

BOOK 2



DD DAY THROUGH GERMAN EYES

HOLGER ECKHERTZ

D DAY
Through German Eyes

BOOK 2

**Further Eyewitness Accounts
by German Servicemen
of June 6th 1944**

A new collection of original
archive material

Edited by
Holger Eckhertz

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Introduction to Book 2

D Day (the name which the Allied media gave to the Normandy landings of June 6th 1944) is an event which has been viewed very largely from an Allied perspective. Considering the colossal challenges which the Allies faced, and the bravery with which their troops carried out the landings, this is in some ways understandable. Having said that, however, I have been astonished at the interest which greeted Book 1 of these accounts by German soldiers who experienced D Day. So many people around the world have been fascinated and intrigued to read the words of the German defenders of the Normandy stronghold – words which have been almost lost to the historical record.

This new book presents a different series of accounts, some of which I deliberately excluded from Book 1. To be frank, when editing Book 1, I felt that some of these testimonies would be distressing to French people whose parents or grandparents had been in Normandy in 1944, because of the way in which some of the German interviewees describe their attitudes to the French population. After much thought, however, I have commissioned a translation of these interviews, as I believe that these glimpses into the Germans' presence in Normandy deserve to be known and understood.

For readers who have not read Book 1, the background to these interviews is that my grandfather, Dieter Eckhertz, was employed during the second world war as a writer for German military propaganda magazines such as 'Signal' and 'Die Wehrmacht.' He visited the Atlantic Wall and the Normandy area in the spring of 1944 to collect interviews with the troops for such propaganda, and was fascinated by the enormous fortifications being built under General Erwin Rommel's command. Ten years after D Day, in 1954, he made it his personal mission to track down German survivors of the Normandy landings, in order to record their experiences. Meeting one veteran put him in touch with others – until he had assembled a portfolio of such interviews which eventually came into my hands in 2014, in the form of unedited notes and transcripts which were untouched since they were first made 1954.

I would like to emphasise that the interviewees whose testimonies are recorded in this book demonstrate a wide range of attitudes to their

wartime experience. Some were remorseful for their service in the German forces; some appeared to have changed only slightly, while others, as the reader will see, were conflicted, traumatised or otherwise affected by the cataclysmic events of June 6th.

Taken as a whole, I believe that these testimonies offer us a rare and crucial insight into the psychology of German foot soldiers in 1944, and above all a unique glimpse of the onslaught of June 6th from the defenders viewpoint. I don't doubt for a moment that these interviews will be controversial. Nevertheless, these are among the human voices of D Day - and surely they deserve to be heard in all their human form.

Holger Eckhertz
July 2015

The Concrete Panzer

Gustav Winter was a Gefreiter (Private First Class) with the 726th Infantry Regiment, 716th Static Infantry Division, stationed near Colleville, inland of the American Omaha beach.

Herr Winter, you said in your letter to me that you started the war in the panzer forces, the elite panzer troops as you said, and then you finished the war on the Atlantic Wall in Normandy. How did that come about?

You see, Herr Eckhertz, the Normandy invasion was a bitter experience for me, because I had been transformed from a panzer crew man into a *static* panzer crew man, and so I was fighting in a panzer but unable to move.

Can you explain what you mean by that? In what way were you in a static panzer?

Oh, the static panzers were an important part of the Atlantic Wall, and later the West Wall between Germany and France, and the defences inside Germany also.

You see, if a panzer is damaged in action, especially in the running gear, engine or hull, and if that panzer was an older type, say a Panzer III or one of the Eastern European machines that we used, it was often not worth the time and the steel to repair it fully. But of course, it could not be wasted. If it was not melted down, it could be used as part of the fortifications.

The static panzer which I was assigned to in Normandy was an old Panzer III which had no engine or drive wheels. It was encased in concrete, literally set in a concrete box, and this box was positioned down in the ground so that the turret could operate at ground level. It had to be in a concrete box, because the ground was mostly sand, which was unsuitable for digging a normal emplacement. Because there was no power, the turret was traversed by a hand wheel, and the panzer only held two men: the gunner and loader. We called it 'der Betonpanzer' (*'the concrete panzer.'*)

Where was this concrete panzer located?

On the dunes, just back from the sea itself. Our panzer had a field of fire onto the seafront and the beach, and the intention was that we would fire on any enemy that tried to come up off the beach, as they came up over the dunes at that point. The purpose was to keep the enemy pinned down on the beach at that point, preventing him moving inland. In that sense, we were part of the main line of defence, after the machine guns and artillery that were positioned to fire along the beach itself.

For me, it was very strange to be in this concrete panzer, because I had taken part in the France and Russian campaigns in a real Panzer III, which at that time was the workhorse of the Wehrmacht panzer forces. To come from those dramatic campaigns, which were full of glory and movement, to a concrete panzer set in the sand dunes . . . this was a difficult transition for me to make.

This is what I want to understand - why were you assigned to this unit in Normandy?

This was because I suffered very badly from frostbite during that first winter in Russia, in 1941. We had no winter clothes at that time, and in the unheated panzers the temperature could go down to minus twenty or thirty celsius. We in the armour suffered less than the infantry, but still, remaining for twenty four or thirty six hours in a steel box at minus twenty degrees, without enough fuel to use the engine, this will damage a man.

As you can see, I lost the little fingers on each of my hands, because my gloves were torn, also the tip of my nose, and my toes were damaged as well. I was no longer the handsome panzer boy after that, although I suffered far less than many of the others . . .

. . . I remember one crew in Russia who were stranded in the ice when their fuel ran out; they froze to death inside their panzer. When we eventually got to them, they had to be lifted out with a winch, like statues, one after the other. We lined them up on the ice, like marble statues of men. So I considered myself lucky to lose two fingers and my nose, and to have a limp.

I was transferred to be a panzer training instructor, but it was felt that my frostbite wounds would unsettle the cadets, and so I was made a truck driver in the auxiliaries. Finally, because I was a skilled panzer gunner, I was moved to the Atlantic Wall and I ended up with the Static

Infantry on the concrete panzer. I learned to use the gun controls with my eight fingers well enough. The mechanics adapted the gun system for me, with extra grips on the control wheels. My assistant, my loader, was a Czech-German boy who was not very bright, but very enthusiastic. We were a happy crew, just the two of us.

Was this concrete panzer part of a system of fortifications?

Yes. In that area of the dunes, there were several strong points covering the exits from the beach. Apart from my concrete panzer, there was a PAK (*anti-tank*) gun on a turntable inside a steel shield, and a number of the small concrete bunkers for one or two men. We were spread out on that plateau in the dunes, just within sight of each other. There were also trenches for infantry, and behind us there were some houses we used as barracks, which were linked together and mined to make fortresses.

Did you consider these to be strong defences?

Well, in the East, they would have been considered quite weak, especially against an enemy expected to use panzers. But there on the French coast, it seemed to me that it was pretty unlikely that the Allies could land with large numbers of panzers. We knew they had landing craft which could bring a panzer onto dry land, because they had used this in Italy. But France was not Italy. They would need thousands upon thousands of panzers to invade France, and how could these possibly be carried across the water from England to all arrive at once? We had no idea of the organisation that the Allies were capable of, you see.

Also, on many of the beaches, the sand between high and low tide was completely covered with girders that had Teller mines, which were there to blow the tracks off panzers if any tried to come ashore, and also the Belgian gates. All this made the beach defences seem stronger.

What were the Belgian gates?

They were large, steel frames with rods that stuck out, and were meant to damage panzer treads or flat-bottomed boats. I don't know why they were named that. There were thousands of these things stuck in the

sand, and other girders or posts with mines or artillery shells primed to explode . . . those beaches were a murderous place. Personally, I couldn't see how an invader could come ashore and move off the beach in any kind of strength, and so I was not greatly worried by the thoughts of an Allied landing.

On the other hand, some of the other men manning the other bunkers around me were very anxious with 'Invasionangst' ('*Invasion Anxiety.*') This meant that they thought about the invasion too much and they became weighed down with the thought. You must remember that we were isolated there on that damned plateau of dunes, and all day we had to stare through our binoculars at the sea, which was only about one kilometre away, not knowing what devilish things might appear out there.

What was life like for you in the bunkers on the plateau?

Apart from the uncertainty, we in the infantry had a comfortable life before the invasion came. The local French people were not supposed to come close to the bunkers, but in reality they would come and trade with us, offering food. They had bread, milk, cider, eggs and even fresh meat, which was unavailable to Wehrmacht lower ranks. In return we exchanged things like cigarettes, bootlaces and lamp oil, which the French couldn't get hold of at all.

We would also catch seagulls and cook them, and further inland there were a lot of rabbits to be hunted. It's strange that my memory of those months before the invasion is so full of food, but that is how it was. We would say, 'Fill your belly on French ham and cider, because tomorrow you may be transferred to the East, where there is only hard biscuit and snow to eat.' Some of our bunkers were little storehouses of contraband food and liquor, and the officers would take their share when they inspected us. This would never have happened in the panzer troops, of course, but standards of conduct in the Static Infantry in France were different.

Did the Germans form relationships with the French?

The relationship was generally friendly. The French would complain bitterly about the Allied bombing, which was ruining their little towns and villages, especially around the transport routes. Many of us had lost

relatives in the city bombing in Germany, so we sympathised. Some of the French also hated General De Gaulle, who they described as a traitor and a coward. De Gaulle and his gang were our enemy too, so we had that in common. After the war, I was amazed that De Gaulle became the president of France!

Why do you think the French hated De Gaulle so much?

I said *some* of the French hated him. I think it was because De Gaulle threw in his chances with the English, and some of the French detested the English. Honestly, to listen to some of those French farmers cursing the old ‘Anglo-Saxons!’ It was ‘Anglo-Saxon’ this and that – terrible French swear words, too. Some of those French hated the English more than we Germans did, I tell you that for a fact.

But many other French people had no understanding of the world at all, no more than if they were farmers in Russia or Poland. I am not criticising them for this – I’m sure that country people in Germany were equally ignorant. And in America or Britain, too.

I myself was from Berlin, and I liked to hear about world events and discuss them with my comrades. I considered myself well-informed at that time, even though I was only a Gefreiter (*Private First Class.*)

Did the Germans ever form relationships with the French women?

Of course, this happened. Why do you ask that question?

It is a subject that is not spoken of today.

Oh, well then, let’s speak about it. Do you want to know the facts?

Yes, please. That’s my purpose.

Well . . . since you ask, I’ll tell you what went on. The truth is that sometimes the French ladies in our sector would get pregnant by German soldiers, and when that happened they went to a house in the inland zone, a house that was run by Catholic nuns, to have the babies. This house, which was known to everyone as ‘The Children’s House,’ became a kind of

orphanage for French-German children; there were many of them being looked after there. If you can imagine the situation, we Germans in 1944 had been in France for four years, almost exactly four years, and so the orphanage was much needed.

By the way, I have relatives who were in the German army in France in the 1914 war, and they tell me that the same thing happened in those days.

But there is a very sad story connected with that Children's House, in fact, and the things that happened when the Allies invaded.

How was this orphanage affected by the invasion?

It was caught up in the events, as everything and everyone was caught up.

One of our men in the bunkers on the dunes was rumoured to have fathered a child that was now in the Children's House, being brought up by the nuns there. When the Allies bombed inland, which they did very heavily, the Children's House was hit badly . . . I don't know the details, but some of the children were killed. Our comrade in the dunes was said to have lost his child in that attack. I don't know if this was true, but the man in question certainly became fanatical about killing the enemy after that. He blamed the Americans, because they were supposed to be the ones who bombed the Children's House.

That's a sad story, indeed.

Did you yourself have any personal dislike of the Americans or the English?

I had lost several relatives in the daylight and night bombing of Berlin, and so I was angry about this, yes; I was very bitter. Many of my comrades felt the same way. The frustration for us was that we were not fighting the war against the Western powers, really. Our real war was with the Soviet Union and the threat that we believed they posed to us in the East. Today, of course, we in West Germany all understand that this belief was mistaken, but ten years ago the feeling against the East was very strong. And this added, you see, to our anger against the Americans and the

English Empire, because they were diverting our strength, our forces, away from the battles in the Eastern Front.

What a foolish thing that war was, when you think about it. The Americans had so much space in their prairies and mountains, and the English had India and all those places in Africa. And yet they wanted to take France from us, and stop us fighting the Reds. All of us there on that area of sand dunes, me in my concrete panzer, and the PAK gun, and the little two-man bunkers, we all should really have been in the East, fighting the real enemy of Europe over there. But the Western Allies insisted on threatening us in France.

That is what we thought at the time.

For you in the dunes, in that isolated place, how did June 6th develop for you?

That terrible day . . . I hate to remember it, and at the same time all the events are still very clear in my mind here.

