

Transcription of Dr. Donald Chrisman's D-Day account, contained in the Miriam Chrisman Papers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Special Collections and University Archives.

Completed by Catherine Sebastian, December 2010

June 25, 1944

My Darling –

Enclosed is the opus. When I began I didn't dream it would reach the proportions it now has. It grew just like Topsy until I struck Count Tolstoy. Then I had to sweat & really work to get my ideas in a workable state. After that effort, I doubt if I'll add any more to this essay – anticlimax. The work I put in on this detracts from my regular letters anyway.

Next subject – I'm not supposed to keep a diary or any such record as this. And in some respects, as you can readily see, it is very very confidential. It's written to you, and I think you'd better keep it – there are some pretty good spots in it. Let's add it to the Noyes house letter & build up a few things of that sort for our children. Otherwise, be rather careful about who sees it or reads it – if any one does. I believe you understand my mixed & muddled feelings on the subject.

Please remember that the last half was written while we were in action, at general quarters, and are obviously not well thought ideas or well meditated conclusions. Ken Sam is taking it to you. I hope you like it –

Your loving husband.

Dearest,

I can't send this as a letter, so I'm going to just write down some notes to remind me of all the myriad things I want to tell you after this is all over.

### Arrival

Six years ago I landed in this same port – Plymouth, England. The return of the Pilgrim, to coin a phrase. As I saw it, it hadn't changed a bit. An unbelievable number of golden yellow daffodils covered the steep hills circling the harbor. The sun was bright. The sky was blue with white clouds. I wandered lonely as a cloud – block that Wordsworth. The famous Hoe (Norman for park, I think) looked as it had in 1938 – a 700 foot steep slope from the sea up to a splendid promenade, three large Georgian buildings in a row on the left, the ancient walled citadel on the right with the park in the center dominated by the huge statue & monument to the Drake, who was bowling on this green when he got the word about the approaching Armada. People were scattered over the hillside looking lazy and the grass was very green and inviting and the sailors were discussing with amazement that eternal American problem, English money; and what could be bought in port with it. I am not referring to Guinness, which is said to be good for you.

### Plymouth

Louis Repe, Bruce Lemmon and I found a room (bed and breakfast, four and six) and walked around to see the town. We asked directions from an elderly Englishman walking our way, and he got so involved in giving them to us that he decided to take us there. He walked us to the Hoe and the Cathedral and Priory and then the Citadel and to a pub where we drank stout and learned that our mentor Robert Heath, Bobby to us, had been to the cinema and like Americans because his favorite uncle, a Canadian had told him all about them (!). And he lived at 7 Walker Terrace, West Hoe, Plymouth. Walker spelled W-HAY-L-K-E-R, Bobby to us. Then he took us thru narrow cobblestone streets with timbered houses leaning over us, of which one had sheltered Elizabeth, To Antlous' Pool, the early harbor. It was now night and we could with difficulty read, "From this quay departed the Mayflower, 1620." Then Bobby bought us some fish and chips wrapped up in an old newspaper and took us home to bed and breakfast. (4/6)

What can I say of Plymouth now? The green woods & fields & moors are even more beautiful when compared with blue ocean, sky and steel. The common paths thru the fields lead you thru stiles and gates in stone walls to small villages like Antony, build around its old church on the hill and the Ring O' Bells under a huge spreading elm in the valley. The houses are just as they ought to be, gabled and sagging under their slate roofs and hiding a private garden. The bicycles are packed outside. And the still serve cider at the Ring O' Bells. The fabulous Hoe is unchanged – still the most gorgeous park in Southern England. Behind this splendid front, Plymouth has lost one building in every three. One third of Plymouth is rubble, neatly piled, but rubble. We arrived during an alert, with the sirens moaning and the silver balloon barrage high in the air, and several days later, left during a German air raid. The next morning Plymouth had some more rubble to pile up neatly. (\*see note) The cathedral is now a shell; they call it the Garden Church, because the altar flowers now grow neatly at the altar, fresh and unpicked. The roof and entire inside furnishings are gone; most of the walls, tower and congregation remain standing. It is claimed that the Germans went in for churches – John Austin calls this blatant propaganda, but admits that there are few churches left in Plymouth. I think they tried to get large buildings, and that that accounts for it. Most of the Old Tudor houses are still there,

including Elizabeth's. The Mayflower Rock is surrounded by LCI's and LCT's. The English are hospitable as ever over a glass of stout, however, and I bought some fish and chips and ate them out of a newspaper. The change that hurts me most deeply concerns 7 Walker Terrace spelled W-HAY-L-K-E-R. There's nothing left of it or its neighbors.

### The Firth of Clyde

Hoot mon! I like Scotland. But all I can write about now is "A Journey around the Hebrides" (with Dr. Chrisman). I saw them thoroughly – thru binoculars. We anchored off the village of Rosebank on the Isle of Arran in the Firth of Clyde. I wanted to go ashore so badly I could taste it – there was a perfect village and above it there were rugged mountains. Jack began to talk about the Telous and skiing, damn it all. The village had that clarity & picturesqueness of outline typical of Swiss villages, but the striking feature about it was its peacefulness. The only movements discernable were of the cows in the fields, the smoke from the chimney pots and a soccer game on a green next to the church. All the binoculars on the ship were trained on the game, keeping score.

### Belfast Lough, N. Ireland

The emerald isle deserves its name; it's supergreen. I haven't seen so many brilliant headed people since I left South Boston. We were anchored within Belfast Lough just off Bangor, which is 12 mi. from Belfast. If I didn't know they weren't sending any of your letters to us for some time I'd make some leading remark about the Hippocampus. Ah, me – Cousin Tish is more practical. I don't quite understand this form of censorship I should think they would restrict our letters to you – we are the ones who might have interesting information. On the other hand, I'd rather have you get my wires & letters – I'm not worried about the Washington setup and you might be about the Baldwin situation.

