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One intrepid American warrior on D-Day

By Lewis E. Lehrman

“We’ll start the war from right here,” ordered an aging Gen. Ted Roosevelt on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

His infantry units had drifted off course while landing on Utah Beach. Fortuitously, Roosevelt’s units landed nearly a mile from the division’s destination. In contrast to the desperate fighting elsewhere on D-Day, especially on Omaha Beach, Roosevelt landed on a part of the Cotentin Peninsula of Normandy that was not heavily defended by Germans. Directed by Roosevelt’s animated cane and very brave presence, American seaborne and airborne forces quickly made contact and secured the area despite a German Panzer division that responded to the landing. General Omar Bradley, who commanded that theater, later described “Theodore Roosevelt (Jr.) on Utah Beach” as the bravest act of D-Day.

By rights, Roosevelt shouldn’t have been on Utah Beach. Then 56, he walked with a cane as a result of arthritis and injuries suffered in World War I. But the son of the hero of San Juan Hill (President Theodore Roosevelt) would not be denied the opportunity to lead into battle men less than half his age: “They’ll figure that if a general is going in,” he argued, “it can’t be that rough.” He would be the only Allied general to participate in the first wave of Allied assaults — and the only father to have a son, that same day, share the withering German fire of opposition.

In May 1918, Roosevelt earned the first of four Silver Stars for his World War I gallantry under fire: “Major Roosevelt during an enemy raid, displayed high qualities of



Theodore “Ted” Roosevelt, Jr. son of President Teddy Roosevelt, in one of a group of photos stamped Jan. 29, 1931

courage and leadership in going forward to supervise in person the action of one of the companies of his battalion which had been attacked; on the day of our attack upon Cantigny, although gassed in the lungs and gassed in the eyes to blindness, Major Roosevelt refused to be evacuated and retained command of his battalion, under heavy bombardment, throughout the engagement.” Like his more famous father, Roosevelt believed in leading from the front. Like his father and Uncle Franklin, Ted Roosevelt graduated from Harvard and served as a New York State legislator, and as assistant secretary of the U.S. Navy. Like his father, Ted was persuasive and stubborn. He had his father’s infectious grin without the flashing teeth.

Months before Pearl Harbor, Gen. Roosevelt signed up to join his old regiment from World War I. First, Roosevelt would see action in North Africa and Italy. Only two months

before D-Day, Ted Roosevelt served as best man at the wedding of his son, Quentin, in England. At the end of May 1944, a determined Roosevelt had written Gen. Raymond Barton, commander of the U.S. 4th Infantry Division, emphasizing the importance of early command leadership on the D-Day beach: “I know personally both officers and men of these advance units and believe that it will steady them to know that I am with them.” Reluctantly, Barton granted Roosevelt’s wish. The night before the D-Day invasion, Gen. Roosevelt told his troops: “I’ll see you tomorrow morning 6:30, on the beach.” Roosevelt indeed saw them on the beach, but Normandy’s tricky ocean currents pushed their landing craft off course. No matter, Roosevelt put his troops to work at war.

After a month of strenuous fighting, including the capture of Cherbourg, Gen. Roosevelt wrote home to his wife, trying to put the best — and fictitious — face on his battlefield situation: “The Doc came and said with a little embarrassment that my troubles were primarily from having put an inhuman strain on a machine that was not exactly new.” In fact there was no doctor, no examination, no rejuvenation. Roosevelt was very sick with a heart condition he kept carefully hidden. Two days later, Brig. Gen. Ted Roosevelt was dead — five weeks after the D-Day invasion. His heart, which endured several small attacks in the aftermath of the invasion, finally gave out on July 12, leaving the unforgettable memory of one intrepid American warrior on D-Day.

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