
Ernie Pyle Visits an Anti-Aircraft Battery

A Department of Defense spokesman, incensed at what he considered an anti-military bias in today's media, recently lamented that, "There are no more Ernie Pyles." Ernie Pyle was the legendary Scripps-Howard war correspondent who covered World War II from a foxhole. He not only shared the hardships and dangers of battle with ordinary soldiers, but wrote about combat soldiers with such empathy and understanding that he was a welcome visitor to the battlefield in both the European and Pacific theaters of World War II. The following excerpt, probably the best description of what life was like in a World War II anti-aircraft battery, was published in *Brave Men*, a collection of Pyle's wartime dispatches published during the war by Henry Holt and Co. It reappears in *Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches* which has just been released by Random House.

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One of the vital responsibilities during those opening weeks of our war on the continent of Europe was the protection of our unloading beaches and ports. Over and through them, without interruption and in great masses, our buildup of men and material had to pass in sufficient masses to roll the Germans clear back out of France. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with that unloading. Everything we could lay our hands on was thrown into the guarding of those beaches and ports. Allied ground troops policed them from the land side. Our two navies protected them from sneak attacks by sea. Our great air supremacy made daytime air assaults rare and costly. It was only at night that the Germans had a chance. They did keep pecking away at us with night bombers, but their main success was in keeping us awake and making us dig our foxholes deeper.

The job of protecting the beaches at night was given to the anti-aircraft artillery, or ack-ack. I heard that we had there on the beachhead the

greatest concentration of anti-aircraft guns ever assembled in an equivalent space. After three solid weeks of being kept awake all night long by the guns, and having to snatch a little sleep at odd moments during the daytime, that was not hard for me to believe. The falling flak became a real menace — one of the few times I've known that to happen in this war. Every night for weeks, pieces of exploded shells came whizzing to earth within 50 yards of my tent. Once an unexploded ack-ack shell buried itself half a stone's throw from my tent. A good portion of our army on the beachhead slept all night in foxholes, and some of the troops swung over to the Anzio beachhead custom of building dugouts in order to be safe from falling flak.

Our ack-ack was commanded by a general officer, which indicates how important it was. His hundreds of gun batteries even intercepted planes before they neared the beaches. The gun positions were plotted on a big wall map in his command tent, just as the battle lines were plotted by infantry units. A daily score was kept of the planes shot down — confirmed ones and probables. Just as an example of the effectiveness of our ack-ack, one four-gun battery alone shot down 15 planes in the first two weeks.

The Germans couldn't seem to make up their minds exactly what they wanted to do in the air. They wandered around all night long, usually in singles though sometimes in numbers, but they didn't do a great deal of bombing. Most of them turned away at the first near burst from one of our 90mm guns. Our ack-ack men said they thought the German pilots were yellow, but I had seen the quality of German fighting for nearly two years, and I could hardly believe that. Often, the enemy dropped flares that lighted up the whole beach area, and then they would fail to follow through and bomb by the light of their flares. The ack-ack men



said that not more than two out of 10 planes that approached the beachhead ever made their bomb runs over our shipping. But we were liable to get a bomb anywhere along the coastal area, for many of the Germans apparently just jettisoned their bombs and hightailed home.

It was a spectacle to watch the anti-aircraft fire when the Germans actually got over the beach area. All the machine guns on the ships lying off the beaches cut loose with their red tracer bullets, and those on shore did too. Their bullets arched in all directions and fused into a sky-filling pattern. The lines of tracers bent and waved and seemed like streams of red water from hoses. The whole thing became a gigantic, animated fountain of red in the black sky. And above this were the split-second flashes of big-gun shells as they exploded high up toward the stars. The noise was terrific. Sometimes low clouds caught the crack of those many guns and scrambled them all into one gigantic roar which rolled and thundered like the blood-curdling approach of a hurricane. Our tent walls puffed from the concussion of the guns and bombs, and the earth trembled and shook. If we were sleeping in a foxhole, little clouds of dirt came rolling down on us. When the planes were really close and the guns were pounding out a mania of sound, we put on our steel helmets in bed and sometimes we would drop off to sleep and wake up with them in the morning and feel very foolish.

