



Men of the 16th Infantry Regiment seek shelter from German machine-gun fire in shallow water behind "Czech hedgehog" beach obstacles, Easy Red sector, Omaha Beach.
© Robert Capa/Magnum Photos.

The Magnificent Eleven: The D-Day Photographs of Robert Capa

"The war correspondent has his stake — his life — in his own hands, and he can put it on this horse or that horse, or he can put it back in his pocket at the very last minute ... I am a gambler. I decided to go in with Company E in the first wave."

— Robert Capa

The ten photos selected from the eleven surviving negatives and published by LIFE on June 19, 1944 ...

The Photographer: Bob Capa

When soldiers of the 16th Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division landed at Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944, photographer Robert Capa, in the employ of LIFE magazine, was among them.

Perhaps the best known of all World War II combat photographers, the Hungarian-born Capa had made a name for himself well before climbing into a landing craft with men of Company E in the early morning hours of D-Day. He risked his life on more than one occasion during the Spanish Civil War and had taken what is considered the most eerily fascinating of all war photographs. The famous image reportedly depicts the death of Spanish Loyalist





militiaman Frederico Borrell Garcia as he is struck in the chest by a Nationalist bullet on a barren Iberian hillside.

Capa was known to say, "If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough." On D-Day, he came close once again. With Capa standing in the very stern, his landing craft mistakenly came ashore at the section of Omaha Beach dubbed "Easy Red." Then the ramp went down.

"The flat bottom of our barge hit the earth of France," Capa remembered in his book *Slightly Out of Focus*. "The boatswain lowered the steel-covered barge front, and there, between the grotesque designs of steel obstacles sticking out of the water, was a thin line of land covered with smoke — our Europe, the 'Easy Red' beach.

"My beautiful France looked sordid and uninviting, and a German machine gun, spitting bullets around the barge, fully spoiled my return. The men from my barge waded in the water. Waist-deep, with rifles ready to shoot, with the invasion obstacles and the smoking beach in the background gangplank to take my first real picture of the invasion. The boatswain, who was in an understandable hurry to get the hell out of there, mistook my picture-taking attitude for explicable hesitation, and helped me make up my mind with a well-aimed kick in the rear. The water was cold, and the beach still more than a hundred yards away. The bullets tore holes in the water around me, and I made for the nearest steel obstacle. A soldier got there at the same time, and for a few minutes we shared its cover. He took the waterproofing off his rifle and began to shoot without much aiming at the smoke-hidden beach. The sound of his rifle gave him enough courage to move forward, and he left the obstacle to me. It was a foot larger now, and I felt safe enough to take pictures of the other guys hiding just like I was."

Capa was squeezing off photographs as he headed for a disabled American tank. He remembered feeling "a new kind of fear shaking my body from toe to hair, and twisting my face." With great difficulty his trembling hands reloaded his camera. All the while he repeated a sentence that he had picked up during the Spanish Civil War: "Es una cosa muy seria" ("This is a very serious



The debate continues ...

business").

After what seemed an eternity, Capa turned away from the beach killing zone and spotted an incoming LCI (landing craft, infantry). He headed for it. "I did not think and I didn't decide it," he later wrote. "I just stood up and ran toward the boat. I knew that I was running away. I tried to turn but couldn't face the beach and told myself, 'I am just going to dry my hands on that boat.'"

With his cameras held high to keep them from getting waterlogged, Capa was pulled aboard the LCI and was soon out of harm's way. He had used three rolls of film and exposed 106 frames. After reaching England, he sped by train to London and delivered his precious film for developing.

