



ASSIGNMENT TO HELL



The War Against Nazi Germany

with Correspondents

**Walter Cronkite, Andy Rooney, A. J. Liebling,
Homer Bigart, and Hal Boyle**



TIMOTHY M. GAY



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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

*To my mother,
Anne Harrington Gay,
still going strong at eighty-five,
Civil Air Patrol volunteer, 1942–1944.
And to the memory of my aunt and uncle,
Ella Harrington Cashman (1910–2009) and William Maurice Cashman, MD (1904–
1989), U.S. Navy surgeon, 1941–1945.
The best of the best generation.*

I know that it is socially acceptable to write about war as an unmitigated horror, but subjectively at least, it was not true, and you can feel its pull on men's memories at the maudlin reunions of war divisions. They mourn for their dead, but also for war.

—A. J. LIEBLING, 19
MOLLIE AND OTHER WAR PIECES

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



Despite all the books and movies, despite popular culture's genuflection to the Greatest Generation it's still difficult for us to imagine the heartache that World War II exacted on our parents and grandparents. This story illustrates why.

In July 2011, my wife, Elizabeth, and I took our kids—Allyson, then twenty-one, Andrew, eighteen, and Abigail, eleven—on a World War II-inspired trip through England and France. While visiting the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial at Colleville-sur-Mer, we wanted to pay our respects to the brother of Associated Press columnist Hal Boyle's sister-in-law, Radioman Second Class John N. Murphy of Kansas City, Kansas. Young Jack was killed D-Day evening on Omaha Beach. At the visitor's center, I approached the guide sitting behind the counter and asked for help in finding Jack's grave. One of Boyle's best columns was a tender tribute to Jack, written at Normandy a month after Murphy perished.

The guide turned out to be Anthony Lewis, a patient and gracious Brit. Lewis has bushy brown hair, a ready smile, and an enviable, Joe Liebling-like facility for carrying on simultaneous conversations in English and French. He clearly enjoys helping people find the burial spots of family members and old friends of old friends on the bluff near Omaha Beach.

"Let's see," he said, squinting through wire-framed glasses at the database he'd called up on his computer screen. He scrolled through endless names. "John N. Murphy of Kansas City ... John N. Murphy ..."

After a few minutes, Lewis reckoned that *our* John Murphy was no longer buried at Colleville. Once the war had ended, Jack's family must have requested that his remains be repatriated; the bodies of more than half the Americans killed in Europe during World War II were eventually transferred back home, Lewis explained.

Lewis continued to eye his screen. He was "sad to report" that there were many other martyrs named John Murphy buried in the eleven cemeteries maintained around the world by the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC).

"Good heavens. How many?" I asked.

Eventually Lewis determined that there were twenty-seven John Murphys resting in ABMC gravesites: four in Margraten, Holland; three in Florence; two in Sicily; two in Normandy; two in Ardennes, France; one in Henri-Chapelle, Belgium; three in Honolulu; and ten in Manila.¹

Twenty-seven?

World War II was so malignant that twenty-seven Americans named John Murphy are buried in ABMC cemeteries—and that doesn't even count the John Murphys, like *our* John Murphy, resting elsewhere?

Lewis pointed out that a Sergeant John P. Murphy of New York, a member of the 299th Engineer Combat Battalion, happened to be buried at Normandy, in Plot I, Row Five, Grave Eighteen. He'd been killed on D-Day, too, not far from *our* John Murphy.

So the five of us set out through those sacred grounds to find Sergeant John P. Murphy's gravestone. There's something about that immaculately landscaped lawn, those thousands of pristine and geometrically precise white markers, that envelops you, that makes you feel large and small at the same time.

While we stood over Sergeant Murphy's grave, I thought of Andy Rooney's lovely hymn to the me

interred at Colleville: “Even if you didn’t know anyone who died, the heart knows something the brain does not—and you weep.”²

Too many of us still take the fight against Adolf Hitler and global Fascism for granted. We’re so familiar with the war’s ebb and flow—the “inevitable” Allied triumph over evil—that we’ve become inured to the sacrifice it demanded.

There was nothing inevitable about victory over Nazi Germany. It was accomplished against long odds through stirring leadership and incalculable suffering.

There was also nothing inevitable about the caliber of U.S. journalism in World War II. Much of the press coverage of America’s earlier conflicts—the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the Great War of 1917–1918—had been tainted with “yellow,” appallingly shallow and propagandistic, usually concocted a healthy distance from the front lines.

Most World War II correspondents were of a different breed: conscientious journalists who insisted on being close to the action and reporting something resembling the truth. Even with intrusive censorship, the journalism they practiced during the war helped propel their postwar craft—and spawned the greatest era of press independence and integrity in American history.

We know now that Hitler’s blitzkrieg through France stopped soon after the Wehrmacht captured Paris. But the *New Yorker*’s A. J. Liebling didn’t know that when, with Stuka dive-bombers still terrorizing the French countryside, he jumped into a tiny Citroën with two other correspondents and headed out for Lisbon.

We know now that enemy resistance to the Allied landings in Morocco was comparatively light. But the Associated Press’ Hal Boyle didn’t know that when, in the dank chill of a November morning, he joined other petrified young Americans in shimmying onto a landing craft.

We know now that the Nazis were eventually pushed off the high ground surrounding the beach at Anzio. But the *New York Herald Tribune*’s Homer Bigart didn’t know that as he spent two agonizing months on Anzio’s beachhead, constantly diving for cover as enemy gunners peppered it with artillery.

We know now that, after weeks of gruesome combat, the Germans retreated from St.-Lô in Normandy. But Staff Sergeant Andy Rooney of the *Stars and Stripes* didn’t know that when he was following GIs up savagely defended hills, dodging machine gun and mortar fire. Rooney’s bravery earned him a Bronze Star.

We know now that Hitler’s prized *Panzer* units eventually abandoned Holland. But United Press’ Walter Cronkite didn’t know that when his 101st Airborne glider crash-landed in Zon. The glider turned upside down as it slithered in a farm field, splintering in two. As Cronkite scrambled out, he could hear enemy artillery. It barely let up for weeks.

For every moment of joy in the struggle against Nazi Germany, there were dozens laced with profound grief. To be sure, covering the war to stop Hitler took journalistic skill. But mainly it took courage. It’s been an honor to tell their story.

So to Andy Rooney, who sadly left us at age ninety-two just as the manuscript was nearing completion, and to his friends and family, to the friends and families of Walter Cronkite, A. J. Liebling, Homer Bigart, and Hal Boyle, to the families of the twenty-eight blessed John Murphys, and to the hundreds of other Allied heroes celebrated in these pages, the Gay family of Vienna, Virginia, would like to say thank you.

