



# THE SUICIDE WAVE

## Beach

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looked to be dead. So did the man Baumgarten didn't recognize.

Bedford Hoback had his Mae West life preserver inflated and his chin just out of the water. Just as Baumgarten looked up, an 88 mm shell exploded between him and Hoback, throwing shrapnel into both their faces. Baumgarten wiped blood from his eyes and saw that Hoback's head had dipped into the water.

Baumgarten made it to the sea wall ahead of the tide. Some men from Company A lay on the beach too badly wounded to escape the rising water. Their arms reached up for help. Baumgarten pulled one man out of the water but did not dare try to save any more. Snipers high on the bluffs to his right had a good angle on anyone who strayed from the sea wall.

About that same time, Ray Nance and 14 other members of Company A, including big Sgt. Wilkes, John Schenk, J.D. Clifton and John Reynolds of Bedford, approached the beach with the second assault wave. Their boat landed on the other side of the Vierville draw 19 minutes after the first five boats landed.

Nance, as second-in-command of Company A, was in charge of the "headquarters boat." The men in it had no automatic weapons, flamethrowers or mortars. Their job was to find an area of the beach already secured by the first wave and set up a command post with a portable radio.

A few hundred yards out, someone noticed that the radio's antenna had broken off. The radio would be useless without it. Nance told Clifton, the radioman, to bring it ashore anyway. Someone on the beach would fix it.

Nance could see the steeple of the Vierville church, floating above a dark pall of dust or smoke that wreathed the beach. He kept his head down and peered through a horizontal slit in the front doors of the boat. The beach was coming up fast.

The boat grounded and stopped. The front doors stayed shut. The coxswain was jiggling a cable. "Get it open," Nance screamed. The coxswain did. He cried, "Up and at 'em, mates," and Nance jumped out.

He landed thigh-deep in cold water, took a step and sank to his chest as a wave broke over him. He churned forward until he broke free of the surf, ran up the beach about 25 yards and threw himself down on his stomach.

Bullets and shells were flying out of the bluffs, but not at him. The beach around him was empty, as if no one ever had set foot there. He looked back and saw no one else from his boat. He was mystified. In all his imagining of what Omaha Beach would be like, he had never imagined it being lonely.

Soon another boat touched bottom about 20 yards to his right. From up in the bluffs, he heard the new sound of a machine gun firing: brrrrp, brrrrp. Men in the boat ran down the ramp and seemed to melt into the shallows. He did not see any of them rise again.

Nance heard the sounds of a fierce firefight still farther off to the right, in the direction of a promontory named Point du Hoc. Every few seconds a mortar shell would explode somewhere on his part of the beach.

He propped himself up on his elbows, drew his rifle to his shoulder and scanned the bluffs for a German to shoot at. He saw no one but fired two or three rounds anyway. Then a mortar shell exploded just behind him and to his left, and he felt a sharp pain. A sticky liquid crept down his left hand. His hand was full of shrapnel. One piece had taken a divot out of his rifle stock just inches from his face.

Nance looked to his left and saw Clifton lying on his stomach a short distance away with the bulky, useless radio still strapped to his back. Nance felt a sick rush of regret at having insisted Clifton hang onto it. The radio made him a more inviting target.

The two men called ideas back and forth about how to advance. Then Clifton shouted that he had been hit. He still seemed to be moving well. Nance shouted for him to keep moving. But the next time he looked over, Clifton wasn't there.

Ahead and to his right, Nance saw four men from another unit who had been assigned to his boat at the last minute. They had taken cover together behind one of the big, metal, jack-shaped obstacles called hedgehogs. "Spread out," Nance called to them. "Scatter out." A mortar shell exploded directly in front of them and all four went down. Only one got back up.

Nance heard the brrrrrp of the machinegun again, but this time the sound was louder and fuller. He had become the target. The German was in a concrete bunker about halfway up the right side of the draw. The bullets kicked up puffs of sand in front of Nance.