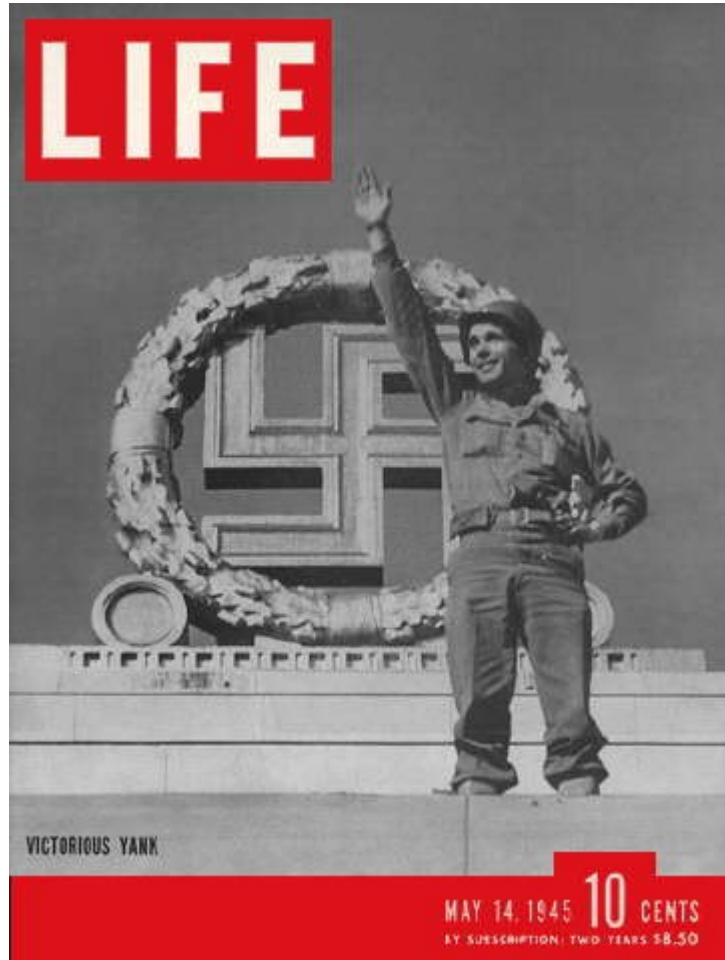
A darkroom technician was almost as anxious to see the invasion images as Capa himself. In his haste, the technician dried the film too quickly. The excess heat melted the emulsion on all but 10 of the frames. Those that remained were blurred, surreal shots, which succinctly conveyed the chaos and confusion of the day.



A Capa photo of Omaha Beach several days after the landings.

Capa's D-Day photos have become classics. One of them, depicting a GI struggling through the churning surf of Omaha Beach, has survived as the definitive image of the Normandy invasion. He went on to photograph the Arab-Israeli war in 1948. He also photographed his friends Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso, as well as film star Ingrid Bergman, with whom he reportedly had a love affair.

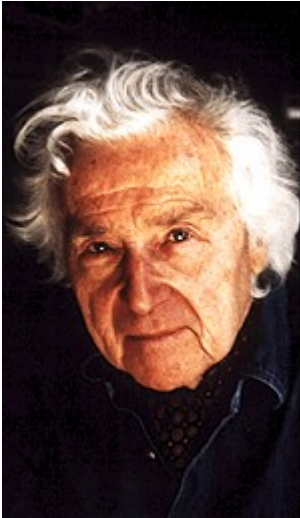
After that, having cheated death so many times, Capa vowed never to risk his life in wartime photography again. In 1954, however, he agreed to supply LIFE with some photos of the escalating conflict between the French and the Viet Minh in Indochina. That spring, while attempting to get as close to the fighting as possible, he stepped on a land mine and was killed at the age of 40.



Capa's shot of a victorious Yank graced the May 14, 1945 cover of LIFE.

Robert Capa is one of many wartime photographers who have risked their lives and made the ultimate sacrifice to capture the essence of desperate combat on film. Frozen in time and etched in our collective memory, the D-Day photos speak volumes about courage and sacrifice.

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John G. Morris, 1998

"I had rehearsed my part in every detail, from the moment the raw film arrived in London to the transfer of prints and negatives to the courier who would take them to the States — with a stop at the censor's office in between."

