

D-DAY

June 6th, 1944

Antiaircraft Artillerymen fight
their way off the invasion beaches

by Col. E. Paul Semmens

The Allied invasion of the Normandy peninsula in early June 1944 rightfully ranks as one of the great accomplishments in American military history. It was a statement of the inevitable, the beginning of the end of World War II. This operation overcame years of frustration; it represented a victory over Allied indecision, turf battles and strategic proliferation. In the end, it was a joint, coalition victory. It was American warfare at its best — the direct approach — the massing of combat power at a decisive point to achieve a measurable result. It was the beginning of American military leadership in Europe.

It was also a very human victory. The hard-earned victory at Normandy was the product of a doctrinal, training and leadership evolution that had been ongoing since the onset of World War II. It was not just a great victory for the American Army, it was also an accomplishment for its antiaircraft artillery. The invasion of Normandy would become the largest American AAA operation in history.

The Allied plan was for Gen. Bernard Montgomery to command the 21st Army Group, which had the First Army under Gen. Omar Bradley, which would land at Omaha and Utah Beaches, and the 2nd British Army under Lt. Gen. Sir Miles Dempsey, which would land at Gold, Sword and Juno Beaches. The German plan had been to deploy poorly trained, third-class infantry units all along the heavily obstructed beachline, and then to position armored divisions in the rear, and to react as necessary. Since May 1944 the Allies had been conducting an aggressive counterair campaign against the Luftwaffe. By D-Day, the Allies had air supremacy. Even with that, the Allied planners believed the Germans could pool their aircraft and generate as many as 2,200 sorties on D-Day.

During World War II, all AAA units, with the exception of a AAA group headquarters (no battalions) in each corps, were assigned to the field army. Each army had a AAA



Battery A, 197th AAA (AW) Battalion came ashore in the Easy Red sector of Omaha Beach. The antiaircraft artillerymen backed their M-16 half-tracks onto the fire-swept shale to deliver fire against enemy strongpoints on the bluffs overlooking the invasion beaches.



to come ashore and then capture the exits leading off the beach: Dog 1, Dog 3, Easy 1, Easy 3 and Fox 1, as quickly as possible. The initial assault concept was for the 16th Group to take the right hand, or southern side, of the beach. The 18th Group would be to the north (see map, below).

The 397th Provisional Machine Gun Battalion was the first American AAA battalion to land in France. It was supposed to land on Dog Red or Easy Green, names given to sections of the beach by Allied planners to enhance control. Instead, Battery C landed on Dog White and Battery A and Battery B were washed ashore on Fox Green. The battalion came ashore, hit the beach and encountered a withering rain of German anti-aircraft and machine gun fire after negotiating mines and wire and obstacles to get the Rhinos and LSTs on the beach. The battalion, which had only existed for about three months and was commanded by a great soldier named Art Meyer, a captain, took 60 percent casualties in the first 15 minutes after landing.