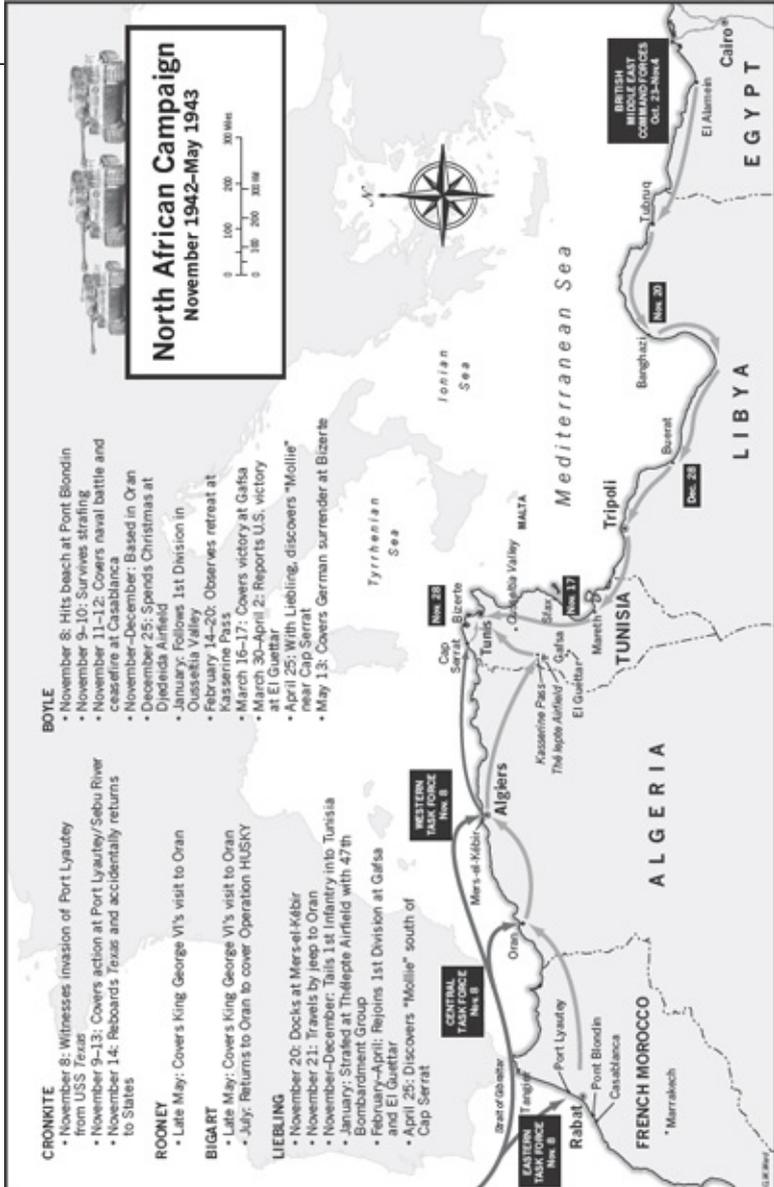
Timothy M. G.
December 20



North African Campaign November 1942–May 1943



- BOYLE**
- November 8: Hits beach at Point Blondin
 - November 9–10: Survives strafing
 - November 11–12: Covers naval battle and ceasefire at Casablanca
 - November–December: Based in Oran
 - December 23: Spends Christmas at Djedida Airfield
 - January: Follows 1st Division in Ousseilla Valley
 - February 14–20: Observes retreat at Kasennine Pass
 - March 16–17: Covers victory at Gafsa
 - March 30–April 2: Reports U.S. victory at El Guettar
 - April 25: With Liebling, discovers "Mollie" near Cap Serrat
 - May 13: Covers German surrender at Bizerte
- CRONKITE**
- November 8: Witnesses invasion of Port Lyautey from USS 7
 - November 9–13: Covers action at Port Lyautey/Sabu River
 - November 14: Reboards Texas and accidentally returns to States
- ROONEY**
- Late May: Covers King George VI's visit to Oran
- BIGART**
- Late May: Covers King George VI's visit to Oran
 - July: Returns to Oran to cover Operation HUSKY
- LIEBLING**
- November 20: Docks at Mers-el-Kébir
 - November 21: Travels by jeep to Oran
 - November–December: Falls 1st Infantry into Tunisia
 - January: Stranded at Thlépte Airfield with 47th Bombardment Group
 - February–April: Rejoins 1st Division at Gafsa and El Guettar
 - April 25: Discovers "Mollie" south of Cap Serrat



BRITISH MIDDLE EAST COMMAND FORCES
OCT. 23–NOV. 4

EGYPT
Cairo
El Alamein

LIBYA
Benghazi
Barrat
Tubouq

Dec. 28

ALGERIA

FRENCH MOROCCO
Rabat
Port Lyautey
Casablanca
Marrakech

Nov. 8

Nov. 13

Nov. 20

Nov. 23

Nov. 28

Dec. 23

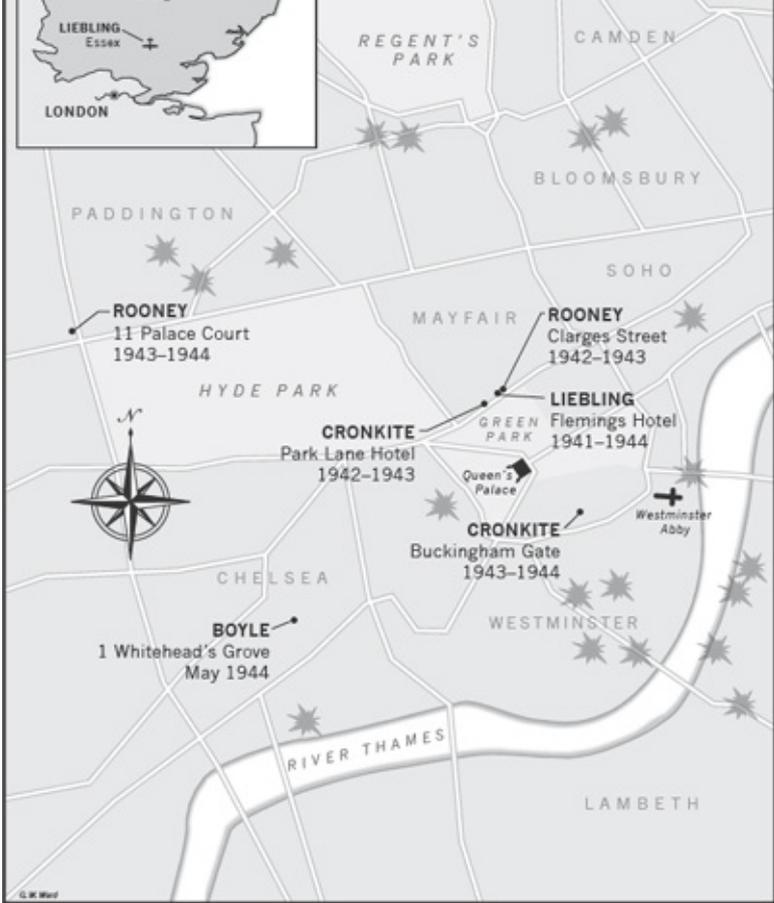
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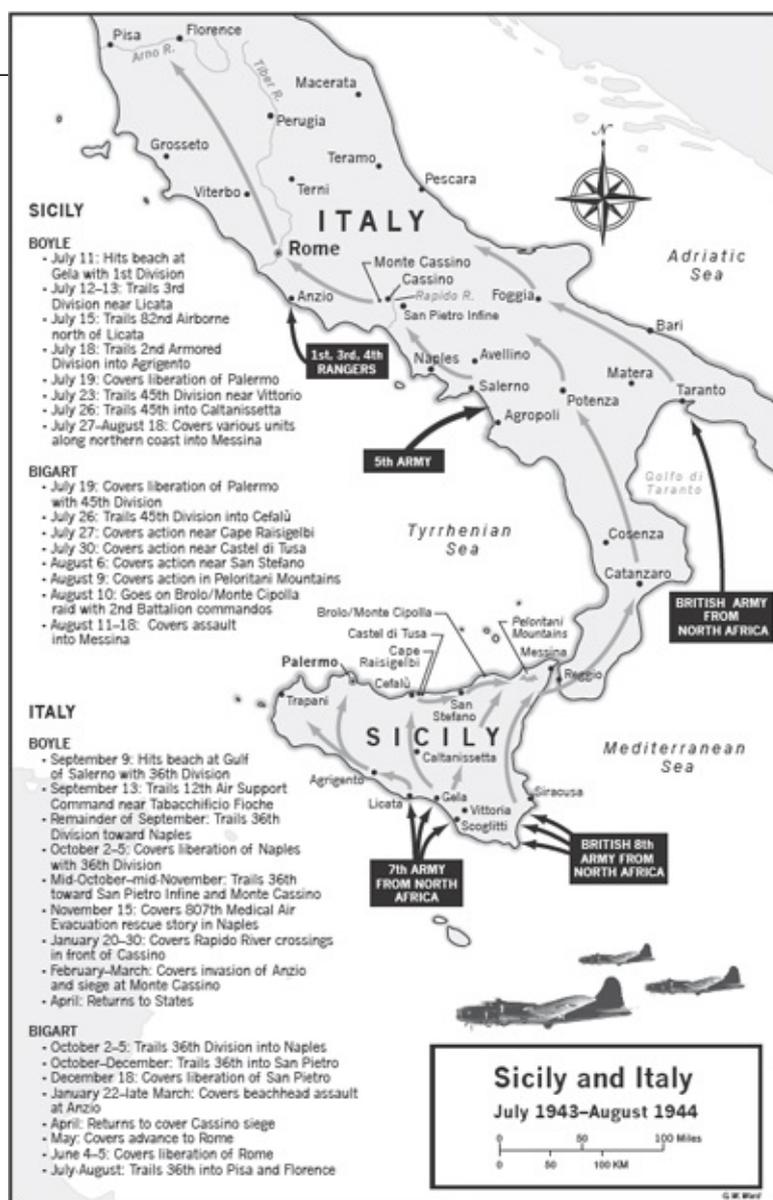
East Anglia Airbases

