

## From Heaven to Hell - The US 29th Division in Cornwall in 1944

Written by Andy Owen



Contrast.

We all experience it - and, given certain circumstances, it can really put specific things in perspective in our lives.

The official dictionary description of the word, is "a great difference between two or more things which is clear when you compare them"

The US 29th Infantry Division certainly had that, in June 1944.

**Sadly, it was a contrast to end all contrasts...**

In 24 hours, they went from beautiful sleepy Cornwall - to the Hell on Earth that was Omaha Beach. And so many of those brave young boys ended their short lives there.

This is their story.

At the start of World War II, the United States Army began a significant build-up and reorganisation of its fighting forces.

The 29th American Infantry Division started life on 3rd February 1941. It brought together men belonging to the National Guard.

The Division comprised of four battalions and was based originally in Fort Meade, Maryland.

It was well equipped in its early months, benefiting from a large number of vehicles and equipment freshly out of the newly activated weapons factories.

The 29th consisted of three main infantry regiments - the 115th Infantry Regiment, the 116th Infantry Regiment, and the 175th Infantry Regiment.

Also assigned to the division were the 110th, 111th, 224th, and 227th Field Artillery Battalions, as well as the 29th Signal Company, the 729th Ordnance Company, the 29th Quartermaster Company, the 29th Reconnaissance Troop, the 121st Engineer Battalion, the 104th Medical Battalion, and the 29th Counter Intelligence Detachment.

It took a year to get the division fully equipped and organised.

From March to October 1942, further training took place to get them ready for war. They were finally sent to Europe - and went in some style.

They sailed for England on 5th October 1942 - on RMS Queen Mary.

The dangerous U-Boat-infested Atlantic was a great worry to all aboard, but this was offset slightly by the knowledge that the speed of the ship made it an almost impossible target.

And thankfully, so it proved. They arrived safely.

They were the first U.S. Army division to arrive in Britain.

Initially, the division was based throughout England and Scotland, where it immediately began gruelling training for an invasion of northern Europe across the English Channel.

It was a hard period for everyone. Scotland was bleak and cold.

Fortunately, their stay in Scotland was short.

The young soldiers of the 29th Infantry were then transferred to new training grounds in Tidworth Barracks, in the south of England.

And for 7 months, the training was intensive and they were worked very hard.

Finally, in May 1943, the division moved down to the more attractive area of the Devon & Cornwall peninsula.



At this time, the division was assigned to V Corps of the First United States Army. In July 1943, the 29th got a new chief. His name was Major General Charles Gerhardt. His deputy commander was General Norman Cota.

The regiment trained on the cold moors during the late summer and then transitioned to amphibious assault training.

Many landing exercises were undertaken, including a number on Slapton Sands, one of which - Exercise Tiger - resulted in a major disaster, with 946 GI's killed.

The details of this tragedy, were kept under wraps until the end of the war.

It was in Devon and Cornwall that they started to hone and sharpen their already keen military skills - and they started conducting simulated attacks against fortified positions, in readiness for what was to come.

The landing beaches used for training had been carefully selected, based on the data collected on the chosen beaches of Normandy. A lot of the coasts and beaches had many identical characteristics with the invasion beaches.

In readiness for the troops to be moved further down into Cornwall, The US 81st Naval Construction battalion – (25th Naval Construction Regiment - The Seabees) arrived in November 1943 and started building the camps and the infrastructure.

They built "Sausage" Camps (named after the shape they made on maps) devised by Colonel Wyman. These were to hide the thousands of troops who would embark for D Day.

These included:

- Falmouth - Built USN Advanced Amphibious Base, 2x 750 men huts, 1,000 man tent city, Galleys, recreation areas, septic tanks Renovation of St Michaels Hospital - 100 men taking 5 months to complete.

- St Mawes – Built USN AATSB – Advanced Amphibious training base - 264 man camp, renovation of 12 hotels, gun mounts, water supply, storehouses, armoury 30 men, 5 months to complete.

Significant ammunition dumps were located in the dense woodland around Lostwithiel and Lanhydrock

So secret were these bases, that any fresh soil was painted green and the entrances were covered in planks so not to disturb the earth. This was to stop the camps being spotted from the air.

Once these camps were completed, then the main division was moved down to the invasion assembly areas in Cornwall.

The 115th were stationed at Bodmin, the 116th at Plymouth and the 175th, in and around the Truro/Camborne/Hayle areas.

Over 1,000 soldiers were used to protect these camps.

Wheal Busy at Chacewater was one of the biggest, seen below.



During the build-up, 2,500 American GIs were billeted on the site and were said to have restarted the 85-inch pumping engine.