American anti-aircraft gunners began playing their important part in the Battle of Normandy right on D-day and shortly after H-hour. Ordinarily you wouldn't think of the anti-aircraft coming ashore with the infantry, but a little bit of everything came ashore on that memorable day — from riflemen to press censors, from combat engineers to chaplains — and everybody had a hand in it.

The ack-ack was given a place in the very early waves because the general in command felt that the Germans would throw what air strength they had onto the beaches that day, and he wanted his men there to repel it. As it turned out, the Germans didn't use their planes at all, and the ack-ack wasn't needed to protect the landings from air attack. So, like many other units, they turned themselves into infantry or artillery and helped win the battle of the beaches. They took infantry-like casualties too. One unit lost half its men and guns. I ran into the story of a crew of ack-ackers who had knocked out a German 88 deeply ensconced in a thick concrete emplacement — and

did it with a tiny 37mm gun, which is somewhat akin to David slaying Goliath.

I hunted up this crew to see how they did it. By that time they had moved several miles inland. I found them at the edge of a small open field far out in the country. Their gun had been dug into the ground. Two men sat constantly in their bucket seats behind the gun, keeping watch on the sky even in the daytime. The others slept in their pup tents under the bushes, or just loafed around and brewed an occasional cup of coffee. The commander of this gun was Sgt. Hyman Haas of 1620 Ocean Avenue, Brooklyn. Sergeant Haas was an enthusiastic and flattering young man who was practically beside himself with delight when I showed up at their remote position, for he had read my column back in New York but hadn't supposed our trails would ever cross. When I told him I wanted to write a little about his crew, he beamed and said, "Oh, boy! Wait till Flatbush Avenue hears about this!"


The outfit had landed behind the first wave of infantry. A narrow valley leading away from the beach at that point was blocked by the German 88 which stopped everything in front of it. So driver Bill Hendrix, from Shreveport, La., turned their half-track around and drove the front end back into the water so the gun would be pointing in the right direction. Then the boys poured 23 rounds into the pillbox. Some of their shells hit the small gun slits and went inside. At the end of their firing, what Germans were left came out with their hands up.

*"Oh, boy! Wait till
Flatbush Avenue hears
about this!"*


Our ack-ack can be divided into three categories. First there are the machine guns, both 50-caliber and 20mm. Airplanes have to be fairly low for these to be effective. The ack-ack branch has thousands of such guns, and so does every other fighting unit. When a low-flying strafing comes in, everybody who has anything bigger than a rifle

shoots at him, whether he is an ack-ack man or not. In the second big category of ack-ack is the Bofors, a 40mm long-barreled gun which can fire rapidly and with great accuracy at medium altitudes. Our ack-ack is equipped with thousands of these, and although they can't see their targets at night they put a lot of shells into the sky anyway. The big gun, and the elite, of our ack-ack is the 90mm. This is for high-altitude shooting. It is the gun that keeps most of the planes away, and has such a high score of planes shot down.

I spent two days and nights with one of these 90mm gun crews there on the Normandy beach-head. They were having their first taste of war, but already after three weeks or so of it they felt they were the best gun crew in the best battery of the



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best ack-ack battalion. It was close to impossible for a German bomber to pick out their position at night, yet the crew felt that the Germans had singled them out because they were so good. As far as I could learn, practically all the other gun crews felt the same way. That's what is known in military terms as good morale.

My crew consisted of 13 men. Some of them operated the dials on the gun, others loaded and fired it, others lugged the big shells from a storage pit a few feet away. The big guns usually operate in batteries, and a battery consists of four guns and the family of technicians necessary to operate the many scientific devices that control the guns. The four guns of this particular battery were dug into the ground in a small open field, about 50 yards apart.

The gunners slept in pup tents or under half-tracks hidden under trees and camouflage nets.

The boys worked all night and slept in the daytime. They hadn't dug foxholes, for the only danger was at night, and they were up all night firing. The guns required a great deal of daytime work to keep them in shape, so half the boys slept in the forenoon and half in the afternoon while the other half worked. Their life was rugged, but they didn't see the seamiest side of the war. They stayed quite a while in one place, which makes for comfort, and they were beyond enemy artillery range. Their only danger was from bombing or strafing and that was not too great.