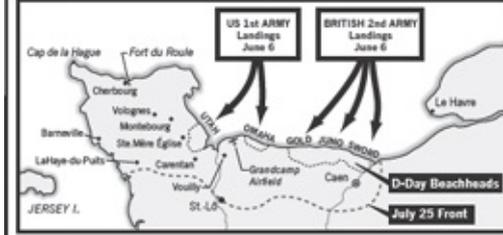
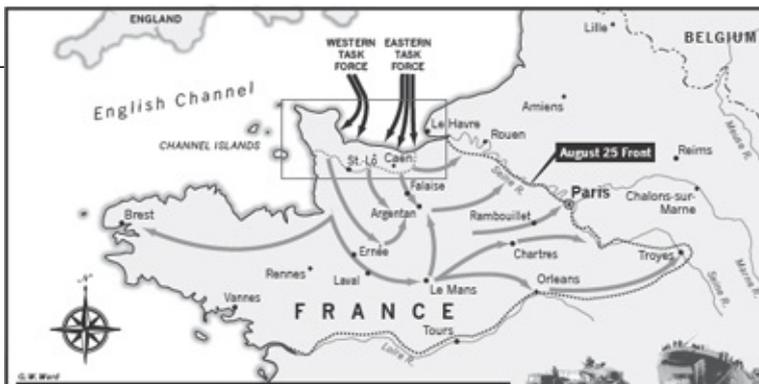


London and the Air War 1942-1944



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Normandy and The Breakout June-August 1944

0 50 100 Miles
0 50 100 Kilometers

- ROONEY**
- June 10: Hits beach at Utah with 4th Division
 - June 11-13: Covers action near Carentan
 - June 14-15: Trails advance into Ste-Mère-Eglise
 - June 15-26: Trails advance up Cotentin Peninsula to Montebourg and Valognes
 - June 27: Covers liberation of Fort du Roule, Cherbourg
 - June 28-30: Stays in Cherbourg with Liebling
 - Early July: Stays at Grandcamp Airbase with Bede Irvin
 - Early mid-July: Stays in Vouilly while covering action around St-Lô
 - July 15-17: Covers assault on Hills 192 and 122 outside St-Lô
 - July 18: Covers liberation of St-Lô with 29th and 1st Divisions
 - July 20: Covers Bradley's press conference at Vouilly
 - July 25: Covers COBRA breakout
 - August 3: Files story on FFI action near Vannes
 - August 15-18: Covers action at Falaise Pocket
 - August 18-22: Stays at Bagnoles press camp
 - August 23-25: Stays at Rambouillet
 - August 25: Covers liberation of Paris with French 2nd Armored
- LIEBLING**
- June 24: Arrives in Normandy from England
 - June 25-26: Covers FFI on Cotentin
 - June 27: Covers liberation of Fort du Roule, Cherbourg
 - June 28-30: Stays in Cherbourg with Rooney
 - Early July: Stays at Vouilly with Boyle and Rooney, covers action around St-Lô
 - July 8-9: Trails 79th Infantry into Barneville and La Haye-du-Puits with Boyle
- BOYLE**
- June 27: Arrives in Normandy from England
 - June 29: Covers surrender of Cap de la Hague
 - July 8-9: Trails 79th Infantry into Barneville and La Haye-du-Puits with Liebling
 - Early July: Stays at Vouilly with Liebling and Rooney, covering St-Lô
 - July 20: Covers Bradley's press conference in Vouilly
 - July 25: Covers COBRA breakout
 - August 3: Covers action around Rennes
 - August 13: Trails 5th Division into Argentan
 - August 14: Covers liberation of Chartres
 - August 18: Stays at Bagnoles
 - August 21: Covers Bradley's press conference in Laval
 - August 22-24: Stays at Rambouillet
 - August 25: Covers liberation of Paris
 - August 29: Injured in motorcycle accident in Paris
- CRONKITE**
- June 13-September 17: Dodges V-1s in London
- Other entries:**
- July 18: Covers liberation of St-Lô with 29th Infantry
 - July 20: Covers Bradley's press conference in Vouilly
 - July 25: Covers COBRA breakout
 - Late July-early August: Stays at Carlsby press camp
 - Mid August: Trails First Division artillery unit
 - August 15-17: Covers action near Falaise Pocket
 - August 18: Stays at Bagnoles press camp
 - August 21: Covers Bradley's press conference at Laval
 - August 22: Stays at Ernée
 - August 24: Stays at Montlhéry outside Paris
 - August 25-September 30: Covers liberation of Paris and aftermath



- HOLLAND**
- CRONKITE**
- September 17–18: Drops into Zon with 101st Airborne
 - September–October 3: Covers action around Eindhoven with 101st Airborne
 - October 3–5: Covers action around Nijmegen with 82nd Airborne
 - October 6–8: Covers Allied advance on Overloon and Venray
- ROONEY**
- September 21: Covers liberation of Maastricht
- BOYLE**
- September 20: Covers liberation of the Hague
- BELGIUM/LUXEMBOURG**
- CRONKITE**
- September 29–December 16: Covers Montgomery in Brussels
 - December 16–25: Covers Bulge from Luxembourg City
 - December 26–27: Covers Bulge from south of Bastogne
- BOYLE**
- October 15: Covers Aubel
 - December 17: Covers Malmédy Massacre involving 285th Field Artillery
 - December 20: Covers action near Stavelot
 - December 28: Covers action near Celles
- GERMANY**
- ROONEY**
- September 20: Covers action in Roetgen with 1st Army



D-DAY FOR ALL THEIR LIVES

I have D-Day now for all of my life ... No one can ever take [it] away from me, but nobody can give me another D-Day, either.