From what I have been able to establish, here are some of the locations of the 175th billets in Cornwall:

The Regimental HQ was at the Pendarves Estate. The Service Company were based at Clowance. The Medical Detachment at Penzance. AT Company was based at Tregulow and the Lands End Hotel; Cannon Company at Trelowarren, Tregulow and St Ives and HQ1 was at St. Ives.

There were other locations used, including Hayle and Helston.

There were also Americans encamped and billeted in homes from Sennen to Wadebridge. The infantry were billeted by company in private homes in Marazion, Hayle, Penzance and Praa Sands.

The 776th AA weapons Battalion arrived late in April 1944 and were set up and headquartered at Trelassick House, in Feock, near Truro. They had 4 batteries A- D situated in the area.

Once settled in Cornwall, The 3 Regiments of the 29th consisted of close to 10-15,000 troops.

From 1943 and into the spring of 44, the Americans pretty much took over Cornwall.

It was an exciting time for the kids and they loved it, being presented with chewing gum and chocolate at a time when rationing was at its height.



And, of course, the young women loved it too...

Early 1944 witnessed a number of high-ranking visits to Cornwall.

In February, the Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D Eisenhower, inspected 'H' Company of the 29th Division, followed in March by the Commander of 1st Army - Lt General Omar Bradley - who came to address the Division's officers.



Finally, in April, there was a meeting between Eisenhower and the Overall Land Commander, Lt General Sir Bernard Montgomery at Abbotsfield Hall.



Embarkation points for thousands of troops, armour, equipment and supplies were sited at Mount Edgcumbe and at a number of points on the Helford River.

With the location of the embarkation 'hards' being at the end of really narrow roads and lanes, the US Engineers had to carve out passing places to allow their halftracks and lorries to get down to the landing craft.

A lot of these are still used today.

At Trebah, garden maintenance was reduced to a minimum when the beach was suddenly secured in readiness for the despatch of a regiment of 7,500 men for the assault landing on Omaha beach. The nearby Budock Veian Hotel was used to quarter American officers.

The newly-built embarkation points consisted of a concrete apron, known as a 'hard', which sloped down towards the water.

Hards were constructed in two parts. There was solid concrete above the high water mark and flexible concrete matting, made up of concrete slabs hinged with steel hooks, to the lowest limit of the tide.

Beyond the hard, there was a series of steel-framed moorings known as dolphins.



Surviving features, include concrete vehicle storage road, features partial survival of concrete apron, mooring rings and a concrete slipway.

At Trebah, the concrete biscuits have since been taken from the beach and are now used to form a pathway within the gardens leading to the beach.

On 5th June 1944, without warning, the troops were woken up and told to "get ready, as you are going on a little trip".

Final preparation for D-Day had begun. Troops and equipment were moved into position, in readiness for embarkation.

They were to form part of the greatest invasion fleet ever assembled.

At the end, it all happened astonishingly quickly.

Just a mile down the road from Trebah, is the village of Mawnan Smith, where the American troops first arrived, with absolutely no warning.



Suddenly, truck after truck appeared in convoys. It was an incredible sight in this sleepy Cornish village.

*"We were not told anything,"* said Sylvia King, a resident of Mawnan Smith, who was just a child in 1944.

*"The troops just went through one night and everybody had to keep off the roads,"* she said. *"We were not even allowed to go on the road from the school. Our parents had to collect us, walk over the field and take us home."*

*Nobody knew what it was all about.*

*Then, as quick as it had originally happened, they were gone.*

*Suddenly, it was so quiet. I could not believe what had happened.*

*They just disappeared overnight."*



From embarkation points at Mount Edgcumbe, along the Fal River and Trebah on the Helford and Polgwidden Cove, the troops and their equipment were transferred to the boats.







In all, 7,500 American servicemen of the 29th Infantry Division started boarding a large number of attack transports for the D-Day invasion.

Amongst them were landing craft and ships, tanks and other vessels such as the SS Empire Javelin, USS Charles Carroll and USS Buncombe County.