Bangor is a nice little County Down resort town, quite Victorian in appearance & attitude. There is a beautiful old Georgian church with a Palladin window – 1690 or so except for a ghastly tower build in the reign of her majesty. The train is a familiar type – side doors and compartments first, second and third – really a Toonerville Trolley. 12 miles in 45 minutes. But the countryside is lovely there are two main kinds of goodlooking farm houses. The oldest type are low & long – of stone plastered with white or yellow mortar or stucco – with sagging slate or thatched roofs, small windows & low doorways. The later ones are Georgian, but not in wood or red brick – generally grey stone or white or grey stucco. I can't quite get over Georgian fan doorways & bill roofs & small paned windows with gray stucco. As to Belfast, there's really nothing to it – it's just a big industrial city. Nothing pretty about it. They have plenty of Scotch & Irish whiskey, tho. There is a 100% luxury tax, so linens & antique Irish silver are cheaper in New York than they are in Ireland.

On my most recent travels to the British Isles, I can add only 3 places to our Duncan Hines.

\*Note for the above star: My only reaction to air raids is that of Dr. Wassell who, when asked what he thought about the Jap air raids said, "I don't like them."

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I have mentioned the Ring O' Bells for cider; I will add Grand Hotel in Plymouth for tea, mainly because you can look out over Drake's Harbor and best of all the Crawfordsburn Inn at Helen's Bay. It's in our tradition of fine eating places with a real atmosphere. Helen's Bay is a little town three miles from Bangor & also on Belfast Lough. You walk thru well tailored roads &

lanes past low thatched houses and more pretentious Georgian ones, all with west hedges and logs of flowers and vegetables. The vegetables seem just as pretty as the flowers, but that's probably because the ship can't get them. It's a wonderful feeling to walk hard, especially toward a Dunc. The Inn spraggles low and much built on all over the curved crest of a hillside, and shoots off at angles, with all the rooms at slightly different levels. Brown Tudor timbers inside and out, ivory stucco, slate roof with funny chimney pots, and small leaded panes. Roaring log fires are going in a long low lounge spread with easy chairs. And your choice of beer or wine. The dining room has good candelabras and they use antique china, silver and pewter. A couple of Army airmen joined me and they let us have a second portion of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. The three of us returned to the lounge for more beer and to get warm again (damn the British room temperatures) & picked up a middle-aged Englishman named George who turned out to be a merchant captain disguised in Harris Tweed. And feeling very mellow we all walked home together.

### Portland

These places all have Maine names. But Portland England is completely unimportant – just a village. The harbor, however, is wonderful. On our way we found a large oilslick and lots of floating debris. A convoy of American LSTs loaded with their Army personnel were moving thru the channel under the protection of one overage British destroyer the night before. Fast German E-boats came in and torpedoed four of the LST's. Over 600 Americans were killed. The Commodore talked to the British officer in charge of protecting the convoys; he said, "The incident was very unfortunate. I feel rather badly about it." I respectfully submit that English is a foreign language. If it isn't, I'm an anglophobe, beginning now.

### Belfast Lough, continued

It was a grey day and raining from time to time, but despite that thousands of sailors in undress blues & white hats were standing smartly at attention on the decks of the many ships in the harbor – and had been for two hours despite the rain. The inspection party was on a nearby heavy cruiser. Then a little English boat with an American flag came toward us. Eight side boys stepped into ranks and the chief boatswain's mate blew his pipe for as long as he had wind. As General Dwight Eisenhower stepped on board the Baldwin, four stars shone on either shoulder and collar, and a genial grin on his face. His smile is really warm & sincere. In fact, he's an original personality bid. Behind him came a double handful of major generals, vice admirals and smaller fry of various nationalities – five admirals and four generals all in dripping gold braid all over the decks. We went thru a gun drill to show off and gathered round the loud speakers –

"Men of the Baldwin, this is the first time I have inspected the ships of our fighting fleet.....ships of proud records and great potentialities..... I am aware that you are not unfamiliar with this battle zone, having escorted convoys into the Mediterranean and turned these heavily laden ships over to the British..... I welcome you to this theater of the war.

And I hope that you very soon (quick catch) sooner or later you will take part in a successful combined operation on the shores of Europe. .... Good luck to you all."

After the speech, General Ike inspected the men at quarters, asking several men questions about themselves and their work. He asked an 18 year old seaman (who looks 15) how old he was. The seaman gulped, opened his mouth, but couldn't say a word. In a similar way, the Exec. got all fouled up on "H" hour when he was showing the General our Combat Information Cuieter. There are many other stories but they have changed and altered so much in a few days

that they are really legends. There is even an epidemic of moustache growing after the General admired one particularly fine flourishing effort.

The festivities ended in the wardroom where Eisenhower smoked a couple of cigarettes & talked to the Commodore & other Captains about the Mediterranean & the Stalian Campaigns. He left after being snapped several times with flash bulb cameras. And the gold braid flowed in streams behind him to the boat.

Well, it was very nice & very interesting, but what does it all mean – just an effective gesture to promote morale? Feels like it. Also looks as tho D day was just around the corner – especially after the slip in the speech. Anyway Eisenhower is a nice guy & the Baldwin has had a great thrill that all the boys can tell their grandchildren about. Including me, I hope.

### Interlude in the Irish Sea

One fine day we were joined by a division of new destroyers which included the Meridith, Commander Kneupfer's new ship. Captain Powell sent over a message: Baldwin to Meridith:

“To George (Kneupfer), Bob (Savage) and John (Burton), Happy to have you join the party.”

To which Kneupfer replied:

“Too late to be sorry now.”