I and my young loader, we went into our concrete panzer at midnight, replacing the other crew who went off to sleep in the fortified houses. There was a lot of rumbling of aircraft in the air, but we couldn't see anything up there . . . we thought this was an especially heavy bombing raid.

The concrete panzer was pretty comfortable, because it was all stripped out inside and there was plenty of room. The turret had a 50mm gun, and in addition to the telescopic gunsight it was fitted with periscope binoculars which could focus on the sea immediately beyond the dunes. On this night, there was moonlight, but all I could make out was clouds over the horizon of the sea.

But then we never saw much happening on the sea at all.

You never saw much on the sea between England and France? In 1944? Are you sure?

Yes, there was never much activity out there. It is strange, isn't it? Despite all this massive war going on, the sea during the night and the day was quite empty of ships; it was rare to observe one of our S-Boats (*gun boats*) and we only occasionally glimpsed a proper warship, which of

course was always British or American, as the Kriegsmarine (*German Navy*) did not operate big warships between France and England.

Anyway, on that night of the 5th, there was aircraft noise and heavy bombing inland, but being in the panzer we couldn't see what was happening out there. All our watching and waiting went on for hours, until sometime around five am, when everything changed.

First, our officer came to us on horseback (he had been a cavalry commander in the first war, and he prided himself on his Austrian horse.) He told us that there was suspicious activity to the East, involving gliders and such things, and to be completely vigilant. Therefore, we checked over the gun, and I went out to see if anything was happening around us.

There were flares in the sky, I don't know where from, and they lit up the underside of the clouds, and I could see many planes moving through the clouds, which worried me. Our only Flak was a single 20mm gun behind us, near the fortress houses, and this remained silent. I had a very bad feeling now, and I felt very exposed out there, even with our concrete shell. I suppose that all the other crews in the bunkers around me were thinking the same thing – *'What the devil is happening?'*

First light came at about five fifteen or five thirty, I think, and I noticed that the sea was still empty as far as I could make out into the distance. All I saw was a series of flashes on the horizon, which I thought might be more flares. Then there was a horrific noise in the air, which was a long crashing sound, and we began to be hit by huge explosions. These explosions were incredibly powerful . . . they made the whole concrete box around the panzer move and rattle.

I figured out that these were naval shells coming from out on the sea, something which had never happened before in my experience. I could actually see the flames of the warship guns firing, that was what the flashes were out on the sea. After several of these explosions, which landed randomly around us, the air was full of sand, smoke and dust, and it was hard to see anything through the periscopes at all.

The intensity of that bombardment was more than anything I had known on the Eastern Front. When one of these naval shells exploded near us, the shock wave came through the ground and travelled through the panzer, which felt like a punch in the stomach. These blows came again and again, every time a kick in the belly, and making my ears ring horribly.

The Czechoslovakian lad who was my loader got down on the floor of the panzer and began sobbing, the poor idiot. He was not very bright, as I told you. I told him to shut up, but he was only seventeen, and had not been in action before. What a way to start!

After that, I think we were bombed by aircraft, but I'm not sure. I couldn't hear properly, but I felt a lot more explosions, which seemed to be some distance away. A few of these bombs came close, and bits of shrapnel came crashing off the turret, and a lot of smoke was coming in through the air vents. I braced myself and closed my eyes, that was all I could do. When the bombing finally paused, the explosions seemed to fall behind us, in the inland zone. I opened the side hatch of the turret a tiny bit and looked out. What a sight that was.

One of the small concrete bunkers was destroyed, and the concrete was in pieces all over the dunes. There were huge craters in the sand everywhere around us, and in places the sand was on fire from the explosive. The PAK gun near us was in one piece, and the crew there signalled to me with a green signal flag that we used (we had no phone or radio, of course, and I was deafened anyway, I could hear nothing at all.)

That particular PAK gun was commanded by the man I told you about, the fellow who had lost his child in the Children's House bombing.

The light was fully up, and a drizzle was coming down, which damped down all the smoke and dust. I wiped my eyes and tried to look out at the sea through the periscope binocular. And so, at that moment, like thousands of other German soldiers, I saw the number of ships that the Allies were bringing against us. I was staggered at the sight, even though I could only see it dimly. I was absolutely stunned, and also very angry.

What did you see? Why were you angry at this point?

Out on the sea . . . well, the horizon was like a solid wall of ships. As if someone had put a steel curtain across the horizon, that's how many there were. The warships that were firing on us were lighting up the whole array of ships with the flash of their guns. I looked up out of the hatch, and saw that overhead there were vast numbers of planes, which I couldn't hear because my ears were deafened, but I could feel the vibrations of their engines in the air . . . probably nobody can understand that sensation unless

they have been under an air fleet like that, not with the modern jet engines, but the propellers from those days. The air itself was vibrating around us.

But why were you angry?

Because of the senseless waste of all this. All these planes, these ships, were crewed by men who were the same as us, from the same civilization and race as us, and yet they were launching this attack against our Europe, while all the time the Soviets were massing their armies against Europe in the East. It was such a waste, so unnecessary.

But soldiers are not allowed any moments to reflect on such grand matters, are they? By now the light was quite clear, and with the light came the Allied aircraft. A large number appeared over the fleet of ships, I can't be sure but I would say a hundred planes, at different altitudes and speeds. I saw several of these approach our area at very high speed, almost as if they were diving on us . . . I sealed the hatches again, and soon I heard the impact of cannon shells on the turret. These aircraft cannon were very powerful, and they partly split open the armour plate around the cupola. If they had come round again, they might have destroyed my turret completely, but I heard them go off to the south.

Through my periscopes, it was difficult now to see anything because of smoke outside; whether this was a smokescreen the Allies had put down with their shells, I don't know. I managed to get my young loader off the floor of the panzer, and we got ourselves into some kind of fighting shape, ready for whatever was to be thrown at us.

What was your feeling at this stage?

I was determined to hold the resistance point. I still felt angry about the whole situation, furious even. I was also puzzled as to how the attackers thought they could climb the cliff that led off the beach onto the dunes. There was a low sea wall there, and then a sand cliff of several metres which was strung with mines. It was a low obstacle, but very hard to climb for men or panzers. At times, the sea wind blew the smoke clear, and I could see large numbers of craft on the sea, coming closer. These were boats with high front walls, vertical walls, which I later realised were

ramps. Again I had the feeling of a wall of steel coming towards us . . . an absolute wall.

By the way, the approach of these craft was not rapid, but quite slow. I saw several explosions when a craft hit a Belgian gate with a mine, and the detonation blew big pieces of steel from the hull. I saw one craft in which the front ramp was blown off completely, and inside were a large number of men, all of them scrambling around as the craft tipped over and sank. Several of these craft were on fire in one place or another. I saw many bodies in the sea, even before the craft landed.

Then a bombardment began again, which blew up the sand all around us and blinded us with smoke and dust, and we had no way of knowing what was happening. We were there, just me and this scared boy, in our concrete panzer, as this great army came slowly towards us.

After that, there was a long, long period of time where there was just smoke, explosions and firing from the beach direction. We had resistance points in the headland there, looking down onto the beach, and I could see flashes and clouds of smoke coming again and again. I was in a state of real anxiety, not knowing what was happening. Of course, there was a terrible battle going on at the beach while the Americans were coming ashore, but at the time I didn't know what was going on. This went on for hours, I think, with us in the concrete panzer not knowing if we were winning or losing or what the enemy were up to.

I knew that a lot of the troops on the beach front itself were from the Eastern Regiments; these were Russians who had changed over to our side. I felt sorry for them, because they were miserable men, who had no real heart for fighting alongside us at all, but there they were, in the middle of it all. We had thousands of these Russians up and down the coast, and nobody today knows or cares what happened to them after the invasion . . . I can tell you something about that later, though.

I would like to hear that. But when did you first see the enemy on the land, on the dunes?

It was much later. I saw explosions down at the edge of the dunes, where the low cliff was. These were big flashes that threw sand a great distance into the air. The noise during all this time was unbearable, with the huge impacts coming again and again. I primed the turret gun and tried to

see through the gun sight, but all I could see were some of our own troops, or maybe the Eastern troops, running back from the cliff. These men were caught by a shell blast and thrown in pieces across the sand, which was a horrible sight. I dreaded the thought of dying like that.

Then I saw some kind of explosion on the edge of the dunes. This explosion ran left and right in a line, and I suppose it was an explosive cord for clearing the barbed wire there, or something like that. A few seconds later there was a cloud of sand and an American panzer came up over the top of it, onto the dunes.

This was a great shock to me, as I didn't think it was possible for the attackers to come off the beach, but I fired on that panzer immediately. It was a Sherman class panzer, which was very high in profile, and made an easy target - especially with the big, white star they had painted on the front. I aimed straight at the star, but my shell bounced off the armour and went off over the beach behind. This Sherman fired on me very quickly, and I imagine that the crew had studied plans or photographs of our positions, because they seemed to know their way around the plateau.

They shot me in the front of my gun mantle, which dislocated my gunsight and dazed me with the impact. When I managed to look out through the cupola, I saw that the Sherman was firing on the PAK gun behind the metal shield near me too. There were other Shermans coming up this path onto the dunes; one of them hit a mine, I think, and started to burn up in flames very brightly.

I tried to fire again, but with our damage there was no way to aim our gun. We were hit again, and this round came into the turret itself. It was a nightmarish moment, because the Sherman's warhead came through the turret front plate, and hit my loader fully in the chest where he stood. It shattered his whole chest at once, and passed straight through him, and ricocheted around on the floor of the hull without hitting me. The bulk of his body had slowed the shell down, just enough to stop it bouncing off the walls and hitting me, I think.

So this poor boy, who barely needed to shave his chin, saved my life in that way. He died instantly, standing next to me. That was the end of the concrete panzer as far as I was concerned.

What did you do? Did you try to surrender?

I tried to get out of the panzer, without really knowing what I was trying to do out there. I slid out of the turret side hatch and got behind the turret, sheltering there. The situation on the dunes was appalling. There were bits of bodies on the ground, and huge craters, and dust and smoke everywhere. That Sherman which was on fire was burning like one of those flame torches that metal welders use, you know the ones I mean? Like an oxyacetylene flame. It was burning like that, sending up a very tall, blue flame, going up many metres into the air.

To my side, I could see our PAK gun in its metal shield, a few hundred metres from me, and it was still firing. That was the gun commanded by the man who hated the Americans. That gun kept firing, firing, even though it was being hit by rounds from the Shermans.

The Shermans were coming onto the dunes in numbers now, I think there were three or four . . . they fired very rapidly, with their gun barrels depressed down to aim at that PAK. In a minute, that PAK stopped firing, but the men in there kept firing with a machine gun. I could only crouch and peer out from behind my turret.

In a few minutes, American infantry began coming up onto the dunes, and the Shermans were shooting away at that machine gun behind the PAK shield. One of the American infantry had a flamethrower, and he got close enough to use it on the PAK. The flames were enormous and they shot out very fast, like a fire hose but full of burning liquid. The whole PAK position was covered in these flames; the burning stuff was dripping off it and making a pool of fire on the sand.

At that moment, something awful took place . . . it was almost like a sign from God that we were doing wrong. A strange, circular wind blew up on the dunes, some kind of small tornado, and it whirled around and it fanned the fires from the burning Sherman and the burning PAK . . . there was chaos all around me in this whirlwind. Ammunition was exploding, men were screaming, both German and American and in Russian too. All the time, the planes were racing over us through the smoke, firing their cannons inland. It was absolute hell on that sand. Absolute hell.

How did this battle end for you?

I wish I could say that I was a hero, but I was drained and finished by all of this. I remained crouching behind the concrete panzer turret, and

when those American soldiers began running past me towards the inland area, I didn't do anything to attract attention. It was only when the first dozen troops had charged right past me that a soldier noticed me there. He hit me in the face with his rifle stock . . . those American rifles were much heavier than ours. He had a bayonet fixed on it, and he was going to stab me with it, I think, but an explosion close by diverted his attention.

Other Americans ran up, and threw grenades into the concrete panzer. The poor panzer, with the boy's body inside, exploded with all the ammunition. I remember that these soldiers were dripping wet from the sea, and steam was coming off their limbs. One of them pointed back to the beach and sent me off running down there with a kick to my backside. I ran to the beach, and other Americans halted me and put me in handcuffs under the edge of the dunes. There were a few other German men there in manacles, and several wounded and unconscious. I noticed that the Americans had separated the Russians who had surrendered from the Germans. The Russians were being taken away separately, that was clear.

On the beach itself, I was shocked to see the remains of that battle. It was a sight that would make the bravest man very mournful. There were bodies all along the sand, some still in the water and many just piled up on the sand. These were all American dead, as far as I could see along the sand. All the way along the beach, one after the other, into the distance. Closer to us there were German corpses, men who had fallen out of their points on the sea wall, and they were very burned. We German prisoners were all mute, just looking at this.

