Citizen Soldiers
by Stephen E. Ambrose
There were some unusual junior officers on the front. One was Lieutenant Ed Gesner of the 4th Infantry Division. He knew survival tricks that he taught his platoon, such as how to create a foxhole in frozen ground: he shot eight rounds into the same spot, dug out the loose dirt with his trench knife, placed a half stick of TNT in the hole, lit the fuse, ran, hit the dirt, got up, ran back, and dug with his trench shovel. Within minutes a habitable foxhole.

The junior officers coming over from the States were another matter. Pink cheeked youth, they were bewildered by everything around them.

Prologue

FIRST LIGHT came to Ste. Mere-Eglise around 0510. Twenty-four hours earlier it had been just another Norman village, with more than a millennium behind it. By nightfall of June 6, 1944, it was a name known around the world—the village where the invasion began and now headquarters for the 82nd Airborne Division.

At dawn on June 7 Lieutenant Waverly Wray, executive officer in Company D, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), who had jumped into the night sky over Normandy 28 hours earlier, was on the northwestern outskirts of the village. He peered intently into the lifting gloom. What he couldn't see, he could sense. From the sounds of the movement of personnel and vehicles to the north, he could feel and figure that the major German counterattack—the one the Germans counted on to drive the Americans into the sea, the one the paratroopers had been expecting—was coming at Ste. Mere-Eglise.

It was indeed. Six thousand German soldiers were on the move, with infantry, artillery, tanks, and self-propelled guns—more than a match for the 600 or so lightly armed paratroopers in Ste. Mere-Eglise. A German breakthrough to the beaches seemed imminent. And Lieutenant Wray was at the point of attack.

Wray was a big man, 250 pounds, with "legs like tree trunks," in the words of Lieutenant Colonel Ben Vandervoort, commanding the 505th. "The standard-issue army parachute wasn't large enough for Wray's weight, and he dropped too fast on his jumps, but the men said. Hell, with his legs he don't need a chute. He was from Batesville, Mississippi, and
was an avid woodsman, skilled with rifles and shotguns. He claimed he had never missed a shot in his life. A veteran of the Sicily and Italy campaigns, Wray was, according to Vandervoort, "as experienced and skilled as an infantry soldier can get and still be alive."

Wray had Deep South religious convictions. A Baptist, each month he sent half his pay home to help build a new church. He never swore. His exclamation when exasperated was "John Brown!"—meaning abolitionist John Brown of Harpers Ferry. He didn't drink, smoke, or chase girls. Some troopers called him the Deacon, but in an admiring rather than critical way. Vandervoort had something of a father son relationship with Wray, always calling him by his first name, Waverly.

On June 7, shortly after dawn, Wray reported to Vandervoort—whose leg, broken in the jump, was now in a cast—on where he expected the Germans to attack and in what strength. Vandervoort took this in, then ordered Wray to return to the company and have it attack the German flank before the Germans could get started.

"He said, 'Yes Sir,' saluted, about-faced, and moved out like a parade ground Sergeant Major," Vandervoort later wrote.

Wray passed on the order. As the company prepared, he took up his M-1, grabbed a half-dozen grenades, and strode out, his Colt .45 on his hip and a silver-plated .38 revolver stuck in his jump boot. He was going to do a one-man reconnaissance to formulate a plan of attack.

WRAY WAS going out into the unknown. He had spent half a year preparing for this moment, but he was not trained for it. Wray and his fellow paratroopers, like the men at Omaha and Utah beaches, had been magnificently trained to launch an amphibious assault. By nightfall of June 6 they had done the real thing successfully. But beginning at dawn, June 7, they were in a terrain completely unfamiliar to them. In one of the greatest intelligence failures of all time, neither G-2 (intelligence) at US First Army nor the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) G-2, nor any division S-2 (special staff intelligence) had ever thought to tell the men who were going to fight the battle that the dominant physical feature of the battlefield was the maze of hedgerows that covered the western half of Normandy.
The hedgerows dated back to Roman times. They were mounds of earth raised about each field, about two metres in height, to keep cattle in and to mark boundaries. Typically, there was only one entry into the small field enclosed by the hedgerows, which were irregular in length as well as height and set at odd angles, with beeches, oaks, and chestnut trees on the summit. On the sunken roads, which were shut in by clay banks, the brush often met overhead, giving a feeling of being trapped in a leafy tunnel.