I'd hate to be on that ship, especially in Bob Savage's shoes. Kneupfer no more expected to be over here than Hiroshito did.

### At Anchors – Portland

Here we sit waiting. We're studying the plans, organizing and getting acquainted with our part in them. The ship is sealed and the men know that the invasion of France is imminent. They don't know where, as yet, and none of us know really when. I have been working on the routine detailed communications setup. Communications are really the most important phase of an operation like this. I've also been getting my plasma ready, but most of my time goes to communications. Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country.

The atmosphere of the ship hasn't changed much, if any. And I think that's healthy. With the biggest headline of the war hanging over us, we still watch dull moon pitchers, take sun baths, comment on Jack's good menus and scrape paint. “Sweepers, man your brooms. Sweep down all decks and ladders.” Nor is there any morbid touch in their letters – the men and officers are busily laying plans for a future which may be nonexistent. The German night raids are more than nuisances; we have had several near misses and one man had a minor shrapnel wound. First Blood. Well, darling, here we go to write a page in the history books. It looks like a good, carefully thought out plan. You might be interested in my mental reactions: they are in no way out of the ordinary. I felt infinitely more tense & excited when applying for medical school or while denting a fender of the old Chevy or when I did my first appendix. As you well know, I certainly have not adopted a deterministic or fatalistic attitude. Nor does this attitude imply courage, whatever that ambiguous word may mean. The ship, including me, has been trained to meet coming events and we expect to do our job well. Incentive? A very strong one: we are fighting for our lives, present and future. But since that is what we have been doing right

along, there's no excitement about it. In fact, the attempts on the part of various commanders to sound the chord of noble history in the making has fallen rather flat.

#### No Lady, she!

I've been talking to Charley Wikinson, my class in medical school and B.C.H., who is on the Emmous, another destroyer. He has a wonderful story. When in Plymouth he was trying to find the bus to the hospital when a little lady getting into a car overheard him and said she was going that way, hop in. The conversation proved interesting; it hopped around from Boston to Virginia to Plymouth's fine plans for rebuilding from the blitz to what had happened recently in Parliament. He wasn't long in figuring out that he was riding with Lady Astor. He thought she was an energetic, enthusiastic, and pleasantly opinionated person who made excellent company. She drove him thru the Dartmouth moors to tea in the country and back to dinner with Lord Astor, now mayor of Plymouth, and a couple of admirals. Like other mortals, she had trouble getting gasoline. (What has happened to her horse?) Grudgingly, a gas station man gave her gas, saying, "You may be an M.P., but you ain't no lady."

#### D. Day – Preface

What I remember of this day so few days ago actually but so far away in mental distance is dulled by a long period of strain and fatigue and hard work. Perhaps it is just as well that memory is inefficient, especially about unpleasant events. Not that these were entirely or even mostly unpleasant. Betty Butcher Everhardt can wring my neck for this statement, but certain events of these days were not only thrilling and exciting, but they were also immensely satisfying and were funny in a peculiar sort of way. If you want to account for it on the basis of temporary insanity, you may, if you care to define insanity among large numbers of previously "normal" men. The ship acted like prize fight spectators when we smashed a cleverly hidde gun emplacement which had been killing hundreds on the beachhead. It was gratifying to see that gun & its Germans go up in smoke and come down in pieces. We had a feeling of power – "Him, the Almighty hurled headlong flaming downward..... who durst defy the omnipotent to arms." And it was really funny to chase some Germans up a village street with machine gun fire. Yes, I am actually writing this and it actually happened. It isn't a theory, for discussion or condemnation – it's a fact. A fact built into human nature; it can't be eradicated by people deploring it or saying that it is wrong, whatever they may mean by that. Right now, I personally would enjoy having the entire German army within devastating range of our five inch guns. I don't know why I and others assume this immortal-omnipotent attitude – sort of a cruel stepfatherly spare-the-rod-and-spoil-the-child approach, but I definitely want to see Germany hurt & hurt badly. Ditto Japan. American men & boats blown to pieces in front of you and American wounded dying in the Baldwin wardroom force the abandonment of the Christian ethic (not that I have ever held it). Despite sublimatious, self interest, interest in one's own family, interest in one's own land, city or state, America first are important motivations despite the discredit they receive. They will never be given up. If collective security of nations and peoples is ever established, it will be because it includes these interests, not rejects them.

O.K. dear, don't blow up. These opinions are strong now, in the heat of action, but they are not seasoned, well considered judgments. I know that. But they are none the less important. All this is prelude, however – let me set some things down before they are entirely buried in my memory. It's hard to recall it even now. I think people don't like to talk about battle not because they think it's too horrible to talk about (some of it is, but not a tremendous amount), but it's just too hard to remember exactly or put your impressions in the proper words – too hard to build up

in anyone else the atmosphere necessary to get the proper point across. Marguard has some such idea. It's not that I can't tell you details of horror – I can, with blood spurting and bones sticking out and intestines hanging down and men going nuts with pain. And all the pitiful hopes and fears of the injured, assuring a boy he will not lose his legs, because you know he will never live to have them amputated; watch a man's face when he learns he is paralyzed from the waist down – had enough? I've seen more than my share of pure horror in this world, though, and it isn't pleasant to think about. So far we have been goddamned lucky. How thoroughly are your good international intentions implanted? If you knew I died like that wouldn't you enjoy seeing a few Germans writhe in agony? Don't answer that – just think it over in terms of human nature. The argument that individual Germans are not to blame is obvious but specious – it's just as obvious that collective Germans are to blame.