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"Dennis came bounding up the stairs and into my office, sobbing. 'They're ruined! Ruined! Capa's films are all ruined!'"

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The Editor: John Morris

Something woke me early on the morning of Tuesday, June 6, 1944. I drew the blackout curtain and saw that it was just another dull, gray day, colder than an English spring had any right to be. The streets were empty, and I was alone in the flat I shared with Frank Scherschel on Upper Wimpole Street in London's West End. He had departed — vanished, actually, without saying a word — several days earlier for his battle station, a camouflaged airfield from which he would fly reconnaissance over the English Channel to photograph the largest armada ever assembled. My job was to stay behind, to edit those and other photos for LIFE as picture editor of the London bureau.

I dressed as usual in olive drab, turned on the radio, made tea and read the papers, which of course had nothing to report. Then, at 8:32 London time, the bulletin came over the BBC:

"Under command of General Eisenhower, Allied naval forces, supported by strong Allied air forces, began landing Allied armies this morning on the northern coast of France."

"This is it," I whispered to myself, uttering the very words that Joe Liebling of The New Yorker later called "the great cliché of the Second World War." I hurried to the TIME-LIFE office in Soho, even though there wouldn't be much for me to do — for many hours, as it turned out.

I had been waiting eight months for this day. There had been a false alarm on Saturday, when a young telegrapher in the Associated Press London bureau, practicing to get up her speed, had put out an erroneous bulletin:

URGENT PRESS ASSOCIATED NYK FLASH
EISENHOWER'S HQ ANNOUNCED ALLIED
LANDINGS IN FRANCE

It had been corrected within a minute — "Bust that flash" — but it had sent a wave of panic through both

Allied and German headquarters. Now it was for real. Tuesday was a good D-Day for LIFE. Our job was to furnish action pictures for the next issue, dated June 19, which would close on Saturday in New York, and appear the following week. Wirephotos, of poor quality and limited selection, would not do; besides, they would be available to newspapers through the pool. Our only hope to meet the deadline was to send original prints and negatives, as many as possible, in a pouch that would leave Grosvenor Square by motorcycle courier at precisely 9:00 a.m. London time on Thursday. The courier would take it to a twin-engine plane standing by at an airdrome near London. At Prestwick, Scotland, the base for transatlantic flights, the pouch would be transferred to a larger plane. After one or two fuel stops, it would arrive in Washington, D.C., and our pictures would be hand-carried to New York on Saturday.

I had rehearsed my part in every detail, from the moment the raw film arrived in London to the transfer of prints and negatives to the courier who would take them to the States — with a stop at the censor's office in between. Clearing the censors at the Ministry of Information was by now a familiar routine. Their office was on the ground floor of the University of London's tall central building, which backed onto Bedford Square. Available twenty-four hours a day, the censors were cooperative, as censors go, permitting us to sit alongside them as they worked. Our photographers knew to avoid the faces of Allied dead, shoulder patches that revealed unit designations, and "secret" weapons (although by now most were known to the enemy) — so the work was for the most part *pro forma*. But it was tedious in the extreme, since every single print had to be stamped, after which the censor bundled all the acceptable material into an envelope and sealed it, using a special tape imprinted with the words PASSED FOR PUBLICATION. Without the tape, it could not leave the country.

Getting the packet by car to the courier at Grosvenor Square, about a mile from the ministry, looked simple on the map, but the most direct way, down Oxford Street, was often jammed with double-decker buses, so I devised a parallel route on a series of side streets: Hollen to Noel to Great Marlborough to Hanover to

Brook (I can remember every turn five decades later). This put me onto the wrong side of Grosvenor Square, but the final fifty yards could be covered on foot — while running at top speed. I left the little two-door Austin sedan Time Inc. had given me to its own fate. It was not uncommon for joyriders to take it out for a spin when I worked late, but that was no problem. A call to Scotland Yard was all that was necessary. The car would invariably be found as soon as the thief ran out of what little petrol was in the tank.