They were so new at war that they still tried to keep themselves clean. They shaved and washed their clothes regularly. Their service section had not arrived yet from England, so they had to cook their own meals. They were pretty sick of that and said they would be glad when the service boys and the field kitchens caught up with them. They ate ten-in-one rations, heating them over a fire of wooden sticks in a shallow hole in the ground. The battery commander was Capt. Julius Reiver of Wilmington, Del. He stayed up all night too, directing their firing from his dugout, where information was phoned to him.

On my second day with the battery, the boys asked their officers if it would be all right for them to write in their letters home that I was staying with them. The officers said yes, so the boys all got out paper, and since it had turned warm for a change, we sat and lay around on the grass while they wrote short letters home, using ammunition boxes for writing boards. When they got through, all of them had me sign their letters.

The boys said they didn't choose ack-ack but were just automatically put into it. They did like it, however, as long as they had to be in the Army. They were all over being gun-shy, and since they had been through their opening weeks of war they weren't especially afraid. They had been overseas more than six months, and like everybody else they were terribly anxious to go home. They liked to think in terms of anniversaries, and much of their conversations was given to remembering what they had been doing "a year ago today" when they were in camp back in America. They all hoped they wouldn't have to go to the Pacific when the European war was over. Although the noise and concussion of their gun was terrific, they had gotten used to it and no one wore cotton in his ears. They said the two best morale boosters were the *Stars and Stripes* and letters from home.

The boys were proud of their first night on the soil of France. They began firing immediately from a field not far from the beach. The snipers were still thick in the surrounding hedges, and bullets were singing around them all night. The boys liked to tell over and over how the infantry all around them were crouching and crawling along while they had to stand straight up and dig their guns in. It takes 12 hours of good hard work to dig in the guns when they move to a new position. They dug in one gun at a time while the three others were firing. My gun was dug into a circular pit about four feet deep and 20 feet across. This had been rimmed with a parapet of sandbags and dirt, so that when a man stood on the floor of the pit he could just see over the top. The boys were safe down there from everything but a direct hit.

The gun was covered in the daytime by a large camouflage net. My crew fired anywhere from 10 to 150 shells a night. In the early days on the beachhead they kept firing one night until they had only half a dozen shells left. But the supply had been built up, and there was no danger of their running short again. The first night I was with them was a slow night and they fired only nine shells. The boys were terribly disappointed. They said it would have to turn out to be the quietest and also the coldest night they had ever had. Just because of that, I stayed a second night with them.

The Germans were as methodical in their night air attacks on our positions in Normandy as they were in everything else. We began to hear the faint, faraway drone of the first bomber around 11:30 every night. Our own planes patrolled above us until darkness. It was dusk around eleven, and we were suddenly aware that the skies which had been roaring all day with our own fighters and bombers were now strangely silent. Nothing was in the air.

The ack-ack gunners, who had been loafing near their pup tents or sleeping or telling stories, now went to their guns. They brought blankets from the pup tents and piled them up against the wall of the gun pit, for the nights got very cold and the boys wrapped up during long lulls in the shooting. The gunners merely loafed in the gun pit as the dusk deepened into darkness, waiting for the first telephoned order to start shooting. They smoked a few last-minute cigarettes. Once it was dark, they couldn't smoke except by draping blankets over themselves for blackout. They did smoke some that way during the night, but not much.



In four or five places in the wall of the circular pit, shelves had been dug and wooden shell boxes inserted to hold reserve shells. It was just like pigeonholes in a filing cabinet. When the firing started, two ammunition carriers brought new shells from a dump a few feet away up to the rim of the gun pit and handed them down to a carrier waiting below; he kept the pigeonholes filled. The gun was constantly turning in the pit and there was always a pigeonhole of fresh shells right behind it. The shells were as long as a man's arm, and they weighed better than 40 pounds. After each salvo the empty shell case kicked out onto the floor of the pit. They lay there until there was a lull in the firing, when the boys tossed them over the rim. Next morning they were gathered up and put in boxes for eventual shipment back to America to be retooled for further use.

Each gun was connected by telephone to the battery command post in a dugout. At all times one member of each gun crew had a telephone to his ear. When a plane was picked up within range, the battery commander gave a telephonic order, "Stand by!" Each gun commander shouted the order to his crew, and the boys all jumped to their positions. Everybody in the crew knew his job and did it. There was no necessity for harshness or short words on the part of the gun commander.

