give for city's good

The last time, it was simple. When Plymouth philanthropist Robert Thompson tried to donate \$200 million worth of new charter high schools to the city of Detroit, and the city — buoyed by legislators and some community leaders — rejected the offer, I railed against the decision.

This year, there's a new Thompson offer in jeopardy. But this time, it is Thompson who is withholding a promised \$10 million gift to help raze 1,400 dilapidated buildings around the city, some near schools.

This time, Thompson is wrong. Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick asked for \$12.4 million for demolition and the Detroit City Council approved \$8.9 million.

Those who speak for Thompson said his goal wasn't to simply replace budget funding, that he wanted to contribute over and above the budget.

But I don't recall the gift being called a matching grant when he offered it.

An ambitious proposal

When Thompson offered to fund at least 15 charter schools much like the successful University Prep High School that he helped fund in central Detroit, city leaders and school officials wanted him to donate the money to the school district. Thompson refused, basing his decision on a history of mismanagement of funds within the district.

Thompson also wanted the schools run his way. With the shape that some of the schools are in, it didn't seem too much to ask. But legislators and community activists didn't trust Thompson, wanting instead for the school system to charter the schools and run them. Critics also charged that the charter schools would devastate the city schools by taking state funding.

Not taking the first \$200 million was a bad idea.

But Thompson appeared to be larger than the worst of Detroit, more noble than those who would not accept his help. His offer of money to help make Detroit better in spite of itself made him appear to be the winner after all.

And now, he's threatening to take that away.

I hope he changes his mind.

Bill Warner, who joined the Coast Guard in 1941, is a D-Day veteran.

Bill Warner sits in a blue La-Z-Boy recliner, sipping whiskey, trying to dull his memory, trying to make the ghosts disappear. Seagram's. 7 & 7. But it doesn't

work. His eyes look distant and tortured. The television is tuned to the war in Iraq, Fox News morning to night, as another generation of kids goes off to war.

As Warner sits in an 11th-floor co-op apartment in Wyandotte, next to a window overlooking the Detroit River, the past and present blur.

"The vision I get is shattered, shredded bodies," says the 81-year-old World War II veteran, glancing at the soldiers on television. "That's what I see when I look at young soldiers going to war. I think of what I saw: shattered, shredded bodies. We hauled them out of France quite a few times, back to England."

Sixty years ago today, Warner crawled across the wet sand of Normandy, where everything would change: the world, the nation and a generation of men like himself. D-Day affected every aspect of Bill Warner's life — how he lived, how he worked and how he raised his five children.

World War II survivors are dying at

a rate of about 1,000 a day, but Warner is still here, still breathing, still haunted by his crystal-clear memory.

"A Civil War general got it right," he says. "War is hell and it happens over and over and over again."

Sometimes, to the same person.

For Bill Warner, 60 years is separated by nothing but a single breath — and it smells like whiskey.

JUNE 6, 1944

Sitting in a harness behind a 30-caliber air-cooled machine gun, Bill Warner stared at the horizon, heading to Omaha Beach in a 36-foot boat filled with troops from the 29th Infantry. Dark, heavy clouds filled the sky. The beach was hidden behind a wall of smoke and fire, like a hazy curtain over the doorway to hell.

"I was ready to shoot, but there was nothing I could see," Warner says. "If a Kraut had popped up, I would have tickled his butt."

As 5,300 boats headed toward the beaches of Normandy — American

forces would land 73,000 troops during the invasion, including 43,250 on Omaha Beach, trying to push the Germans out of France — he had only one expectation: This is where he was going to die. Warner, who was 21, stood 5-foot-6 and weighed 120 pounds, had written his last will and testament with the help of a Navy storekeeper, leaving everything to his infant son, Bruce.

"Your wife is young and pretty, undoubtedly, she'll marry again," he was advised. Born in Detroit but raised on a farm in the Upper Peninsula, on a finger of land that jugged into Lake Superior, Warner had married his high school sweetheart, Jean, before he shipped out to war.

Airplanes filled the sky — oh, how Warner loved to watch the planes, he always wanted to be a pilot — and Navy destroyers shot shells over his head, trying to destroy the German pillboxes protecting the shore.

