

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

DECLARATIONS
By PEGGY NOONAN



A Day at the Beach

July 5, 2008; Page A11

It was May 1944, and 22-year-old John Whitehead of Montclair, N.J., an ensign on the USS Thomas Jefferson, was placed in charge of five of the landing craft for the invasion of Europe. Each would ferry 25 soldiers from the TJ, as they called it, onto the shore of France. John's landing site was to be a 50-yard stretch of shoreline dubbed Dog Red Beach. It fell near the middle of the sector called Omaha Beach, which in turn fell in the middle of the entire assault.



AP

Americans land at Normandy, June 6, 1944

The TJ sailed to Portsmouth Harbor, which was jam-packed with ships. On June 1 the Army troops arrived, coming up the gangway one by one. "They were very quiet," John said this week. Word came on June 4 that they'd leave that night, but they were ordered back in a storm. The next morning, June 5, the rain was still coming down, but the seas were calmer. Around 8 that night, they cast off to cross the channel. The skies were dark, rain lashed the deck, and the TJ rolled in the sea. At midnight they dropped anchor nine miles off the French coast. They ate a big breakfast of eggs and bacon. At 2 a.m. the crew began lowering the Higgins boats—"a kind of floating boxcar, rectangular, with high walls"—over the side by crane. The soldiers had to climb down big nets to get aboard. "They had practiced, but as

Eisenhower always said, 'In wartime, plans are only good until the moment you try to execute them.' "

The Higgins boats pitched in the choppy water. The soldiers, loaded down "like mountaineers" with rifles, flame throwers, radio equipment, artillery parts, tarps, food, water, "70 pounds in all"—had trouble getting from the nets to the boats. "I saw a poor soul slip from the net into the water. He sank like a stone. He just disappeared in the depths of the sea. There was nothing we could do." So they boarded the boats on the deck and hoisted them into the sea.

It took John's five little boats four hours to cover the nine miles to the beach. "They were the worst hours of our lives. It was pitch black, cold, and the rain was coming down in sheets, drenching us. The boats were being tossed in the waves, making all of us violently sick. We'd all been given the big breakfast. Hardly anyone could hold it down. Packed in like that, with the boat's high walls. A cry went up: 'For Christ's sake, do it in your helmet!' "

"Around 4 a.m. the dawn broke and a pale light spread across the sea, and now we could see that we were in the middle of an armada—every kind of boat, destroyers, probably the greatest array of sea power ever gathered."

Now they heard the sound, the deep boom of the shells from the battleships farther out at sea, shelling the beach to clear a path. Above, barely visible through clouds, they saw the transport planes pushing through to drop paratroopers from the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. "Those were brave men."

At 5 a.m. they were close enough to shore to see landmarks—a spit of land, a slight rise of a bluff. In front of them they saw some faster, sleeker British boats trying desperately to stay afloat in the choppy water. As the Americans watched, three of the boats flipped over and sank, drowning all the men. A British navigator went by in a different kind of boat. "He was standing up and he called out to my friend in a very jaunty British accent, 'I

say, fellows, which way is it to Pointe du Hoc?' That was one of the landmarks, and the toughest beach of all. My friend yelled out that it was up to our right. 'Very good!' he cried out, and then went on by with a little wave of his hand."

Closer to shore, a furious din—"It was like a Fourth of July celebration multiplied by a thousand." By 6 a.m. they were 800 yards from shore. All five boats of the squadron had stayed together. The light had brightened enough that John could see his wristwatch. "At 6:20 I waved them in with a hard chop of my arm: Go!"

* * *

They faced a barrier, made a sharp left, ran parallel to the shore looking for an opening, got one, turned again toward the beach. They hit it, were in a foot or two of water. The impact jarred loose the landing ramps to release the soldiers as planned. But on John's boat, it didn't work. He scrambled to the bow, got a hammer, pounded the stuck bolt. The ramp crashed down and the soldiers lunged forth. Some were hit with shrapnel as they struggled through to the beach. Others made it to land only to be hit as they crossed it. The stuck ramp probably saved John's life. After he'd rushed forward to grab the hammer, he turned and saw the coxswain he'd been standing next to had been hit and killed by an incoming shell.

The troops of Omaha Beach took terrible fire. Half the soldiers from John's five boats were killed or wounded. "It was a horrible sight. But I had to concentrate on doing my job." To make room for the next wave of landings, they raised the ramp, backed out, turned around and sped back to the TJ. "I remember waving hello to the soldiers in the incoming boats, as if we were all on launches for a pleasure cruise. I remember thinking how odd that such gestures of civility would persist amid such horror."

Back at the TJ, he was told to take a second breakfast in the wardroom—white tablecloths, steward's mates asking if he'd like more. He thought it unreal: "from Dog Red Beach to the Ritz." He heard in the background the quiet boom of the liberation of Europe. Then back to a Higgins boat for another run at the beach. This time the ramp lowered, and he got off. Dog Red Beach was secure. The bodies of the dead and wounded had been carried up onto a rise below a bluff. He felt thankful he had survived. "Then I took a few breaths and felt elated, proud to have played a part in maybe the biggest battle in history."

* * *

John went on to landings in Marseilles, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. After he came home, he went on to chair Goldman Sachs, work in Ronald Reagan's State Department, and head great organizations such as the International Rescue Committee. He is, in that beautiful old phrase, a public citizen.

But if you asked him today his greatest moment, he'd say that day on the beach, when he was alive and grateful for it. "At that moment, dead tired, soaked to the skin, I would not have wanted to be anywhere else in the world."

It is silly to think one generation is "better" than another. No one born in 1920 is, by virtue of that fact, better than someone born in 1960. But it is true that each era has a certain mood, certain assumptions—in John's era, sacrifice—and each generation distinguishes itself in time, or doesn't. John's did. He himself did. And what better day than today to say: Thanks, John.