When a plane either was shot down or went out of range, and there was nothing else in the vicinity, the command was given, "Rest!" and the crews relaxed and squatted or lay around on the floor of the pit. But they didn't leave the pit.

Sometimes the rest would be for only a few seconds. Other times it might last a couple of hours. In the long lulls the gunners wrapped up in blankets and slept on the floor of the pit — all except the man at the telephone. It was the usual German pattern to have a lull from about 2 to 4 a.m., and then get in another good batch of bombing attempts in the last hour before dawn. The nights were very short then — from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. — for which everybody was grateful. Dawn actually started to break faintly just about 4:30, but the Germans kept roaming around the sky until real daylight came.

Our own patrol planes hit the sky at daylight and the Germans skedaddled. In the first few days, when our patrol planes had to come all the way from England, the boys told of mornings when they could see our planes approaching from one direction and the Germans heading for home at the opposite side of the sky.

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As soon as it was broad daylight, the boys cranked down the barrel of the gun until it was horizontal, and then took a sight through it onto the stone turret of a nearby barn — to make sure the night's shooting hadn't moved the gun off its position. Then some of them gathered up the empty shells, others got wood fires started for heating breakfast, and others raised and tied the camouflage net. They were all through by 7 o'clock, and half the shift crawled into their pup-tent beds while the other half went to work with oil, ramrod and waste cloth to clean up and readjust the gun.

It was 11:15 at night. The sky had darkened into an indistinct dusk, but it was not yet fully dark. I could make out the high hedgerow surrounding

our field and the long barrels of the other ack-ack guns of our battery poking upward. We all leaned against the wall of our gun pit, just waiting for our night's work to start. We had plenty of time. The Germans wouldn't be coming for 10 or 15 minutes. But no. Suddenly the gun commander, who was at the phone, yelled "Stand by!" The men jumped to their positions. The plane was invisible, but we could hear the distant motors throbbing in the sky. Somehow a man could always sense, just from the tempo in which things started, when it was going to be a heavy night. We felt that this would be one.

A gunner turned a switch on the side of the gun, and it went into remote control. From then on a mystic machine at the far end of the field handled the pointing of the gun, through electronic cables. It was all automatic. The long snout of the barrel began weaving in the air and the mechanism that directed it made a buzzing noise. The barrel went up and down, to the right and back to the left, grinding and whining and jerking. It was like a giant cobra, maddened and with its head raised, weaving back and forth before striking. Finally the gun settled rigidly in one spot and the gun commander called out, "On target! Three rounds! Commence firing!" The gun blasted forth with sickening force. A brief sheet of flame shot from the muzzle. Dense sickening smoke boiled around in the gun pit. I heard the empty shell case clank to the ground. Darkly silhouetted figures moved silently, reloading. In a few seconds the gun blasted again. And once again. The smoke was stifling. I felt the blast sweep over me and set me back a little. The salvo was fired. The men stepped back. We took our fingers from our ears. The smoke gradually cleared. And then once more the gun was intently weaving about, grinding and whining and seeking for a new prey.

That's the way it was all night. We never saw a thing. We only heard the thump, thump of motors in the sky and saw the flash of guns and the streaking of red tracers far away. We never saw the plane we were shooting at, unless it went down in flames, and "flamers" were rare.

I found out one thing being with the ack-ack at night. A man is much less nervous when he's out in the open with a gun in front of him than when he's doubled up under blankets in a tent, coiled and intent for every little change of sound, doubtful and imagining and terrified.

We shot off and on, with rest periods of only a

few minutes, for a couple of hours. The Germans were busy boys that night. Then suddenly a flare popped out in the sky, out to sea, in front of us. Gradually, the night brightened until the whole universe was alight and we could easily see each other in the gun pit and everything around us in the field. Everybody was tense and staring. We all dreaded flares. Planes were throbbing and droning all around in the sky above the light. Surely the Germans would go for the ships that were standing off the beach, or they might even pick out the gun batteries and come for us in the brightness. The red tracers of the machine guns began arching toward the flares but couldn't reach them. Then our own "Stand by!" order came, and the gun whined and swung and felt its way into the sky until it was dead on the high flare. Yes, we were shooting at the flare. And our showering bursts of flak hit it, too.