#### Rough Chronological Sheet of D.Day - June 6, 1944, U.S.S. Baldwin

##### About

- 0150 Sighted fires on Cherbourg peninsula started by allied bombers, distance – 7 miles, also antiaircraft fire.
- 0535 Enemy shore batteries on the coast of France opened fire on the invasion fleet “O” for Omaha. Numerous shells were bursting all around us. Distance 5640 yards. Allied planes overhead. Invasion fleet starts bombardment fifteen minutes early. Arkansas opens fire and so do we.
- 0557 We are in position for firing on our specified targets. Near miss shakes us up a little. Range – 5670 to target, 4800 to beach.
- 0615 Rocket craft open up with a terrific barrage on the beach. Small craft loaded with troops and tanks move in.
- 0620 Smoke barrage & haze render beach almost invisible. Our aircraft are everywhere.
- 0630 H-Hour, our troops have landed.
- 0645 Shifted fire to other targets; there is no more fire on us. Range to beach 1830 yards.
- 0649 Following heard on TBS, “Do not fire, we are engaging our troops.”
- 0659 Beach has cleared a little, landings are being made with little opposition, despite explosions from mines & rows of anti tank posts planted along the beach.
- 0710 Fire in Gun One under control immediately (Hot guns).
- 0719 Can see American Rangers on top of the cliffs.
- 0727 Firing on a white house on beach, from which gunfire was coming. Landing going nicely.
- 0751 Distribute “K” rations for first time.
- 0805 Firing on gun emplacements on beach starts a large fire. A cloud of smoke spiraled skyward, accompanied by an explosion.
- 0820 Report of gun fire from hill near breakwater outside the town Port en Bessin. We are straddled.
- 0821 Gunfire from this target hits Baldwin's motor whaleboat on starboard side of ship, destroying the stern of it & spraying shrapnel over the decks, some of which penetrated the passage-way, laundry & forward fire room. No personnel injured.
- 0824 Second hit on main deck, shrapnel broke hydraulic bit lines to Gun #1. Also a hole in Gun #1. Gun #1 on manual control only. We continue to fire on target with other guns at

the battery on the cliff. Shrapnel identify it as at least 105mm calibre. We pursue invasion tactics to discourage enemy fire.

0850 Bodies sighted in life belts, face down in water.

0851 Broken steam line render repair.

0901 Air raid warning received; 0912, all clear.

0959 Air defense reports “battery (at Port en Bessin) is demolished, nothing much left but a rubble of concrete.”

1112 Mortar fire on the beach becomes serious.

1200 Fired on enemy pill boxes further back.

1305 Enemy pill boxes & machine gun nests are being eliminated slowly but surely. Some battery is placing shot after shot, with perfect accuracy, on our own landing craft, tanks & supplies on the beach head. This fire is murderous. We bombard church tower & house to eliminate spotters.

1330 Report by TBS, our troops have infiltrated 3 miles without serious resistance.

1350 Bombardment eases except for shore controlled fire.

1540 Emmous reports direct hit on enemy mortar.

1740 Two landing craft bring wounded on board for emergency Rx.

1913 Firing on the enemy mortars. Colleville taken.

2105 Located enemy battery in gully 6 miles away. Rapid fire. Fire control partly reports mission accomplished.

2340 German air raid. JO-88s overhead. 2 shot down.

June 7, 0920 (TBS) We have scored direct hits on hidden mortar. Landing craft continue to pour onto the beach. We continue firing on spotted targets with great accuracy, according to Army.

#### D. Day & beyond – The Events

We skipped out at dusk. The minesweepers were ahead of us, and of course the bombers were at work. It was light enough to see what we were convoying, and it was plenty impressive. Battleships, cruisers and fighting transports. The minesweeps had left light bouys[sic]. An attack right then would have been plenty bad. In the early morning around one o’clock, we knew that paratroopers were landing. We passed some ominous looking German mine fields. New broadcasts bumbled on about Burma and Italy and there was meaningless music. As we came nearer, we could see the explosions of the bombs on France and the anti-aircraft barrage – it was rather beautiful – like some immense 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration in a huge city park, dominated by the long orange streamers going up thousands of feet.

At the first sign of light in the sky, we started in. None of us felt very well about it, because we really didn’t see how we could possibly last. We knew their shore guns were large ones and were under reinforced concrete, difficult for airplane bombs to put out of commission. I haven’t figured out yet why we weren’t sunk. They started firing at our little line of destroyers fifteen minutes before we were supposed to open fire. So we fired back. I’m not sure, of course, but I think that may mean that we were either the first or second ship to bombard France – the curtain raiser. Their shells were close & getting closer when all of us began pouring shells at the flashes. It stopped them. We continued to shell until the first wave hit the beach, then we moved to other targets farther back.

France looked cold and gray, you could see that the Army was having tough going over those beaches. There were tanks burning up. We turned our attention to a little town between two cliffs – very Norman, with a thick church spire looking peaceful. It wasn't long – they began shelling us with big stuff and hit us twice before we got out. Wrecked one of our boats and injured a gun, but didn't hurt anyone, miraculously. It was gratifying to see our bid babies tear up that town. The second wave ran into trouble. Apparently we had surprised them (which is amazing, I think) and only then did they get fire on the beachhead, but it was plenty bad when it started. Direct hits on landing boats sent men sky high. It was methodical shelling and very accurate. We were losing men by the hundreds. It was hellish to watch it & not be able to do anything about it. When we found one of those guns we really hit it – we have never been so accurate. Finally the first wave directed our fire to the rest of them and we put out shells thankfully. Then the Army moved again.

We had been told we were going to have a ringside seat, but I had never really expected to be as close as we were. They couldn't take adequate care of the wounded and asked the destroyers to help. I got a dozen, six of whom were really bad. I was busy giving them plasma, morphine, etc. for several hours before I could transfer them to a large ship. Our wardroom was a shambles, but I think I saved some lives. Some were dead before they got to me. And there's nothing more pitiful on earth than a young high school boy with so much life before him, dressed clumsily as a soldier, lying white and still at your feet.