As the minutes went by, I began to think more about what was going on at the beach, and I was amazed at the amount of ships and vehicles the Americans had available. There were landing barges lined up on the sand for hundreds of metres, and huge numbers of jeeps and armoured vehicles moving around. They had machines there which I didn't even know the name for . . . trucks which drove on the water and then came up onto the land, and flat rafts which carried stores and jeeps. There were metal ramps lying around which maybe they had used to get up onto the dunes, and armoured bulldozers with enormous blades which were digging out a bigger exit lane from the beach.

I recently spoke to another German veteran who mentioned that he was surprised that the Allies had brought no horses with them for the

invasion.

Yes, that *was* a surprise to us. We commented on it. If that had been a German army, even in 1944, there would have been a lot of horses and wagons there, in the supply element, because of the lack of fuel and trucks. In fact, one of our men stupidly asked one of the American guards, ‘But where are your horses?’ The Americans just laughed at this and gave him a cigarette.

I remember that there were lots of the barges and boats on fire, too. I think this was from artillery, because the posts with mines and the Belgian gates were all still there, although some of them were flattened. Everywhere there was activity and machinery, and there were clouds of smoke and sand drifting past us. The new American troops coming onto the beach ran right past me. Some of them looked scared, but most of them looked very eager to get into France . . . I remember that very clearly. Those troops *wanted* to attack and conquer France. They were very highly motivated.

How were you treated as a prisoner?

I was taken on a ship that same night to somewhere in England, on the coast. By the way, there were no Russian prisoners on that ship, not one. We got off the ship at about eight in the morning, and we had to walk from the docks to a rail station in the town. There were lots of English civilians about, all old men and women, and they all stopped and stared at us going past in our ragged German uniforms. That was a strange moment, when we came face to face with the English women. I must say that none of them shouted at us or cursed us - not that I could hear, anyway. Maybe I didn’t understand what they said. I didn’t see any of them spit at us or throw stones, anyway. But I remember that the eyes of these women were very bright, they were very proud, to see us trudging away in our defeat. We were a pitiful sight, in our rags and bandages.

I suppose that a scene like that has been repeated many times in human history, hasn’t it? Captured prisoners trudging past the women folk.

But to answer your question, we were treated well in England. Our camp was visited regularly in 1944 and 45 by Red Cross inspectors . . . some of these Red Cross folks were from neutral countries in South America, which we found fascinating.

Also, the English army doctor in our camp was very interested in me because of my frostbite injuries from the Eastern front. He brought other army doctors to examine me, and they asked a lot of questions about how I lost my fingers and nose, and what treatment I received, and what happened to other German frostbite sufferers. I told them what I knew, because it was hardly a military secret. I got the impression that nobody in the British Army had ever suffered frostbite!

After May 1945, after we surrendered, I got to know this English doctor well, and I worked as a basic assistant for him, so we often talked. He was fascinated, I think, by my stories about the Russian front and what went on there. I think that the English had almost no understanding of the Russian front. To them, the whole war was North Africa and Italy and Normandy, but of course the war in the East was fifty times the size of that, maybe a hundred times the size.

That reminds me, talking of Russia, I can tell you something you should write down for sure. I once asked this English army doctor, who was a very pleasant man, what the hell happened to all the Russians who were in the German forces in Normandy.

This was what you were going to tell me about the Russian defectors?

Yes. There were thousands and thousands of those Russians and Eastern Europeans in the Wehrmacht along those Atlantic Wall beaches, and we German prisoners often wondered what the devil became of them after the invasion. They must have surrendered in big numbers, because they had no stomach for fighting in France – why should they? But there were none of them in the prisoner of war camps, that was for sure. It was as if they were separated from us, and then they just vanished. So where did they all go? What happened to them all?

What did this doctor tell you about the fate of the Russians in Normandy?

I shall tell you something strange and worrying now, Herr Eckhertz, although you may not believe what I say. The Englishman told me, after we had been drinking, that he knew what happened. He said that when the

Allies invaded Normandy, there were representatives from the Soviet Union among them. Yes, it's true. Among the American and English troops, there were commissars from the Red Army, who were there specifically to search for the Russian defector troops. And when these Russian defectors were taken prisoner, they were immediately separated off and handed over to the Russian commissars, right there on the beaches. They were put on ships from Normandy and sent back to Russia via the Baltic, back to the Soviet Union. And when they got back, they were all immediately shot as traitors. There was no Geneva Convention for them.

The Americans and English didn't want them executed in France, because it would have been hard to explain after the war. So they handed them over to their deaths.

Do you believe this is true?

If it is not true, then where *are* the Russians from Normandy? There must have been ten thousand of them or more, some of us figured out. Did they all just disappear? Where are their graves?

Well . . . talking to you has given me a lot to think about. You have brought home to me some new dimensions of the tragedy of Normandy . . . what you said about the Children's House, and the fate of the Russian defectors.

These were terrible events, but they need to be remembered.

The Luftwaffe Pilot

Thomas Beike was a Leutnant (Pilot Officer) attached to Jagdabschnittführer 5 (Leading Fighter Group 5) in the area North of Evreux, Normandy.

Herr Beike, you are the only Luftwaffe veteran that I have met as part of my project of interviews about June 6th. I am fascinated to learn of your experiences on June 6th, and to learn, for instance, if you flew a sortie on that day?

Well, that isn't a very good start to our conversation, Herr Eckhertz. Your tone of voice is really rather ironic. I hope you don't subscribe to the 'Luftwaffe did nothing' school of opinion, which holds the Luftwaffe partly responsible for the German defeat in Normandy.

It was not my intention to be ironic, Herr Beike. My purpose is purely to set down the experiences of Germans during June 1944, and not to push any particular point of view.

I see. Well, perhaps I was hasty in my remarks to you just now. But the fact is that we who were in the Luftwaffe are accustomed to being told that we 'did nothing' or 'disappeared from the skies' in June and July 1944. The wretched Allied journalists and movie makers have simply encouraged this version of events. The fact is that we in the Luftwaffe were facing enormous difficulties even before the invasion began. This was despite our situation appearing to be excellent, superficially.

Can you explain your situation? In what way did it appear to be excellent, as you say?

You see, our section's small airbase, which was in the Evreux-Lisieux sector was one of several in that area positioned quite near to the

coast. The base was on a plain belonging to a country estate of some kind, and the chateau had been requisitioned to provide accommodation for the pilots and senior officers. So I went from bedding down in a frozen hut, as I did in my posting on the Eastern Front, to sleeping in a proper bed with a staff servant to attend to meals and the polishing of boots and other necessities.

This chateau had a wine cellar which was very well stocked, and the quality of food available locally was remarkable. We did not barter for food with the local civilians in the way that the Heer (*German Army*) did, but nevertheless we ate well. We regularly tried to send parcels of French food home to our relatives in Germany, where the diet was very restricted. Our families were under instructions from us not to mention this in their neighbourhoods, because of course it made the Reich seem inefficient. The parcels often went missing anyway.

What else can I say about our life? As you are a man of the world, sir, you can also appreciate that we pilots were popular fellows with the French ladies. We were officially forbidden from having anything more than a passing relationship, if you understand me, with French women, but in many cases the pilots and the ground crews, the Flak crews and so on formed quite affectionate bonds with some of these girls. The ladies were extremely astute, I remember, and in many ways they ran the local villages and towns in the absence of their menfolk, who were often in the labour force or the internment system.

So, all in all, on the surface, you could say that our situation appeared excellent, on the face of things.

But below the surface, how did things stand?

In a number of ways, things were in a bad way; a desperately bad way. The simple fact was that we in the fighter groups could not live up to the expectations that people had for us. We could not live up to the image or the legend of the Luftwaffe as it had been from 1939 to about 1942, which was when the very large bombing raids started over the Reich. Let me explain the problems for you, as you are evidently interested.

The basic issue was that the command echelons of the Luftwaffe could not supply us with enough aircraft, spares, fuel and fresh pilots to be an effective force, compared to the colossal resources of the Allied air

fleets. To keep a fighter aircraft in service, you need a great deal of spare parts, oil, coolant, lubricants and so on, and all of these were in short supply in 1944. It was quite common for a fighter to be waiting in its hangar, fully armed, pilot ready, fuelled, but unable to take off because coolant could not be found for the engine. Or, when the coolant arrived, the special air filters could not be replaced, and so on, with endless combinations of things that were missing or could not be repaired. This meant that units took off below strength, meaning that yet more planes were lost when they ran up against the big Allied formations.

As for the pilots, we simply did not have enough good quality, fresh pilots to replace those lost in the air. You cannot just take any fellow and press him into service as a pilot, and an experienced pilot cannot be made to fly combat missions around the clock – the mind and body cannot cope with that. The end result of all this was that our units were under strength and each individual man was badly over-stretched, with all the mental stress that is a result. So each Luftwaffe pilot, living in his chateau with his polished boots and so on, was under the surface a somewhat tormented individual.

How did the pilots try to cope with these pressures?

Some were able to cope through mental strength. Religion was a comfort to others, and our Luftwaffe chaplains became psychologists in some ways, offering counsel and advice. On the other hand, some of us found distractions with the women . . . while some others turned to alcohol, which was freely available, or even to certain drugs which were used, such as mixtures of amphetamine, and chemicals such as cocaine.

At the time there was the well-known branded stimulant product called Heroin, made by the Bayer company, and this was used as well. It was no secret that Hermann Goering, our supreme commander of the Luftwaffe, was extremely fond of this Heroin stuff too. But all these stimulants only made matters worse after their initial impact was used up.

On that subject, Herr Beike, I sometimes hear from Heer (German Army) veterans the stories of our men taking drugs, especially amphetamines, to keep them going at certain times during the war. Are you saying that this was widespread in the Luftwaffe also?

I can only say that it certainly happened. We have to remember that the use of stimulating drugs was more common in the 1930's and 40's, and much less frowned upon, than it is today in the 1950's.

Let's remember that Bayer, which I think is probably still the largest German pharmaceutical company, they invented their two wonder drugs in the 1930s, Aspirin and Heroin. They were intended to go hand in hand, if you remember back then (*Aspirin = Hope, Heroin = Heroism.*) You could get Heroin very easily from a pharmacist, just like Aspirin.

Today there is talk of banning Heroin and preventing its sale, which personally I would support. I knew several officers who used that unpleasant product during the war, and a couple of them became quite addicted to its use. It's said that Goering himself died from a Heroin overdose before he was due to be hanged at the Nuremberg trials.

But we have strayed from the subject in hand, haven't we?

Forgive me, but the question of drug use in the Third Reich interests me . . . and I have never heard such a frank description. But yes, you were talking about the reasons for the Luftwaffe's decline after 1942.

Exactly. And all the time, you see, as our strength was sapped, the massive Allied air fleets, funded by their international finance backers, became bigger and more powerful. And all of this was brought out into the open when the Normandy attack happened in June 1944. All of this was exposed brutally, as if a strong light was shone onto a festering wound, when suddenly you could see all the problems clearly. That is what happened in France that time.

You say that the Allied forces had 'international finance backers.'
What was your view of the international situation at the time?

My view during the war was that we were engaged in a conflict which was ideological in origin, the conflict between our German National Socialism, which had finally unified Europe after all its centuries of conflict, and the vested interests of International Socialism, represented by the Bolsheviks. I took a great interest in these political matters, you see.

The conflict that we had with the Western Allies was incidental to this primary struggle between the two competing and fundamentally

opposed forms of socialism: *National* and *International*. We had no great argument with the Americans or the English, but the fact was that the Western countries were pooling their resources with the Russians, and the three Allied powers were drawing on all the accumulated wealth of their banking and finance agents. I was convinced of this at the time.

Since the war, I have realised that this view was partially mistaken. I had underestimated the animosity between the Anglo-Americans and the Soviets, which we see openly displayed today. At the time, that mutual dislike was concealed well, and they put on a united front. But the fact remains that the British Empire, the American banks and the Soviet command were pooling their resources. Why else, on the Eastern front, would we sometimes see Russians driving American panzers and trucks? Or Russians flying British planes?

And all of this pooling of resources was brought to bear on the beaches of Normandy, which became a kind of anvil, I suppose, on which the Allies hammered and hammered with all their strength, above all with their massive aerial power from above.

The Allies were very active in the air in the build-up to the invasion, weren't they?

They were extremely active. The British RAF came over at night, and they caused huge destruction to the French railways, road junctions and that kind of thing. My Geschwader (*squadron*) was not equipped for night-fighting, but we regularly caught RAF aircraft around dawn if they were returning over France. The Americans carried out raids in the daytime, and we were sent up against the American Jabo and twin-engined bombers frequently.