—A. J. LIEBLING, 1944
LETTER TO JOE MITCHELL OF THE *NEW YORKER*

The June sun had barely crept over the soggy English countryside when Captain Robert W. Sheets, his nine crew members, and their surprise guest began crawling through the belly of the B-17G Flying Fortress *Shoo Shoo Baby*. Launched at Molesworth, a Cambridgeshire airdrome sixty miles north of London, that morning's mission would mark the hellion pilot's twenty-first raid over enemy territory.¹

Bob Sheets loved living on the edge. On a whim four years earlier, sans passport, he had ditched the University of Oregon to swab decks on a freighter bound for the Philippines. Right after Pearl Harbor he had enlisted, but balked when the Army groomed him toward tanks; instead, he insisted on enrolling in flight school.² Now, just six months removed from pilot training, the wiry towhead with the sly wit had become a balls-out bomber jock for the Eighth Army Air Force. Every time Sheets went wheels up, he was bucking survival odds—and he and his crew knew it.

His boys had come to believe their new “Fort” was a talisman; *Shoo Shoo Baby* was named after a bluesy and bittersweet tune by the Andrews Sisters about a serviceman kissing his girl goodbye. Painted on the nose's starboard side was the obligatory “bomber gal” provocatively stretched out in a peignoir, her auburn tresses almost brushing the crude block lettering of SHOO SHOO BABY. Scrawled on the port side was their squadron's mascot, Warner Brothers wise guy Bugs Bunny, coolly munching a carrot while standing atop a plummeting bomb.³

Bugs, the temptress, and SHOO SHOO BABY⁴ shooed away flak and checker-toothed Focke-Wulf 190s and Messerschmitt (Me) 109s and the twin-engine Me 110s—or surely that's what the men told themselves over pints of beer at Molesworth's Cross Keys tavern when, battered and bloodied, they made it back from the Third Reich while so many pals in less providential planes hadn't.

They were proud to belong to the 303rd Bomb Group, a rough-and-tumble outfit that defiantly called itself Hell's Angels. The men of the 303rd may have been hell in the air, but they knew how to operate on the ground, too. More than beer guzzling went on at Cambridgeshire pubs: Molesworth produced more marriages between Englishwomen and American servicemen than any U.S. air base in Great Britain.⁵

SHEETS AND HIS CREW HAD been introduced to their visitor at the preflight briefing precisely three and half hours after midnight.⁶ They found themselves shaking hands with a stoop-shouldered twenty-seven-year-old United Press (UP) correspondent with a husky baritone, a Gable-ish mustache, and a pair of mischievous eyes that missed nothing—especially if wire service competitors were lurking. His name was Walter Leland Cronkite, Jr., and he'd spent so much time at Molesworth he considered the dingy base his second home in England.

Around airmen, Cronkite was the soul of affability, often springing for the next round of ale and offering a sympathetic ear as he scribbled their accounts of clashes with the Nazi war machine. But in the company of rivals—reporters with Associated Press (AP) and the International News Service

(INS)—he could be aloof, often curt.⁷ Rats churned inside the young Cronkite; with a deadline looming, he suffered no fool gladly. Instead of sitting square to an Olivetti or a portable Hermès as he typed his dispatches, he tended to perch sideways, legs crossed, furiously puffing a pipe as his fingertips crashed over the keyboard. Literally every second counted when butting heads with the competition.

Two years into covering the war, Cronkite's waistline was thinning almost as rapidly as his hair. He complained in letters to his wife, Betsy, that the combination of round-the-clock reporting, food rationing, and dreadful English cuisine made it tough to keep on weight. Cronkite was just under six feet tall; his weight that spring had dipped alarmingly south of 160 pounds.⁸ He was so haggard he looked "like hell," he confided to Betsy.⁹ The faux officer's uniform commissioned by the U.S. military—a dark olive suit coat with War Correspondent stitched over the left breast pocket and on the left shoulder patch—now bagged around his neck like the blazers he had once borrowed from his dad for Chi Phi fraternity dances at the University of Texas.¹⁰

Cronkite may have been emaciated, but from the deft way he fastened his flak jacket and "Mae West" life preserver, then hoisted himself through *Shoo Shoo Baby's* starboard-side waist hatch and wriggled past the ammunition box, the two waist-gun emplacements, the aperture to the Sperry ball-turret gunner's post, the radar and radio compartments with their wires jutting every which way, then negotiated the narrow metal beam that spanned the bomb bay, inched past the ladder to the top-turret gunner's perch, and—skirting the elevated cockpit—finally lowered himself into the Plexiglas nose with the bombardier and the navigator, it should have been apparent to his new friends that he was hardly a rookie.

Fifteen months earlier, on his first combat foray in a Flying Fortress, Cronkite had manned the starboard nose machine gun, hammering away at German fighter planes in clear violation of the Geneva Conventions governing the conduct of noncombatants. It seemed absurd, Cronkite later said, to observe the niceties of international law while being attacked by a malevolent enemy. He may not have wounded any Nazi fliers ("Boy, they came at you!" he remembered years later¹¹), but as Cronkite climbed out of the B-17 he had the satisfaction of wading through hundreds of spent shells.

By midwar, in fact, Cronkite had gone up in practically every crate the Yanks and Brits had in their fleets—trainers and two-man fighters and medium and heavy bombers and reconnaissance rattletraps that hawked enemy *Unterseebooten* (U-boats) in Torpedo Junction, the treacherous waters surrounding the British Isles. In November of '42, desperate to outscop a wire service foe, he'd even squeezed into a pontoon plane catapulted from the deck of the battleship *USS Texas*.¹³

Cronkite was proud to be a straitlaced Missourian, but he was ultracompetitive; part of him had always been a daredevil. Whether on a two-laner in Jackson County or a blacked-out country road in East Anglia, the future auto racing buff drove like a banshee.¹⁴

In the late '30s, with the specter of war looming, Betsy and Walter had signed up for the federal government's Civilian Pilot Training Program. Much to his chagrin, Walter had been washed out because of color blindness, but Betsy had earned her wings—and bragging rights for the rest of their lives together.¹⁵

The color-blind correspondent's penchant for going airborne elicited a rebuke from his UP superiors, who had already lost prized reporter Brydon Taves in a plane mishap and didn't want to lose another. In February 1944, after Cronkite returned from a B-26 Marauder operation against nascent enemy V-1 rocket sites along the Pas de Calais coast on the English Channel, he was told in no uncertain terms to forswear combat flights.¹⁶

Decades later, after "Uncle Walter" had succeeded Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower as paterfamilias—twentieth-century America's last (and best) surrogate dad—his CBS News underlings astounded and a little put off by his doggedness and unflappability, dubbed him "Old Iron Pants." It

was one of those exquisite nicknames meant to convey heartfelt respect and a hint of disdain all at the same time.