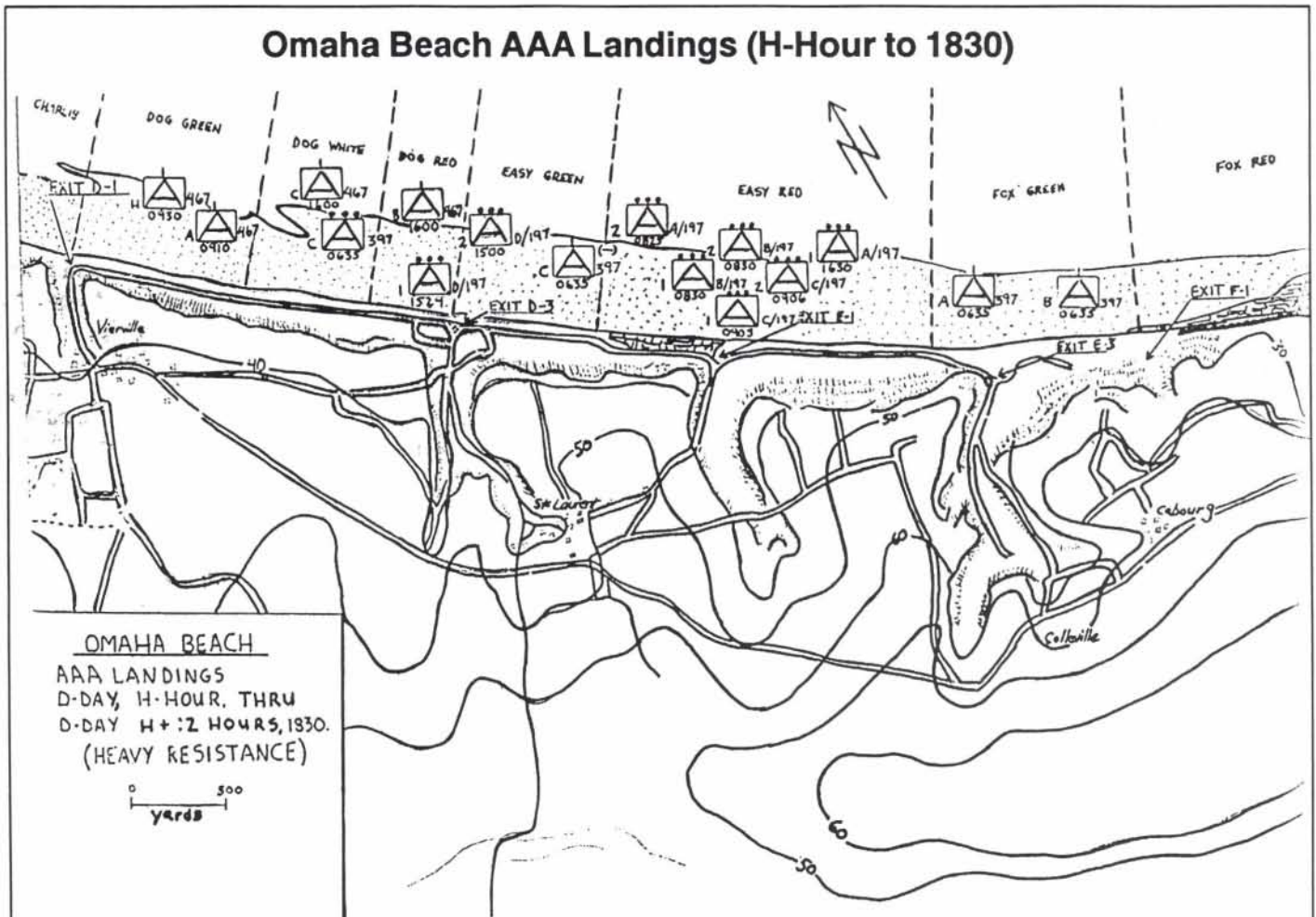
The 462nd AW Battalion began coming ashore around 0900, and the 197th AW Battalion (Self-Propelled) started coming ashore on Easy Red about the same time. The 197th was one of the finest battalions the branch has ever seen. Battery A of the 197th, which began landing in increments at 0800 and was completely ashore around 1630 on D-Day, also fought in the Battle of the Bulge, drove all the way across Europe and helped defend the Remagen Bridge — and never lost a soldier.

Battery A drove its M-16 half-tracks ashore in the Easy Red sector of Omaha Beach, a fire-swept beachhead upon which thousands of water-soaked men lay huddled, pinned to the rubble of the beach by small arms, mortar and 88mm fire. The fire, the rubble and minefields blocked all units from advancing. In the ships offshore, American commanders were considering evacuating the beachhead.

Since the beach exits were impassable due to intense enemy small arms, automatic weapons, mortar and artillery fire, Battery A's fire units at first dispersed along the beach. The low bluff at the edge of the beach made it impossible for most of the anti-aircraft guns to fire in a ground support role. At two places where the terrain was more suitable, an M-16 and an M-15A1 were driven into the water and backed up the steep and rocky shale at the edge of the beach. The gunners on these tracks made every effort to direct fire at enemy strongpoints, but the slope of the beach was so steep that the mounts could not be leveled. Their fields of fire were limited to the highest points of the ridge overlooking the beach.

Battery A soldiers not actively occupied on the tracks directed small arms fire at pillboxes and at the origin of enemy tracers, pulled wounded and dead men from the surf and acted as litter bearers.