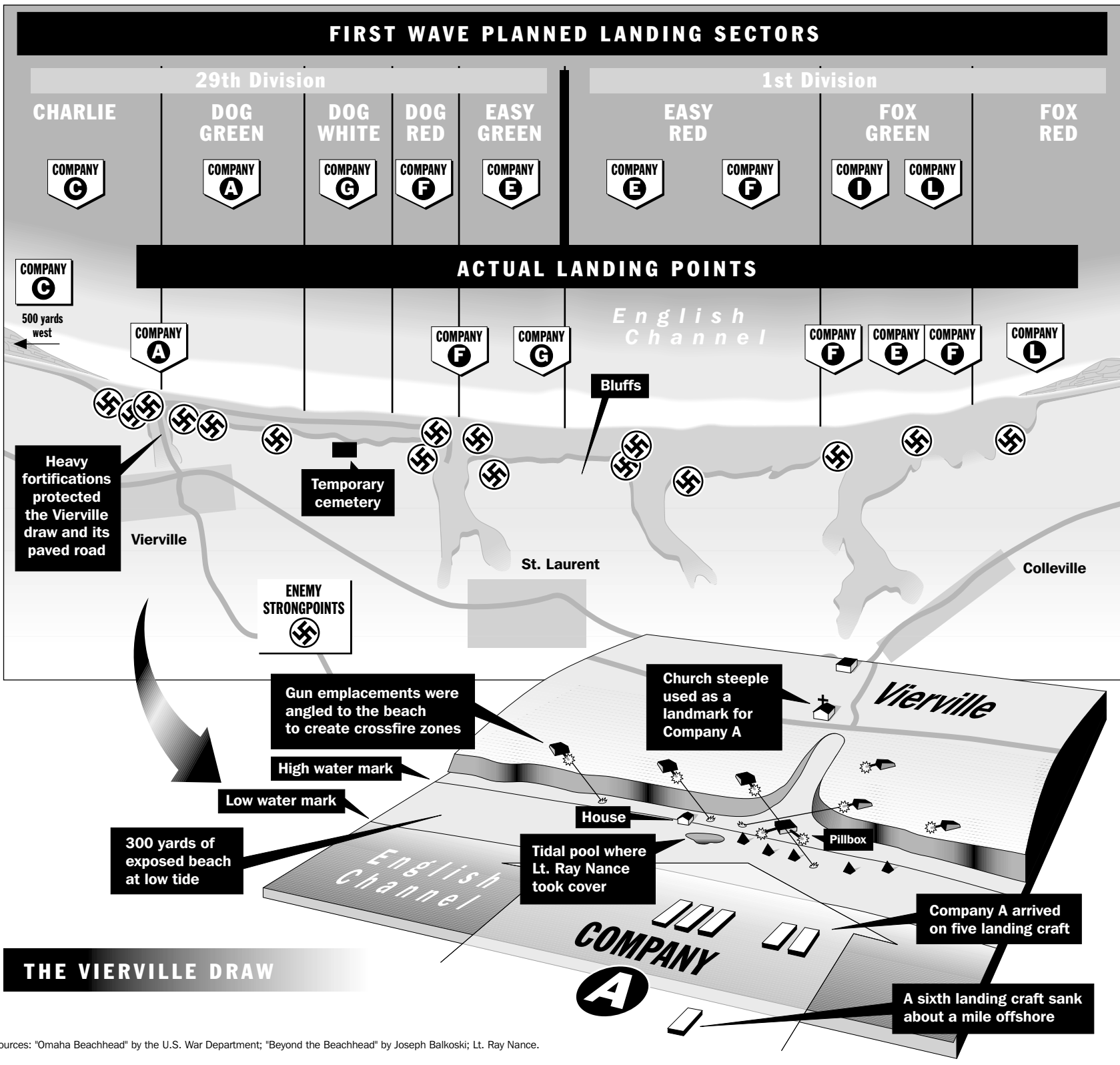
He shifted his body to face the German in order to present the smallest possible target. He flatted himself into the wet sand, his wool clothes soaked with cold water. His rifle was full of wet sand and undoubtedly useless.

The machine-gunner would aim at a spot in front of Nance and fire a short

## H-Hour: 0630 - 06 June 1944

Operation Overlord called for the first wave of assault troop boats to arrive in evenly spaced intervals along Omaha Beach. Naval shelling and aerial bombardments would have leveled Nazi fortifications and pockmarked the beach with craters to provide cover for the foot soldiers, demolition teams would have blown up obstacles and

special swimming tanks would have come ashore to engage the Germans. None of that happened at Sector Dog Green, where the men of Company A arrived on an untouched beach that offered no cover, but a rising tide. They were all alone to face one of the most heavily fortified German positions on Omaha Beach.