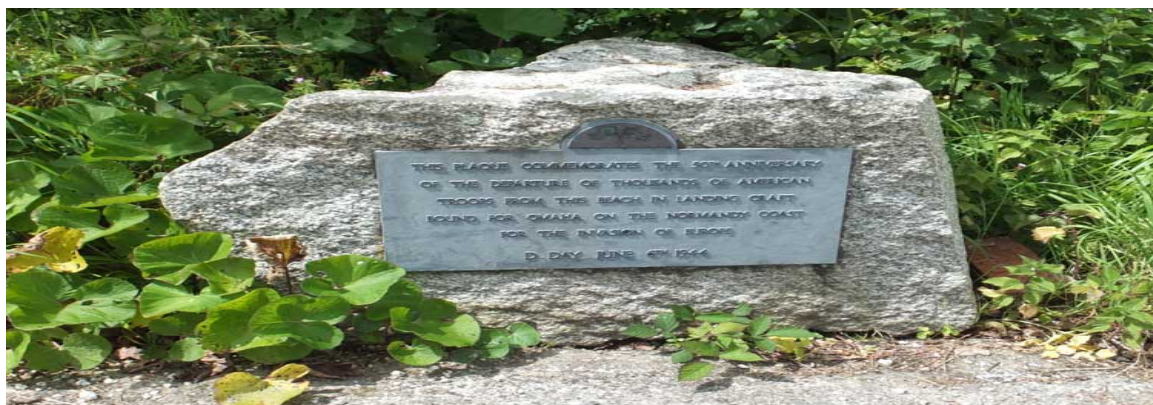
To this day, Ms King remembers how troops near the beach prevented locals from approaching the shore in preparation for D-Day.

*"I still don't like celebrating down at the beach, because I think of those young men. It is quite shivering to think about it."*

When you visit Helford today, it's impossible to imagine that this idyllic spot was the last peaceful place that so many of the Division's young troops would ever see.

They went from there, across the channel to Omaha and Utah, where so many would lose their young lives, probably without ever firing a shot in anger.

At the head of the lane leading to Turnaware beach, between Truro and Falmouth, a monument stands to the men of the US 29th Division, who left from that very spot in June 1944 to make their landing on Omaha Beach in Normandy on June 6th, the morning of D-Day.



Close by, at Smugglers Cottage, various hut bases, platforms, water tanks and more, are still visible to this day. The Cottage itself was requisitioned as the Hardmaster and Embarkation Staff Office.

General Eisenhower visited the Cottage in 1944, while carrying out final inspections of troops in the area. A memorial tree planted to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, stands a short distance from the hard.



The 29th Division landed on Easy Red Beach Sector, Omaha Beach, at 0630 hours on 6 June 1944, the Division's 116th Infantry Regiment, making up one of the two initial assault forces.



It was carnage. Hell on earth.

The landing craft immediately came under withering and unrelenting German machine gun fire from concrete bunkers positioned perfectly high above the beach, 300 yards away.

The German machine gunners calmly and deliberately waited until each landing craft lowered its steel ramp, then they fired directly into the Higgins boats, killing or wounding the massed American soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder within.

The MG-42 machine gun was capable of firing up to 1,500 rounds a minute and it was brutally effective.

Within minutes, it had turned Easy Red Beach into a blood and gore-splashed slaughter pen.

Staff sergeant Henrik Naube, who was part of the defences of Omaha, was holed up in a machine-gun nest overlooking the beach. He recalled:

*"The Americans were about four hundred metres away from us. I did not sight on them individually at first, but I began firing and swept the gun from left to right along the beach.*

*This knocked down the first few men in each line. The MG 42 was so powerful that the bullets would often pass through a human body and hit whoever or whatever was behind it.*

*So many of these men were hit by a bullet that had already passed through a man in front, or even two men.*

*The only time we stopped firing was when the gun barrel began to overheat and the mechanism showed signs of misfiring. We didn't want to run the risk of the gun breaking down, so we rested it to let it cool.*

*We took up our rifles and used them instead."*

The casualty rate of the 116th in this sector has been put between 65% and 95% killed or wounded - an astonishing figure.

Omaha Beach was a killing field...

When U.S. First Army General Omar Bradley received the tragic news of what was happening on the beach, it very nearly caused a total American abandonment and withdrawal.

During the next several hours, well over 3,000 American Army assault troops and Rangers would be killed or horrifically injured on Omaha beach, by German mines, machine gun, rifle and mortar fire.

Finally after intense and bloody fighting, the beachhead was secured and the second wave of the 29th Infantry Division's 115th Infantry Regiment landed, followed a few days later by the 175th, which had been held back in reserve.





Once inland, the entire division then became involved in another nightmare - the bitter hedgerow fighting among the Normandy Bocage.

Following D-Day, the Division helped capture St Lo in a fierce battle, and moved on to take Brest in the Brittany Peninsula. By the end of the war they had fought their way across Western Europe and into Germany.

The 29th Division was in combat almost continuously for the eleven months between D-Day and VE-Day, and during this period, sustained 20,300 casualties (4,780 dead), the fourth highest amongst all U.S. Army formations.

So many of the young men who had been based in Cornwall in the months before D-Day, would never return home.



Following the surrender of the German army, the regiment remained in Europe until 1 January 1946.

The 175th demobilised between 11th–17th January 1946 and then re-organised as an infantry regiment, regaining federal recognition on 12th November 1946.



**We all owe those boys so much...**