But the Cronkite who wedged himself between bombardier F. E. Umphress, Jr., (front right) and navigator Kenneth Olsen (back left) in the transparent nose beneath *Shoo Shoo Baby's* cockpit wasn't wearing iron pants. Cronkite was plenty nervous, he later admitted. The UP reporter had been on the bombing beat for his entire tenure in England. He'd written tons of profiles about airmen like Umphress and Olsen, kid lieutenants who risked life and limb and braved subzero temperatures to take the fight directly to Adolf Hitler's Germany. Millions of American newspaper readers, anxious to learn more about their boys in battle, hung on every word.

Cronkite was never as pious as his public persona. With a good smoke and cocktail in hand, he loved to spin yarns about his dalliances in bookie joints and topless bars and the rest of Kansas City's steamy underbelly. Still, he'd once toyed with becoming an Episcopal minister. But he had a soft spot—and not inconsiderable envy—for hell-raisers. He was forever pulling his rakish London roommate and fellow UP reporter Jim McGlincy, out of barroom brawls and scrapes with the landlord.¹⁷

So Cronkite was bemused to learn that *Shoo Shoo Baby's* Bob Sheets was one of the four B-17 pilots who'd gotten in Dutch the previous fall for buzzing Yankee Stadium during the first game of the 1943 World Series.¹⁸ Members of the New York Yankees and St. Louis Cardinals weren't the only ones ducking for cover that afternoon as Sheets and his wing mates, completely unannounced, came thundering in low over the Bronx. Many in the sellout crowd of sixty-eight thousand-plus thought the city was under attack. Enraged, mayor Fiorello La Guardia wanted the miscreants court-martialed, but there was too great a demand for competent bomber pilots. Sheets, his buddy Jack Watson, and their two accomplices got away with mild reprimands and seventy-five-dollar fines.¹⁹ Overnight, the Yankee Stadium quartet became legends in the hell-for-leather air corps.

Correspondents, especially wannabe pilot Cronkite, were in awe of flyboys: the bomber skippers who hustled the “swellingest gals”;²⁰ the fighter hotshots who bragged about their duels with Luftwaffe aces over the North Sea; the bombardiers, radar technicians, radio operators, flight engineers, and navigators who, when not in their cups, would calmly dissect their planes' performance at five miles above the earth; and, most of all, the tail-, topside-, and ball-turret gunners, the eighteen-year-old kids who stared into their beer a little too long, hands trembling as they took another gulp.

Cronkite the correspondent may have been awed, but Cronkite the human being knew enough not to get too close. Indeed, among the first things he told Harrison Salisbury when the UP senior editor (and future *New York Times* sage) arrived in London in early '43 was to keep an emotional distance from the bomber boys. Too many wouldn't be coming back—or if they did, they'd be shot up, maybe crippled for life, Cronkite warned.²¹

No reporter understood the macabre metrics of air combat survivability better than Cronkite. *S for Sugar*, the Molesworth-based B-17 in which Cronkite had flown his first mission over the Reich, was one of eleven bombers shot down in January '44 while attacking an aircraft assembly plant in Oschersleben, Germany. The *S for Sugar* men were luckier than many Allied fliers that day: they bailed out and spent the rest of the war in a Luftwaffe-run stalag.²²

Fully three-fourths of the American airmen who flew against Nazi Germany in 1943 and the first half of 1944 ended up as casualties of one kind or another,²³ apparitions that haunted the journalists who covered East Anglia airdromes, sharing beer and small talk with doomed young men. *Stars and Stripes* reporter Andy Rooney, Cronkite's friend and fellow air war writer, likened bombing missions to playing Russian roulette with a six-shooter.²⁴

CRONKITE HAD BEEN AROUND MOLESWORTH for a lot of missions. But he'd never seen it as frenzied as was on that early June morning. At the last minute the brass had added a horde of new targets and

demanded extra sorties, exacerbating Molesworth's bedlam. Each of the thirty-four B-17s in *Shoo Shoo Baby's* 427th Bomb Squadron was being loaded with a full complement of ten five-hundred-pound demolition bombs, believed to be the optimal weapons for the unprecedented low-altitude attack the squadron was being asked to undertake.

A few hours earlier, Cronkite had been alone in his London flat. Like virtually everyone in the south of England that evening, he'd heard the unstinting drone of Allied warplanes and figured something big was up. "The whole world knew that the [cross-English Channel] invasion was imminent," Cronkite remembered a half-century later. "The secret being guarded to the very death was exactly when and where."²⁵

Over Cronkite's protestations, his bosses at UP that spring had dictated that once the assault began he would stay in London, write the lead story, and coordinate transatlantic coverage. Their edict left him "broken-hearted," he wrote to Betsy on May 14. "I am safe and snug and hating it," he snarled.²⁶ Fewer than three dozen of the five hundred Allied war correspondents in England had been "assimilated" with invasion-day troops; Cronkite, despite his stature, wasn't one of them. Ironically, his party-boy roomie, McGlincy, was among the elite few.²⁷

At his place on Buckingham Gate a couple of blocks from the royal palace, Cronkite was trying to nod off after midnight when he was startled by someone banging on his door. Standing there, red-faced and in full uniform, was Major Hal Leyshon, an Eighth Air Force public relations officer whom Cronkite had gotten to know from poker games and the occasional spree in Piccadilly. A postmidnight visit from Leyshon, then, was not all that unusual—but not with Hal wearing a uniform and a scowl.

A onetime New York newspaperman, Leyshon brusquely inquired about the whereabouts of McGlincy. Still half asleep, Cronkite explained that Jim was somewhere in the south of England, sequestered with an Army outfit "on maneuvers."²⁸ Still not satisfied, Leyshon stormed around the apartment, jerking open every closet door. "What in the devil are you doing, Hal?!" Cronkite demanded.²⁹

Finally Leyshon growled, "Cronkite, you've drawn the straw to represent the Allied press on a very important mission. It will be dangerous. No guarantee you'll get back. But if you do, you'll have a great story. You can turn it down now, or you can come with me. And security is on—you can't tell your office!"³⁰

Cronkite did not hesitate. "I'm in. I'm with you," he assured Leyshon.³¹ Already rehearsing an alibi, he hurriedly climbed into his ill-fitting uniform. "I figured if I made it," he wryly recalled, "the UP would forgive me."³²

Leyshon had a sedan and driver waiting. As they tore north on blacked-out country roads, the wily public relations officer stoked his friend's competitive fire. Leyshon promised Cronkite he'd have the hottest story in the European Theater of Operations (ETO) that day. Best of all, Cronkite would be back at UP's offices off Fleet Street before any Allied reporter—including his nemeses at AP and IN—had even filed a story!³³ Leyshon knew his man: Cronkite was as vainly cutthroat as any correspondent in England.

THEY PULLED INTO MOLESWORTH IN time for the premission briefing at 0330. Having been awakened ninety minutes earlier, the B-17 crew members were perched on chairs and benches, eager to learn their objectives.

G-2 intelligence officers wielding wooden pointers stood on a platform; behind them was a huge map concealed by a drape. Every briefer in Britain at that hour was smiling "like a skunk eating chocolate," one flier recalled.³⁴ After calling the men to attention, the officers paused for dramatic effect—then dropped the curtain.