How could the various G-2s have missed such obvious features, especially as aerial reconnaissance clearly revealed the hedges? Because the photo interpreters, looking straight down at them, thought that they were like English hedges—the kind fox hunters jump over—and they had missed the sunken nature of the roads entirely. "We had been neither informed of them or trained to overcome them," was Captain John Colby's comment. The GIs would have to learn by doing, as Wray was doing on the morning of June 7.

The Germans, meanwhile, had been going through specialized training for fighting in hedgerows. They had also pre-sited mortars and artillery on the entrances into the fields. Behind the hedgerows they dug rifle pits and tunnelled openings for machine-gun positions in each corner.

Wray moved up sunken lanes, crossed an orchard, pushed his way through hedgerows, crawled through a ditch. Along the way he noted concentrations of Germans in fields and lanes. He reached a point near the N-13, the main highway into Ste. Mere-Eglise from Cherbourg, where he could hear guttural voices on the other side of a hedgerow. They sounded like officers talking about map coordinates. Wray rose up, burst through the brush obstacle, swung his M-1 to a ready position, and barked "Hände hoch!" to eight German officers gathered around a radio.

Seven instinctively raised their hands. The eighth tried to pull a pistol from his holster. Wray shot him instantly between the eyes. Two German grenadiers in a slit trench 100 metres to Wray's rear fired bursts from their Schmeisser machine pistols at him. Bullets cut through his jacket. One cut off half of his right ear.

Wray dropped to his knee and began shooting the other seven officers one at a time as they attempted to run away. When he had used up his
clip, Wray jumped into a ditch, put another clip into his M-l, and dropped the two German soldiers with the Schmeissers with one shot each. He made his way back to the command post (CP) - with blood down his jacket, a big chunk of his ear gone - to report on what he had seen. Then he started leading. He put a 60-mm mortar crew on the German flank and directed fire into the lanes and hedgerows most densely packed with the enemy. The Germans broke and ran. By midmorning Ste. Mere-Eglise was secure, and the potential for a German breakthrough to the beaches was much diminished.

THE NEXT day Vandervoort, Wray, and Sergeant John Rabig went to examine the German officers Wray had shot. Unforgettably, their bodies were sprinkled with pink-and-white apple blossom petals from an adjacent orchard. It turned out that they were the commanding officer (CO) and his staff of the 1st Battalion, 158th Grenadier Infantry Regiment. The maps showed that it was leading the way for the counterattack. The German retreat was in part due to the regiment's having been rendered leaderless by Wray.

Vandervoort later recalled that when he saw the blood on Wray's jacket and the missing half ear, he had remarked, "They've been getting kind of close to you, haven't they, Waverly?"

With just a trace of a grin Wray replied, "Not as close as I've been getting to them, Sir."

At the scene of the action Vandervoort noted that every one of the dead Germans, including the two grenadiers more than 100 metres away, had been killed with a single shot in the head. Wray insisted on burying the bodies. He said he had killed them, and they deserved a decent burial, and it was his responsibility.

Later that day Sergeant Rabig commented to Vandervoort, "Colonel, aren't you glad Waverly's on our side?"

BEFORE THE battle was joined, Hitler had been sure his young men would outfight the young Americans. He was certain that the spoiled sons of democracy couldn't stand up to the solid sons of dictatorship. If
he had seen Lieutenant Wray in action in the early morning of D-Day plus one, he might have had some doubts.

The campaign in northwest Europe, 1944-45, was a tremendous struggle on a gigantic stage. It was a test of many things, such as how well the Wehrmacht had done in changing its tactics to defend the empire it had seized in blitzkrieg warfare, how well the assembly lines of the Allies and the Axis were doing in providing weapons, the skill of the generals, the proper employment of aeroplanes, and how well a relative handful of professional officers in the US Army in 1940 had done in creating an army of citizen soldiers from scratch. Because of the explosive growth of the army—from 160,000 in 1939 to over 8 million in 1944—America had the numbers of men and weapons and could get them to Europe, no question about it. But could she provide the leaders that an 8 million-man army required—leaders at the people level, primarily captains, lieutenants, and sergeants?

US Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall had created the US Army of World War II to take on the Wehrmacht, to drive it out of France and destroy it in the process. The success of D-Day was a good start, but that was yesterday. The Allies had barely penetrated Germany's outermost defences. The Wehrmacht was not the army it had been three years earlier, but it was an army that had refused to die, even after Moscow, Stalingrad, and Kursk.

That the Wehrmacht kept its cohesion through these catastrophes has been attributed to the superior training of its junior officers. They were not only grounded in detail and doctrine but were encouraged to think and act independently in battle. They also made a critical contribution to the primary bonding—the Kameradschaft—that was so strong and traditional in the German army at the squad level.

Could the American junior officers do as well? Could the American army defeat the German army in France? The answer to the second question depended on the answer to the first.

Chapter One

Expanding the Beachhead: June 7-30, 1944
ON THE morning of June 7, Lieutenant Wray's foray had broken up the German counterattack into Ste. Mere-Eglise before it got started. But by noon the Germans were dropping mortar shells on the town. That afternoon E Company, 505th PIR, moved out to drive the Germans further back. Those who participated included Sergeant Otis Sampson, an old cavalry soldier with ten years in the army, by reputation the best mortarman in the division; Lieutenant James Coyle, a platoon leader in the 505th; and Lieutenant Frank Woosely, a company executive officer.

The company had two tanks attached to it. Coyle's order was to take his platoon across the field and attack the hedgerow ahead, simple and straightforward enough. But Coyle explained to his CO that the Germans dug into and hid behind the hedgerows, and they would exact a bloody price from infantry advancing through a field, no matter how good the men were at fire and movement.

Coyle received permission to explore alternative routes. Sure enough, he found a route through the sunken lanes that brought the Americans to a point where they were looking down a lane running perpendicular to the one they were on. It was the main German position, inexplicably without cover or observation posts on its flank.

The German battalion had only arrived at the position a quarter of an hour earlier (which may explain the unguarded flank) but already had transformed the lane into a fortress. Communication wires ran up and down. Mortar crews worked their weapons. Sergeants with binoculars peered through openings cut in the hedge, directing the mortar fire. Other forward observers had radios and were directing the firing of heavy artillery from the rear. German heavy machine guns were tunnelled in, with crews at the ready to send crisscrossing fire into the field in front.

That was the staggering firepower Coyle's platoon would have run into had he obeyed his original orders. Because he had successfully argued his point, he was now on the German flank with his men and tanks behind him. The men laid down a base of rifle and machine-gun fire, aided by a barrage of mortars from Sergeant Sampson. Then the tanks shot their 75-mm cannon down the lane.

Germans fell all around. The survivors waved a white flag. Coyle told his men to cease fire, stood up, and walked down the lane to take the surrender. Two grenades came flying over the hedgerow and landed at his feet. He dove to the side and escaped, and the firing opened up again.
The Americans had the Germans trapped in the lane, and after a period of taking casualties without being able to inflict any, the German soldiers began to take off, bursting through the hedgerow with hands held high, crying "Kamerad!"

Soon there were 200 or so men in the field, hands up. Coyle went through the hedgerow to begin the rounding-up process and promptly got hit in the thigh by a sniper's bullet—not badly, but he was furious with himself for twice not being cautious enough. Nevertheless, he got the POWs gathered in and put under guard. He and his men had effectively destroyed an enemy battalion without losing a single man.

It was difficult finding enough men for guard duty, as there was only one GI for every ten captured Germans. The guards therefore took no chances. Corporal Sam Applebee encountered a German officer who refused to move. "I took a bayonet and shoved it into his ass," Applebee recounted, "and then he moved. You should have seen the happy smiles and giggles that escaped the faces of some of the prisoners, to see their Lord and Master made to obey, especially from an enlisted man."

E COMPANY'S experience on June 7 was unique, or nearly so—an unguarded German flank was seldom again to be found. But in another way, what the company went through was to be repeated across Normandy in the weeks that followed. In the German army, slave troops from conquered Central and Eastern Europe and Asia would throw their hands up at the first opportunity, but if they misjudged their situation and their NCO was around, they were likely to get shot in the back. Or the NCOs would keep up the fight even as their enlisted men surrendered.

Lieutenant Leon Mendel, with military intelligence, interrogated the prisoners Coyle's platoon had taken. "I started off with German," Mendel remembered, "but got no response, so I switched to Russian, asked if they were Russian. 'Yes!' they responded, heads bobbing eagerly. 'We are Russian. We want to go to America!'"