As artillery fire and sporadic machine gun fire swept the area, one M-16 squad crossed the beach and began clearing the first exit leading off Easy Red. Some crewmen filled in



Omaha Beach AAA Landings (D-Day, 1830 to 2359)



a deep trench across the exit and removed barbed wire to form a path for the vehicle while others probed for mines with bayonets. They then moved the half-track through the exit and to a temporary position defending the beachhead. A bulldozer appeared later to complete the work. The M-16 was the first combat vehicle to leave Easy Red and the exit Easy One was the only exit used by V Corps during the first 48 hours of the invasion.

While the initial landings were ongoing, Timberlake, who had commandeered a boat for himself and a few members of his staff, was driving up and down the coast trying to find a place to come ashore. Finally about 1700, Timberlake landed down on Fox Red, on the northern edge of Omaha Beach. He walked off the end of his LST, six-foot four-inches tall, pure white hair, wearing an oversized silver star that he had been told to cover up. Air defense doctrine at that time prescribed that a brigade commander came ashore when the defenses on the beach were established. The AAA brigade commander at the Leyte invasion a few months after Normandy came ashore on D+8 days, which was doctrinally correct. Timberlake wanted to be ashore on D-Day, and he had stolen a boat for that purpose.

All around him, infantry soldiers pinned to the ground with their feet in the water begged the general to get down. Ignoring their pleas, he found an infantry battalion commander and then pointed down the beach and told him everybody else was moving out. When the incredulous infantryman looked down the beach, Timberlake admonished him to get his soldiers moving toward the bluffs. The battalion commander rallied his men and began moving off the beach. Timberlake then walked down the beach, yelling at

soldiers, "Go get the bastards! Go get the bastards!" By the time he got to the far end of Omaha Beach, he could legitimately tell the soldiers there that everybody else was indeed moving out. For his heroism on D-Day, Big Ed Timberlake was nominated for the Distinguished Service Cross.

The landings continued, and by 1830, the antiaircraft artillerymen began concentrating on the exits from the beach. The 18th Group began coming ashore and, by the end of the day, the air defenders had defenses established around all the key exits (see map above).

The first barrage balloons began flying around 2300 on D-Day. On D+1, the 413th Gun Battalion, the equivalent of a high-altitude air defense battalion, came ashore at 0230, dragging their 90mm guns, radars and fire control equipment through the surf.

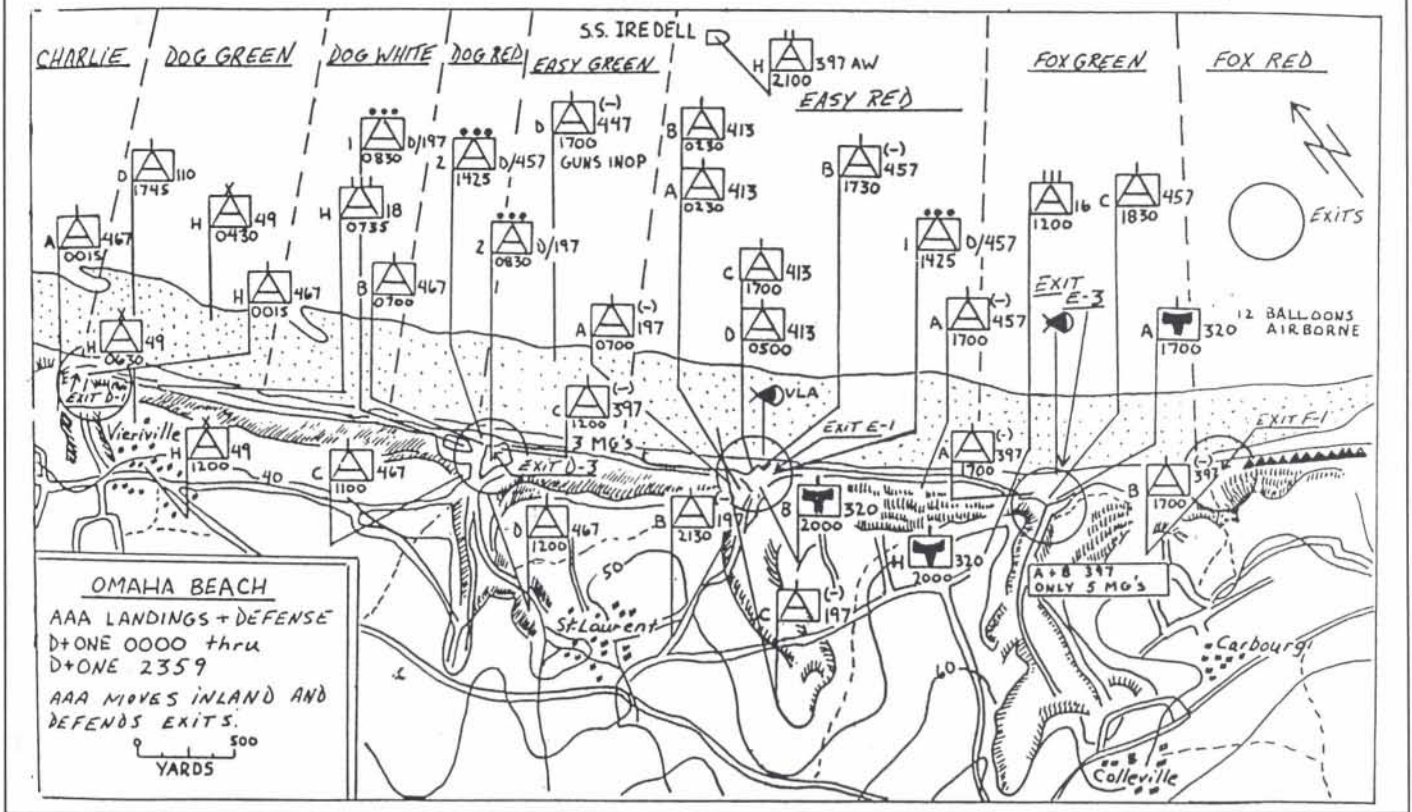
Early on the morning of June 7, the remaining members of the 49th AAA Brigade staff who did not accompany Timberlake joined an infantry unit in an assault up exit Dog 1 into Vieriville, secured the town and set up shop.