Warner, positioned on the left side of the wooden Higgins boat, named

Please see WARNER, Page 2G

Warner likes to watch ships passing by on the Detroit River from the 11th-floor Wyandotte apartment he shares with his wife, Jean.



ABOUT THIS SERIES

For "Portraits of War," Detroit Free Press reporter Jeff Seidel and illustrator Richard Johnson traveled overseas, living with the troops and civilians who were caught up in the war in Iraq.

The series continued with "The Home Front," with Seidel and Johnson writing about people in Michigan affected by the war.

Today's "Portraits of War" is about one Michigan soldier and his experiences in another war: the invasion of Normandy on D-Day, 60 years ago today.

> D-DAY TIMELINE, PAGE 3G

PORTRAITS OF WAR

By JEFF SEIDEL & RICHARD JOHNSON | FREE PRESS STAFF

A LIFE ON BORROWED TIME

From Page 1G

after its designer, Andrew Higgins, shivered from the hard cold wind as the boat bucked and crashed into the waves. Freezing water splashed against his face. Most of the soldiers were bent over with seasickness. "The whole bottom of that barge was full of puke," Warner says. "The soldiers were hanging on the side, puking, afraid they were going to die, and a lot of them did."

The soldiers were given what they were told were seasickness pills, but Warner refused to take them. "They gave you pills wrapped in tinfoil," he says. "They said, 'Ten minutes before you hit the beach, take the pills.' Who's kidding whom? That's some kind of dope. Run. Be afraid. I didn't take them."

Inching closer to shore, Warner was caught in the crossfire. "The American and French battleships were firing right over us," he says. "The Germans were sitting on the hill up there, shooting 88s (88-mm shells), mortars and machine guns at us."

As they approached a wrecked British Landing Craft Transport, a German mortar hit a corner of the craft.

"There was a flash, an explosion," Warner says.

American sailors on another Higgins boat saw the explosion and assumed that everybody in Warner's boat was lost. "They're all dead," they cried. "They're all dead." Before the day would end, a letter was mistakenly drawn up, notifying Warner's family that he had died.

The plan was to get the boat to shore, drop off the troops, turn around and pick up another load of troops for the next assault.

But Warner's Higgins boat was stuck about 75 yards from Omaha Beach, near Colleville-sur-Mer. He watched the coxswain, the boat's driver.

"I see him," Warner says, his eyes glazed, looking back 60 years. "He has a lever. I see him go forward and back. He wanted to go all the way to the beach but he couldn't make it go."

So many soldiers had died in the water — many of them blown apart — that body parts clogged a shaft that went to the propeller.

The fighting was fierce and the coxswain ordered Warner to go to shore,

red."

When he reached the beach, the ground shook and the earth exploded in fire. He could smell burned gunpowder. "You could feel the bullets as they were passing your face," he says. "That's how close it was."

The Germans had positions high above the beach, in reinforced concrete pillboxes on the bluffs. "They had us zeroed in," he says. "We were fish in the barrel."

He inched forward, crawling from the cold, wet sand to an incline of dry sand, where the high tide had receded. After advancing about 60 feet, he buried his face, trying to take cover. "Everything was fire, explosions, fire. Planes flying over. Everywhere was bodies. Parts of bodies. It was a massacre."

After a while, he started to pet the sand with his left hand, digging gently with his fingertips. Nothing but nervous energy. Until he went down 3 or 4 inches. "All of a sudden, I felt something circular. Flat. A mine. If I had moved my hand over, my head would still be in orbit."

He froze. "Where you gonna go?" he asks. "You can't go back. You can't go forward. You just wait."

He stops speaking and gestures at the room in his apartment, about 12 feet wide, every wall and table covered with framed photographs of his five children, nine grandchildren and six great-grandchildren, but not a single piece of evidence that he was in a war. He doesn't want to remember; he's spent his life trying to forget.

"In the area of this room, there were probably 30 or 40 guys either dead or dying," he says.

Ghosts. He can still see them. Filling the room now.

He remembers watching Army Rangers climb a cliff, trying to reach the Germans. "They would get shot and topple backward and die," he says.