"Me too!" Mendel said in Russian. "Me too!"
The Wehrmacht in Normandy in June of 1944 was an international army. It had troops from every corner of the vast Soviet Empire—Mongolians, Cossacks, Georgians, Muslims, Chinese—plus men from the Soviet Union's neighbouring countries, men who had been conscripted into the Red Army, then captured by the Germans. In Normandy in June 1944 the 29th Division captured enemy troops of so many different nationalities that one GI blurted to his company commander, "Captain, just who the hell are we fighting, anyway?"

By no means were all the German personnel in Normandy reluctant warriors. Many fought effectively; some fought magnificently. The 3rd Fallschirmjäger Division was a full-strength division—15,976 men, mostly young German volunteers. It was new to combat, but training had been rigorous and emphasized initiative and improvisation. The equipment was outstanding.

Indeed, the Fallschirmjäger were perhaps the best-armed infantrymen in the world in 1944. So in any encounter between equal numbers of Americans and Fallschirmjägers, the Germans had from six to twenty times as much firepower.

And these German soldiers were ready to fight. A battalion commander in the 29th remarked, "Those Germans are the best soldiers I ever saw. They're smart and don't know what the word 'fear' means. They come in and they keep coming until they get their job done or you kill 'em."

These were the men who had to be rooted out of the hedgerows. One by one. There were, on average, fourteen hedgerows to the kilometre in Normandy. The enervating, costly process of making the attack, carrying the attack home, mopping up afterwards, took half a day or more. And at the end of the action there was the next hedgerow, 50 metres away. All through the Cotentin Peninsula, from June 7 on, GIs heaved and pushed and punched and died doing it for two hedgerows a day. It was like fighting in a maze. Platoons found themselves completely lost a few minutes after launching an attack. Squads got separated. Just as often, two platoons from the same company could occupy adjacent fields for hours before discovering each other's presence.

Where the Americans got lost, the Germans were at home. The German 352nd Division had been training in Normandy for months. Further, they were geniuses at utilizing the fortification possibilities of the hedgerows. In the early days of battle many GIs were killed or
wounded because they dashed through the opening into a field, just the kind of aggressive tactics they had been taught, only to be cut down by pre-sited machine-gun fire or mortars (mortars caused three quarters of American casualties in Normandy).

American army tactical manuals stressed the need for tank-infantry cooperation. But in Normandy the tankers didn't want to get down on the sunken roads, because of insufficient room to traverse the turret and insufficient visibility. But staying on the main roads proved impossible: the Germans held the high ground inland and had their 88-mm cannon sited to provide long fields of fire along highways. So into the lanes the tanks went. There they were restricted. They wanted to get out into the fields, but they couldn't. When they appeared at the gap leading into a field, mortar fire, plus panzerfausts (handheld antitank weapons), disabled them—often, in fact, caused them to "brew up," or start burning. The tanks had a distressing propensity for catching fire.

So tankers tried going over or through the embankments, but the hedgerows were almost impassable obstacles to the American M-4 Sherman tank. The Sherman wasn't powerful enough to break through the cementlike base, and when it climbed up the embankment, at the apex it exposed its unarmoured belly to German panzerfausts. Further, coordination between tankers and infantry was almost impossible during battle, as they had no easy or reliable way to communicate with one another.

Lieutenant Sidney Salomon of the 2nd Ranger Battalion, one of the D-Day heroes, found that out on June 7. He was leading the remnants of his battalion, which had come ashore at Omaha and been involved in a daylong firefight on D-Day, westward along the coastal road that led to Pointe-du-Hoc. Three companies of the 2nd Rangers had taken the German emplacement there and destroyed the coastal guns, but they were under severe attack and had taken severe casualties. Salomon was in a hurry to get to them.

But his column began taking well-placed artillery shells. Salomon could see a Norman church, its steeple the only high point around. He was certain the Germans had an observer spotting for their artillery in that steeple. Behind Salomon a Sherman tank chugged up. Salomon wanted it to blast that steeple, but he couldn't get the crew's attention, not even when he knocked on the side of the tank with the butt of his carbine. "So I ultimately stood in the middle of the road directly in front of the tank,