JOHN G. OWNBY/TIMES-DISPATCH

### Company A's fate

Of the total of 34 Bedford men in Company A, 26 went ashore on D-Day and 19 were killed on Omaha Beach. Here's what happened to the others:

#### Killed on June 11, 1944, in Normandy:

- Pfc. Charles W. Fizer

#### Missed landing on D-Day when boat sank, but landed days late:

- Tech. Sgt. Roy O. Stevens, whose twin brother Ray was killed on D-Day, and who later was wounded; Staff Sgt. Robert D. Edwards Jr.; Staff Sgt. Henry C. "Clyde" Powers, whose brother Jack was killed on D-Day; and Sgt. Harold E. Wilkes.

#### Landed on D-Day, but survived it and the war:

- 1st Lt. Elisha R. "Ray" Nance, the only one in this group still living; Pfc. Glenwood E. "Dickie" Overstreet; Staff Sgt. Robert E. Marsico, who played on ETO champion baseball team but was wounded on D-Day and never played ball again; Staff Sgt. Anthony M. Thurman, who was wounded three days after D-Day; Sgt. Robert L. Goode, wounded on D-Day; and Pfc. James Lancaster, wounded on D-Day.

#### Served in support capacity and did not land on D-Day:

- Mess Sgt. Earl R. Newcomb, Supply Sgt. Jack Mitchell, T/4 George E. Crouch (cook) and T/5 Cedric Broughman (cook).

#### Other Bedford men killed in the invasion:

- Joseph E. Parker Jr. and John W. Dean, were killed in the days immediately following D-Day while serving with other companies. Parker was in Company C, Dean in Company F.

burst, raising his sight as he fired. He was stitching short, vertical arcs in the sand, searching for an arc with Nance in it. Nance would see the puffs of sand walk toward him and hold his breath until the brrrp sound passed over his head.

Each new burst started him trembling until his whole body shook, and he would continue to shake after it ended. As soon as he stopped shaking he would crawl a few feet up the beach, angling away from the machine gun. Then he would hear the brrrrp, see the puffs of sand, and start trembling again. In the middle of one burst, he felt a painful hammer blow to his right leg. He craned his neck and saw that the sole of his boot had split open.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a soldier sprinting past him on his left. It was his boat mate John Reynolds. Reynolds knelt on the sand and raised his rifle. He seemed to be looking for something to shoot. Then he stiffened, fell forward and lay still.

The machine-gunner found a second target somewhere down the beach and ignored Nance for a few minutes. Nance used the opportunity to crawl, painfully now, toward a tidal pool that looked deep enough to hide in.

Another close machine-gun round parted the shoulder strap holding his empty binocular case. A severed end of the strap flew out and splashed into the shallow water to his right. The case floated right in front of his eyes. It had a hole the size of a 50-cent piece.

Finally Nance and another wounded man reached the tidal pool and slid into the cold water. It was deep enough.

The machine-gunner lost interest. The men crossed the pool unmolested and emerged on the other side. From there it was a short crawl to the shingle, and their first real cover from the guns on the bluffs.

Nance lay on the beach for what seemed a long time. He had no idea how D-Day was going. He still had not seen a German.

After a while, a Navy medic scrambled across the sand toward him, cut open his boot and announced that a piece of shrapnel had passed through Nance's foot. He said the wound probably would get Nance sent back to England, then wished him well and moved off. The medic was wearing such a crisp, dry uniform that Nance wondered if he were an apparition.

The tide swirled in almost to the shingle, bringing the stuff of nightmares. The water was full of dead soldiers. Each rhythmic surge of the surf knocked their bodies and equipment together. Some floated face-up. Nance recognized two officers from Company D.

The man who had crawled to shelter with Nance reached back into the water and dragged one soldier onto dry sand. Nance could not tell if the soldier was alive. His body was limp and his face ashen.