The problem was always the numbers and the airframes. Some of our group were kitted with new aircraft, and the latest designs, but in my squadron we would go up in aircraft that were two years old, with refitted engines and equipment. When you saw the American planes, it was obvious they were new from the factory. Just before the invasion, I saw inside one American plane, a Mustang, which crash-landed in a field near the coast. That plane was completely new, without even scratches on its canopy. All the pedals in the cockpit were unmarked. And our planes creaked and let in

rain water. But you mustn't think I'm complaining; I'm just telling you what I experienced.

By the way, I spoke to the American pilot of that Mustang before he was taken away, in my very poor English, and I told him he was a lucky bastard to have such a fine plane. He answered me in excellent, very old-fashioned German! It was very strange. I heard from the interrogators that this pilot had a German surname, and they believed that he was from a German-speaking farming town in the USA.

All this Allied air activity . . . did you get the impression from all this activity that an invasion was coming?

Well, all this Allied bombing escalated in May, and there was a definite feeling that 'something' was on the way. The tonnage of bombs they were using was enormous, even on small targets. When they bombed the rail yards at Rouen, which I think was in early April that year, it was astonishing. I flew over there a few days later, and I saw they had bombed the yards into dust, from one end to another, including all the civilian houses along the tracks. Everything was flattened, and of course the French had no air raid shelters in the way that we in Germany did, or the English in London had. I heard that five hundred French civilians died in that one attack alone. And attacks like that took place daily.

As for us, our air field was bombed repeatedly, and it was only because we had strong blast walls around the planes that they stayed intact. The shelters for the aircrew were very thin slit trenches, and half a dozen of us would jump into these things while the Lightnings and Thunderbolts bombed our runways. Even before they left, our engineers would be out there in the open again, getting ready to repair the damage. But while the craters can be filled in if you have the workers and the tools, if your stock of engine oil is destroyed, or the new shipment of hydraulic tubes, which has only just arrived after a long delay, is set on fire . . . all these things make it so hard to put aircraft into the air.

I imagine that you were in the air on June 6th itself?

I did get up there, yes.

Our pilots' sleeping accommodation had been moved from the chateau to a farmhouse, because the chateau was too obvious as a target. This meant we were several kilometres from the airfield itself, and had to go back and forth by car. On the 5th, it was the birthday of one of the other pilots, and we had a small gathering at the farmhouse to mark this event. I won't say 'celebration,' you understand, because the war was no time to be celebrating anything like that.

What form did this gathering take on the evening of the 5th June?

Well, there were six of us pilot officers, and two senior officers, one of whom attended with his wife, who was visiting the base from Germany. You may look surprised, Herr Eckhertz, but this was quite acceptable in our section. At about nine pm, the senior attendees departed, leaving only us pilots. We were joined after that by several French ladies, who were well-connected locally and were excellent company.

In what role did the French ladies attend this gathering?

In what role? As guests. I am sure you can understand that if one is in France, it is inevitable that such ladies will find their way into the company of pilots.

Are you saying that these ladies were your girlfriends?

I really wish that I hadn't mentioned this matter. It is sufficient to say that these women were present as our guests, and we appreciated their company over the wine that we drank to mark our comrade's birthday. And all of this went perfectly well until late in the evening, about midnight, when there was a great build-up of aircraft overhead.

We went out to see what was happening; the noise was from the North, over the sea. The ladies, I must say, were very upset at this display of air power that the Allies were making over France. We could tell that these were Allied aircraft from their engine tone, which was level, whereas our large aircraft had a rise-and-fall tone to the engines. We stood in the darkness listening to all this going on in the air. The ladies made remarks such as 'You must save us from those *salauds Anglaises*' (*English bastards*)

and similar things. For them, it was very upsetting, this threatening force, and we sent a squadron car to return them to their homes.

We did not know what the situation was, but we opted to get some few hours' sleep, as it seemed likely we would be needed in the daylight. Pilots must be reasonably fresh, you see, because of the demands of eyesight and reflexes, and those few hours of rest were the best contribution we could make to the war at that moment.

How did you sleep?

Badly, to be frank. Being an airman, I could not help listening intently to all the aircraft, and the sounds of our Flak firing at them, and estimating their altitude, numbers, direction and so on. I knew that there were very few night fighters located so far West in France; most were over the narrower part of the Manche (*English Channel*) and Holland to the East, to counter the bomber streams going into the Reich itself. I asked myself who would be up there to meet these Allied intruders, and what were these Allied planes doing? Of course, I know now that I was probably listening to the airborne infantry transport planes which caused so many problems for us on the day itself, but at the time I didn't know this.

Ultimately, my orderly woke me before first light, and we pilots drove to the airfield just as the grey light came up.

Strangely, almost all the aircraft had now stopped. There were some individual planes overhead, but it was nothing like the swarms of the night itself . . . this sudden silence all seemed very ominous to us. As we neared the airfield, we saw a peculiar sight, so baffling that we stopped and stared. This was an Allied glider which had crashed into one of the meadows, and it was just sitting there on its belly, apparently abandoned. In retrospect, this must have been a single glider which had drifted inland from the attacks on the coast, but the sight of it alarmed us. Some of our troops were nearby, searching for the occupants, and they told us to beware of paratroopers and glider troops.

When we got into the base, we were briefed on the situation, which appeared to be an airborne landing around Carentan to the West. That is all we were told at that point.

Troop reinforcements were arriving to guard our site, which was obviously a potential target, and our ground crews were under orders to

blow up the buildings if the Allies tried to capture them. Breakfast was eaten in some excitement, I remember. When the light was full, a wave of enemy fast bombers came over, but fortunately they attacked the nearby decoy airfield.

What was this decoy?

Oh, because of all the bombing, we had created a structure near to our base which, from the air, resembled a runway and buildings, while our real facilities were heavily camouflaged with nets which, and all our plane dispersal points were concealed by false trees. So these enemy planes, which were the USA Lightning type of bomber, hit the dummy airfield. They flew off, no doubt congratulating themselves on their attack. But the issue for us was: how to make ourselves useful?

What aircraft were you equipped with?

The Messerschmitt 109, type Gustav, which was based on the original design from the 1930s, but with a new supercharged engine. It was still a formidable aircraft. You're probably aware that the designers had made the 109 as fast as possible by making it as small as possible, which meant that the fuel tank was very limited. But otherwise, in experienced hands, it was still probably as good as a Mustang or even the new version of the Spitfire. '*Probably as good*' – that sums up our problem!

We got into the cockpits at about six thirty that morning, still under all the camouflage, and we simply sat there and waited. We were kept informed, because a runner would come up and give a verbal communique, or bring a note of the latest understanding of the situation. But still there were no orders!

What were your feelings as you sat in the cockpit?

Frustration, nerves, excitement, and anxiety of course. Any pilot who waits in his plane on such a day and doesn't feel fear, I would say he is not telling the truth. I felt many things mixed together. I knew that this was a big effort by the Allies, whether a complete invasion or some other kind

of attack, and I couldn't imagine what we would find when we got up among the enemy.

I could see a lot of planes going overhead. It was a rather grey, damp morning that day, and the enemy planes' exhausts stood out very bright in the murky light. The runner came finally with an order for us to intercept enemy aircraft over the coastal area. Priority was to be given to attacking troop transports and bombers, of course. This was at about nine am, and just after that the order was rescinded, and we turned off the engines again. To do justice to our commanders, it must have been very difficult to make sense of the situation, and to take a decision on where to allocate the fighters.

In the end, in the mid-morning, three of us were ordered to take off and fly to the coast near Caen as an armed reconnaissance patrol. So we were to be reconnaissance pilots! This was hardly a promotion, but it finally got me into the air.

Was the Messerschmitt suitable as a reconnaissance plane?

No, it was completely unsuitable. Visibility was very limited forward, because the engine cowling was right here, under your chin. You were meant to dive on things to be able to see them. We could see nothing behind, with no bubble canopy, and even to the sides the wings obstructed the view. But you must improvise in such times, and we were determined to see whatever we could. One problem was that our planes had no radio connection to our base . . . in the air, we could only speak to each other. So we would have to observe, see what we could, and then return to base at speed without being shot down, to make our report.

As my ground crew were closing my canopy, my commander stepped up on the ladder and shouted to me that this was a vital mission, that the aerial information we could bring back was essential to the task of driving the enemy back to the sea. He gave me his personal Leica aviation camera, in the hope that I could take aerial photos with it; obviously, the chances of using a hand camera in such a situation are almost zero, but the act underscored his urgency. I put the camera inside my seat harness, but in the situation that followed I completely forgot about it.

I was the second plane to take off, and we began to climb in a staggered formation of three, separated by altitude and latitude heading to

the North West to Caen. As soon as we levelled out, we were hit by a pair of Mustangs that came down from the 120 degree point, on our rear quadrant. The tore right through us before we got our wits together . . . damn, I blush with shame when I remember that, to be attacked so quickly and in such a basic fashion.

What was your armament in the Messerschmitt?

We had 20mm cannon in each wing, two machine guns over the engine cowling and another cannon firing through the propeller. This was a far better armament than the Allied fighters, because the 20mm was very powerful, and completely accurate, with one being inside the propeller. The Mustangs at that time had, if I remember right, six machine guns. These Mustangs that caught us . . . with their speed, they were past us and already banking before we could evade.

I wasn't hit, but one of my comrades was, and he began to make a lot of grey smoke as he turned away. As he banked below me, I remember that an orange glow began to spread from his engine. I remember that I groaned, knowing what this meant, and in a few moments his cowling flew off in pieces and flames shot back over his cockpit. I could not look properly, because the air was full of these damned Mustangs, but I remember seeing him with his arms over his face, like this . . . and then he was simply lost in all the flames. This was the pilot whose birthday we celebrated the night before; he was twenty-five years old. I doubt if he has a grave or a headstone of any sort in France.

I gained height and accelerated, faster, always faster. My task was to observe the beach head, not to engage enemy fighters. I saw my remaining comrade in his Messerschmitt, ahead of me, making for the coast as well. My rear visibility was so limited, I twisted around trying to see those planes, and Flak tracer was coming up as well, which must have been German fire, as we were still inland. Those Flak gunners were in a panic and shooting at anything, it seemed. I crossed over the rail lines near Caen, and still couldn't see those Mustangs, so I went in a straight line for the coast. There's a river inlet with docks near there, and I went over it at maximum speed, which was over 600 kmh. The coast itself just leapt up at me at that speed, and from that height I could then see a massive line of ships out at sea, about three kilometres from the shore. This just happened

like that, in the blink of an eye . . . my canopy glass was just full of these ships.

I was astonished at this sight. I wondered if I was hallucinating, or if this was a delirium of some kind. I had never seen such an assembly of ships, and I'm sure nobody will ever see such a thing again, perhaps not in human history. The sea was absolutely solid with metal, that is no exaggeration.

After a couple of seconds, no more, I turned to fly West along the coast, so that I could see down to the right, and I banked my wings to give a view of the shoreline. These were the beaches that the English and Canadians attacked, I forget the code names they used for them.

West of Caen, this would be the Gold and Juno beaches.

Gold and Juno? Well, for us this was the Caen sector. I saw that the beaches were crammed with vehicles, moving in on transport barges, and even tanks were being unloaded like that. The thought came to me, 'So this is the big invasion, this is it.' No other explanation was possible. Throughout the beaches, there were fires burning, vehicles and boats on fire, and explosions from artillery. I saw flamethrowers being used inland, very powerful ones, and the flames lit up a wide area down there.

The enemy were driving a bridgehead inland, that was clear to see, and they had enormous resources building up on the sand waiting to move off. I could see flashes of bombs and shells all over the inland area. I remember that some of the fields were flooded, and the exploding shells sent out a concentric shock wave through the water that was very noticeable.

I took all this in within a matter of seconds, but for that time I was stunned by the sight. Of course, there were many Allied aircraft in that sector too. There was a low umbrella of fighters over the beach, and they came straight for me. There were three coming after me. I went down to minimum height and maximum speed, which was safe because the land is so flat there, and the German Flak would be less likely to misidentify me, I hoped. I thought that if I could move away from the beach head, the Mustangs would turn back to protect their sector. So I used a huge amount of fuel accelerating to the South West.

I went west as far as Saint Lo, and I couldn't see the Americans behind me, so I turned East and followed the forest back towards Evreux. That was the extent of my mission, there was nothing further I could do. I tried, in my mind, to estimate the number of ships on the sea, but I couldn't do it. It was thousands, surely. Do you know what the figure was?

Actually, I don't know the number. It must be thousands, I agree.

I must be one of very few Germans who saw that from the air. Going over the land on my return to the airbase, which only took a couple of minutes, I saw lines of our armoured vehicles on the roads, and many more dispersed in the fields. Fortunately my plane's yellow nose and black crosses must have been clear for them to see, and nobody fired up at me.

