Elwood Thompson witnessed the Rangers' ascent at Pointe du Hoc.

Elwood Thompson

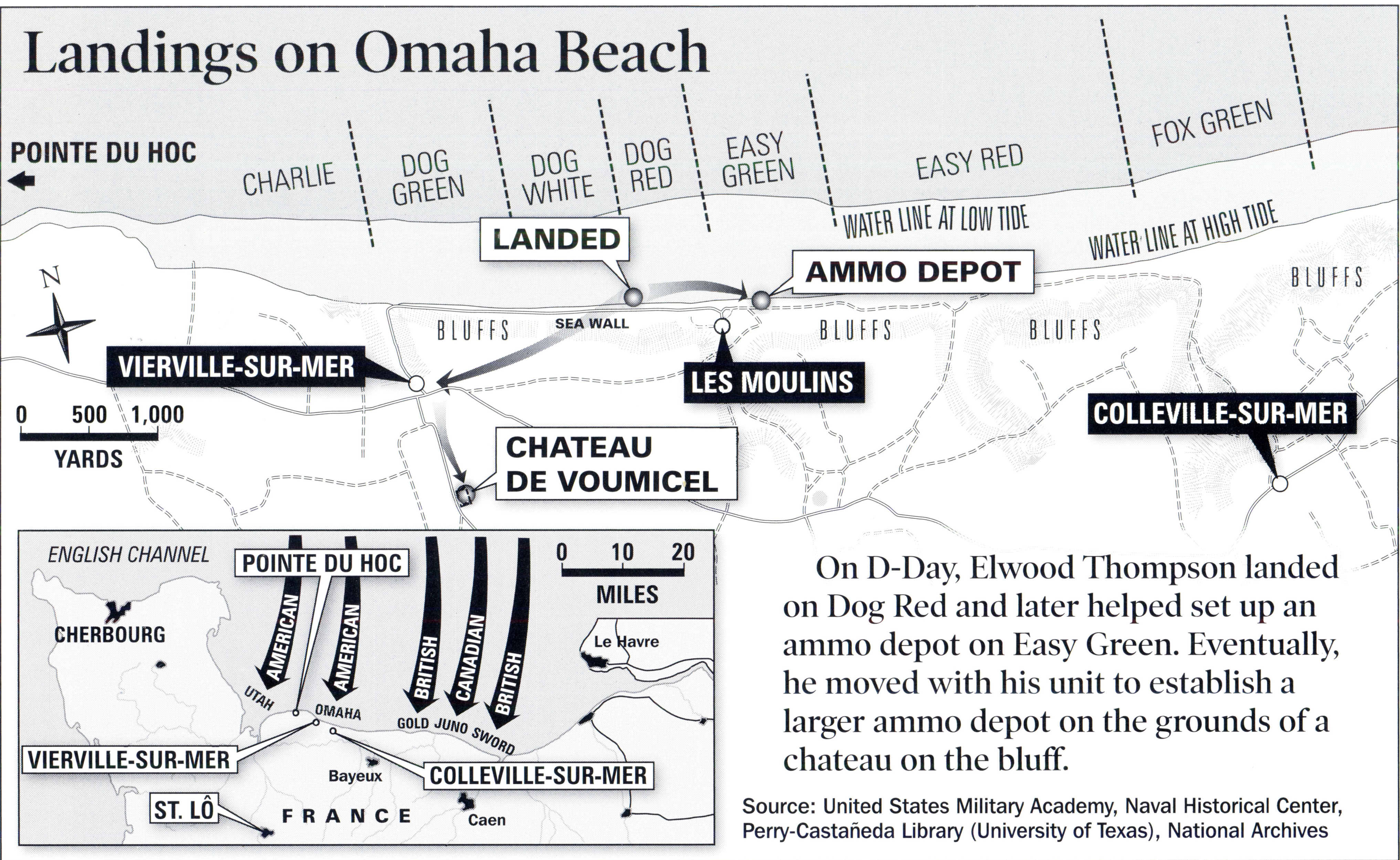
D-Day, Omaha Beach

Elwood Thompson is eighty-eight years old and lives in Franklin, New Hampshire. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he was living in Andover, New Hampshire, and working as a carpenter. He landed on Omaha Beach on June 6 with the 618th Ordnance Ammunition Company.

In 1942, I was working on a government project in Springfield, Vermont. One weekend I came home to Andover to visit my father. He had been in World War I. He started in Franklin in a machine gun company, but they changed that to a field artillery company. He never got a chance to go to France. He wanted to make a little bet with me. He said, "I'm going to be in the service before you are." I said, "How do you figure that? They aren't going to take you. You're almost forty years old." All my friends were in, and I told him I was going to join, too. About the middle of the next week I got a card from him down in Fort Devens—already in. He was training troops as a corporal, his old rating.

I took the oath December 5, 1942, and joined the engineers, the 90th Heavy Pontoon. I shipped to northern Alberta the next spring. Six months later, they deactivated that outfit and sent me to Camp Pickett, Virginia, where I joined the smallest outfit in the Army,

Landings on Omaha Beach



On D-Day, Elwood Thompson landed on Dog Red and later helped set up an ammo depot on Easy Green. Eventually, he moved with his unit to establish a larger ammo depot on the grounds of a chateau on the bluff.

