

“Thank God for the United States Navy!”¹

So wrote Major General Leonard T. Gerow from his headquarters on Omaha Beach to General Omar N. Bradley. His words captured not only the sentiment of the Allied soldiers who stormed the beaches on D-Day but, indeed, that of the entire free world—and generations to come.

Weather and logistical challenges combined to threaten the success of the D-Day invasion, but most historians agree that “what saved the day for the Allies was a handful of British and American destroyers.”² Of the nearly 7,000 ships in the English Channel ahead of D-Day, the *USS Emmons* was one of three-dozen destroyers and destroyer escorts who provided essential sea-to-land defense ahead of and during the largest seaborne invasion in human history. General Bradley later referred to the naval firepower at Normandy as “the greatest show on earth”³ thanks to the overwhelming coverage American destroyers provided as they came within 1,000 yards of shore to eliminate enemy positions and allow the landing to take place.⁴

At Omaha Beach, in the heart of the entire operation, the *Emmons* took the first artillery fire of the battle, which it promptly returned in spades, taking out German machine gun nests and sniper posts in the most heavily-fortified portion of the entire coastline; in fact, the *Emmons* “engaged the enemy at every possible opportunity” throughout the battle.⁵ But the strategic role of several destroyers, including the *Emmons*, in the success of Operation Neptune and Operation Overlord began prior to June 6, 1944. Together with the *Doyle*, “[t]he two destroyers were to provide defense for the flotilla during sweeping operations” conducted by the Royal Canadian Navy on the night of June 4-5, as well as the early morning hours of June 6 to provide a clear path to Omaha Beach.⁶ Additionally, on the 5th, the *Emmons* was dispatched to recall two landing craft that had been pulled out of formation by the rough seas and tumultuous weather that threatened to delay the operation.⁷ If these vessels drifted far enough, they ran the risk of being spotted by the Germans and revealing Allied intentions of an imminent amphibious landing.

Thus, by the time the battle officially began in the pre-dawn hours of June 6, the *Emmons* had already provided invaluable support to the success of the D-Day invasion, which proved to be the lynchpin in defeating the Third Reich’s grip on Europe. Without the efforts of the *Emmons* and her crew both before and during the battle, the devastating casualty toll of more than 26,000 Allied service members⁸ would have been exponentially higher and the entire invasion may have, quite possibly, failed. By reducing enemy positions to rubble and allowing ground troops to successfully

storm the beaches and overwhelm the remaining German posts, naval firepower established the base upon which the rest of the victory in Europe would be built. It is not an exaggeration to assert, therefore, that the American naval destroyers at D-Day changed the course of human history.

They changed the course of my own family's history, as well. Following in the footsteps of his uncle who was killed in action aboard the *Emmons*, my father enlisted in the United States military and served for 20 years, and I married a service member, making me both a military child *and* military spouse—two titles I carry proudly. In 1998, I had the opportunity to visit Omaha Beach and witness firsthand the incredible conditions against which the Allies prevailed. But I was *more* than just a witness; I understood that their legacy is an indelible part of my own life not only in the freedoms I enjoy but in the sacrifices they—and all of those connected with the military—offer on behalf of liberty.

The unmatched example of international cooperation against a belligerent and despotic force at D-Day must be preserved for future generations so they can understand the awful cost of war and the tremendous strength of the human spirit to prevail over evil. Never has this lesson proven more vital in the nearly eight subsequent decades as right now, as a belligerent military force is once again on the offensive against a sovereign nation in Europe, and another is threatening the stability of Asia. The example set by American and Allied servicemen on D-Day, including those brave sailors serving aboard the destroyers and accompanying ships, stands as testament to the indomitable power of freedom and to the fact that the cost of doing right is incalculably high, but it will always outweigh the devastating cost of doing nothing.

¹ Morrison, Samuel E. *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II— Vol. XI: The Invasion of France and Germany, 1944–1945*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1957), 110.

² Symonds, Craig L. *World War II at Sea: A Global History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 531.

³ Balkoski, Joseph. *Beyond the Beachhead: The 29th Infantry Division in Normandy*. (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books), 61.

⁴ Allen, Thomas B. "The Gallant Destroyers of D-Day," *Naval History Magazine*, vol 18. No. 3, June 2004. US Naval Institute (usni.org).

⁵ Billingsley, Edward Baxter. *The Emmons Saga: A History of the USS Emmons (DD457-DMS22)*. (New York: USS Emmons Association, 2005), 252.

⁶ Billingsley, 237.

⁷ Billingsley, 238.

⁸ "D-Day Casualties: Operation Overlord by the Numbers." Retrieved on May 5, 2023 at <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/d-day-casualties-operation-overlord-by-the-numbers/>. Casualty numbers vary by source.