When I came to put down again at the airstrip, I saw on the runway the burning outline of our third Messerschmitt. I found out later that he had returned with an engine fire, and blown up as he came in. I was the only one to survive of us three, you see. The smoke from this burning plane was a beacon to the American planes, who came back just like a pack of wolves. I landed as they were strafing again, and I had to jump straight into a slit trench on top of the ground crew. The enemy realised then, I think, that they had originally bombed the decoy airfield, and they came back repeatedly with new bombers. In between the bomb bursts, I ran to the main shelter and gave my report, with more bombs exploding around us. We were kept in those shelters like prisoners for several hours, which was the Allies' intention, of course.

Did you fly again on the 6th?

The air field was too badly damaged, and the orders were still contradictory for several hours. They ordered us to strafe the beaches, and then No, leave the base and take the planes inland, and then No, wait for orders . . . each time our heads span a bit more. It was only on the 7th and 8th that we got into the air again, but I did not penetrate as far as the coast after that, the fighter screen up there was too heavy. Then we were moved to an airfield further to the South East, and we were tasked with low-level strafing of opportunity targets, which is not a good use of a valuable aircraft, and we

were tasked also with intercepting the attacking planes to keep them away from our armour concentrations around Caen-Rouen.

Did you have success in the strafing role after June 6th?

We were so few in number, and at the new airfield the problems of supplies and maintenance were even worse. As for pilots, to replace the two men we lost on June 6th, we received a novice with minimal hours flying experience and a forty year-old training instructor. The novice was shot down by a Spitfire over Rouen on his first sortie with us, and he crashed near the bridge. That new version of the Spitfire was an absolute freak of a plane; it was faster even than our latest Focke-Wulf, it was said. There were rumours that it was supersonic, but of course that was impossible in those days.

But you asked about the strafing; well . . . I am not proud of it, but I personally shot up a row of Churchill tank men in that week after the invasion. They were dispersed behind trees in the bocage (*hedgerow country*), and they had made only basic attempts at camouflage. We got this information about their position from a local French civilian, in fact, who was passing us intelligence about the Allied locations.

You see, we couldn't go up, patrol around for targets and then attack them, as the Allied pilots did. We were so outnumbered that we would have been brought down immediately. But if we had reliable, specific information that a certain target was at a certain location, we could race over in one pass and hit them and then go for home, with no need for a second run at them.

The French who sympathised with us, and there were many, often gave us this kind of target information, through channels that our people had set up as we retreated.

The French gave you information about Allied panzer positions?

Absolutely, yes. I know this for a fact. Remember, please, that the French were in two minds about the invasion at first: would it succeed, or would it fail? In the first days and weeks, it was by no means certain that the landings were a permanent lodgement, or that they would develop into a full invasion even if they were. Everyone remembered the peculiar attack

on Dieppe, when the Canadians invaded but then left after a few hours. Was this going to be a repeat of that, but on a bigger scale? So, because of this uncertainty, many of the French in the Allied zone put their bets on both horses, if you see what I mean, and they played up to the Allied invaders while secretly passing information to us.

A certain contact gave us excellent information, and this particular alert about a group of the Churchill tanks came from her. I went up and set myself on a direct course for the location, knowing I would only have one pass before having to break for my base again. As soon as I saw the copse of trees, I saw the outline of the Churchills, which were stationary with no attempt to break up their outlines with foliage or nets. I also saw the crews assembled in a large group, in a meadow to the rear. Perhaps they were having some kind of briefing there. In my one pass, I came down on them while they were starting to scatter, and fired everything into the middle of them. Just one second, like this. It felled them like skittles, I have to say. I was gone from there before they stopped rolling. It was very precise.

Do you know what happened to the French informants when the Germans withdrew from the sector?

I don't know what happened to this particular one, or even who she was. I mean, I *assume* it was a woman. The fact is that many such people came to Germany with our forces when we retreated from France. This is a part of the war that is not discussed today at all, Herr Eckhertz. The fact was that quite a number of the French followed us out of France, rather than be paraded as 'collaborators' and the like by the Allies and the French patriots who sprang up all over the place after the invasion. Such French helpers were welcomed into the Reich, even though they gave us more mouths to feed.

Did you yourself manage to get out of France before it was lost to the Allies?

No, I was taken prisoner after the massacre of our forces at Argentan, which the Allied newspapers called the 'Falaise Gap,' I believe.

I had been injured in a crash landing in July, and I was hospitalised at a field treatment centre near to Alençon. I should have been returned to

Germany for recuperation, but the policy was to have recuperating pilots near their bases so that they could be pressed back into service. The hospital was overrun by the Americans very early one morning. We heard engines, and suddenly there were Jeeps in the courtyard, and these huge American fellows, like giants, with their Thompson guns over their shoulders, were already making friends with our nurses. I don't know whether the Americans put their tallest men in the front line, or if this was by coincidence, but these fellows were close to two metres tall, all of them.

There was nothing we could do to avoid capture. We were put in trucks and driven to the West, and our route took us past the Argentan-Falaise area where the massacre had taken place. I saw some terrible things on that journey.

I'm sorry, Herr Beike, but you have said 'the massacre' twice now. Can you explain what you mean?

I am referring to the large number of German personnel who were killed by air attacks as they were retreating from the battlefield between Falaise and Argentan. Huge numbers of our forces built up in that bottleneck, and the Allied aircraft, the jabos above all, simply flew over and massacred those men. Some were armed combatants, you see, but many were unarmed rear echelon men, drivers and engineers and the like.

On those prisoner trucks, I'm sure that we were quite deliberately taken past some of the worst destruction. I remember that we were driven slowly, with repeated halts and delays, on a road which went between some fields where some of these bombing attacks had happened. The bombing was probably only a day previous, because we could still smell the burning, and the wreckage and bodies were not yet cleared away. The things we saw in those fields were shocking, even for the most experienced men among us on the trucks.

On one side, I remember that a row of our panzers had been bombed, beautiful Panther tanks too. There were six of these panzers, all with their turrets blown off, or their wheels blown off, and the metal tracks lying around everywhere.

Between them were many dead horses still attached to carts and wagons, and many motorcycles and cars, dozens of cars. The bodies of the men that had been killed were lying around everywhere, still in the open,

covered in flies. There must have been two or three hundred bodies in that field alone, all black with soot and horribly torn up. And this went on for kilometres, field after field. It was a place of endless destruction.

We also passed a group of our soldiers who had survived the bombing, but who had been driven insane by the experience. These men were being kept in a stockade in the open, acting just like helpless lunatics in an old-fashioned asylum. And these were men from the elite Divisions, and SS men among them too, all reduced to this pitiable state.

I swear to you that in one of these dreadful meadows, I saw a line of our Hitler Youth boys, the lads who were sixteen or seventeen, that had been stupidly sent to fight with the Waffen SS. They were all dead, these boys, lined up as if on parade, all shot one after the other. What the devil was the explanation for that act, I do not know.

And we were shown all this deliberately, you realise, in order to have an effect on us. We were all crushed by the sights, and we remained virtually silent for days afterwards. This is why I call the events at Falaise and Argentan a massacre.

I have read in the newspapers that General Patton visited those fields at Falaise, and he said that, if he wanted to, he could have walked for hundreds of metres on the dead German bodies that he saw, without ever touching the ground. That's a strange choice of words for a General.

But I have to ask, Herr Beike, how is this different from what we in the German forces did to our enemies? This was the nature of the war, was it not?

I cannot say what was or was not the nature of the war . . . it is too big a question. I would rather not talk about this entire situation anymore now. I appreciated the opportunity to tell you about the Luftwaffe, and my mission on June 6th . . . I am glad we spoke about that. But this conversation has brought back to me the memory of those dead bodies. I would prefer to stop our discussion at this point.

Thank you for the account you have given. It has opened my mind to some aspects of the conflict that I had not considered before.

The Troops in the Observation Point

Heinrich Runder was a Grenadier (Rifleman) with the German 709th Static Infantry Division, manning defences on the Cotentin Peninsula.

Herr Runder, I believe that you were in a position to witness part of the assault on Utah beach from a location to the West.

Yes, I was posted in a Widerstandsnest (*resistance point*) on the coast to the East of Valognes. This was on the Western edge of what the Americans called their Utah beach. Why they called it Utah, I don't know to this day.

What was your resistance point like?

It was a fortified position on ground overlooking the beach itself. The position was very basic in construction, being made of logs rammed into the sides of a trench in the earth. The soil was very sandy, you see, and the logs were needed to hold the walls up. We were on dunes behind the low sea wall, and our task was to fire on any attackers who appeared in front of us, and to defend a PAK (*anti-tank*) bunker and a concrete observation post which were nearby.

We were a Static Infantry unit, which other units jokingly called 'the belly army' because of the age of our troops. This was misleading, because while some of our men were aged forty or over, others were much younger. But many of our men had been classed as physically unfit, or they were considered otherwise unsuitable for service in the mobile combat divisions.

When you say that they were 'otherwise unsuitable,' what does that mean?

Let's be honest, Herr Eckhertz; any conscript army will contain men who are rather slow-witted, or men who are unable to think like front-line soldiers. Now, such men cannot stay at home, they must play their part, and

a Static Infantry role is a good way for them to serve. I am sure that those men acquitted themselves well when they were called on to fight. It was not lack of bravery on their part, but lack of mental faculty.

I can say categorically that there were also men in the Static Divisions who had previously suffered mental problems as a result of being in combat, especially on the Eastern front. You know what I mean – mental breakdowns and this kind of reaction to fighting. Such unhappy men were often transferred to the Static Divisions, in France and elsewhere.

This is an aspect of the Static Divisions that I had not considered up to now. Can you think of specific examples of these troops who had mental problems?

Well, my own cousin was one such example. He was in a dreadful battle in the East, at Kharkov, and he was awarded the Ritterkreuz (*Knight's Cross*.) Despite his bravery, he had a mental collapse. In the earlier part of the war, you know, such men would have been treated harshly for their symptoms, but by 1943-44 we were so short of manpower that he was transferred to the Atlantic Wall, which was a kindness at first. I can think of other examples, other stories that I heard, and I'm sure this situation was common. Of course, France was a good place to send such unfortunate men. The life in France was without combat, and they could recuperate to some extent while still serving in the forces.

But we all knew that an invasion would come, sooner or later.

You expected an invasion in June 1944?

Personally, yes, I did. We were told by our officers that an attempt at invading France by sea might be made at any time, and logically this had to be in the summer because of the rough seas in the fall and winter. My comrades and I would often sit at night in our barracks in April and May that year and say, 'Will they come tomorrow? When will they come? When?'

On the day that they came, what was your experience?

On that day before the invasion itself, we started to be aware during the night that the Allies were mounting some kind of operation. This was the Monday night, the 5th June. I think that nightfall came at around ten pm, and exactly as soon as darkness fell the air seemed to absolutely come alive with the sound of aircraft. I remember this very clearly: large numbers of planes began to pass overhead precisely as the air went dark. The timing of this was remarkable: they must have calculated their approach exactly so that they came over France literally the very moment that night fell.

I was on duty in our trench, and I recall listening to the engine noises, and exchanging glances with my comrades. None of us knew what was going to happen, but this was not the normal night-time bombing activity, which was itself very heavy by then.

At the same time, we could see and hear bombing to the south, and we received a telephone call from our Leutnant telling us to watch for paratroopers and glider troops. The Leutnant himself wasn't shirking; he was moving between the trenches and bunkers in our sector and maintaining contact with all the men.

The night was quite wet, and it was impossible to make out details of what was happening overhead. We had no searchlight, and the nearest one was at a Flak battery guarding a larger bunker complex about two kilometres inland. Those guns fired on and off, into the early hours.

What was in your mind during the night?

I was very apprehensive. I had been in action before, in Tunisia, where I received a head injury from a shell burst, and I dreaded being in action again. To be frank, some men excel in combat, and others manage to somehow struggle through, and I was in the latter group. By the way, I did not really understand the political ideals of the Hitler regime, but still I was convinced that I was in France to do my duty as a soldier and to protect Germany from attack.

You saw your role as protecting Germany?

Our training had impressed this on us. The idea was that the Western Allies were in the pay of the Bolsheviks in the East, who were orchestrating world events against us. I remember that phrase clearly from some of the

officers: *'They are orchestrating world events.'* To us, this meant that the Reds were closing in on Germany in the East, and their partners the Americans and the English were trying to crush us in a pincer from the West, by attacking through France. This is another phrase I recall: *'We are in a clamp, and Germany is caught between the Anglo-Americans and the Slavic races.'*

We had no great understanding of politics, my fellow Landsers (*foot soldiers*) and myself, but we understood the idea of the clamp closing on us. We all believed that we were in France to stop the American-English clamp from crushing our homeland from the West.

Well, we did not actually speak about all this as we were standing there in the dark with all these unseen planes passing overhead, but I am sure that it was in all our minds in one way or another. Then, I think it was at about one am, the cloud cover overhead cleared a little bit and we could start to see what was up there. The moon was almost full, I think, and there were fires to the South which shed some light upward onto the clouds remaining.