He watched paratroopers float from the sky and land in the water. "With all the gear they had on them, they had the same ability to float as a cement block," he says. "Down they went."

He estimates that he watched between 100 and 200 people drown. "You'd look out and there'd be a bunch flopping in the water," he says, "and keep looking and there's not too many and then all of a sudden, there's nobody."



Sixty years ago today, Warner crawled onto the sand at Omaha Beach, part of the first wave of the D-Day

Credit goes flush right

The fighting was fierce and the coxswain ordered Warner to go to shore, even though his machine gun was strapped to the boat.

So Warner, a third class boatswain's mate who was in the Coast Guard but assigned to the Navy, a Motor Mac who worked the throttles in the engine room or took a battle station on ship, was forced to invade Normandy without a gun.

He bailed over the side and jumped into the water, wearing a rubber coat with a hood and helmet. The water came up to his chin. To this day, he remembers how cold it felt, like jumping into Lake Superior just after the ice breaks.

He was surrounded by dead bodies. Some had been shot. Others had drowned, still wearing their packs and holding their rifles. "I was pushing bodies away to get up to the beach," he says. "There were spots where the water was

there's not too many and then all of a sudden, there's nobody."

THE IMAGES WOULD HAUNT Warner for the rest of his life.

"We heard about it growing up," said Marilyn Jelcin of Shelby Township, his middle child. "When we were kids swimming, Dad would sit on the beach in a cold sweat, with binoculars watching us, because he saw so many people drown around him. We used to think, what's wrong with him?"

"I know how fast a guy can drown," Bill Warner says. "It isn't 10 minutes."

All of his children have memories about their father's fear of drowning.

"He was so adamant about us learning to swim," says Judi Floro of Trenton, his oldest daughter. "We had no fear of the water. I remember one time I was out on Traverse Bay, probably 100 yards out. I was on a paddleboat with my girlfriend and I could see him on the beach, waving me in. I was 13 and I'm like hey, what's the big deal? When we got to shore, he was madder than heck."

LYING ON THE BEACH, Warner stared at grotesque scenes still vivid in his memory.

"There was a young soldier," Warner says. "He was lying on his back. His head was disconnected and it rolled out on the tide. There were two small cords. I don't know what they were. The head would go out the length of those cords and the tide would try to bring it back in. I would look at that and be fascinated by it. Sometimes, his hair would be combed real nice when the head came in. Other times, it would be every which way."

Surrounded by death, Warner wondered when it was going to be his turn, hoping a bullet would catch him between the eyes. "I didn't want it to hit me in the gut because I knew it was going to hurt like hell. Make it quick. Get it over with. I really thought I was dead."

He remembers a soldier in the sand screaming: "Hail Mary! Hail Mary!"

"And all of a sudden, I didn't hear him. I looked back and he fell back and his mouth was still open and his eyes were still open. He had died."

Where was God?

"I thought, if there is a God, an all-loving, powerful God, would He permit this?"

WARNER WAS RAISED METHODIST, but at that moment on Omaha Beach, unsure which side was winning, feeling like the world had turned inside out and evil had taken control, he stopped believing in God.

To this day, he says, he doesn't pray, doesn't worship. But his children are still trying to convert him back.

"I'm working on him," Marilyn says. She talks to her father about war, telling him that God doesn't create war, man does.

"It's man's free will," Marilyn says. "Man seems to want to blame God when they make bad choices, but a lot of those choices, He is allowing us to make. We've had many discussions about this and I'm still convinced that I'm going to win him over."

Some will say that God kept Warner alive at Normandy. Many came back from war, stronger in their faith. But Warner's faith was shattered.

"On our ship, there was a Naval chaplain on board," Warner says. "He would hold services up in the bow. At the time, I believed in it, so I was always up there. He was dwelling on, 'If God is for us, who shall be against us?'"

"At the same time, you could see the fire on the horizon like heat lightning. The ministers were praying, 'God, be with us.'"

Marilyn, who has heard the story often, finishes her father's thought. "But my dad knew the Germans had ministers, praying for God to be with them, too," she says. "It created a huge conflict for him."

Even though he lost his religion, Warner wanted his children to be exposed to Christianity so they could make up their own minds. "My mom would drag us to church," Marilyn says.