There, but for the grace of fortune, lay I. I now had a chance to rest a minute & think. We had been hit, but not badly. We were really doing the troops some good. Things began to look a lot rosier. The radio told us that all the beachheads were going well. We listened to Eisenhower. We were glad to hear our guns roar & those of the larger ships just behind us. The trivia of life went on despite the long hours at our battle stations. I shaved & changed clothes (they needed changing) and ate K-rations and drank coffee. K-Rations are fine except for the crackers in them – they could hardly be more unpalatable. They are vitamin enriched – but I fail to see what good vitamins you throw away do you. I sneaked an hours sleep that night – a preview of the next 3 nights. Two things kept me up – decoding all the messages sent out to us by radio and enemy attacks.

The nights were the worst – then & only then could they get thru our blanket of planes. Enemy bombers came & came again. We had a near miss which shook us up, but again no seriously injured. The planes laid mines – every time we moved, we were in danger – some were not as fortunate as we were. And torpedo boats – E-boats tried to sneak in. There was one suicide attack by enemy destroyers; it isn't much of a fight when destroyers try to attack a force containing cruisers & battleships. And the blasted radio kept playing “I couldn't sleep a wink all night.” That's one of many songs I never want to hear again.

I don't remember too much about the days – they sort of ran together. We slept whenever we could & ate a little if there was anything to eat. I lost 10 lbs. We had a lot of laughs listening to the false news & illogical reasoning of the German broadcasts. And we all got rather tired of the B.B.C. playing up the British contribution. The word American was never mentioned the first several days – it was either British or Allied. It hurt to see the dying on the beach & the sinking ships and hear that kind of news. Everyone was rather bitter; comments were: “Well, I'm glad someone is fighting over here” and “Let's pull out boys – the British have the situation well in hand.” It still goes on but someone must have put them wise, because it's a bit better now. That could ruin more good feeling (and has) than any single thing the British could do.

Yes, I said sinking ships. Including destroyers. And by ironic fortune, one of those was the Meridith, Capt. Kneupfer's brand new ship, with John Burton & Bob Savage on board. I think they are all safe. They were in on the party all night. As Kneupfer said it, it's too late to be sorry now.

Things like that do not have a sedative effect. The next night we blasted an E-boat and tried to sink a little island that the radar men swore was moving toward us. Nobody felt chagrined in the least. We didn't want to be late or sorry. The captain has handled the ship superbly – just as we knew he would. We are beholden to him.

#### D. Day – in retrospect [note in the margin] Man's inhumanity to man

I wish I could say that the invasion of France was planned as well as possible and executed with foresight and common sense thru out and that the losses were necessary and as minimal as they could be to gain the required objectives. I cannot. Some of the troops were not well trained for their jobs, the plan was cumbersome & the corrections to it were more weighty than the plan itself (actual weight). There were contradictory orders, some officers of subordinate commands were more interested in gaining reputations than in handling their units properly. I am almost certain that U.S. naval guns killed American soldiers, and lots of them, thru inefficiency and obstinacy. There were no adequate arrangements made for handling casualties on the beach during the first day. Later, that improved, but surely it might have been possible to have care closer at hand. Outmoded tactics were costly in handling E-Boats and airplane attacks. Perhaps such a large plan – it was tremendous – cannot be efficient. Even if true, I think that's a sorry argument. What's on the other side of the ledger? The big think, of course. We have landed pretty well so far. And on the most heavily defended coasts in all the world. Where the Todt organization and Rommel planted mines & pill boxes and booby traps, we have now planted harbors complete with breakwaters, nets and guns, in which are unloading thousands of ships. We have our French air strips now. It's pretty wonderful. New York harbor has nothing on this for size. I think it all means that the war will be over soon, and, if so, I'm very glad I am here doing part of it.

#### Operation Neptune

The history books will have all the events & the plan – Perhaps your uncle will write “the Story of the Great War II.” Anyway, I'm not going to bother writing many if any details of the Army's fight. The beach was difficult as all hell. Underwater obstructions & mines, wire, anti tank posts, tank traps, ferroconcrete pill boxes & enfilading fire, more landmines & booby traps. The demolition squads seemed to take care of all that pretty efficiently, as far as I could see, with their dynamite. They blasted some “safe” channels thru. But the major trouble was the secondary fire. I've talked about the major mistakes I believe occurred – here's one of the most major: As we were bombarding, medium bombers were supposed to plaster the actual beach to explode land mines, help remove obstructions & the secondary guns. For some unknown reason, they did not. At some points, eg Point du Hoc, this was very costly. For about six hours in the middle of the day, things looked really tough. The first wave, including the rangers who sealed the cliffs, had gotten thru except in one spot, but after that every boat which came near the shore was blown sky high. The wounded were piled high & the dead were piled higher. About 30% of one Ranger outfit were alive. A direct hit on a landing boat send pieces of men in every direction. The boats, sensibly enough, pulled away to wait for someone to get that fire. And

pretty soon the ocean around us was just full of loaded waiting boats of every description. And until the first wave could locate the mortars further back, we just sat there & twiddled our thumbs. At that moment, I wouldn't have been surprised if we had called the whole thing off & gone home. But then we got the guns & things began to move again. I tell you all this so that the glamorized newspaper guff will be counteracted. Our losses may have been light compared to what we were prepared to lose in landing, but they were certainly plenty & bad. Furthermore, don't get the idea that this "wonderful" plan with aerial & naval bombardment brought the Germans to their knees – the only force which accomplished that was the Army, and they went thru hell.

And yet, considering what the Germans had built up on this beach for years, the guns we couldn't knock out of their concrete, the other artillery & army units they had around, it's amazing that it went off as well as it did. Many things have been considered to explain it:

1 – We succeeded in tactical surprise in picking out beaches & the time

2 – We had excellent intelligence work.