To the South East, we could see very large numbers of aircraft moving at medium altitude. When I say large numbers, I mean literally scores of planes going over at any one time. And as soon as these planes moved away, another twenty came to follow them. It was a dreadful sight for us, because these could only be Allied planes, coming from the North; but at the same time many of us grudgingly admired the Allies for their organisation. The formations of those planes were perfect, even in the dark, and this impressed us greatly.

We saw no signs of air combat, apart from the very sporadic Flak aimed up at the planes. I remember that one of these aircraft was hit by Flak, and it began to leave a trail of fire in the sky as it descended. It made a large red ball to the South where it crashed. At this point, our officer rode up to us again, and directed us all to man our guns and be vigilant for airborne troops. I remember that his voice was strained, and he was a bit confused in his orders; to see our experienced and trusted officer in a state of confusion was worrying for us.

How did the morning of June 6th unfold for you?

You see, we were right at the southern point of our Valognes sector, where the peninsula starts to widen out down towards, I think, Saint Mairie. This meant that we were on the upper edge of the zone that the Allies chose to attack on June 6th. To our East was the Dunes area, which I now know that the Americans called Utah beach, and then across the bay of the Vire was Colleville and those places which they called Omaha. I know these American names from reading magazines since the war ended, but during that night, obviously, I had no concept of what was happening from one minute to the next.

I've heard since the war that the attack on the Utah beach zone drifted to the East of its planned assault point because of the tides or the wind or something, and that may be why my particular sector was spared the initial assault. I often think about what might have happened to me if, by chance, the tides had not been so strong that day. Would I be speaking to you at all today? Would I still be alive?

I also have such thoughts about the war. But here we are, speaking today, the fortunate ones. Do you consider yourself lucky to be alive?

Yes . . . in the sense that I was not a natural soldier. When I said to you that some men excel in combat, those are the men who thrive on such uncertainty, because they have type of mind that can adapt to changing circumstances and exploit the changes. I do not have that type of mind, because I prefer things to be predictable. One might say that I am a simple man, and this may be true, but the Static Infantry divisions had huge numbers of men such as me, and frankly we were not natural soldiers.

All in all, the night of the 5th was a time of great anxiety for us.

At times, we saw flashes to the South, maybe somewhere around Saint Mairie, and shapes in the sky which we thought might be parachutes. But in the darkness and drizzle it was difficult to make anything out clearly.

When did you first become aware of the scale of the invasion?

Oh, my God, this was at first light on the 6th, when we could make out the sea more clearly, and also the light rain stopped falling. I remember that the sky was overcast above the sea in front of us, but a bit brighter over

to the East. When the light came up, some of our men at the end of our trench shouted to the rest to come and see what was happening.

When I looked over the trench at that side, onto the sea to the East, I can tell you that my throat went dry, painfully dry, and my hands began to shake. I was not the only person to be affected in this way; one of the very young lads began to retch as if he was going to be sick. It was the effect of pure fear, to be honest with you, but it passed.

What could you see on the water over there?

A vast number of ships. Absolutely vast. We were looking from the side onto the flank of the formation, as the ships came towards France from the horizon. We had a pair of binoculars that we shared, and using these I could see a line of ships which was literally endless, it simply stretched off into the distance. And behind that first line there was a massive formation of ships going back for many kilometres. It is impossible to give you an impression of that formation unless you saw it yourself.

There were many kinds of ships, some large battleships which were clear to see, and many small craft, some of them with anti-aircraft balloons attached. I remember that the bodies of these balloons were a kind of pearl-grey colour in the light. Above all this, there was an absolute hive of aircraft moving overhead.

But the strangest thing about this sight, now that I think back, is that, apart from the planes, there was no noise! The enemy warships were not firing their guns, and from the coast, from our positions, I did not hear a single gun being fired. I think that if you ask other veterans of that day, they will confirm this: that many of our bunkers simply did not fire at this formation as it came closer. Of course, the range would have been too far for any but our most powerful guns, but the silence along our coast was very strange to experience.

I remember also that in front of this fleet, between the beaches and the invaders, there were a couple of small fishing boats, local French boats. These boats remained static for some time, then they slowly raised their sails and they tacked away from the formation. Very slowly they moved away, up towards Cherbourg. What must have been their thoughts, I cannot imagine. In our trench, we were making ourselves ready for what might happen.

You mentioned that the invasion on Utah did not initially land on your particular beach. Were you observers, or did you come into contact with the enemy?

We were strafed by enemy aircraft before the invasion ships began to approach the shoreline. I think that the first ones were Mustang type fighters, and they came upon us very quickly from the West. The intention was, I suppose, to keep us with our heads down under cover, so that we could not observe the landings to the East.

These planes came along the beach and shot down at us. I remember that the bullets went along the parapet of the trench and made explosions of sand. One man was blinded by a deflected bullet. This was a large calibre bullet, and it smashed open the whole side of his face; he sat down slowly, with the blood coming out of his eye and cheek. Another man had a bullet pass directly through his hand, right there in the palm, so that he could not do anything more as a fighter. Both men were bundled off to the rear behind the sand dunes, although the nearest field treatment station was several kilometres away, I think.

In the middle of all this confusion, the thought came to me that those Mustang aircraft were very handsome machines. They were polished metal, and the metal caught the light from the East as they flew off. I was envious that the Allies had such superb machines. We could see on their wings the American star, and one of our young lads shouted out that these planes had flown across the ocean from America. We cursed him for being so stupid, but it shows you how simple-minded some of our troops were, that they could think this was possible. And all the time, the formation of ships came closer to the shore, until the warships began bombarding.

You saw this bombardment?

There was mist on the sea, but we saw all the flashes from the guns of the bigger warships which were a long way back behind the leading craft. These flashes were enormous, and even when the sound came to us it was very loud. We saw explosions on the shoreline which raised large plumes of dust and smoke. This was a terrible sight – because we knew who

the men were down there on that shoreline, and we felt sorry for them, even though many of them were Russians.

The men were Russians?

Yes, that was a zone which was manned by Russian units that were working for the German army, troops who had changed sides when they were captured in Russia. There was a whole company of them dotted around down there; we called it 'Little Russia' sometimes. God only knows what the Americans thought of them when they found them all there, or maybe the Americans knew about them in advance . . . maybe that's why the Americans chose to attack that sector? I wonder if that's possible. Well, we felt pity for them, anyway. We knew also that if the battleships turned their guns onto us, we would get the same treatment as those Russians.

The Allies, of course, had no intention of just letting us stand and watch this. We were bombarded next with rockets which shot out from smaller ships on the edges of the formation. The sun had not yet come up completely, and the rocket trails were very bright as they came towards us. What we saw was a great network of these bright trails in the sky, coming towards us at incredibly high speed. They were stabbing towards us, if you can understand what I'm trying to say. They stabbed at us, and they exploded on the sea wall area below our trench.

The explosions were very powerful, and we threw ourselves to the bottom of the trench. I could feel the blasts, which made my ears ring and made my nose bleed. The shock waves blew sand over us, and some of the trench walls collapsed behind the logs. Some of our men were blinded with sand being blasted into their eyes, and other men refused to get up from the floor of the trench. These rockets came again and again, and they kept exploding into the ground below our point and around us.

From where I was crouching, I could see the large bunker behind us, which was a concrete bunker mounting a PAK gun. One of the rockets struck the bunker, and simply blew it to pieces. The walls and roof of the structure all flew apart, and the gun itself crashed down near our trench.

This destruction went on for a long time, it seemed to me. I think in reality it was about thirty minutes, but if you are on the floor of a trench, time is hard to follow. My watch stopped working, which I believe often happens in a bombardment. When I thought that things could get no worse,

a huge piece of one of these rockets crashed right into our trench. This was the tailfin unit from the back end of a rocket, and it flew along the trench hitting the men randomly. I remember that one man was hit in the arm, which was almost torn off by the fins, and other men were caught in their bodies and faces. This fin assembly ended up sticking into the end of the trench, throwing out flames and smoke. I thought that if the bombardment went on for many more minutes, we would all be carved to pieces in our trench.

After some time, the rockets became less frequent, and we were able to organise ourselves and get back into our proper positions. I looked over the top of the trench, and towards the South, I could see a huge number of small craft on the sea, between the main fleet of ships and the shore. There was a lot of smoke in the air, and it was difficult to make out fully, but in the end, as the sea breeze blew the smoke away, I saw many of these craft going quite slowly towards the beaches down there.

How did your commanders, your officers respond to this event?

Everything was in confusion for some time.

We were still being bombarded at intervals by rockets, which were coming from the ships on the edge of the fleet out there. These explosions made us take cover frequently, and made it difficult for us to see what was happening. That was the purpose of the rockets, I suppose. The sun came up, and we could hear explosions from the Southern beaches, and see a lot of movement of vessels between the beaches and the fleet. That fleet kept growing bigger all the time – it simply astonished us to see so many ships all in one place. And still no German ships, no German aircraft! No German response except for us in our trench.

Our Leutnant came into our trench, very out of breath, and told us that this must be the main invasion of France taking place to the South. He was very agitated and he seemed unsure what to do. I think he wasn't being kept informed by his superiors, and he had no information to give us about what to expect. We all just assumed that our position would be attacked at some point very soon.

How did the day progress? How did the men in your trench react?

Well, for one thing, rumours began to spread – all kinds of crazy rumours and stories. This is the way with troops who are not kept informed, I think, they begin to repeat rumours and things get distorted in the retelling.

A soldier came to our trench bringing ammunition, and another man to replace a telephone cable. Both these men said that the Americans were landing on the shore to the South, using amazing machines and weapons, machines that the German defenders could not understand. They said the American panzers were suddenly appearing five or six kilometres inland. There were rumours about American panzers landing from the air, or coming out of special submarines – all kinds of absurd, wild exaggerations. But of course, as nobody was telling us what was happening, what else could we believe? How else could American panzers suddenly arrive in that peaceful part of France?

This horrible waiting went on for some hours.

Around midday, I think, our Leutnant came back and said that Americans were storming along the high ground above the beaches to our South. He ordered us to defend our position to the last man, the last bullet, and all that kind of thing. We could still see the huge fleet sitting on the water out there, and the warships were still firing, shooting inland. We saw a Luftwaffe fighter, a Messerschmitt, go over our beach very fast, and then it turned inland and it just disappeared without shooting. That was the only German plane I saw on that day. Meanwhile, the sky over the Southern beaches was absolutely full of Allied planes. We ate our midday ration watching these planes.

You ate at such a time?

It's better to eat something before a battle. We had our rations there, so we ate them. Because this was France, our army food was supplemented with very good sausage and cheese, and our officer allowed us to drink some schnapps. It may sound strange, but I actually have a good memory of that meal, because we were all there together, relying on each other and encouraging each other, and knowing that the day could only get more difficult for us. We knew that many of us would probably be among the fallen by sunset, but there was nothing we could do to avoid this destiny. It was better to accept it.

Of course, this strange phase of inactivity could not last. In the afternoon, we were strafed again by Jabo (*fighter-bomber*) planes of the Thunderbolt class, I think, which fired out rockets from under their wings.

These rockets exploded when they landed and threw out a liquid which exploded with a very bright, red flame. The first group of these rockets flew over us, thank God, and burst open in the fields behind us. There was a very strong smell of burning tar or rubber, and we could feel the heat from the flames even in the trench. After that, we heard another of these Jabo planes diving down on us . . . that wait seemed to go on for ever; we stared at each other in the trench and listened to this screaming engine getting louder. That pilot sent his rockets all along our defences, and one of them exploded right there at the end of my trench.

The next few moments were complete hell and chaos. I still struggle to make sense of it all. The burning liquid blew up in a great ball which spurted out along our trench; I mean that it poured along the trench with a horrible force. Have you seen a big water pipe that has burst in the street, and the water comes flying out into the air for four metres, five metres, under great pressure? That is the way this burning liquid flew along the trench, splashing out everywhere. I can still see this today in my mind: there were half a dozen men lined up along the trench between me and where the rocket burst, and each one of them was covered in this burning spray that came towards us. And the liquid was sickening in the way it worked; it was some kind of gasoline fuel mixed with rubber or nylon, or something like that. It stuck to everything like glue, to the men's uniforms and skin, and their hair and bodies. It splashed in front of me, and I ran like a madman, I'm not ashamed to say, and I got away from it.

When I turned to look back, many of our men – who a few minutes before were eating their last meal – were completely on fire. One by one, those men fell to their knees and gave up their struggle, or they simply fell back into the flames and disappeared from my sight.

How did you react to this event?

The few of us who survived, we ran down the communication channel into the next trench. We were stopped there by the Leutnant who had his pistol drawn, and he ordered us back to the trench despite our reluctance, saying that he would come with us. I remember that as he did

this, one of the American planes came over again, very low. This plane shot all along the trench lines with machine gun fire, but the worst thing was that the slipstream, the wind from his wings and engine, this wind fanned up the incendiary flames even more, as if it was fanning a bonfire. We could hear the flames becoming like a furnace in the trench we had just left.