Everyone hooted. Instead of a flight path taking them deep into the Third Reich, the tacked-up

ribbons foretold a brisk run across the Channel into northern France. Colonel Kermit D. Stevens, commander of a 303rd combat wing, marched to the front of the stage and bellowed, “This is the day we have all been waiting for! Make ’em know it!”³⁵

Along with scores of other Allied air units, the 303rd’s mission was to bomb enemy entrenchments and transportation arteries immediately behind the Calvados coast of Normandy—all aimed, they were told, at helping seaborne infantry gain a toehold on Normandy’s beaches. *Shoo Shoo Baby*’s squadron was given a daunting target: a bridge over the Orne River and its parallel canal that, left intact, would enable the Germans to rush reinforcements to the beaches. The bridge was some 10 miles inland, outside a village known as Caen.³⁶

For weeks, Cronkite had groused about being sidelined. Now, thanks to a lucky draw and a friendship forged over watered-down bourbon, he would be an eyewitness to the twentieth century’s most epochal moment. On that day of days, Cronkite’s Fort was one of 9,500 Allied warplanes that saw action over the Channel. The Missouri daredevil was the only American correspondent that morning to fly on a bomber. During takeoff, Cronkite parked himself in the B-17’s plastic nose, the better to absorb the full adrenaline rush.³⁷

By the time *Shoo Shoo Baby* rumbled down Molesworth’s mucky runway, jostling its men with each bump, the sun had been up for a while. Twenty-four thousand Allied paratroopers had already hurtled into the dank gloom all over Normandy. Before long Cronkite could glimpse through the clouds the “unbelievable” spectacle of vessels steaming across the Channel—so many, he wrote, that there “didn’t seem to be room for another.”³⁸ By now it was nearing 0700, Tuesday, June 6, 1944.

It was D-Day.

ONE OF THE BOATS THAT *Shoo Shoo Baby* barreled past at sixteen thousand feet was LCI(L)-88, a Landing Craft Infantry, Large, operated by the U.S. Coast Guard and carrying an elite band of demolitionists from the Sixth Amphibious Naval Beach Battalion. At that precise moment, LCI(L)-88 was hovering a mile or so off a beach Allied planners had christened Omaha.

Bracing themselves against choppy seas, LCI(L)-88’s officers were standing on the bridge, peering through field glasses, trying to divine how the first wave of seaborne troops—infantrymen from the U.S. Army’s Blue and Gray Division, the Twenty-ninth—was faring. From that distance it was tough to tell, but it didn’t look good. Huge plumes of smoke billowed from German artillery and 88s, the deadly accurate antiaircraft and antitank guns. Every few seconds there was a concussive *whoosh!* as enemy gunners zeroed in on the boats in front of them. The splashes were getting closer and louder.

At exactly 0735—sixty-five minutes after H-Hour—LCI(L)-88’s job was to clear a path for the next wave of invaders scheduled to hit the heart of Omaha. Its mission was to deposit the Navy demolition team, expert engineers who’d been trained to dismantle the insidious obstacles that German commander Erwin Rommel had planted to repel an attack. Allied planners called that section of the beach, apparently without irony, Easy Red.

Perched next to the officers was a rotund thirty-nine-year-old writer with thick wire-rim glasses named Abbott Joseph Liebling. Liebling, scion of a wealthy New York family, owned a set of binoculars so powerful that he loaned them to the LCI(L)’s captain that morning.

The essayist was A.J. to readers of the *New Yorker* magazine but Joe to his friends—and in five days on board the LCI(L), four of them spent docked at Weymouth, England, Liebling had made a lot of new friends. The Coast Guard and Navy men were tickled that an intellectual with an Ivy League pedigree could talk sports—especially prizefighting—with such relish. Liebling not only knew more about boxing than most cornermen, but loved to imitate his heroes, inducing howls as his chubby carcass pranced and jabbed, bobbed and weaved. He was also a dead-on mimic, the kind of guy who could eavesdrop on a snatch of conversation and instantly spoof both ends.

One of the crew members who got a kick out of Liebling was a chunky youngster from the District of Columbia. The other Coasties needled the D.C. kid about his habit of beginning every letter to a girl back home with “Well, Hazel, here I am again.”³⁹ The Coast Guardsman who served as the LCI(L)’s coxswain—the swabbie who lowered the ramp and plunged into the water to secure the anchor—had aspirations to be a journalist.

Among the seamen in the Navy’s amphibious force (or, as the Coasties kiddingly called it, the “ambiguous farce”⁴⁰) was a twenty-two-year-old radioman from Kansas City, Kansas, named John Murphy. Young Jack was the kid brother of Associated Press columnist Hal Boyle’s sister-in-law. During the North African campaign earlier in the war, Boyle and Liebling had become jeep mates and drinking buddies. Thanks to Jack and his cohorts, Normandy would soon reunite them.

Liebling was the least pretentious-looking correspondent in the ETO. Combat reporters weren’t necessarily matinee idols, but most tried to dress the part, sporting an aviator’s scarf or a tanker’s jacket or some other item that projected a martial image. Fashion affectation, though, was lost on Liebling, whose military-issue slacks fit so loosely they flapped in the breeze. Three decades later, fellow correspondent Don Whitehead remembered that Liebling “managed to look like a large, uncomfortable sack of potatoes.”⁴¹

The potato-shaped boxing aficionado had begged the Army for an invasion assignment with foot soldiers. Liebling wanted to coldcock Hitler’s *Festung Europa* (Fortress Europe) with his First Division pals from Tunisia—and had a personal invitation from the First’s commanding general, Clarence Huebner, to hit the beachhead at Omaha.⁴² Many of the men in the Big Red One, as the First Division was known, were native New Yorkers, ethnic guys with “Toidy-Toid Street” accents and attitudes to match—the streetwise cockiness that Liebling loved to celebrate in print.

After the Army press brass refused to honor Huebner’s proffer, Liebling accused them of perpetrating reverse snobbery. Nobody wanted to hand a plum invasion spot to some fat egghead from a snooty rag, he crabbled. But Liebling was lucky: Two old friends, John Mason Brown, a once and future Broadway critic, and Barry Bingham, a prewar reporter with the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, were handling the Navy’s invasion-day press relations. Lieutenants Brown and Bingham arranged for a berth for Liebling on LCI(L)-88, one of the first large landing crafts scheduled to hit Omaha.⁴³

When Francophile Liebling, who was almost as enamored of northern France as he was of New York City, learned four days before the invasion that Normandy was the objective, he remembered feeling “as if, on the eve of an expedition to free the North from a Confederate army of occupation, I had been told that we would land on the southern shore of Long Island and drive inland toward Belmont Park.”⁴⁴

Liebling had no idea until he arrived at Weymouth that the boat was skippered by an acquaintance. Before the war, Coast Guard captain Henry Kilburn “Bunny” Rigg had been a prizewinning sailor; on occasion, Rigg would write up his seafaring adventures for none other than the *New Yorker*. Liebling didn’t know Rigg well, but it’s likely he viewed Bunny’s presence as a heartening omen.⁴⁵

Rigg’s gangplank greeting was so nonchalant it was “as if we were going for a cruise to Block Island,” Liebling wrote. But Rigg wasn’t leading a pleasure outing: the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) had made it clear to journalists that once aboard a boat bound for the Channel, there was no getting off. The LCI(L) was a marvel of design: Its flat bottom and collapsible ramp permitted it to run right onto a beach.

Liebling’s prewar critiques of New York’s dining scene had betrayed a weakness for the good life. He was both gourmet and gourmand, and the thin gruel of service chow took some getting used to. On his first night on LCI(L)-88, before sitting down to a repast of frankfurters and beans, Liebling made mental notes as Rigg and the commanding officer of the beach battalion rolled out a remarkably detailed map of Omaha, buttressed by reconnaissance photographs of Easy Red that showed where the

Germans had dug in pillboxes and artillery guns. Rigg pointed out a blockhouse on the bluff overlooking the beach, saying they could expect menacing fire from that area.