And when she couldn't, Bill would.

Marilyn holds out hope that her father will be saved spiritually. She says a family member overheard him saying the Lord's Prayer at a recent funeral.

"Dad," she says. "I think you are more on the other side than you think."

He shrugs.

"Well, I'll admit nothing."

He doesn't think about heaven or hell.



Warner family photo

Bill Warner and his wife, Jean, were teen sweethearts. They married in 1943.

"I'll go into the ground, just like you," he says. "I don't think you are going to go up there and float in the clouds."

AFTER SPENDING NINE HOURS on Omaha Beach, Warner spotted a friend from his ship in another Higgins boat, which had just dropped off a load of troops.

He got up and ran across the beach.

"The whole beach was full of people, pieces of people," he remembers. "Man, I started running for that boat. I wanted off. He took me back to the ship."

Warner was taken back to LST 262, a 328-foot ship parked 8 to 10 miles offshore, out of mortar range, in the English Channel.

"When I got back, the whole ship, everybody was saying, 'Warner is still alive. Warner is still alive.'"

The captain took him into the wardroom and set out a bottle of scotch and a glass.

"Now Bill," he said, "tell me what happened."

Then he handed Warner the letter notifying his wife that he had been killed in action.

It was never mailed.

ON OMAHA BEACH ALONE, there were 3,000 casualties, including dead, missing and wounded. It was the bloodiest battle of Normandy. "I thought, why am I alive?" he says. "Everybody around me was either dead or dying."

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower said the Higgins boats "won the war for us."

AFTER RETURNING from the war, Bill Warner became an alcoholic.

"I know my dad had a lot of the nightmares," Marilyn says. "Sometimes, he would fall asleep on the couch or in the chair and he'd wake up swinging, in a cold sweat, because he was reliving that experience. He did a lot of self-medicating."

She looks at her father. He wears a T-shirt and glasses, and has a cropped mustache and wavy brown hair mixed with white.

"Thirty years, wouldn't you say, Dad?" Marilyn says.

"Not that long," he says.

"You quit drinking in the early '70s," Marilyn says.

He believes that his experiences in World War II are somehow tied to his battle against alcoholism, but he doesn't want that to sound like an excuse.

"It's got to mess your mind up, it's got to," Bill says. "You aren't used to seeing mutilated human bodies. Nothing in your previous experience sets you up for that."

Most of the time, he drank whiskey and beer.

His wife, Jean, would get him a bottle and let him drink at home. "It was better than having him on the road," she says.

Bill remembers that he gave up drinking after he had a heart attack. He went to Alcoholics Anonymous for several years. "They stress if you take one drink, you are off to the races again," Bill says. "Well, that's not true."

He still drinks, mostly in the evenings.

Jean keeps an eye on him. "If it gets to be too much, if he has one drink after another, I'll cut him off," she says.

In the evening, before he goes to bed, he pours a shot of Seagram's and mixes it with 7-Up or water.

"I'm 81," Bill says. "It hasn't killed me yet."

DURING THE WAR, Warner says he drank on the ship to dull the horror: "Everybody drank. Orange juice and medical alcohol. Whatever. The whole idea was to get it out of your mind."

After D-Day, Warner spent the rest of the war transporting troops to France and bringing back wounded on the LST, crossing the English Channel countless times. He remembers one time when 300 casualties were spread across the deck in stretchers. During the war, LSTs brought back 41,035 from France to England.

"You were so damn tired that when you did get to sleep, you dreamed you were sleeping."

It was his duty.

"We knew we had to kick Hitler's ass when we were over there," he says. "When that one ended, we knew we had to go over and get Hirohito. We knew it."

After fighting the Germans, Warner expected to go to Japan. "Then Harry

Watching men drown in the waters off Omaha Beach made Warner particularly fearful of drowning. He made sure his five children were good swimmers.

dropped the bomb," he says with a smile, referring to President Truman. "Harry's my buddy."

Bill returned to Michigan and worked in the copper mines in the Upper Peninsula, but quit because the conditions were so rough. "I figured, I didn't go through the Normandy invasion to get killed in the copper mine."