The Leutnant was a good officer, and he did not force us to do something that he himself could not do, and he clearly could not bring himself to go into that trench. Instead, he told us to go and man the observation bunker nearby.

What kind of bunker was this?

We called it a bunker, but in fact it was just a small concrete dome big enough for a handful of men, with firing points. It was in a position close to the sea wall, so it had an excellent view along the beaches to the South. It was intended as an observation post, not a defensive position, but logically the enemy could not leave it undamaged, because it had such a strong view of the landing zone. When we got into this bunker, we found only two soldiers, who were observing through binoculars and giving commentaries into a field telephone. Who was on the other end of this phone, I don't know; I suppose it was our artillery. The bunker was defended with a single machine gun, a 34 type, and we manned this.

I was trained on the 34, and I became the gunner, aiming it along the beach. The observer soldiers told us that the Americans were moving along the headland, along the top of the higher ground, and knocking out the defensive points all along there. In fact, there were not many manned points along that stretch at all, and when we looked through the firing slits we could see Americans already moving towards us on foot.

That was my first sight of the enemy as individuals in France.

How did the Americans appear to you?

It is strange, the thoughts that come into your mind at such a moment. Their green uniforms stood out quite strongly against the sand and earth of the top of the cliffs, I remember. I was surprised that their assault troops didn't have camouflage uniforms, as our top units of

Panzergranadiers had. My head was spinning, I was dazed, and this thought came to me.

Well, this was my time to fight. I primed the gun and fired on them from about six hundred metres away. I had one of their men in the ring sight, and as soon as I started firing, I moved it along their line and shot the men behind him.

What manner of emotions did you have when you did this?

I was too dazed and shocked to have emotions. I could still smell the burning incendiary fires, and my eyes were streaming with tears from all the acrid smoke, and I only wanted to do my duty as well as I could. I was not in a state to think about things at all. The gun was well-maintained and it fired perfectly – I remember thinking that.

There was a short battle, between our observation post and these Americans. Some of them got down into the rocks and fired on us from there. The wounded American men crawled into the rocks also, and I chose not to fire on them. But of course, all that we were achieving was to draw attention to our position, and inevitably the Americans brought up heavier weapons to use against us.

What weapon did they use?

I think it was the Panzerschrek (*bazooka*) type weapon. I saw a white flash come out from between the rocks, and this thing shot straight towards us and exploded on the outside of the bunker. The rocket didn't penetrate into the bunker, but it did make a huge blast and smoke which blinded us for a few seconds. I aimed the 34 at the rocks and fired all over that area; again and again I fired, until the ammunition belt ran out. The observation soldiers were firing too with their rifles through the slits.

The Americans fired that bazooka on us again, and this time it exploded close to one of the slits. This sent fragments of stone and concrete inside the bunker, which flew around and hit us. It was like being hit with a hammer as these stones smashed into us. I was hit in the face, which broke my cheekbone, as I learned later, and knocked my front teeth out. I was stunned by that injury, and one of the other men took over the gun.

I do not remember the other events very clearly after that, because of my injury.

I recall that I left the observation bunker, seeking medical help, and I went away along the trench. I had no gun, and I had blood pouring down onto my chest from my mouth. I was very confused. I remember looking around, and seeing behind me an American soldier climbing on top of the bunker roof, onto the dome itself, and throwing grenades inside. I realised that there were these American men everywhere suddenly. They were standing on the top of the trench, looking down at me. There was a lot of shooting and yelling, all happening at once.

Of course, what happened was that while we were firing on one group, another unit had come around and overrun our position from the side. The observation bunker gave out a lot of smoke, and I knew that it was all finished in there.

Did you surrender?

I was so dazed, that I just stood there. The Americans were shouting at each other; I think they were having some kind of argument. One of them jumped down into the trench and hit me in the chest with his rifle butt, which knocked me over. The next thing that I recall, I was being taken in handcuffs down to a point lower down in the dunes, where a lot of our men were lined up under an armed guard.

This was much later in the day, towards evening. The dunes were full of equipment that our men had thrown away, and some of the Americans were going through all this stuff, all the haversacks and coats and so on. They were very pleased if they found a bayonet or an officer's cap; I suppose these items were souvenirs for them. An American officer who spoke German told us that France was being liberated from Germany now, and that we would be treated well provided that we followed orders.

How did the German troops respond to being prisoners?

There were a couple of us who said they wanted to organise an escape and then get back to German lines, and that kind of idea. Such a thing would have been completely impossible, obviously. The amount of men and vehicles that the Americans had, just in that small part of the

beach, was astonishing for us to see. There were many jeeps and trucks, and piles of stores. Inland there were loud explosions and flashes, and columns of smoke rising up. There was no way that any of us could have escaped through the lines. The vast majority of us accepted the situation. I had no more desire to fight or resist, I can tell you that.

We were very quickly put on a ship and taken back to England overnight. We were filmed by newsreel cameramen when we arrived. We had to file off the ship and go marching away across the docks under guard, with the cameramen taking a record of everything. If you see the newsreel films of German prisoners landing after June 6th, I am probably in there, with a bandage around my head, and my teeth missing.

But to answer your question, most of us were relieved to survive that day, and to be taken prisoner. I think that many of us felt in some way privileged to survive the day, when so many others had not lived through it. Inside the ship, we sat in silence, with very little speaking . . . and so we went into captivity.

Were you held by the Americans or the English?

At first we were in a large camp run by Americans. After a month, we were dispersed, and I was sent to a smaller camp in the North of England.

Did you notice differences between the Americans and the English? Or were they quite similar in their behaviour?

There were differences. The English were quite similar to us Germans, because they liked repairing things. If a machine stopped working, an English person would enjoy trying to fix it, and other English would gather round and give suggestions, or tell him he was doing it wrong. Then the man who repaired it would tell his friends, ‘*You know that generator in hut seven? Well, this is how I fixed it. First . . .*’ and so on. This was actually quite like us Germans.

But the Americans wanted everything done quickly, whatever the expense. So if a generator failed, it was ‘*Get me a new generator, damn it,*’ and it had to be done at once. This was not our way, because we had so few resources, and we thought that making repairs was the right thing to do.

Regarding the camp conditions, I can say that the Americans and the English followed the Geneva Convention very strictly, and we could not complain about our conditions. I was given medical treatment throughout my imprisonment.

By the way, I remember that near my camp in the North of England, there were huge camps of Italian prisoners who had surrendered in North Africa in 1941 . . . these Italians were now very comfortable in England, working on farms and speaking English. I wouldn't be surprised if some of them are still there.

I myself was repatriated to West Germany in 1946, on a ship from Felixstowe.

Looking back on June 6th, do you think that the day could have had a different outcome?

I really don't see how that would be possible on the 6th of June itself. If you had witnessed that attacking fleet on the sea, the sheer number of ships they had available. I think it was inevitable that on the day itself, the Allies would gain a foothold in France, some kind of bridgehead.

The other side of the coin, of course, is why, immediately after that happened, our German forces could not have wiped out this bridgehead. With all our panzers, our Luftwaffe, the wonder weapons which we had, how could we not take back these few square kilometres of land that the Allies took on the day itself?

Men such as me, we could not have held back the enemy forces with our machine guns firing from our bunkers. But the inland troops were supposed to be our very best, all the panzer units and the Waffen SS men and those others. Still today, when I think about it, that is a puzzle for me. Why did our elite troops not push the Allies back at once?

But the whole thing is over, it's all done with, and there's no point in dwelling on that question today. We have to try to look ahead, we who survived that day.

I would like to thank you, Herr Runder, for giving such a complete account of your experiences.

The Military Police

Niklaus Lange was a Feldgendarme (Military Police Officer) attached for security and traffic control to the 21st Panzer Division near Caen, inland from the Juno and Sword beaches.

Herr Lange, I think that we might have met before. When I was in Normandy in early 1944, I was escorted in the Caen area by a number of military police men, and I think you were one of them.

That is correct, Herr Eckhertz. I was on a superb Zundapp motorcycle, if you recall. I used to wear my goggles up on my helmet all the time. I remember escorting you near to that big emplacement at Bayeux where you interviewed some of the troops. I loved that Zundapp motorcycle, I must say.

I wonder what you can tell me of your experiences of the build-up to June 6th in Normandy?

With that question, my mood turns from the light to the dark in some ways. But you are right to ask the question, because those of us who were involved surely witnessed a unique event in human history, and it would be folly if these experiences weren't collected and set down in some way.

I was assigned at that time to the headquarters of the 21st Panzers. My role was to ensure traffic control if the panzers or command units were using the civilian roads. The Division as a whole was involved in very urgent preparations for a possible attack throughout early and mid-1944. In that whole Caen area, there was a large amount of construction work on anti-tank obstacles, beach obstacles and resistance points, stretching all along the coast.

What form did you think a possible attack would take?

There were many ideas about how this might happen. They might come from the sea, or using paratroopers. There was a particular concern that the Allies would try to capture airfields in the region, and use them to land troops. Other people thought the French themselves would join some kind of uprising against us. The effect on us was that we saw everything as a threat: the sea, the skies and the local people.

Some other veterans that I have spoken with have said that relations with the local French civilians were very good. What was your experience?

My experience was that the civilians simply could not be trusted. Of course, we should have been in control of them, as we were the dominant partner in our partnership with France, but the French civilians found so many ways to undermine us.

If I may ask: you use the phrase 'our partnership with France.' What did that mean?

Well, the 'partnership' was what the French government called the presence of our German troops in France. I know that the Allied press call the French wartime government the 'Vichy Regime' or something like that, but we never used that term. We called them 'the French government' or 'the French authority.' They put out a large amount of information to the civilians explaining why we, the Germans, were there.

What reasons did they give?

The main reason was that we were a protection force, a kind of guard, against all the bad things in the world which might harm the French. These bad things were Communism, secret societies such as Freemasons, and of course the Americans and the English who wanted to occupy France and use up all its resources for their own people. The French were very aware of how lucky they were to have such a fertile country, so rich in farming and industry, and they were very defensive about foreigners taking their produce. The French government played on this fear a lot, I remember.

My God, if you went to the local cinema, which we were allowed to do, their newsreels had these endless information films from the French

Government, explaining this over and over again. *Partnership – protection - prosperity*, it was really drummed into them.

And yet, you see, for every ten French civilians who went home from the cinema grateful for our presence, I would say there were two or three who were planning against us.

That is interesting, because some of the other veterans I have spoken to have implied that the level of French resistance activity was actually lower than we see in popular portrayals today, in films and books and so on.

But the armed Resistance was only part of it. You had the theft, the rackets, the gathering of intelligence which the French passed back to the Allies.

What does this mean? Can you explain the thefts, the rackets?

Well, don't forget that French society was very corrupt, extremely corrupt. I'm sorry if that is an unfashionable thing to say, but it is a fact. Damn it, but I was also in France in the first war, in 1918. I saw how the French population made money out of the war. They did the same in the second war.

This picture of France in 1944 which you are portraying is very controversial.

But it is the reality that I knew. You asked to come here to talk about the reality, didn't you? Well, then. I am sorry if I seem angry, Herr Eckhertz, or agitated. But I saw a side of France on that day that you are interested in, that day of June 6th, which is not widely known.

Maybe we can come back to this.

What can you tell me of your experience on June 6th? How did it begin for you?

It began, as I remember so clearly, on the night before, on the 5th. On that evening, which was cool and rainy, I was tasked with escorting a

number of officers in an armoured car convoy to a command centre near to Janville. As a military police man, my task was to ride ahead on my motorcycle and ensure the roads were secure, holding back other traffic as necessary, and stopping civilians from taking an interest.

The memory of that night . . . talking to you brings it back. There was a light rain. The asphalt road was wet and it reflected the flashes of bombs exploding to the North. Everyone was on edge, because the bombing was intensifying all the time.

Oh, and I remember at one point, there was a gap in the clouds and an aircraft appeared right above us. It just appeared, and floated over us, and then swooped away. This was an English Mosquito bomber, the thing which had two Spitfire engines on a cheap plywood body . . . I recognised it at once, from its profile, and so did the officers in the cars. Everyone stood up to watch this hideous thing go swooping over us . . . it was like a vision of death. It was like a vampire bat floating over us. And the worst thing was that we recognised it, and we knew it was made out of cheap wood, just plywood and timber . . . and in our hearts, we knew that our engineers could not build an aircraft like that, not even in German metal. The sight of that wretched plane was offensive to us. Even the officers shouted out and cursed it.

Who were these officers that you were escorting?