For the Normandy invasion, there were twelve photographers accredited for the wire services and six for LIFE. (In the photo at left, taken one week before disembarkation in Normandy, are (top) from left to

right: Bob Landry, George Rodger, Frank Scherschel, and Bob Capa. Bottom, John Morris (Editor) stands between Ralph Morse and David Scherman.) Only four press photographers were supposed to land with the first wave of American infantry on D-Day itself, and we managed to get two of the spots, for Bob Landry and Robert Capa. Both were veterans — Capa would be on the fifth front of his third major war. Although often unlucky at cards and horses, Capa nevertheless used a gambling metaphor to describe his situation on D-Day in his 1947 memoir-novel, *Slightly Out of Focus*: "The war correspondent has his stake — his life — in his own hands, and he can put it on this horse or that horse, or he can put it back in his pocket at the very last minute ... I am a gambler. I decided to go in with Company E in the first wave."

Bob Landry also felt obliged to accept this dubious privilege. The other LIFE assignments sorted themselves out. Frank Scherschel stuck with his buddies in the Air Force. David Scherman chose the Navy. George Rodger accompanied the British forces, under General Bernard Montgomery. Ralph Morse's assignment was General George Patton's Third Army,

but since it would not hit the beachhead until later, he boarded a landing ship whose job it was to pick up casualties — of which there would be plenty.

Who would get the first picture? Bad weather prevented good general views from either air (Scherschel) or sea (Scherman). Rodger, landing with the British on an undefended beach, "walked ashore in a blaze of anti-climax," as he put it in typically modest understatement. All day Tuesday we waited, and no pictures. It was rumored that one Signal Corps photographer had been killed in the first hours, but it turned out that he had "only" lost a leg. Late on Tuesday night Bert Brandt of Acme Newspictures, having scarcely gotten his feet wet, returned to London with a first picture!, but not a terribly exciting one, of a momentarily unopposed landing on the French coast, shot from the bow of his landing craft. Landry's film — and his shoes — somehow got lost. A disaster. I had been told that AP would have the fourth first-wave spot, but not one of their six photographers landed that day. So it was entirely up to Capa to capture the action, and where was he? Hour after hour went by. We were now waiting in the gloom of Wednesday, June 7, keeping busy by packaging the "background pictures," all of relatively little interest, that now flooded in from official sources. The darkroom staff — all five of them — had been standing by idly since Tuesday morning, their anxiety about the pressure they would be under growing steadily by the hour. This nervousness would soon result in an epic blunder.

At about 6:30 Wednesday evening, the call came in from a Channel port: Capa's film was on the way. "You should get it in an hour or two," a voice crackled over the line before fading into static. I shared this information with pool editor E. K. Butler of AP, a feisty little martinet whose nickname was "Colonel." He snapped back, "All I want is pictures, not promises!" Around nine, a panting messenger arrived with Capa's little package: four rolls of 35-millimeter film plus half a dozen rolls of 120 film (2 1/4 by 2 1/4 inches) that he had taken in England and on the Channel crossing. A scrawled note said that the action was all in the 35-millimeter, that things had been very rough, that he had come back to England unintentionally with

wounded being evacuated, and that he was on his way back to Normandy.

Braddy, our lab chief, gave the film to young Dennis Banks to develop. Photographer Hans Wild looked at it wet and called up to me to say that the 35-millimeter, though grainy, looked "fabulous!" I replied, "We need contacts - rush, rush, rush!" Again I phoned Butler through the AP switchboard, but he could only bellow, "When do I get pictures?" Brandt's wirephoto of troops landing apparently unopposed had scarcely satisfied the West's desperate need to believe in the actuality of invasion. A few minutes later Dennis came bounding up the stairs and into my office, sobbing. "They're ruined! Ruined! Capa's films are all ruined!" Incredulous, I rushed down to the darkroom with him, where he explained that he had hung the films, as usual, in the wooden locker that served as a drying cabinet, heated by a coil on the floor. Because of my order to rush, he had closed the doors. Without ventilation the emulsion had melted.