The air defenses around Omaha Beach continued to grow and the Luftwaffe seemed complacent with the situation (see top map, next page).

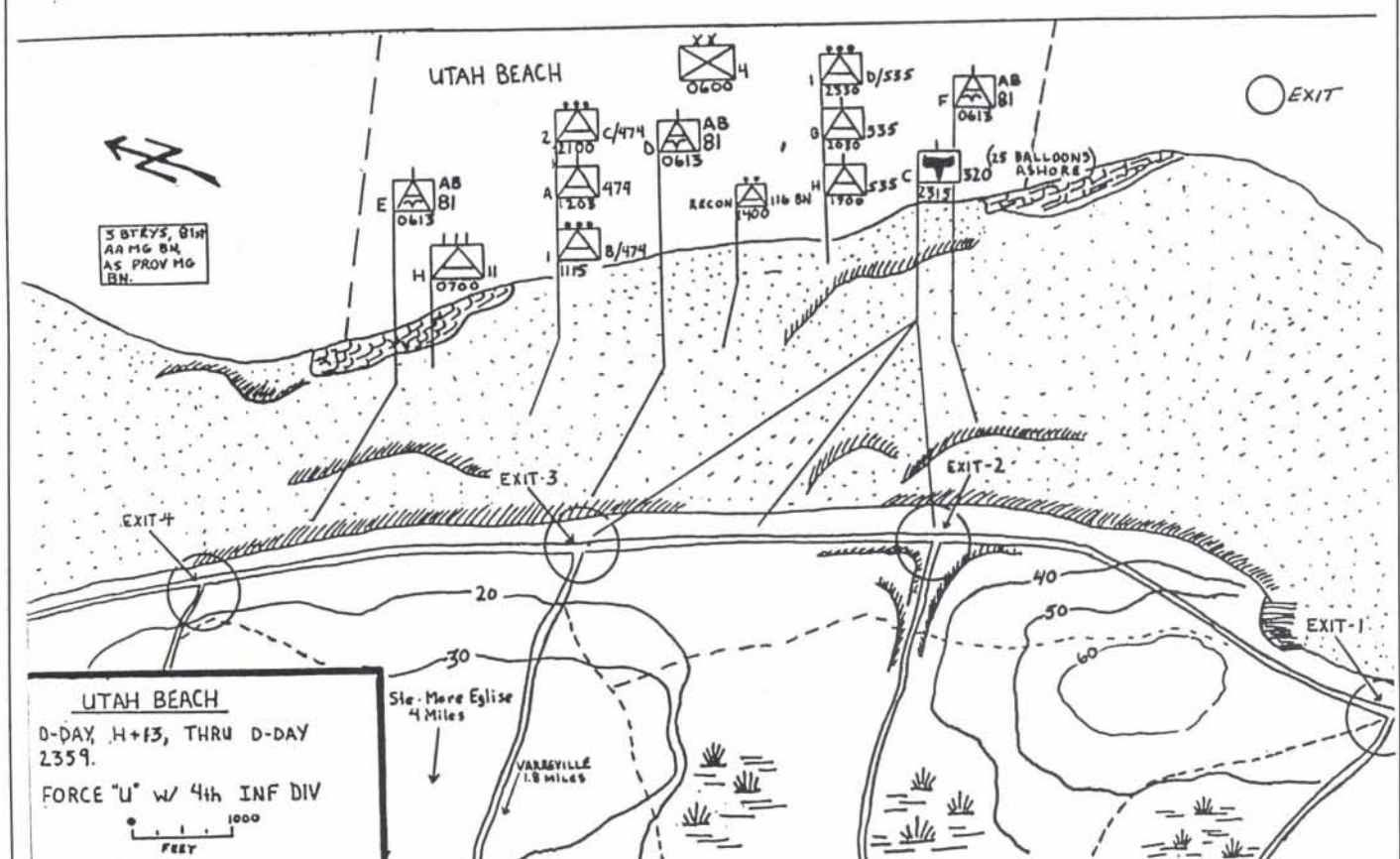
Utah Beach

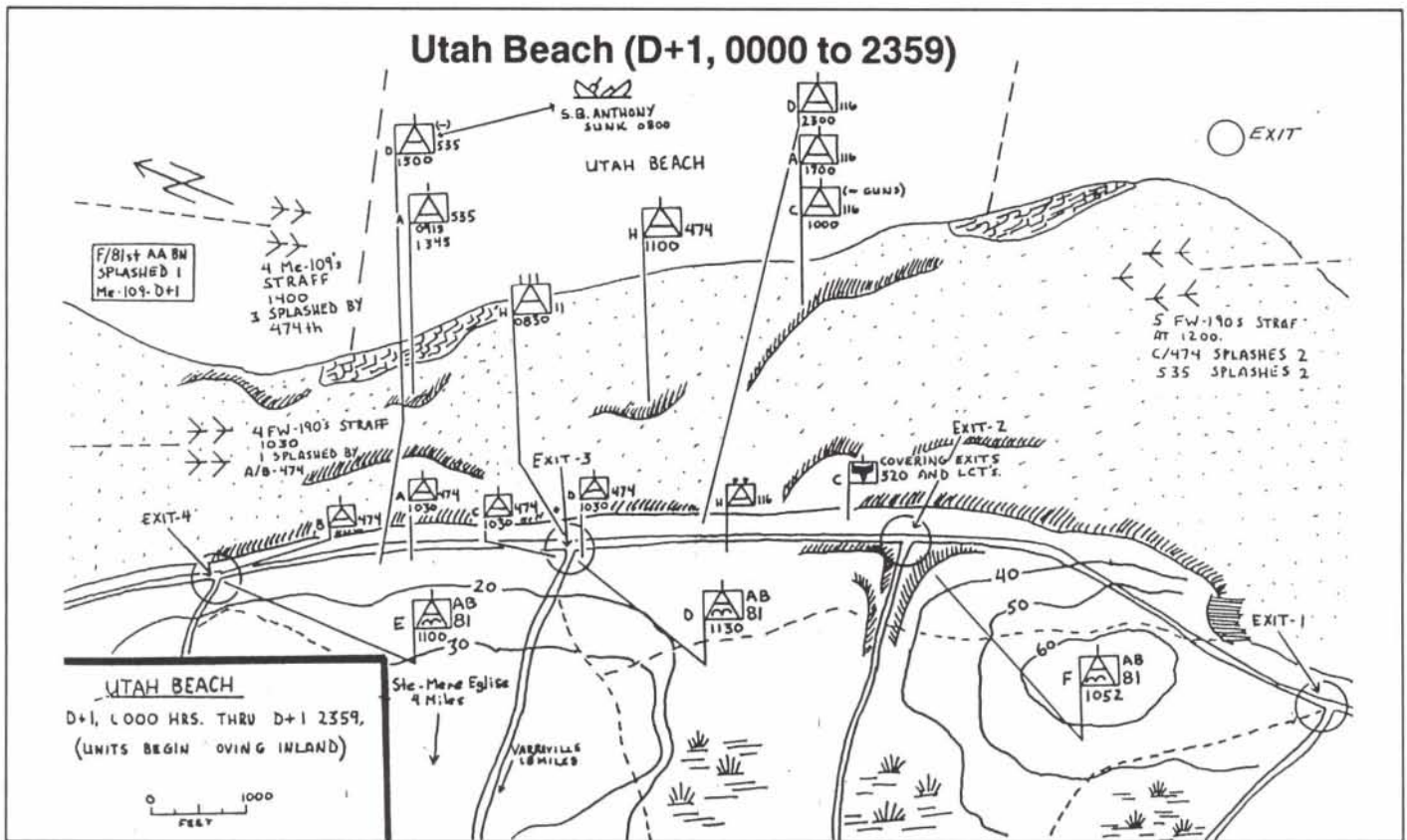
On Utah Beach, the 81st AAA Battalion (-) landed on D-Day and immediately began moving toward the exits from the beach. The 474th, a short-range air defense battalion, was the second unit ashore around noontime and it was followed by elements of the 535th AAA Battalion (AW), another short-range air defense battalion, around 1700 (see bottom map, next page).

