Allied forces advance on a Normandy beach on June 6, 1944. Although the attack ended victoriously for the Allies, much went wrong. Many landing craft hit sandbars or came ashore in the wrong place. Germans shot many soldiers before they even left their boats. Others drowned in their heavy gear. The rest raced to the relative safety of the sea wall, having to move on without the fallen. Ultimately, 4,400 Allied troops died in the D-Day invasion.

Before storming beaches, sowing the seeds of deception

"The sounding of 'Taps' still sends chills up and down my spine."

Pfc. Carl Praeuner of Battle Creek, Nebraska, who nearly died on D-Day after being shot in the leg on a hill above Omaha Beach

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war. They mounted Operation Fortitude, an elaborate deception to convince the enemy that the thrust would come someplace other than Normandy.

Staging fake aircraft in Scotland and broadcasting phony radio traffic created the illusion of standing up a phony British army to invade Norway. Similarly, Eisenhower placed Gen. George Patton in charge of an illusory Army based in Dover, England, where the English Channel is at its narrowest point. Besides the radio ruse, the Allies planted wooden aircraft and landing craft in the area and allowed the London newspapers to report on Patton's comings and goings.

The feint worked well. German Gen. Erwin Rommel, the famed "Desert Fox" who had been put in charge of northern European coastal defenses, canceled a planned transfer of divisions from Norway to France. And even on D-Day, the German high command remained so convinced Eisenhower planned to strike at Pas-de-Calais, France — just 22 miles across the Channel from Dover — that it was slow to send reinforcements to Normandy, fearing that it was a ruse.

It's sometimes believed that Eisenhower delayed the invasion for a number of weeks because of bad weather. Actually, historians say, he was stalling to let the U.S. and British shipyards turn out more of the crucial landing craft. They could haul 2,100 tons of equipment, or 20 tanks and 400 soldiers. Eisenhower's margin was so thin, he couldn't bear the loss of a single one.

Even more crucial would be the landing craft that carried most of the U.S. ground forces onto the Normandy shores. They are best known as Higgins boats after Nebraska-born entrepreneur Andrew Jackson Higgins, who developed the craft. The flat-bottomed, open-topped craft carried 36 men and could pull right up onto the beach to let them out via a retractable ramp.

Though Higgins boats were used throughout the war in both the European and Pacific theaters, they are closely associated with D-Day. Years later Eisenhower would describe Higgins as "the man who won the war for us." (See story on Page 8DD.)

Weather would weigh heavily on Ike's mind in the early days of June. He had selected June 5-7 for the landing because it offered the right combination of tides and moonlight necessary for landing at dawn.

But early June coincided with what Eisenhower described as the worst English Channel weather in 20 years. He sent the flotilla out on the evening of June 4 but called it back because of the dismal forecast.

He knew rain and wind and clouds would impact the airborne jumps, the critical air and naval bombardments, and virtually every aspect of the invasion.

Eisenhower suffered through a restless night. The next morning his staff meteorologist predicted a break in the weather June 6. Eisenhower gave the green light.

His planning over, his grand plan now lay in the hands of his men — and fate.

That evening, he visited some British troops as they embarked in Portsmouth for the landing. He spent most of his time with Chuck Davis and the other 101st Airborne soldiers.

From the air: Paratroopers

During the next few hours, about 20,000 U.S. and British airborne dropped behind the D-Day beaches, along with thousands of tons of gear. Their jobs included blocking roads and waterways and clearing paths to the beach to aid the infantry as it came ashore.

A company of 6th British Airborne landed first in gliders, at 15 minutes past midnight. They landed near a pair of bridges over the Orne River at the east end of the easternmost beach, Sword, and quickly seized them from stunned German defenders. Mission accomplished in six minutes. But a British Army officer, Lt. Den Brotheridge, 29, was shot in the neck and became the first Allied death on D-Day.

More than 800 C-47 Skytrains hauled the 101st and 82nd Airborne soldiers on a looping path to the west before swinging around to the east over the Cotentin Peninsula, behind Utah Beach.

They were to jump, on static lines, from about 400 feet at locations marked by spotters from the first waves of paratroopers.

Unexpectedly, though, the pilots encountered low clouds over land. Many of them scattered to avoid collisions and ordered the paratroopers out at altitudes too high or too low.

After crossing the coast, the aircraft formations encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire. Some soldiers suffered rifle wounds even before they jumped.

Chuck Davis recalls waiting in the back of the transport for the red light over the door that signaled when it was time to jump.

"Most of us were scared. We didn't know what was coming," Davis said. "Anybody that said they weren't, they didn't know what they were talking about."

Soldiers landed in trees, in hedgerows, in fields, in rivers, in gardens. One planeload of 18 men jumped into the English Channel and drowned.

Some unlucky ones landed in the soon-to-be-famous village of Ste.-Mere-Eglise, where a house was on fire — likely after catching sparks from an incendiary round. Dozens of townspeople were fighting the flames as German soldiers looked on.

About 30 paratroopers landed in the village and immediately found themselves battling the Germans. Some were shot as they descended.

Air current sucked a few into the inferno of the house fire. Pvt. John Steele's parachute caught on the town's church steeple, and he convincingly played dead for two hours — an incident memorialized in the book and movie "The Longest Day."

Despite the initial chaos, paratroopers would seize Ste.-Mere-Eglise before 5 a.m. — the first town to fall to the Allies.

Davis was luckier. He recalls landing on the edge of some hedgerows. He found some of his squadmates using a child's cricket issued to every paratrooper: click once if you encounter someone, and twice to acknowledge.

But like 80 percent of the airborne troops that night, Davis' group was nowhere near where it was supposed to be. Instead of seizing objectives, the men lay low until daylight, when they could get their bearings.

One of their soldiers, nicknamed "Frenchie" for his language skills, spoke with local farmers and learned they were 17 miles away from their objective.

"We never did get there," Davis said. "Everything was such a mess."

The airborne troops failed to accom-

See D-Day: Page 9DD

Allied assault forces receive benediction from an Army chaplain before leaving England for the June 6, 1944, invasion. Left, American paratroopers fix their static lines before a jump before dawn over Normandy. Many airborne troops were dropped from too high or too low because of blinding cloud cover.