3 – Except for our beach, the bombing was excellent.

4 – We are supposed to have been lucky enough to bomb the Caen railroad yards when 10 trainloads of troops & more of equipment were there, and destroy them.

5 – Enemy radar was rendered ineffective by the special attention paid them by airplanes and by a new jamming device which blocks them completely. If true, this explains why they did not do more damage to the supporting fleet.

6 – The Germans certainly lost a trick by not sending submarines & E boats into the area either the night of the invasion or the next night. Things were disorganized enough to have made it very bad. The Germans are smart people – I can't understand how they missed that chance.

One of the boys got ashore. He walked a short distance inland & returned with all sorts of tall tales. But the most interesting thing he saw was a small French family sitting on their doorstep watching the army rolling by, and without much interest. There were two goats grazing on the lawn. Nearby buildings were destroyed, but their farmhouse was intact. Two tremendous armies had met in a mighty battle & had passed right around this house and there they sat. To me, that is the unchangeable, undefeatable quality of France.

I keep reaching a stopping place & then not being able to stop. The commodore is back aboard & he has just said that because of the absence of bombing by the air force when they were supposed to, the bombardment by the destroyers was of primary importance & necessity to the landing at our beach, "Omaha," from Port en Bessin to Grandcamp. It's nice to know you've done something important. However, the screen is just as important, tho less spectacular. E-Boats & subs could play hell in here if they broke thru. And since the Army is quite inland now, we no longer have a bombardment function.

One note now concerning the American reaction. I understand that there was ringing of bells and general rejoicing in some parts of the States when D-day was announced. That's a hell of a note. But I'm getting a little resigned to that sort of reaction. It's part of the same attitude toward the man that brought a great gasp to the people at home when the heavy casualties at Tarawa (??) were announced. "This must not happen again," was in one editorial. The country rejoices & rings bells when a battle is announced and the papers begin printing vivid verbs and rich adjectives, and then when the casualty lists come thru after a great victory there is indignation at the loss of life. The phrase "they don't know there's a war going on" is not the case; they know it & it affects their young men & interferes a little with their diet & their activities & they have a sort of guilty feeling about being safe at home. But they do not know

what kind of a war it is. The papers, the radio & the pictures, even if they were adequate or accurate, couldn't tell them. Words are not good for expressing some thoughts. The only way they could really understand is to be in it. It doesn't do any good to lecture a bunch of strikers on how they are hurting the war effort, they listen to it without too much protest due to inborn patriotism, but they go ahead & strike anyway. They feel that their grievances as to wages & hours, etc. are just as important or moreso than the war effort, which they feel is a rather vague field in someone else's department. Being forced into some cooperation, they feel they have done their part. They have the feeling that the army & navy are now well trained & equipped & we can bomb the enemy to his knees & walk over him. The old "we're bound to win" idea; little thanks to them however. That isn't what does it. The war is being won with guts, a nasty term which includes the ever present fact of large abdominal bullet wounds with the intestines of young Americans from just down your street at home draped bleeding on the soil of France, Tarawa & the other battlefields. If the American public could see this or understand it, there would be no further strikes or other traitorous activities (yes, I said traitorous). But they won't see it & don't understand it, and I shall never again argue the situation. I suppose I'll always get bad about it tho, and so will others. Some day some people & policies are going to face the anger of what's left of ten million men. It may not be directed or pretty or good for the country, but if & when it comes (and I think it will), I will know why. And I think there needs to be an element in a democracy which knows the heel of war.

PS. I have never much cared for the policies of the American legion, and still don't much, but I can understand them a lot better now.

### Heroes & Hero Worship

(with deepest apologies to Thomas Carlyle) (who needs to get together with Tolstoy, by the way)

John Austin is lying comfortably on my rack, I am sitting on the wash basin & Claude on the desk. We are all smoking pipes, so you can imagine the close quarters & the dense atmosphere of our bull session. John, in his own words is "wallowing in a welter of cynicism." All bull sessions are sort of stream of consciousness affairs; the point of interest changes imperceptibly from one subject to another, and this one has played around with heroism, medals, our leaders in this action and the real importance of the action.

Let me explain the background of our thinking. For a while, we were in on everything. We knew what the score was – we had studied the plans carefully and with great self-interest. We had a damned important vital job to do. And before & during the action our perceptions and observations were heightened by the presence of danger. Going over, I gave us about a 50% chance of sailing the Baldwin back under the Brooklyn Bridge. At one point, I didn't think we had a chance. All thru the landings and for about two days after D-day, we say and heard most of what was going on. When you're fighting for your life, it's a wonderful feeling to be "in on the dope." If you will pardon a grandiose phrase, for a while we held the pulse of history. (Department of rich & beautiful prose). We could analyze it and see what made it tick. It doesn't often happen. Now we are doing a more routine job – an important one – but one which is on the fringe of the tapestry. And we have a chance to think about that other time, and talk it over.