Flares are seldom completely shot out, but they can be broken into small pieces, and the light is dimmed, and the pieces come floating down more rapidly, and the whole thing is over faster. Flares in the sky were always frightening. They seemed to strip us naked and make us want to cower and hide and peek out from behind an elbow. We felt a great, welcome privacy when the last piece flickered to the ground and we could go back to shooting at the darkness from out of the dark.


The six hours of nighttime went swiftly for our ack-ack battery, which was a blessing. Time raced during the firing and in the long lulls between the waves of enemy planes we dozed and catnapped and the hours passed away. Once, during a lull long after midnight, half a dozen of the boys in our gun pit started singing softly. Their voices were excellent. Very low and sweetly, they sang in perfect harmony such songs as "I've Been Working on the Railroad" and "Tipperary." There wasn't anything forced or dramatic about it. It was just a song some young fellows were singing because they like to sing — and the fact that they were in a gun pit in France shooting at people, trying to kill them, was just a circumstance.

The night grew bitterly chill. Between firings every man draped an army blanket around his shoulders, and sometimes up over his head. In the darkness they were just silhouettes, looking strange and foreign like Arabs. After 2 o'clock there was a long lull. Gradually the boys wrapped up in their blankets and lay down on the floor of the pit and fell asleep. Pretty soon I heard them


snoring. I talked with the gun commander for a few minutes, in low tones. Then my eyes got heavy too. I wrapped a blanket around me and sat down on the floor of the pit, leaning against the wall. The night became as silent as a grave. Not a shot, not a movement anywhere. My head slacked over to one side. But I couldn't relax enough to sleep in that position. And it was so cold. I was so sleepy I hurt, and I berated myself because I couldn't go to sleep like the others.

But I was asleep all the time, for suddenly a voice shouted, "Stand by!" — and it was as shocking as a bucket of cold water in my face. I looked quickly at my watch and realized that an hour had passed. All the silent forms came frantically to life. Blankets flew, men bumped into each other. "Commence firing!" rang out above the confusion, and immediately the great gun was blasting away, and smoke again filled the gun pit. Sleep and rouse up. Catnap and fire. The night wore on. Sometimes a passing truck sounded exactly like a faraway plane. Frightened French dogs barked in distant barnyards.

Things are always confusing and mysterious in war. Just before dawn an airplane drew nearer and nearer, lower and lower, yet we got no order to shoot and we wondered why. But machine guns and Bofors guns for miles around went after it. The plane came booming on in, in a long drive. He seemed to be headed right at us. We felt like ducking low in the pit. He actually crossed the end of our field less than a hundred yards from us, and



***"Standy by!"...
"On target!
Three rounds!
Commence firing!"***



only two or three hundred feet up. Our hearts were pounding. We didn't know who he was or what he was doing. Our own planes were not supposed to be in the air. Yet if he was a German, why didn't he bomb or strafe us? We never did find out.

The first hint of dawn finally came. Most of us were asleep again when suddenly one of the boys called out. "Look! What's that?" We stared into the faint light, and there just above us went a great, silent, grotesque shape, floating through the air. It was a ghostly sight. Then we recognized it, and we all felt a sense of relief. It was one of our barrage balloons which had broken loose and was drifting to earth. Something snagged it in the next field, and it hung there poised above the apple trees until somebody went and got it long after daylight.

As fuller light came we started lighting cigarettes in the open. Over the phone, the battery commander asked how many shells were fired, and told us that our tentative score for the night

was seven planes shot down. The crew was proud and pleased. Dawn brought an imagined warmth and we threw off our blankets. Our eyes felt gravelly and our heads groggy. The blast of the gun had kicked up so much dirt that our faces were as grimy as though we had driven all night in a dust storm. The green Norman countryside was wet and glistening with dew.

Then we heard our own planes drumming in the distance. Suddenly they popped out of a cloud bank and were over us. Security for another day had come, and we willingly surrendered the burden of protecting the beaches. The last "Rest!" was given and the gun was put away. There would be no more shooting until darkness came again. □

Ernie Pyle was killed by sniper fire on the tiny island of Iwo Shima, April 18, 1945. Often confused with Iwo Jima, scene of one of World War II's epic battles, Iwo Shima was a backwater of the war. Pyle was with the 77th Infantry Division which captured the island during a minor operation at the end of the Okinawa campaign.