Source: United States Military Academy, Naval Historical Center, Perry-Castañeda Library (University of Texas), National Archives

forty-nine men, the 618th Ordnance Ammunition Company. We shipped over to England in December of 1943.

They took over a whole town in England on the channel and moved everybody out. They took the bulldozers and carpenters in there and built the waterfront so it looked like Normandy. It was known as Slapton Sands. I made two practice landings there, and it was scary. Before D-Day, we marched down to Southampton, where they had a shingle—a stone beach that projects out into the water. There were six LSTs (landing ships, tank) there. We had several dry runs out into the English Channel.

On June 6, we were already on our LST in the channel. They got us up at four in the morning. My outfit was supporting the 29th Infantry Division, so we had a lot of men from that unit on board with us. There was a combat engineer outfit, too, the 202nd. I was up on the deck, but you couldn't see much because it was dark. The boat was heaving up and down because of the weather.

I had my M-1 carbine, and I was carrying two grenades. I had two clips of fifteen for my carbine and a box of ammunition to replace the bullets in the clips. I had a combat pack that was supposed to weigh twenty-six pounds. Inside were an extra pair of socks and one blanket, a raincoat, and rations for three days. We had D-rations, which were nothing but a chocolate bar, C-rations, which were cans that made up a meal, and K-rations, which were in a waterproof container. And of course, I had a couple of cartons of cigarettes.

We had to wear our ODs (olive drab uniforms) to show we were American soldiers. They soaked that thing in some kind of impregnating stuff, to stop gas from going through your clothing. We also had over-alls over the ODs, and they were soaked in that stinking stuff. Our boots were covered with it, too. It was a terrible smell. And we were hot—pretty bulky outfit. And they had this oily stuff that you smeared over your hands and face, also for gas.

Our LST stopped about a mile off the beach at Normandy. We waited up on deck to climb down the rigging into the landing craft. Visibility still wasn't good, but you could see the beach. Our first wave went off, and we got all belted up and ready to go. The six boats that were supposed to come and pick us up got lost. So the commander of the ship said, "I know you guys have got to get in

there, so I'm going to take you in." He started in with that LST. We got in about a hundred yards from shore, and the shells started dropping right around the ship. The doggone naval commander ordered him to get that thing the hell out of there.

He couldn't take it in reverse, so he swung it to the right. He took us right in there and we saw the Rangers going up that cliff—Pointe du Hoc. They had this sixty-foot extension ladder mounted on a barge, and they got that thing in under the rocks along the shore. They ran it up, but the cliff was about a hundred feet, so they were forty feet short. They had a small-caliber rope gun, and the rope got wet and heavy so they couldn't even throw a grapple rope. They had an awful time. We could see the Germans on top shooting down at them.

By the time we got back in position, it was clear, but all you could see was smoke and fire on the beach—terrible smoke. The big boats, the Texas and the Nevada and the others, were firing away.

Our section of the beach was supposed to be Easy Green, but it was so plugged up that the coxswain had to get out of there and land at Dog Red. We didn't know where the hell we were. They had told us we wouldn't have to dig in after we landed because the bombers had gone over earlier in the morning and there would be all kinds of bomb craters. There wasn't a bomb crater within a mile and a half of the beach!

We climbed over the rigging. We knew this was it. We knew we were in for something, but we didn't know what.

We had fifteen men on our landing craft. Some got sick on the way in, but I didn't. Coming in, they had these railroad irons welded together in a "V." On top there was a mine to blow up boats. They called them Belgian gates. Here was this guy from my outfit, his arms wrapped around the gate, hanging on and hollering, "Help! Help! Help!" He was from our company, but we couldn't stop to help him. I guess his landing craft had been blown out from under him. I never saw him afterward.

I pushed way up to the front of my landing craft because I wanted to get out of there as quick as I could. When that door went down, I was the first one out. The water was up to my knees, and I was maybe thirty feet from land.

The first thing I saw was just wet sand, and right away I looked for cover. I saw a seawall to my left, and I said, "I guess that's my best bet." We were taking machine gun fire from the right, nothing from the left. There were bodies in the water and on the beach, and you had to get over them. I could see maybe twenty men down. You weren't supposed to stop. No matter what, they said, keep going. And I never looked back either.

There had been two photographers from *Life* magazine on my LST. They had dark green uniforms. One of them went in with the first wave. Just as I got to the beach, there was his camera on the ground. I had to kick it out of the way, for crying out loud. I don't know whether he got killed or whether he just lost his camera there on the beach.

I had about a hundred yards of beach to cross. I could see bullets hitting in the sand and hear them going past me. A lot of guys made the mistake of hitting the ground there. Then they made a good target. I just kept zigzagging and kept going, which wasn't easy because I had water rushing out of my boots. I might have fallen down a couple of times—I don't know. I was just running as fast as I could with those soggy boots.