I held up the four rolls, one at a time. Three were hopeless; nothing to see. But on the fourth roll there were eleven frames with distinct images. They were probably representative of the entire 35-millimeter take, but their grainy imperfection — perhaps enhanced by the lab accident — contributed to making them among the most dramatic battlefield photos ever taken. The sequence began as Capa waded through the surf with the infantry, past antitank obstacles that soon became tombstones as men fell left and right. This was it, all right. D-Day would forever be known by these pictures.

One more ordeal lay ahead. We now had only a few hours to get our picture packet through the censors, and in addition to Capa's we had hundreds of other photos, the best from Dave Scherman of matters just before the landing. The British and Canadians had covered invasion preparations for days, as had the U.S. Army Signal Corps and the Navy and Air Force photographers. Nobody really cared now about such pictures, but we dutifully sent them on.

At 3:30 on Thursday morning, pictures in hand — including Capa's precious eleven — I drove my Austin

through deserted streets to the Ministry of Information, where I had to wait my turn. Ours was the largest picture shipment of the week, and I almost wished I could throw all but the Capa shots overboard in the interest of time. Finally, about 8:30, the censor finished putting his stamp on all the pictures. I stuffed the big envelope, and then it happened. The censor's specially imprinted tape stuck fast to its roll. It simply would not peel off. We tried another roll. Same result. This went on for minutes that seemed hours, and I had to deliver the packet to the courier, a mile away, by nine o'clock — our only chance to make the deadline after eight months!

I left the ministry at about 8:45 and drove like a maniac through the scattered morning traffic, down the little side streets, reaching the edge of Grosvenor Square at 8:59. I ran the last fifty yards and found the courier, in the basement of the Service of Supply headquarters, about to padlock his sack. "Hold it!" I shouted, and he did.

Just after LIFE's Saturday-night close, the editors cabled,

TODAY WAS ONE OF THE GREAT PICTURE DAYS IN LIFE'S OFFICE, WHEN CAPA'S BEACHLANDING AND OTHER SHOTS ARRIVED.

I could only think of the pictures lost. How was I going to face Capa?

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"All but eleven of Capa's negatives were spoiled by an overly eager darkroom worker in the London office of Time Inc. who turned up the heat in the drying cabinet too high. When LIFE published the photographs, a caption disingenuously explained that the 'immense excitement of [the] moment made photographer Capa move his camera and blur [his] picture.'"

The Photos

- Aperture Magazine



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Who is the GI?

Who was the GI in the surf immortalized in Bob Capa's most famous D-Day photo? Was it Edward Regan or Alphonse Joseph Arsenault?

- [The Case for Alphonse Joseph Arsenault](#)

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[<http://www.skylighters.org/photos/robertcapa.html>]

How LIFE Covered D-Day

June 2004

by John G. Morris

Courtesy of The International Herald Tribune

June 6, 1944: In Remembrance

The nights had been quiet since February, but London was still living under blackout that fateful spring of 1944. Street lights emitted only moonlight. We drew thick curtains across our windows at dusk. In February, night after night, up to a hundred German planes had dropped bombs in the so-called "little blitz." Censors revealed that 50,324 Britons had been killed so far in the air war, and 163,075 wounded.

