

2017

France in June

Alicia DeFonzo

Old Dominion University, adefonzo@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs

 Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Repository Citation

DeFonzo, Alicia, "France in June" (2017). *English Faculty Publications*. 72.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs/72

Original Publication Citation

DeFonzo, Alicia. 2017. France in June [Memoir]. *War, Literature, and the Arts* 29, 5pp.

This Creative Work is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

A L I C I A D E F O N Z O

France in June

Motion sickness bothered me since childhood, though Dad never believed me—thought I was faking for attention. Fits of sweat, the swaying, my nervous stomach would bloat and burn like the aftermath of a warm glass of expired milk. I'd start burping, pleading to my dad to crack a window, if I could only breathe. But he always kept them locked, ever the dictator. One day after school, it was too late, and projectile vomit splattered all over the leather interior of his light blue 1962 Buick Riviera. He occasionally opened the window an inch for me thereafter.

On the other side of the Atlantic, my damp palms clutch a grease-stained paper bag during a two hour bus ride from Paris to the Normandy beaches. The other tourists stare from a safe distance rows away, worried I'm going to burst and the entire bus reek of onion soup. Maybe I should have cancelled this tour and spent my last vacation day in Versailles to poke around the grounds of frivolity and excess. Revolutions always intrigued me. In the tour bus office, though, I saw a Normandy pamphlet and felt guilty passing it up. It was there my grandfather risked his life. D-Day. "Just make it to the first site," I tell myself. "This will mean something to him."

The coach roams through rustic towns of slate roof cottages and pastures of white cattle. As we neared Caen, getting closer to the coastline, almost all of the homes post American and French flags full-staffed. Some say the French hate us, but not here. Here they remember after all this time.

We reach the first tour stop. Utah Beach. This was his stop, too. I immediately leave the coach, breathing in the salty air to calm my guts. With a half-an-hour to walk

around, I head towards the ocean and quickly realize this was not the beach I had imagined.

Acres of grass, rocks, and patches of sand positioned on a cliff. Jade and dandelions scatter the grounds, but the fields are fractured. About every 20 yards lay gaping holes at least 10 feet deep and wide. My WWII pamphlet claims Navy missiles left these craters during the Invasion. Now, the holes are overrun by weeds and tourists.

I descend one crater to inspect its size and am struck in the thigh by two racing toddlers. Up and over the hole, back and forth, they run with piercing laughter. Americans, probably. I suppose it is not the kids' fault their parents let them shout and sprint over an unmarked cemetery. If my grandfather was here, he would curse, but I just keep quiet and focus.

Further towards the cliff rests a massive bunker still intact, imbedded into the ground. The octagon-shaped fortress of concrete could easily hold 10 or 20 standing men with enough room for large weaponry. I begin to take some pictures of the design when a heavy-set man with loud beach trunks and shabby Nike's finds his way into my shot. He stands inside the remains, grazing on a candy bar and inspecting the walls like he's reading hieroglyphics. Minutes pass. Just one clean picture is all I want. A few tourists get up on the perfect photo and move on, and I do the same.

I continue toward the overhang, at least a hundred foot drop above the beach secured by rusted barbed wiring. Hovering near the edge, I separate myself from other onlookers and observe the sun's brilliance off the calm water. I study the distance to where the sea meets the sky at the horizon and envision my grandfather beyond that point, a 19-year-old preparing for battle. The sight urges me to call him, despite the dollar-a-minute charge and one bar of service.

After two rings, a loud voice picks up. "Hey, kid!"

I shout over the wind, "Grandpop! Guess what? I just got to Utah Beach!"

"Oh yeah? I've been there," he says without a beat. I laugh.

He proceeds to ask me how my trip is going, but that was all I get. Without warning, the gentleness in his voice escapes me, and my throat constricts. I inhale through my nose, as the stomach prepares to vomit. How can I be motion sick now, so far from the bus? And then I see. It isn't nausea. I'm not sick, I'm angry. Strange really. Angry at whom or what, I do not know. The sea knew everything, and I know nothing. Nothing about what he did or what it all meant. What use were the few facts from history class or old movies. How nonchalant my grandfather had been, how simple he made it sound. But there could be no doubt now. His survival on this beach was sheer luck. He should have died that day, and I should not have lived.

I hurry to get off the line before he detects my distress.

“Well, I’d better go, Grandpop. Don’t want the bus to leave me.”

“Okay, Alicia. Be safe.”

And with his goodbye, I stand there, weeping, as the sinister waves stalk the shoreline below for what seems like three lifetimes.

I collect myself before boarding and borrow some antacid from a fellow tourist to get the hell over it. My grandfather fought here, 10,000 Allied troops died here, and I couldn’t survive a damn bus ride without complaint.

Omaha Beach and the American Cemetery are just a few miles away. As we approach, all is adorned with deep red and gold garlands and fancy lighting. Enormous blue banners surround the entrance, stating: “Obama, Sarkozy, Brown, Spielberg, Hanks.” Hundreds of tourists, veterans, and families visit the flat lawns of white headstones in preparation for the 65th anniversary of D-Day on June 6—the next day.

I completely forgot.