I made it to the seawall—and then wished I hadn't. A medical outfit had dug in there, and the casualties were terrible. There were maybe half a dozen of them, arms missing, faces blown in. It made you sick. I went around to the other side of the seawall and dug in there. I couldn't go much beyond there because there was a long double-apron barbed-wire fence there, probably six foot high and twelve foot across and thirty or forty feet away.

I was alone at first. I didn't know where the rest of my outfit was.

I stayed by the seawall until they got the barbed wire cut. It was risky going near that barbed wire because the Germans had that all zeroed in. The engineers came down with Bangalore torpedoes. A Bangalore torpedo is a piece of thin tubing, about two and a half inches in diameter and probably six foot in length, and it's full of TNT. The first one has a pointed end so it will keep going through, and the next one that goes in has a blunt end, and they push the first one through with it. When the first one reaches the other side

of that barbed wire, they put on another one with a detonator in it. And then you use a fuse. I saw the German machine guns kill the first man who tried to get the torpedo through, and another man took his place. They got him, too. The third man got the torpedo through, and it blew a hole through the barbed wire.

By this time there were about six men waiting where I was, none of them from my company. We all crawled through the hole in the wire. We dug in again and waited for people to come along and group us up. We had no business there—it wasn't where we were supposed to set up. Finally we moved down to where we were supposed to be—Easy Green.

There we set up our ammunition supply point, the first on Omaha Beach. Our job was to provide ammunition to the men after they moved in off the beach. We unloaded the ammunition, sorted it and put it where we could find it even in the dark to load onto the trucks. We were on a good flat place about fifty yards from the water. We were at the base of a hill so the Germans couldn't see us—they would shoot over the top of us from the big bluff.

They set up the morgue right beside us. As they brought the bodies in, Graves Registration took care of them. They stripped the bodies, all the packs and everything, and put them up in a pile. Some were in body bags, mattress covers. Some were just laid out.

A couple of Rangers who had scaled the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc came up and wanted us to fill their jeeps with grenades and small-arms ammunition. They still had their faces blacked up. One of them told me how the people who ordered the taking of that point were damned fools. He said there wasn't a gun up there.

We stayed on the beach for maybe three days. Once the troops had moved inland far enough to make it secure, we set up a new ammunition supply point on a field up on the bluff. We got up there on a crisscross trail that the engineers cut. The Germans were shooting at us, so we dug in twice along the way. I was digging in, and my helmet was in the way, so I set it on the sand pile, and the next thing I knew a bullet hit that helmet and threw it ten feet. I had to go get it. There was no hole in it, just a crease.

There was a large area with barbed wire around it with signs hanging on it with the skull and crossbones and the word "Minen"

In the sand of Omaha Beach, Thompson saw a Life *photographer's camera.*

(mines). We supposed there were mines all across that field. The engineers went through with a mine sweeper and cleared a path wide enough for two men and marked it with engineer's tape—white tape. You're supposed to stay inside the tape. These two guys, they just got off the boat, gung-ho, and they got behind us, and they said, "You guys are going too slow." And we said, "If you don't like it, go ahead." They plunged out there, goll dern it, and one of them stepped on a mine.

We got up to the top of the bluff in the evening and probed for mines up there all night long. Didn't find any. I guess Rommel (Erwin Rommel, the German general) had time to put the signs up there but no time to put in the mines. We set up our big depot there. The DUKWs (six-wheeled amphibious trucks, called "Ducks" by the soldiers) came in all day bringing ammunition, and it was sorted and hauled up to us.

It was my job to help set up the bivouac area on the grounds of a big chateau. We went to set up the CP (command post) near the gate. Up in a tree, buried in the trunk, was a projectile—could have been one of their 88s or one of our 105s. Every time you went by that thing, you wondered if it was going to go off. Right where the captain wanted his tent set up, there were two German bodies buried with helmets on the graves. We had to dig up the bodies and move them so we could set the CP up. They weren't in coffins—we figured they were guards and were the first to die when the bluff was taken.

They moved in two big shower units with hot water. We'd been wearing that stinky clothing for days and days by then. They said. "Okay, boys, strip everything off and throw it in that pile there." They told us to keep our boots. And after the shower, they gave us a new issue of clothing.

About that time the rain started—a big storm—and it must have rained twenty days after. The only way the vehicles could move in the mud was to get one across and winch the rest across. You'd get back to your foxhole at night and there'd be six inches of water in it. You'd have to take your helmet and bail the water out and get some old ammunition crates and put them in the bottom. You were tired

enough that you slept anyway. We didn't have our shoes off for three or four days at a time.

The big storm came on June 19. It wiped out our operation down on the beach. We had breakwaters down there, Mulberries (artificial harbors), and a regular dock to unload ammunition. Since no more ammunition could come from the water, we took a bulldozer and scraped an area flat up on the bluff and laid down steel matting, and they brought the ammunition in by air to supply the troops.

We stayed there a couple of weeks and then moved up to Saint-Lô. After the breakthrough at Saint-Lô, they pulled us out.

Elwood Thompson served out the war at several outposts in the south of France. After the war, he built his own house in Franklin and had a long career as a carpenter. Of his war experience, he now says: "I wouldn't have missed it for the world, but I wouldn't do it again for a million dollars."