Eisenhower was in charge; General Montgomery, Admiral Ramsey and some English air men were his three chiefs – all English. Other than the development of the plan of action and its delay of 24 hours, I could not see the influence of any of these men – I was not in a position to

do so. However, we could see the rest of the ladder at work on the American (Western) side. Admiral Kirk was in charge (under Ramsey) and General Omar Bradley (under Montgomery). Kirk's second in command, Admiral Deyo, had absolutely nothing to do and he did it very well. The two admirals in charge of the amphibs did a beautiful job of organization. The priorities were correct – they followed the plan that they had practiced and when they couldn't follow it, they improvised with speed. They got the men onto the beach fast and with little friction. Admiral Bryant was in charge of the fire support group. Bryant is simple, friendly, bluff and hearty man from Searsport, Maine. He never did quite know what was going on. He was on the air all the way from England to France with a running chatter of gossip, despite the absolute need for radio silence. His flagship, The Texas, never did bother to stay in the channel. During the day, the Texas would fire at anything. The army told them they were firing on our own troops twice, but she thot she knew better – the shore party asked us if some destroyer wouldn't please torpedo the Texas. Liaison for sore fire control was pretty good tho, Bryant didn't drop the ball on that or on help for the rangers at Pt. du Hoc after his attention was called to them forcibly. One of his positive contributions was to inject a note of humor into the whole thing. On D+2 day, when the guns were going full blast, Bryant got onto the priority radio circuit with a question. It seems a Whitehall carrier pigeon hit the Texas by mistake. He had regulations and instructions for everything, he thot, but this was an emergency that wasn't mentioned in the plans. He asked Dick (Kirk) what you fed a carrier pigeon. He asked Diyo if he didn't want squab for dinner. Kirk himself followed the plan pretty well. He slipped up on coordinating the screen with the convoys, but the Germans didn't even try to sneak thru. I will never understand why they didn't – they would have had a field day & badly crippled us – but they didn't & he fixed it the next night.

Commander Marshall's activities are very interesting. His first job was to take the minesweeps in & protect them while they swept the area. That meant he was the first one in – a perilous position. There weren't many mines & he for thru OK. Then he became assistant fire control commander under Bryant. Now the way to be important is to get people working under you. It doesn't matter what they do or whether they are needed – the more you have, the more important you are. The commodore soon built up to a staff of six. Who stumbled all over each other as he transferred from ship to ship. And all the time, his aim was to get up the ladder. The way he shot the bull was amazing to hear. (\*\*see enclosure) But give him credit for this – when he saw an important job, he grabbed it – The rangers at Point du Hoc were really having a tough time. They needed everything. And he gave it to them – off every ship within reach – ammunition, food, medical supplies, expert assistance, and battled with the admirals to get more & some reinforcements. He became The Ranger headquarters. It helped his ambitions along all right, but it was good work. The rest of the time he was mostly striking for admiral. After the smoke cleared, he recommended his staff for medals because of personal bravery. See the point? – if his staff got that, he was bound to get the next grade up. Plus the backslapping – Bill's a good guy, let's give him this; here, Jack you take that. No wonder John Austin is disgusted & wallowing in a welter, a cesspool of cynicism. Admittedly we were in danger, but not as much as the rangers and demolition squads & others on the beach. The LCT officers will go unsung. We did a good job – but no more than our duty. The medals that are going to be handed out won't mean a thing in most cases. All we deserve is recognition of professional excellence in time of stress.

The whole problem of medals & heroism is pretty loose. Personal bravery above & beyond the call of duty does happen – the submarine captain, wounded on the deck orders to boat

to submerge without him; the yeoman sets the depth charges on safe as the ship goes down to protect his shipmates against the concussion when they are in the water, and is never seen again. These are brave men – the best definition I can give is this: they sublimate their drive for personal safety in order to act advantageously for the group. I think there are very few of these. On most medals, not all that glistens is gold.

What about heroes in Carlyle's sense – the natural leaders who accomplish the work of the world? Who was our Nelson, Cromwell, Napoleon or Frederick the Great? John, in the depths of his cynicism said, "Brother Tolstoy was right – leave the admirals at home." Claude & I jumped on him – there will always be the stuffed shirts, we said, but the important thing here is that a successful landing has been made against terrific odds by the greatest assembled fleet in all times. At this point, I think it stands a chance of being one of the world's decisive battles. I said once before that during the critical phases of it, we held the pulse of history. Well, then, in this particular battle, who was right, Carlyle or Tolstoy? I can see you smiling now at my presumption. Tolstoy wrote a great story in which he analyzed the events of & the forces moving in Napoleon's Russian Campaign. He concluded that human will is not discernable as an important force in the broad stream of history. I intend to review the present campaign by the same method.

#### War & Peace – 1944

##### The Argument.

Tolstoy analyzed Napoleon's Russian Campaign in general and the battle of Borodino in particular to show that the individual will of Napoleon or of high ranking generals on either side had little to do with the actual battle or its results. His main idea was that Napoleon was relentlessly swept, or rather, buffeted around, by a broad stream of forces which made his "important decisions" inevitable and his other orders unimportant or impossible to perform. In analyzing the campaign, Tolstoy felt that:

- 1 – the choice of one of several alternatives by generals was dictated by the circumstances,
- 2 – most of the decisions made by the generals were not carried into effect in the actual battle, including the precombat plans as well as the orders during action, and
- 3 – the more that is known about a given action, the more inevitable its events appear to be; the area in which chance and free choice may possibly occur becomes very small & unimportant in the broad sweep of history.

In my opinion, Tolstoy has not analyzed the energy behind the flow of historical events very well. Much of that energy is indeed derived from other than human sources and has a more or less inevitable character. The forces of wind, waves and weather, of geography, fauna and flora act tremendously on history. However, humans are also equipped with energy and can use it to influence events. It is obvious that individuals or groups of them will use that energy in a way which depends on their hereditary background and their experience in their environment.

Increased knowledge of these factors makes the actions of individuals more understandable. If you know a man very well, you may even be able to predict his actions in certain circumstances. However, understandability and predictability are not inevitability. The worst of the idea of inevitability is its implication that man is passive and without power to act. IN-EV' I-TA-BLE, adj. – Incapable of being avoided, evaded or shunned, bound to come, happen, etc. But inevitability becomes a dead issue when each person makes his choices and decisions in individual way and uses his own energy to mold history. A man is not a leaf carried along aimlessly by a storm; entropy is not a steamroller of inorganic force crushing the passive human

race beneath it. I argue that the resultant of dynamic human and non-human forces makes history.