The Landing Ship Tank bobbed in the steady waters, as two hundred GIs stared at those cut down by rapid machine gun fire on Utah Beach. They were anxious enough, and Ike had kept them waiting, all 160,000 men, lingering in the choppy Atlantic. General Dwight Eisenhower intended to attack the day before but needed the full moon of June 6, 1944 to illuminate the cliffs and calm the tides. Now, it was dawn.

Bloodshot eyes, tears, and vomit filled the last moments aboard the vessel, but Del was silent. He refused to fear the worst, figuring he was “a dead man anyway, so why worry.” Certainly, he would do anything to survive, fight until the end, but obsessing over death was another matter. The constant dread would lead to panic, dull the senses, he believed, inviting death sooner. “It’s just one of those things you have to accept,” he tells me. “Worrying does nothing for you, except get you killed. You can’t let it bother you or it takes control. You can only hope it’s quick.”

Private First Class Anthony DelRossi was part of the 629th Army combat engineers, 1,111th Group. The Light Equipment Company, as they were termed, supported several infantries with engineering maneuvers and supplies. Del’s job was to drive the munitions truck packed with bangalore torpedoes, dynamite, TNT, and all explosive material to the guys positioned on the beach.

The Navy released the LSTs a couple hundred yards offshore, worried that the steel barriers Rommel had planted in the water would rip their ships apart. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel radically improved coastline defenses for the German Army and was one of Hitler’s most skilled and trusted commanders. But in the coming months, he

would question the Fuhrer's tactical decisions, and sanity, encouraging him to end the war. By October, Rommel was accused of conspiracies against Hitler and told to consume cyanide or undergo a public hearing where his family could, or certainly would, be implicated. He chose the capsule and was dead within seconds.

As the last to board the LST, Del was the first to disembark. They dropped the ramp about fifty yards from the beach, and the two and a half ton truck plunged to the ocean floor. "That son of a bitch submerged twelve feet at least and would have flooded had we not water-proofed it back in Bristol," he says. Del used duct seal, a pliable clay-like substance, on all the greased fittings, frame, and engine. The only part that needed air to operate was the carburetor. So, Del attached a large flexible hose around the entire carburetor and positioned the top of the hose to stand above water. The hose essentially worked like a snorkel, giving him a good minute or two of air.

He gunned the truck straight towards the shore, maneuvering through the rock and surf. But as he gained ground, Del found himself steering through waves of infantrymen. They were drowning. The equipment was too heavy, some 30 to 50 pounds for a soldier to carry. The ships were safe, but the current took the men under, dozens of them. Del watched as they kicked for the surface, desperate for air, longing for the beach. He could not stop to save them.

The Germans dug deep into the coastline of Utah Beach, constructing concrete bunkers manned with heavy artillery. The strongholds seemed impenetrable, fully protected with the high ground as their advantage. The location made US attacks almost futile.

Once Del's vehicle hit the shore, he delivered bangalores for the engineers to blow up the bunkers; they were pipe bombs, really, but they worked. The engineers attached the thin metal cylinders together, about 40 feet long, loaded them with amatol, and shoved their heads in the sand. But in order to be effective, close range was needed—without falling to gunfire.

The Navy and Air Corps commenced shelling the bunkers. The planes dropped a flare for the battleships to target with missiles. The plan was successful, for the most part, but the artillery also fell on the shoreline. Del didn't know whether the ships confused their marks or if the drops were miscalculated, but on they went, blasting the beach, blasting GIs and Germans.

Firepower flew overhead and flattened everything in range. Stillness followed by absolute heat and momentum. No warning, instant death. The screams were silent. Faceless carcasses, scattered torsos, seared guts, and gray smoke. Del had nowhere to go

but forward, through the bullets, bombs, and bodies, and weave “this sitting duck” of flammables up the bloody beach.

The Allied Forces overpowered the German resistance on the Normandy beaches five days later. Thousands of corpses masked the coast, and Omaha Beach lost almost ten times as many men than Utah. Del swore that the Navy and Army Air Corps killed more GIs during Operation Overlord than Germans. Friendly-fire was random, often, and classified. He believed the US would never take responsibility for such losses—the journalists were government-issued and most company clerks were killed during combat. “We had no correspondents, they didn’t write anything! All that stuff was hushed up. How are they going to explain to the American people: ‘We just bombed our troops by accident’? They can’t. So the details get lost.”

To this day, historians remain unclear on the number of D-Day casualties because many of the bodies simply disintegrated or were swept into the ocean; they approximate 10,000 Allied troops died.

Perhaps Private DelRossi was right all along: the truth would never escape the beach.

ALICIA DEFONZO is a Lecturer of English at Old Dominion University in Virginia, where she earned an MFA in Non-Fiction under biographer Blake Bailey. In 2014, she received The Gettysburg Review Conference Award in Non-Fiction for her work which retraces her grandfather’s life as an Army combat engineer in WWII Europe. DeFonzo has been published in *War, Literature, and the Arts*, *O-Dark-Thirty*, *Gravel Magazine*, *The Montreal Review*, and *Extract(s)* and also writes for WHRO.org, her local PBS/NPR station. Her father is “always” a Master Sergeant in the Marine Corps, and her brother James deployed to Ramadi as a team leader in the infantry, 2006-2007.