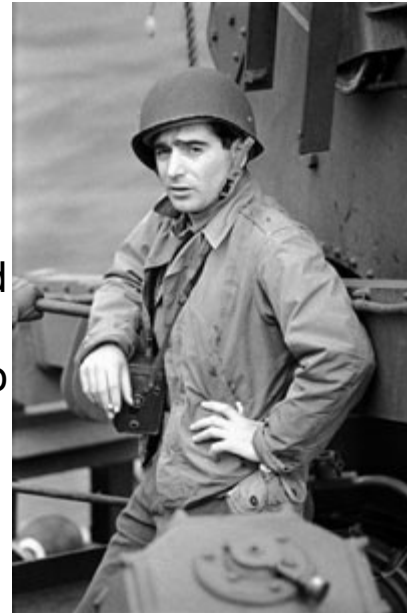
I shared a flat in the West End with Frank Scherschel, a Life magazine photographer. I was his editor, but didn't think of myself as his boss. Frank had crash-landed in Kent when returning from covering a raid on Stuttgart in a Flying Fortress. Thirty-five American planes were lost that day.

Our apartment at 24 Upper Wimpole Street belonged to a dentist, who had evacuated his practice but not his hydraulic dentist's chair. We were splendidly served by a downstairs couple, Lloyd and his wife. Lloyd had been a professional toastmaster for state occasions and during air raids he would call up to us, "Gentlemen, would you care for a cup of tea?" Meaning, get the hell downstairs, to take shelter in the basement kitchen until the all-clear sounded.

Tuesday, June 6, began like any other dull gray day, except that it was colder than London had any right to be in June. The alarm awakened me about eight. I was alone. Frank had simply disappeared a few days earlier, without saying goodbye -- as he had been ordered not to do. I knew he had reported to his Air Force battle station. I went to the window, drew the blackout curtains and looked down on the quiet street. Then I made a cup of tea and turned on the radio.

About 9:30 a bulletin came over BBC: "Under the Command of General Eisenhower, Allied naval forces, supported by strong air forces, began landing Allied armies this morning on the northern coast of France." "This is it," I muttered to myself, using the words that Joe Liebling of The New Yorker later called "the great cliché of the Second World War."

I dressed and drove my little company Austin to the office of Time and Life on Dean Street, in the film district of Soho. At 27, I was already a Life veteran. I had started as a CBOB (college boy office boy) in the New York office on Rockefeller Plaza, had worked a bit in Washington and a year in Los Angeles. I was there when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, on my 25th birthday, and I had scored a scoop when in February, 1942, a Japanese submarine fired a round of shells into an oil storage depot near



Portrait of photographer and journalist Robert Capa (1914 - 1954) in a military style jacket and helmet as he leans in an armored vehicle, Portsmouth, England, June 6, 1944. He carries a camera over his shoulder and has a canteen on his left hip.

Photo by David Scherman/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

Santa Barbara. My hand, holding a gorgeously jagged Japanese shell fragment, made the frontispiece of Life.

In the fall of 1943, with the war at its worst, I had volunteered to go to London, leaving behind my wife and daughter and a healthy embryo. Thus I now had a six-months-old son I had never seen. My wife and I parted, resolutely without tears, at Grand Central. With John Scott of Time I took the train to Saint John, New Brunswick, where we boarded a small Norwegian freighter. Its young captain, a veteran of over fifty wartime crossings, preferred to sail without convoy but that forced him to detour almost to the Azores before we finally made port in Liverpool.

My job in London, as I had been told in no uncertain terms over a last drink in the Men's Bar of the Waldorf, was to "get the pictures" of the eventual invasion of Western Europe. In the days before television, Life called itself "America's most powerful editorial force." We were shameless propagandists for the Allied war effort. I was given a terrific team of six photographers to cover the big day.



John Morris in the Time Life office in London during D Day

Photograph courtesy John Morris collection

It turned out that I was eight months early. That gave us plenty of time for feature stories -- essays on The Church of England and the Houses of Parliament, news stories on a by-election in Derbyshire, on the Miss London Beauty Contest, on Irving Berlin's "This is the Army" when he and it played the Palladium, and on the funeral of Sir Dudley Pound, where I saw Winston Churchill walk quietly in the cortege.