Omaha Beach AAA Landings and Defense (D+1, 0000 to 2359)



Utah Beach (D-Day, H+13 to 2359)





Around 1400, the reconnaissance party from the 116th AAA Battalion (90mm) arrived on the beach. They charged off the LST, which was commanded by an infantry colonel, but took such heavy fire that the colonel ordered them back onto the LST. His intent was to go back out to sea and land again when the situation calmed. The soldiers eagerly agreed, and they went out to sea, got caught up in the traffic offshore and ended up going back to England. The next day the rest of the battalion landed, and the unit history would report that the reconnaissance of the 116th Gun Battalion was the worst in the history of air defense.

As the 81st consolidated its positions around the exits, the barrage balloons came ashore at 2315. The balloons had been inflated in England and tied to the ships as the armada sailed across the Channel. Each barrage balloon had a crew commanded by a sergeant. One balloon section sergeant, after seeing the Germans shoot down several balloons, decided the best way to enhance his balloon's survivability was to grab it by the tether and run up and down the beach, despite heavy artillery and small arms fire. He did just that, and won a Silver Star. By the morning of June 7, the Allies controlled the exits from the beaches. The 11th AAA Group landed at 0830, and the 116th AAA Battalion (90mm) began arriving ashore an hour-and-a-half later without their reconnaissance party, which was still out to sea.

The rest of the 535th AAA Battalion (AW), which came ashore throughout the day, probably conducted the quickest offloading of a ship in history. While transferring their equipment from the *Susan B. Anthony* to a landing craft, the ship struck a mine and began to sink. The soldiers quickly completed the transfer and brought the equipment ashore.

The Germans did attack Utah Beach. At 1030 on June 7, four Folke-Wulf 190s strafed the beach. The 474th shot down one aircraft. Around noontime, five more FW-190s attacked from the east, and the antiaircraft artillerymen destroyed four. At 1400, the Germans attempted a third attack, this time with four ME-109 fighters. All the German fighters were destroyed by the 474th.

This recollection has not done full justice to the AAA's participation in the D-Day invasion. By D+3, there were 53,000 AAA soldiers in France. They had fought alongside their infantry, engineer and armor counterparts and had done what was necessary to establish a lodgement. It was a desperate, heroic struggle that almost failed. Men like Sgt. John Kelly from the 459th AAA Battalion won the day. He quickly organized and led an attack party through a minefield and, despite a serious wound, advanced to the head of the party and killed an entire enemy machine gun crew with a hand grenade. For his heroics on D-Day, John J. Kelly won the Distinguished Service Cross.

It's hard to appreciate the panic and fear that gripped everyone on Omaha Beach, particularly during the early stages of that invasion. But the accomplishments of the air defenders on D-Day are summed up by the motto of the 397th, a unit which existed for just three short months and won a Presidential Unit Citation: "No challenge too tough, no mission unchallenged."

Col. E. Paul Semmens, author of The Hammer of Hell and a former brigade commander, is assigned to Headquarters, USA-REUR and 7th Army and is the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Headquarters, USAREUR and 7th Army.