One of Company A's medics, Cecil Breeden, made his way to Nance. Breeden had seen the bodies of Sgt. Wilkes and John Schenk, Nance's best friend in the company, near the water line where the headquarters boat came in. Breeden also had seen the body of Taylor Fellers on the beach.

Fellers' death meant Nance was in command of Company A. He most likely had been in command of it since the first minutes of the invasion. But it had hardly mattered, even then.

The next day, June 7, Company A's mess sergeant, Earl Newcomb of Bedford, got orders to leave the Empire Javelin and report to the beach to feed the men. He had expected those orders the afternoon before. He arrived on the beach to find it strewn with gear and the smoldering hulks of tanks and landing craft. He rode in a jeep past a sprawling, makeshift cemetery on a low bluff. The white crosses were marked only by dog tags. Off to the side were dozens of still-unburied bodies wrapped in what appeared to be white sheets.

In the face of so much death, it seemed absurd to Newcomb to ask about individuals. But when he served his first meal on French soil that evening, he had to wonder. Only eight men came to eat, and none of them was from Bedford.

Three days later, on June 10, Roy Stevens made it back across the Channel after recuperating in England. A patrol boat had fished him out of the water after nearly an hour. He had been so exhausted that another of the men in the water, Clyde Powers of Bedford, had had to boost him into the boat.

In England, Roy had read encouraging news reports about the invasion. He was anxious to hear the details from his brother Ray and the others. But the excitement rushed out of him as the boat transporting him neared Omaha Beach. The shallows were still full of wreckage. The day was cloudy and warm, and an awful smell hung over the beach.

None of the soldiers on duty knew anything about Company A. Roy said he was worried about his brother, and someone mentioned the cemetery on the bluff. Roy decided if Ray wasn't in there, he probably was all right. The twins still could shake hands at the crossing in Vierville.

Roy set out with Clyde Powers, who also had a brother, Jack Powers, who had gone ashore with Company A. The men walked fast, without conversation. As they crested the bluff, they were taken aback by the size of the cemetery.

A sergeant stood at a folding table with a pad of paper, writing down the numbers of the dog tags of dead soldiers as they were reported to him. He was tired and busy but took time to listen. He said the graves were alphabetized as much as possible under the circumstances and directed Roy to one row of crosses and Powers to another. He seemed to know nothing about the

men's brothers; he was just saying where to look.

Clyde Powers walked along his row and quickly found his brother's grave. Roy walked slowly along his row. Each cross was chest-high and marked only by a dog tag nailed to the upper end of the vertical post. Roy had to crouch closely to read. The first name he saw was Ray's.

The temporary cemetery held the bodies of at least 16 of the 19 Bedford men killed on D-Day. In addition to Tech Sgt. Ray O. Stevens and Pfc. Jack G. Powers, it held Capt. Taylor N. Fellers, Tech Sgt. Leslie C. Abbott Jr., Pfc. Wallace R. Carter, Pfc. John D. Clifton, Pfc. Nick N. Gillaspie, Pvt. Bedford T. Hoback, Pvt. Clifton G. Lee, Pfc. John F. Reynolds, Pfc. Weldon A. "Tony" Rosazza, Staff Sgt. John B. Schenk, Staff Sgt. Gordon H. White Jr., 1st Sgt. John L. Wilkes, Staff Sgt. Elmore P. Wright and Sgt. Grant C. Yopp.

Tech Sgt. Frank P. Draper Jr.'s body was returned to England from the landing craft where he died. The bodies of two other Bedford men were never found, or at least never identified. The only trace of Staff Sgt. Raymond S. Hoback was his Bible, which a soldier found lying on the beach and mailed home to his mother in Bedford. No trace was ever found of Staff Sgt. Earl L. Parker, who never saw his baby daughter.

### About the author

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Geroux, 46, a graduate of the College of William and Mary, has been a reporter and editor for 20 years. He became interested in the Bedford story after reading accounts of it during the 50th anniversary of the D-Day invasion in 1994.

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Last year, The Times-Dispatch published "Sacrifice," Geroux's examination of Company A's hometown and the day, more than five weeks after D-Day, that Bedford learned of the extent of its losses on the beaches of Normandy. "Sacrifice" is available via the Internet at www.timesdispatch.com