He moved his family to Lincoln Park in 1947. For 12 years, he worked as a pipe fitter at Great Lakes Steel, quitting in 1959. "The open hearth was 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit," he says. "That's where you learned your eyeballs sweat."

He shrugs. "I made a living." While working full time as a pipe fitter, he took on second jobs. He worked at a drive-in theater, drove a cab and owned a dump truck.

"Everything on the side," he says. "I had a wife and five kids."

And he had to pay for his booze. He taught his children about pride and

work ethic.

"He got up and went to work, every day, whether it was 25 below or 95 degrees in the summer," Marilyn says. "I don't remember him missing a day of work."

Again, he shrugs.

It was his duty.

He worked for Chrysler Corp. at Trenton Engine for 23 years, retiring in 1986. He made good money and worked so much overtime that he was able to quit the second job. He and Jean bought a cabin on Fife Lake, near Traverse City, spending summers up there for 25 years.

"My wife made me quit Chrysler," he says. "I was 63 years old and she said, 'The way they are working you, they are going to kill you.'"

AFTER THE CHILDREN were grown, Bill and Jean started to enjoy life. They've traveled to Europe, Alaska and the Panama Canal.

Bill got his pilot's license in 1975 and bought a Cessna airplane, fulfilling a desire that went all the way back to D-Day.

Feeling like he was given a second chance at life, he tried to squeeze every moment out of it.

"I think I'm on borrowed time," he says. "I thought I was dead. Everything else was just a bonus — all my children, everything."

He gave up his pilot's license seven or eight years ago. Mentally, he was still capable of flying but his reaction time had diminished.

In 1990, Bill went back to Normandy, not as part of a tour, but on his own.

"I walked up that hill and there's a cemetery in back," he says. It contains the graves of 9,386 Americans who died in the war. "The hair on my arms stood up as I went through there. I figured, geez, I should be there. I got back to the chapel and I was kind of shaking, from the emotion of the thing."

AS BILL SITS WITH HIS DAUGHTER, Judi Floro, in his one-bedroom apartment and talks about World War II, he remembers the time his ship collided with a Liberty Ship on the English Channel.

"I remember talking to a buddy," he says. "My bunk was the third bunk up. He was right alongside of me, eye level."

"A collision on a ship is not like a collision in a car. You keep bumping, bumping, bumping. My buddy wound up in a heap, way down in the corridor. We had the beaver board lockers at the head of the bunk. I woke up with my head inside that locker. That's how hard it hit."

As he talks, his daughter perks up. "Dad," Judi says. "So you did have a head injury?"

And she begins to think that might explain his mysterious head problems.

How many times had the doctor asked her if he'd ever had a head injury? She always answered no. She never knew about the collision at sea.

A FEW YEARS AGO, Bill became weak, disoriented and had trouble walking. Cranial fluid built up in his head. They still don't know why.

"There is a drain in the base of your neck where the cranial fluid flows freely.

But he's recovered and back in the apartment with Jean.

"The shunt has been working well,"

Judi says. "Praise the Lord."

BILL RAISED HIS CHILDREN to read the newspaper, to watch the news, to make their own decisions and argue with each other. Dinners became debates. It was as if Bill had created his own miniature democracy: If you risk your life fighting for freedom, by God, you are gonna exercise it.

"We should drop a bomb over there in Iraq," Bill says.

"But there are so many innocent lives," Marilyn says.

"There were in Japan, too."

"True, you are right, Dad."

Bill and Jean were against sending troops to Iraq.

"I knew something had to be done about Saddam," Jean says, "but I don't think he was responsible for what happened in New York City."

"Why are we sending our young men over there to get blown apart?" Bill says.

Bill doesn't feel like going after Saddam Hussein was anything like going after Hitler. "No, it was not the same. We knew we had to kick Hitler's ass. Mussolini. Both of them."

"Our children were in favor of this war," Jean says. "Some of our grandchildren said they would go to war. I said, no you are not. I knew something had to be done about Saddam but I didn't think we had to send an entire army over there, thousands of boys."