Eleven months earlier, the captain and his crew had weathered their share of action during the dicey landing at Licata in Sicily. Liebling was also comforted by the knowledge that the Coast Guard and Navy men had, together, been rehearsing their movements for weeks.

LCI(L)-88's goal, Rigg chuckled, was to give the Navy boys a "dry-ass landing." Knowing that Liebling was worried about enemy guns as the craft maneuvered near the beach, the Navy commander of a Washington, D.C., attorney and Annapolis grad named Eugene Carusi, assured the writer that LCI(L)s tended "to make a fairly small target bow on."⁴⁶ Carusi was Liebling's kind of guy: He detested military chickenshit. His men loved him for it; they proudly called themselves Carusi's Thieves.⁴⁷

RIGG KNEW THAT CARUSI'S THEORY would be tested as, staring through Liebling's binoculars at 0720, he sought the correct alleyway to Easy Red. If the team that had stealthily surveyed Omaha's attack routes before dawn had done its job, LCI(L)-88 would come across colored buoys marking its path through the underwater mines, iron barriers, and concrete blocks. Not much went according to plan that morning at Omaha. But remarkably, the painted buoys were bobbing almost exactly where Rigg had anticipated.

The Coast Guard captain turned to his staff and barked, "Mister Liebling will take his station on the upper deck during action." It was Rigg's felicitous way of telling his friend to stay the hell out of the way. Once topside, Joe watched Rigg send the craft surging toward the buoy-marked opening "like a halfback going into a hole in the line." Rigg had spotted, dead ahead, two "spider" mines attached to a block of sunken concrete. He slowed LCI(L)-88 to ensure that it didn't go anywhere near the tentacles sprouting out of the mines; the slightest brush would have been catastrophic.⁴⁸

D-Day's beauty and pathos is distilled into what Liebling glimpsed that morning from his aerie on LCI(L)-88. After the boat sped back up, it soon encountered capsized vessels, a burning LCT (Landing Craft, Tank), and infantrymen floating in bloodied water, many with their heads submerged. Other GIs were struggling in water up to their necks. Fourteen years later, Liebling was to write of the men in the water off Easy Red: "They seemed as permanently fixed in time and space as those Marines in the statue of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima."⁴⁹

Tracer bullets, each with a descending arc, were zinging all around as Rigg swung LCI(L)-88 to the right. With machine gun bullets battering the boat, Liebling found himself shoulder to shoulder with the pharmacist's mate. The two flattened their backs against the pilothouse and sucked in their guts. Artillery explosions were ripping into the water; it felt like at any second the boat would founder. Noxious smoke was everywhere; the noise was deafening.

Moments later Liebling felt the craft run aground. He craned his neck toward the bow and saw that the landing ramp somehow, miraculously, was already down; his pal, the coxswain, clad only in bathing trunks and a helmet, had leapt into the surf. In spite of the pandemonium, the Navy men were rushing forward, rifles and demolition equipment in hand. Liebling could hear an officer, probably Carusi, chanting, "Move along now! Move along!" as if, Liebling wrote, "he were unloading an excursion boat at Coney Island. But the men needed no urging; they were moving without a sign of flinching."⁵⁰ Much of the enemy firing, Liebling surmised, seemed to be coming from the blockhouse on the right that Rigg had singled out.

Something scratched at the back of Liebling's neck. Fearing the worst, he grabbed at it, and discovered that the ship's cargo rigging, knocked loose by machine gun fire, had fallen around his shoulders "like a character in an old slapstick movie about a spaghetti factory."⁵¹ As Liebling rid himself of the rope, he glanced toward the stern. There he took in "a tableau that was like a recruiting

poster.” Three enlisted men, one of them a black wardroom steward, were manning a twenty-millimeter rapid-firing gun. Fluttering behind them was a crisp American flag that Rigg had broken out for the occasion.

Amid the din, Liebling heard the welcome rattling of the stern anchor being dislodged. Seconds later the boat was rocked by a blast. It was, Liebling later learned, a seventy-five-millimeter enemy artillery shell that tore through the bulkhead and smashed through the ramp winch, disabling it.

“Pharmacist’s mates, go forward! Somebody’s hurt!” an officer yelled. Liebling’s pilothouse pal and another medic scurried below. A Coastie came running by and screeched in Liebling’s ear: “Two casualties in bow!”⁵² By now, they had swung clear of the beach and were chugging toward deeper water. Captain Rigg almost forgot about the spider mines as he yanked his craft away from danger; the LCI(L) limped toward a designated area mid-Channel where a hospital ship awaited.

To Liebling, whose ears ached and head throbbed, it had seemed like an eternity. But LCI(L)-88 had been anchored off Easy Red for just four excruciating minutes.⁵³

AS LIEBLING WORRIED ABOUT WHICH of his shipmates had been wounded, his chum and acolyte, Staff Sergeant Andrew Aitken Rooney of the military publication the *Stars and Stripes*, was also aboard a warship headed for Normandy. Over dinners together at Fleet Street eateries like The Lamb and Lark the *New Yorker* essayist had taken a shine to the kid reporter.⁵⁴ The cocky Rooney must have reminded Liebling of the Irish pugs he loved to watch at Gleason’s Gym in Brooklyn.

At 0739 on D-Day, though, Rooney was still closer to Britain than France. He was billeted with a Fourth Division infantry unit floating a few miles out in the Channel. Rooney and his *Stars and Stripes* colleague Charles Kiley had been embedded with the Fourth nearly a week prior to the invasion; for the first few days, they had stayed in a Bristol couple’s home before transferring to the troopship in Bristol Harbour. Their British hosts, in a gesture that touched Rooney and Kiley, had scrimped on ration points to treat their Yank guests to morning coffee—which they mangled by making with milk, not water.

Although it was situated on the Atlantic, not the Channel, Bristol was nevertheless a major invasion staging area and embarkation point. To get to Normandy, ships launched from Bristol had to steam west around the promontory at Land’s End before reversing course.

The men on Rooney’s boat were scheduled to come ashore at the assault’s westernmost beach, code-named Utah, on D-Day plus four. Rooney’s section of Utah was some twelve miles west and south of where Rigg and Liebling had eluded Omaha’s spider mines.

Like his friend Cronkite, Rooney had been covering the U.S. bombing campaign against Hitler almost from its outset. A former Colgate University lineman, Rooney was a pugnacious GI who had trouble keeping his lips zipped around superiors. Before being transferred to the *Stars and Stripes* in the fall of ’42, his stint in the Army had been marked by one contretemps after another with higher-ups.

Upon receiving his draft notice in the summer of ’41, Rooney had been assigned to an artillery unit that was eventually sent to North Africa. Fortunately for the upstate New York kid, by then he was in England carrying a steno pad, not in Tunisia hauling a howitzer.

Late in the evening of June 5, Allied planes flying wingtip to wingtip in magnificent V formations soared over Rooney’s convoy. Rooney didn’t know it, of course, but the planes were C-47 Dakota transports and gliders ferrying paratroopers of the U.S. 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions to their drop zones behind Utah Beach—the very place where Rooney and his shipmates were headed.

