

“First Wave” with Alex Kershaw
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By Trenton Spoolstra

This past June marked the 75th anniversary of Operation Overlord, better known as D-Day. As Bush School Dean Mark Welsh said in his opening remarks, 600 World War II veterans are lost each day according to some accounts. The day will soon come when World War II will no longer be recounted by those who fought in it. Much has been written about D-Day, such as the complex planning, the incredible logistical requirements, and the maneuvers needed to advance off the beach. The human aspect is often buried. Mr. Kershaw offered fascinating and stirring personal accounts of a few men who jumped behind enemy lines, landed gliders, and stormed the beaches.

Frank Lillyman was the first American to land in Normandy. Lillyman had made fifty-three practice jumps before jumping into the dark skies at 12:15am on June 6th. He was known by his men for his ever-present cigar – even while exiting the door of the aircraft.

Captain Leonard Schroeder was the first American to come ashore early that morning. Schroeder’s nickname was “Moose,” and he was a good friend of 56 year-old Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., the son of the famous early twentieth century president and the oldest soldier in the first wave on Utah beach. He earned the Distinguished Service Cross for bravery. A few weeks later, Roosevelt had a massive heart attack and was buried in Saint-Mere-Eglise. He was later moved the American cemetery in Normandy, and his award for heroism was upgraded to the Medal of Honor.

Lieutenant John Spalding was the first American officer to lead men off of Omaha Beach. When soldiers left the amphibious boats from the Channel and arrived on the beach, they were easy targets and met with heavy attack from German strongholds. They lay on the beach, paralyzed. Spalding demanded, soldier by soldier, that his men “follow me” and led them through a relentless machine gun fire and a dense mine field. He said he must have had angels on each shoulder and concluded later in his life that, “God had made me a leader of men in combat.”

Of course, the Americans were not the only national force that day. Mr. Kershaw told the story of Leon Gautier, a French Commando who had the mission of moving his men from Sword Beach to capture the seaside town of Ouistreham, where he lives to this day. And he spoke of the Canadian brothers who set off to secure beach exits just a couple hundred yards apart, after shaking hands goodbye and saying, “Well, good luck. I’ll see you tonight.”

Mr. Kershaw struck a light note in recounting Bill Millin. Millin was a Scotsman who wore a kilt and carried bagpipes. Under the strict orders of Lord Lovat, he played his bagpipe continuously from the exit off the landing craft – where his kilt floated up around his otherwise

naked lower half in the 57 degree water – all the way past Pegasus Beach, boosting the morale of the men who could hear and see him in a quite extraordinary way.

And there was Texas A&M's Lieutenant Colonel James Earl Rudder. Rudder was the commanding officer of the Army Rangers battalion that stormed Normandy Beach at Point du Hoc, scaled the 100 foot cliff under enemy fire, and fought off German counterattacks. The clash was later included in the 1962 film *The Longest Day* starring John Wayne. Perhaps the most poignant moment during Kershaw's talk came when Rudder's son pointed out his father in a photo of the group that became known as Rudders' Rangers. Rudder went on to become president of Texas A&M University, fundamentally transforming it from male military school to an inclusive university that maintained a corps of cadets.

Victory for the Allies came at a steep price; casualties amounted to 10,000, more than 2,000 killed on Omaha beach alone. Kershaw pointed out that 60% of those casualties came from the Americans even though they were not the majority of the 150,000+ who were deployed. By December of 1944, over 80% of the Allies dying in the European theater were Americans. Kershaw concluded his talk with the idea that the sacrifice these brave Americans was the beginning of the end of Nazism and heralded the longest period of peace and prosperity in European recorded history.