Bill and Jean have been married 61 years. They share the same opinions on most things. While Bill was courting her in high school — he was a junior and she was a sophomore — he used to walk 6 miles from his house to hers, twice a week. During the summer, he was allowed to take the Model A. They were married May 9, 1943, when he was stationed in Baltimore. Their first son, Bruce, was born in 1944 and Bill shipped out a month later. He didn't see his son again for two years. "I went back two years later and went to pick him up and he cried like hell. Who in the hell is this turkey?"

Bruce was stationed in Alaska during

AWARD-WINNING SERIES NOW A BOOK

PORTRAITS OF WAR

The people of the Iraq war, one sketch at a time



The Free Press series "Portraits of War" took first place in feature writing in the 70th annual National Headliner Awards, one of the oldest and largest journalism contests. An illustration from the series won a Merit Award in this year's Society of Publication Designers contest.

The series has been turned into a book, "Portraits of War" (Free Press, \$19.95), which is available on the Web at www.freep.com/bookstore.

"I like it up here, I'm used to being up here, from being a pilot. You always have a breeze here, even on a hot day. You are over 100 feet from the pavement."

He returns to his apartment, again running his arm along the wall to steady himself. In the hallway, next to the elevator, a red-white-and-blue ribbon is tied to a button that reads: "Proud to be an American." Four feet away, a bumper sticker says: "Pray for peace."

On the television back in his apartment, there are reports of prisoner abuse in Iraq. It disgusts him.

"We hauled a number of prisoners and



Bill often walks to his building's outdoor terrace to watch the ships below.

D-DAY TIMELINE

■ **June 5:** 300 minesweepers clear channels for the assembly of over 6,900 warships and landing craft.

■ **Night of June 5/6:** 1,056 British and U.S. air force heavy bombers drop more than 5,000 tons of bombs on enemy strongpoints.

■ **12:20 a.m. June 6:** Airborne assault Pathfinder teams mark out three drop zones for gliders. British and U.S. paratroops drop into Normandy to seize and secure

bridges and cut off enemy reinforcements.

■ **2 a.m. June 6:** Minesweepers clear approaches to beaches.

■ **4:30 a.m. June 6:** Naval bombardment of beaches commences.

■ **5:30 a.m. June 6:** Heaviest bombardment of the war begins at dawn. 7 battleships, 23 cruisers and 103 destroyers pound German shore batteries to protect

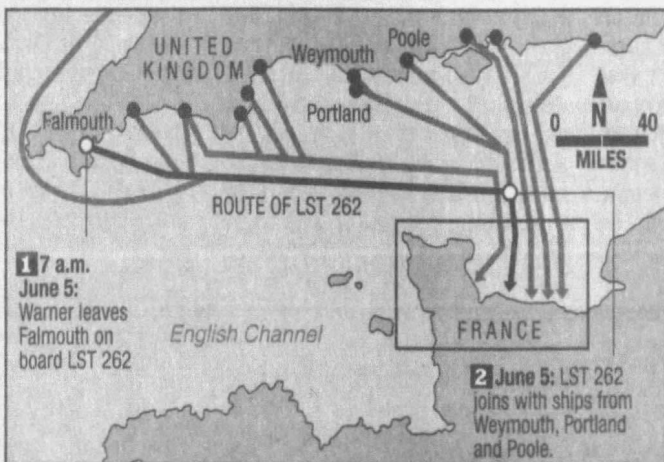
assault craft.

■ **6:30 a.m. June 6:** U.S. troops hit the beaches
UTAH: 23,250 U.S. troops. 350 casualties
OMAHA: 34,000 U.S. infantry. 3,000 casualties

■ **7:30 a.m. June 6:** British troops hit the beaches
GOLD: 24,970 troops. 1,000 casualties
SWORD: 8,845 troops. 1,000 casualties

■ **7:40 a.m. June 6:** The Canadian landings

BILL WARNER'S D-DAY



LANDING SHIP, TANK (LST)



CARGO 18 Sherman tanks, 1 LCT, 160 troops



LANDING CRAFT, VEHICLE, PERSONNEL (LCVP)



OMAHA BEACH

Unknown to the U.S. 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions, enemy forces were dug in along the bluff behind Omaha Beach. At 6:30 a.m. the first troops waded ashore – losing most of their tanks and artillery in the heavy swell – to fight the bloodiest battle of D-Day.