A few days before, General Eisenhower’s office had issued a directive urging reporters to be circumspect. There was “nothing threatening” about SHAEF’s memo, Rooney remembered. “It assumed we knew a lot and Eisenhower was simply reminding us to be careful. It also assumed, which

is what made it friendly, that we were all on the same side.”⁵⁵

In truth, Rooney didn't know a whole lot more about the nuances of D-Day than his Fourth Division pals did. The Army had given him his own jeep, which he spent hours weatherproofing, slapping thick grease onto its electrical connections, ignition, and generator. At the *Stars and Stripes'* insistence, the jeep was being transported across the Channel, too. When Rooney hit Utah, he was determined to drive it over the dunes and into the farmland beyond.

Rooney spent June 6 getting snatches of invasion news from the ship's radio, trying to avoid getting seasick as he stared across the waves and wondered at what point on French soil he and his jeep would have to begin dodging enemy fire. He'd been in the ETO for twenty-three months and had never been near a ground fight, although he'd earned an Air Medal for flying along on five combat missions.

The infantrymen huddled on the deck had a different persona than the flyboys Rooney had covered for so long. Infantry guys were less smug, a little less feisty. Yet the one thing that brought GIs and airmen together, Rooney realized, was the specter of imminent death.

“It's hard to see the big picture,” he wrote, “and especially hard if you're in the picture.”⁵⁶

ONE CORRESPONDENT WHO THOUGHT HE understood Normandy's big picture was Rooney's prospective jeep mate, Harold V. “Hal” Boyle, a thirty-three-year-old reporter and columnist for the Associated Press. An Irishman who under normal circumstances was witty and gregarious, Boyle was, on the afternoon of D-Day, the “maddest man in England,” a colleague remembered.⁵⁷ Along with a select group of reporters that included Cronkite's UP pal McGlincy, Boyle was supposed to be on board a landing craft hitting Omaha Beach. Things went so rough on day one at Omaha, however, that officials kept the press contingent “sitting on their prats” in England, Boyle complained.

Boyle was so frustrated, he wrote his wife, Mary Frances, that he wanted to jump off Waterloo Bridge—but punned that his protest “wouldn't make that big of a splash.”⁵⁸ The last thing Army public relations officers (PROs) wanted was a household-name journalist like Boyle getting bloodied at Normandy, so he spent the next couple of days helping AP pry news out of the Brits' Ministry of War Information at the University of London.

Boyle by then was a grizzled veteran of amphibious landings, having witnessed four of them in the Mediterranean Theater. In November of '42, he nearly drowned in the waters off Casablanca when his craft got swamped on a coral reef. Members of General George S. Patton's armored corps fished him out. Boyle repaid the favor by praising Patton's men and (sometimes) their combative and controversial leader on two different continents.

Guys in the trenches loved swapping stories with Boyle. He had an Irish bartender's mug, an infectious smile, a big belly and a big belly laugh, pockets crammed with cheap cigars, chewing gum and chocolate bars, and, most importantly, an omnipresent flask of rotgut that he was only too happy to share. He also knew how to deliver a profane punch line. His gift for salty language impressed even the most hard-bitten grunts. He was ruddy-faced and beefy, with a batch of brownish Hollywood hair that made him the envy of every aging correspondent in the ETO.

Boyle loved Big Red One infantrymen from the Big Apple as only a Midwesterner could, laboring to capture their banter in *Leaves from a War Correspondent's Notebook*, the popular column he started in late '42. Faithful readers of Boyle—and by June of '44 hundreds of papers back home were running his features—knew that the First Division had saved the Allies' bacon in Tunisia and later up the gut of Sicily.⁵⁹

As he listened to briefing officers describe the stiff resistance that Allied invaders were likely to encounter in Normandy, Boyle braced himself for the worst. The seaborne landings in Morocco and Sicily had been relative cakewalks. But getting off Italian beachheads at Salerno and Anzio had proven nightmarish. For weeks following the Anzio invasion, enemy tanks and artillery operated so

close in the nearby hills that binoculars weren't always needed to follow their movements.

WHILE BOYLE STEWED IN LONDON on June 6, his friend Homer William Bigart, a thirty-seven-year-old correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*, was doing his own stewing eight hundred miles southeast. The dogged Bigart, almost never without a Lucky Strike stuck between oft-stammering lips, was another veteran of the siege at Anzio. Along with other journalists who had followed the dispirited campaign of Lieutenant General Mark Clark's Fifth Army, Bigart was in freshly liberated Rome. At that moment the *Trib* reporter was trying to make sense of Clark's curious decision to abandon pursuit of German field marshal Albert Kesselring's Army Group C, which was finally on the run after a long and bloody stalemate.

Bigart believed in covering war, a Shakespeare-loving colleague once said, "from the cannon's mouth."⁶⁰ In late May of '44, Bigart's bullheadedness nearly cost him his life. Cruising solo in a jeep determined to score an exclusive, Bigart was trying to keep abreast of the Allies' breakout through the Alban Hills south of Rome. Careering around a bend, he suddenly found himself staring at the barrel of a hostile tank. The enemy soldiers were lolling outside, taking a lunch break. They scrambled for weapons as Bigart jammed the jeep into reverse and flew back down the hill. The hair on the back of Bigart's neck stood straight up, he admitted four decades later, until he got out of range.⁶¹ Despite the near-death experience, Bigart got what he wanted, grabbing a story that day that trumped the *New York Times*.

A few nights later, on the evening of June 4, Bigart was following forward elements of Clark's army as they entered the Eternal City. In the rugged prose for which he was already renowned, Bigart wrote "[It] was a moment of such wildly primitive emotion that even now, 12 hours afterward, it is impossible to write soberly of the nightmarish scene along the Via Nazionale, where jubilation gave way to frozen panic and sudden death." Nazi commanders, in a last-ditch effort to keep the Allies from crossing the River Tiber, hurled flak wagons—lethally armed half-tracks—into Clark's lead column, which at that instant was engulfed by delirious Romans.

"It was like a scene from the Russian revolution," Bigart continued. "The transition from exultation to paralyzing fear was not immediate—there was that split second of astonishment when the throng merely stood agape, watching the tracers ricochet off the stone walls of the Palace of Rospigliosi."⁶²

The next morning, June 5, it was Bigart's turn to stand agape as the squirrely Clark insisted on posing for photographs on Capitoline Hill instead of chasing Kesselring. Clark's bearing was so imperious that, outside his earshot, staff officers called him Marcus Aurelius Clarkus.⁶³ When he arrived for a press conference called by his fifty-person public relations team, Clark feigned surprise that newsreel cameramen, photographers, and correspondents were waiting. The shutterbugs were strategically positioned so that they'd get shots of Clark's left profile, the general's "manlier" side—or so he believed.

To ensure that the photo opportunity remained an all-American affair, Clark's staff stuck military policemen at key Roman intersections to stymie any attempt by British officials to infiltrate. It was too bad, reporters sniggered, that the general hadn't expended that kind of energy in cutting off the enemy.

For months Clark had told the press that the aim of the Italian offensive was clear: to decimate Kesselring's forces. Now, suddenly, the campaign seemed to have a more cynical objective: to make Mark Clark a newsreel star and a hero in the pages of *Life* and *Look*. At one point during the session, Clark spread a map on an ancient balustrade and, nodding thoughtfully, pretended to point out something to his corps commanders, a couple of whom were so embarrassed they tried to avoid making eye contact with reporters.

Bigart, cigarette undoubtedly bouncing, exchanged incredulous looks with Paul Green of the *Stars*

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