### The Normandy Campaign.

First, the plan. The strategy is now pretty obvious – the Americans to cut the Cherbourg peninsula and then advance to take the port while the British advanced along the valley of the Orne to cut the German communication lines at Caen and further toward Brittany. Once Cherbourg was taken, and the port reconditioned, the biggest military convoys ever seen would start landing a huge army with huge supply bases. As I write, Cherbourg is falling.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? It certainly wasn't. This was the biggest thing of its kind – there will probably not be a larger landing operation in this war. On a very clear day when you could see perhaps 2/5 of the operation, the size of it was such that one has to use Hollywood adjectives. The triphibious war is new, I think; before this war there was very little of even amphibious operations. We developed our own technique and learned fast from every invasion we made – Pacific and Mediterranean. The African ones were pretty poor – with any real opposition, it would have been shambles. Having seen the confidential reports, I think we learned more from Tarawa than from any other invasion. We had to develop a body of planning experts. Intelligence had to find out every possible intricate detail of the whole vast German defense system; the aviators had to figure out what they could control and what they couldn't; the ships had to be built, supplied and gathered; men had to be trained to special assignments etc. etc. – and after all that, the experts sat down and figured the possibilities. This is no war for one of these heroes of Carlyle; no one man could ever begin making the millions of decisions. After the experts finished, the supreme command got together & picked the possibilities they thought they could handle, and proceeded to lay down the broad outlines of strategy & tactics. Then it went to the Task Force Commanders. These are the men who assign everyone their parts in the play & see that they are coordinated. They even practice landings for their various units. The ships, however, don't vet the finished plan until shortly before the thing begins. Even so, it's a wonder the whole didn't leaked out – so many people were in on it before it happened. One army man was cashiered for having too free a tongue in a bar, I understand. Eisenhower's planning job was no doubt finished six months ago & since that time I imagine most of his work has been minor revisions, straightening out relations between the various allied units and the three services, and patting people like us on the head for morale purposes. From that time on, the task force commanders took over – Admiral Kirk & General Bradley for our area. They are the men on the spot & they move the chess pieces. The interesting comparison between Borodino and Normandy as to plan is that ours required an amazing amount of human judgment & energy and it worked in the exact place, at the exact time, and in the exact manner in which it was supposed to work. As Tolstoy pointed out, Napoleon's didn't.

Another of Tolstoy's main points was that Napoleon was caught in the momentum of events – his order to begin battle and his plans for its beginning had little importance since that affair was almost out of his hands. It is evident that this is not the case in Normandy. Eisenhower delayed D-day twice, just on the eve of battle to wait for more favorable weather, and was prepared to wait another two weeks for favorable tides if the weather made it necessary. It was dangerous, with all the ships, thousands of them, loaded to the gills & sitting at anchor within easy bombing range – but momentum did not carry him forward when he didn't want to go. Certainly this shows that human choice & decision are important in historical events.

As to the battle, Tolstoy's argument is again negated. Napoleon had a very sketchy idea of what was going on and his orders were often impractical & some were not carried out. Tolstoy pictures Borodino as the meeting of two tremendous tidal waves in a chaotic melee. Off Normandy, the super-armada made its approach to appointed positions at night, planes & ships made their rendezvous and then protected by an appalling barrage, they made their landings. There was opposition, but no chaos. In one sector, our beach near Isigny, there as unexpected resistance due to the medium bombers getting lost and the Pout du Hoc Rangers arriving 45 minutes late (poor navigation) and the presence of an unexpected mechanized German division around Carentan. These, plus a storm, prevented the depth of penetration we had planned for, but the task force commander did not lose control. In contrast to Napoleon, Kirk's communication system allowed him to get the dope & give orders instantly by means of the wireless radio. Talkie walkies [sic] are the amazing development of modern war. I'm not saying that there were not mistakes or setbacks. There were plenty. But in spite of them, Bradley cut the peninsula and is storming Cherbourg. Even the setbacks show the importance of human initiative and energy. The commodore's coup in becoming control officer for the rangers was really a golden opportunity & he did a good job. And it was extemporaneous. (Napoleon was right about the friction between even the most integrated allies. There were some rather tragic errors resulting from this confusion. The British never gave us a good idea when night convoys were arriving (a bad time for them to arrive anyway) and there was always confusion. And when one LST had trouble with the British type of recognition signals, one of our destroyers shelled & sunk her. I don't blame the destroyer – friend & enemy alike give the same radar picture. And on one memorable night American PT boats and British MT Boats has a pitched battle, each thinking the others were German E-Boats. (The battle of the Lilliputians).

Well, there is the defense of my argument. Tolstoy analyzed one campaign, concluded that its events were inevitable and that human will was not a moving force in the battle. He then generalized to say that all historic events were inevitable. Remember Huxley and the green apples? It was his example of deductive reasoning: These green apples are sour, therefore all green apples are sour. I believe I have demonstrated that my green apple was sweet – I believe that the battle of Normandy demonstrates that human will can be an important force in the broad stream of history. What do you think?

Each time I think I have finished, I find I have to add something. I've been talking to John again about this, and thinks I'm doing Tolstoy an injustice. He thinks War & Peace was an attempt to debunk the Carlyle school of thot, but was not intending to deny the dynamic energy of peoples. And I agree that all thru the book, he does give the peculiar energy of the Russian people when invaded part of the credit for destroying Napoleon. But I think he forgets about it in the last chapters when he starts his philosophy. And I think you and a lot of other people agree with met that he gets that old passive, predeterministic idea in there. John thinks he meant no more than understandable when he sad inevitable, and that his interpreter "has done him wrong," and that I am quibbling over definitions. Agreed, but in this case they are important definitions. If you didn't mean it, Count, I'm sorry, truly sorry. I think your idea is a lot truer than Carlyle's anyway.