We also managed to enjoy ourselves. We ate well on expense accounts, and drew the same cigarette rations as officers -- war correspondents had the "assimilated rank" of captain in case of capture. There were lunches at The White Tower and parties at The Dorchester. The most memorable party was one given by Life photographer Robert Capa, the legendary war photographer, to honor his friend Ernest "Papa" Hemingway, a correspondent for Collier's. They had covered the Spanish Civil War together. The party lasted until four, when the punch ran out. "Papa" ended up in hospital after being driven into a water storage tank on the way home.

Capa would once more make history. Life belonged to a photo pool, with the three picture wire services, who added another twelve photographers to Life's six. Capa, however, was the only press photographer who managed to go in with the first wave of infantry on D-Day. He landed at dawn with Company E of the 2nd Battalion of the 16th Regiment of the 1st Division on the "Easy Red" section of the beach code-named "Omaha," near

Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer in Normandy. His memoir *Slightly Out of Focus* light-heartedly described his landing: "My beautiful France looked sordid and uninviting, and a German machine gun, spitting bullets around the barge, fully spoiled my return. The men from my barge waded in the water. Waist-deep, with rifles ready to shoot, with the invasion obstacles and the smoking beach in the background." Things soon went from bad to horrible. After shooting four rolls of film, Capa "had it bad," and made it back to England with a shipload of wounded, only to immediately return to Normandy after handing off his film.

Back in London we waited. No word from our photographers all day Tuesday. That night Bert Brandt of Planet/ Acme, the United Press picture wire service, returned to London with a "first picture" taken from a landing craft. It only whetted the public appetite for action pictures.

All day Wednesday we waited, until finally about six in the evening I got a call saying that Capa's film was on the way to London from "a channel port" by courier. Hours later a motorcycle messenger arrived with a small packet of films. A handwritten note from Capa said, "John, all the action is in the four rolls of 35 mm." I ordered the Life darkroom to "rush, for Godssake." I had to have contact prints for editing; four prints of each chosen negative had to be made to pass censorship, and we were nearing our deadline for shipment to Life in New York..

A few minutes later a lad from the darkroom rushed, almost hysterical, into my office, screaming "the films are ruined. Ruined!" He explained that he had hung them in the locker which served as a drying cabinet, normal practice, but because of the rush had closed the doors. There was too much heat; the

emulsion melted. I ran back to the darkroom with him. I held up the films.. Nothing but gray soup on three of them. But on the fourth there were eleven discernible images.

Those are the images that made the lead story in Life, for June 19, 1944: "BEACHHEADS OF NORMANDY: The Fateful Battle for Europe is Joined by Sea and Air." They are the images that Steven Spielberg studied for "Saving Private Ryan," the film that probably recreates D-Day as it really was. Those are the images by which we now remember D-Day: June 6, 1944. A Tuesday.



Top row, left to right: Bob Landry, George Rodger, Frank Scherschel, Robert Capa; bottom row, Ralph Morse, John G. Morris, David E. Scherman

Recently I returned to Omaha Beach. There is a golf course nearby, and the beach looks peacefully dull. Most peaceful of all is the cemetery where the American dead lie, row upon row, under neat white tombstones. For the first time I also visited the German cemetery, not so far away, where other thousands of men and women lie, in clumps of five, many with names unknown.. The French now honor them, as they do the historically unrecognized thousands and thousands of French civilians who also died in Normandy. Now, 133 years after the

Franco-Prussian war ended in the Treaty of Frankfurt, 86 years after the Germans capitulated in a railroad car at Compiègne, 59 years after they surrendered in a little red schoolhouse in Reims, it is clear that there will never again be war between France and Germany.

Let it set an example to the world.

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John G. Morris, who was Robert Capa's Life magazine editor on D-Day, has also edited pictures for Magnum Photos, Ladies' Home Journal, National Geographic, the Washington Post and the New York Times. He is the author of Get the Picture, A Personal History of Photojournalism, University of Chicago Press, 2002.

robert **capa** tells the story himself in his book "slightly out of focus".

Read John G. Morris's book "Get The Picture." The first chapter tells the whole story.