These were officers of the panzers, I think they were logistics people. Their role was to decide on supply dumps, the best routes and roads for the different types of panzer to use, and so on. They were important people. The presence of officers like that had to be handled carefully, because they were likely to be attacked by partisans, terrorists and that kind of operator. In the Caen-Bayeux area, we had lost several of these officers to terrorist incidents.

What form did these 'terrorist incidents' take?

I mean that the officers were assassinated by local partisans. In one case, an officer was machine-gunned from a fast car. It was not difficult to identify the terrorists involved, because so few of the French had access to cars that worked on gasoline. In another incident, a bomb exploded under a

wooden bridge that our men were crossing. Their Kubelwagen (VW jeep) was blown into the river and they drowned like that.

So there was an atmosphere of tension, you understand, and we all knew that the threat was all around us.

Would you still, today, describe these attacks as 'terrorist' attacks? Or as 'resistance attacks,' which is how the French would describe them?

I can't answer that. That's not for me to say. I am not thinking about the present day, but about the ways things were ten years ago. In those days, these attacks were definitely terrorist attacks; that was how we in the Wehrmacht described them. I was only a military policeman, not a great thinker at all. The important thing was that we were alert to the threat, and we guarded the officers carefully, with our lives. That was our job.

On this evening, the night before the invasion, after that Mosquito bomber went overhead, the area was bombed heavily. I think the bombers were trying to destroy the road junction just North of us, because there were big impacts from there, and we could feel the blast waves. We halted the armoured cars in a sunken road, and I went on ahead to see the damage. That was my job, to secure the transit through the road system.

That junction was badly hit. There were fires in all the houses on the corners, and a lot of wounded French civilians coming away from the buildings. Some of these were pushing injured people in wheelbarrows and handcarts, and very distressed. The road itself was full of craters. The danger was that there were bombs on delayed fuses, which was something the British and American bombers used all the time.

Did the Allies use delayed fuses on their aerial bombs a lot?

Definitely. I had seen areas where the bombs, which were buried underground or buried in buildings, went off one after the other at precise one hour intervals for twelve hours. You could have set your watch by those bombs, they were so accurately timed. This was all done to keep people away from the area, to prevent repairs.

Well, we are talking about the Monday night . . . by this time it was after midnight, so it was the 6th itself, I suppose, and the whole damned sky was full of the noise of these bomber planes going over, doing as they

wished. When I got back to the armoured car column, there was a buzz of activity around the radio car, because reports were being made about airborne attacks. Everything was confused, and the planes were going over, making the cars rattle with their noise . . . it felt as if something big was happening.

The officers began to look on the map for somewhere to halt in the darkness, away from the roads. One of them suggested a house nearby which functioned as a hotel and was often used by German officers. This house was a small mansion, with its own generator and kitchens. It was very secure and comfortable, a good choice.

And so we went to this hotel, this French house.

We pulled up outside there before one am, and we requisitioned the dining room for the officers to set up their radio sets and maps. The room became a command centre, if you like, for these panzer logistics men. I made myself useful and stood guard at the door outside, and I could hear them discussing the different attacks that seemed to be taking place. The staff of this house, this hotel, brought food and drinks to the officers in the dining room. I was jealous of that, because I had eaten no meal since lunchtime, but duty is duty.

How did the night unfold?

The amount of aircraft above reached a peak at around one am, I think. I was standing outside the garden doors of the room, with my machine pistol across my chest. I had a good view of the sky, and there were obviously lots of planes up there, but also clouds. There were big bursts of flak exploding at times.

I saw one plane explode, and this lit up the whole sky for several seconds. In the orange flames, I could see a whole mass of other planes moving South East. I couldn't count them all! Then, as the burning plane fell to the ground, those other planes faded back into the dark sky again. I thought, 'My God, what is all this?'

Did you think of the word 'Invasion' then?

Yes, I did. There were so many planes up there, it had to be an invasion. I reported this sight of the planes to the officers at once, and they

added it to their reports, I think.

And now the night became worse for me, more full of threats . . . what happened was that as I was standing there, on duty, one of the serving women, the waitresses, from the hotel, came out and offered me a tray of coffee and bread rolls. It was real coffee as well, not our ersatz German coffee, and she told me that it was from a supply from before the war. Well, I could not refuse. I was grateful to her, you understand. She went in and offered the same to the officers. One of the officers, a Hauptmann (*Captain*) came out and stood watching the sky with me. I expected to be criticised for eating on guard duty, which of course was an offence, but the Hauptmann told me to eat well, because the next day would be a long one for us all. He could feel what was happening too, you see.

The waitress stood near us, with her tray, ready to serve the officer. He was very smart in his uniform, very professional. He told the waitress, in French, not to be alarmed by all the planes, because the German army would protect France from the Allied aggression. The waitress then offered to show the officer to a room for some rest. She said, 'I see you are tired, monsieur. We have rooms where you can rest for an hour or so, and return refreshed.'

This is an odd thing for you to remember happening in the middle of all this activity.

You will see why I remember this. Personally, I did not approve of the officer going off with this French lady, but it was not my job to think about why he did this. But some time later, the other officers came out to look for the Hauptmann, and demanded to know where he was. I went into the house to find this room where they had gone to.

I found that the hotel staff had disappeared; there was not one of them to be found in the whole place. Bombs were falling nearby, so I thought they had gone to find shelter. After looking in the bedrooms, I found the Hauptmann. And this is why I remember this so well, and also why I say that we could not trust the French, you see.

Why? What happened?

The Hauptmann was dead. He had been shot in the side of the head, at very close range, and the bullet had made a terrible mess when it came out of the front of his skull. He was face down on the white sheets of the bed in there, and there was his blood and his brains all over the bed and the wall.

This was a disaster for me, as I was meant to be guarding him, but he had left and gone with this serving woman deliberately.

Do you mean that she had shot him?

Well, close to the body, we found a Browning assassination pistol, so she must have been responsible; her or one of the others in the hotel.

What is a Browning assassination pistol?

Have you not heard of these damned pistols? They were very common in France at that time. The assassination pistol was a simplified version of the American 9mm handgun, but it was smaller and it only held one bullet. There was no magazine, as there was on the normal pistol.

The Allies made thousands of these evil little guns, and they dropped them into France for the terrorists to use in exactly these situations. The idea was that the victim would be unaware of the killer's intent, for example sitting at a table in a restaurant or on a train, or indeed in a bedroom. The killer would move from behind and put the pistol to the victim's head and fire the single bullet. The pistol wasn't made for fighting with, in fact once it was fired, the empty cartridge couldn't even be removed from the chamber, you would have to lever it out with a knife or something.

And that is how I found this pistol, by the bed, still with the cartridge in it. She had dropped it and escaped.

You say these pistols were very common?

There were thousands of them in circulation. Once, we caught a parachute drop that the British RAF made near Bayeux. There was a canister with a hundred of these guns inside, and other canisters in the zone had been removed by the partisans already.

I suppose the idea was to make every French civilian into a possible assassin, just waiting for the moment to kill a German. I can tell you that hundreds of our personnel in France were killed by these things, in cafes, hotels and so on.

Now, if you ask me about the Normandy invasion, my own view is that a directive went out from the Allies on that night before the invasion, saying, '*Shoot an officer. Find a German officer and just kill him with a single-shot Browning pistol.*'

That way the Allies could disrupt our command system and cause confusion at such a critical time. I believe that on that night, the 5th of June, these pistols were being used all over Northern France. It was a very ruthless way to run a war, wasn't it?

But what were the consequences for the civilians who used these pistols?

They would be executed if they were caught, naturally. Murder is murder, after all. But in all the disorder caused by the invasion, there were chances for them to get away. There was great upheaval in the area, with the bombing in the night and the alert about the beach landings in the morning.

In our case, the Hauptmann's body was taken away to Divisional command, and our military police tried to investigate, but in all the confusion this did not progress. In fact, the area around the hotel was captured by the Allies the following day, the 6th of June, which gives you some idea of how close to the coast it was. So the whole situation was lost in the fighting in that sector. I don't know, of course, what happened to the killer herself, and the others from the hotel; I suppose they hid themselves until the Allies took over and then emerged as 'patriots' or whatever the designation was.

I can still see that little bedroom and the blood on the walls.

I see that this event had a deep impression on you.

I would like to take a break from this discussion . . . no, I am not saying stop the interview, but I am stressed.

Why? Because it is a shock, to see an officer of panzers assassinated in that way. That very calculated and cynical way. The damned English

must have been behind that act; that cynical way was the way that the English fought that war. We saw that at St Nazaire, and also when the British destroyed the French fleet in Algeria, and on so many other occasions. The British are the most calculating and cynical people on earth, that is my view. I make no apologies for stating it. I would rather deal with Americans, at least they are basically honest.

Can you explain why St Nazaire and Algeria are still in your mind when it comes to the British?

Why? At St Nazaire, those British laid a trap for our men, using a time bomb, and killed many unarmed Germans and French civilians, for no reason. In Algeria in 1940, the British Navy sank the entire French fleet in the harbour at Oran, before breakfast I believe, with no warning at all. The British killed two thousand French battleship sailors just like that, with no warning or anything. And these were the French sailors who were on the British side a few weeks before. I ask you, imagine if the German navy had done that. What would the reaction be? And yet today, nobody talks about the French fleet in Algeria. We are all too polite to remember it.

What was your experience of June 6th itself, the day of the invasion?

Let me get my thoughts collected . . . I would like to take a schnapps, Herrr Eckhertz, if you don't mind.

I would not wish this interview to distress you any further.

It is fine if I have a drink . . . like many veteran soldiers, I often drink when I recollect the things I have seen. This is perfectly normal, I believe.

You asked me about the 6th of June itself. I remember that after the killing at the hotel, the officer group moved its base to a camp in woodland towards the coast, and a new Hauptmann took over. I left them at that point, which was around four or five am, and I was assigned to traffic control at a crossroads about two kilometres inland. The light was just becoming grey, and we could see the sky overhead.

The amount of aircraft going over that sector was enormous, and all kinds of planes, too: transports, fighters and bombers. I could hear and feel explosions from the beach sector, and there was a lot of smoke in the sky over the sea. It was a damp kind of dawn on that day, with low clouds, and if you watched the horizon towards the coast you could see the low clouds actually flickering with the blast waves of all the detonations. Do you see what I mean? The clouds were actually moving with the energy of the explosions.

I remember thinking, ‘My God, if even the clouds are affected, and if I can feel it through my boots from here, what is it like for those unlucky men on the beaches?’

You were thinking of the German soldiers? Not the Allied troops?

I was thinking of our men, yes.

But after about an hour of this, a lot of traffic began to stream back down the road from the coast. There were our trucks and wagons, and our soldiers driving civilian cars, and many of them on foot or on horses. It was a full retreat, I can tell you. I kept the crossroads open as well as I could, but of course those Allied planes came over very low, and bombed the whole road. There was nothing we could do except to throw ourselves in the ditches and hold on tight.

Those planes, I think they were the Thunderbolts, the ones with the big bodies . . . they dropped a horrible kind of bomb on the road. These bombs fell down from the air, and then they split open, like grenades. They were packed with metal fragments like ball bearings, and these metal things were screaming all over the place. If they hit a car, they would just rip it to pieces; I saw them blow up one of our armoured half-tracks, which was a superb vehicle, and the half-track was cut in half in a moment, like a toy. God help any man who was caught in that explosion. Even the horses were caught up in it, and there were pieces of horse flesh all over that road. I remember at that point, as I was looking out of the ditch, a squad of Russians came running down the road, shouting and yelling in Russian. It was chaos.

Who were these Russians?

These were the type of Russians that had come over to work for us, to serve in the German forces. I think they were mostly Ukrainians, and they were very anti-Stalin and anti-Polish in their views. I saw some of them in training before the invasion, and they were big fellows, but this bombing had panicked them completely. They were charging down this road, throwing away their guns, and arguing with each other about what to do. Some of them were wounded, and they were hobbling or limping along towards the crossroads.

Well, another one of these planes came over and used these bombs again with the ball bearings inside . . . most of those Russian fellows were cut to pieces in front of me, in the middle of the crossroads. One moment they were there, and the next minute I looked out of the ditch, and there were only clothes and bits of men with smoke coming from the pieces. It was like a butcher's slab, that road. The ones who survived ran like madmen, there was nothing I could do to hold them back.

Have you ever been under bombardment, Herr Eckhertz?

Yes, in the first war in France, against the French. But in the second war, I was never in combat, except being in the air raids on the cities.

Well, then you have seen something of it. It is a terrible thing to witness such destruction of human beings. For me, it was all the worse, because I had been in the first war in France, in 1918, when I was seventeen years old. What I saw on that crossroads was worse than anything I saw in the first war, believe me. Everyone who came through that crossroads was affected; men vomited and wept unashamedly. Women too, there were some of our female nurses and female logistical staff retreating through there in trucks. And with every minute, those planes came back and added more bodies, more smoke. It was only about nine or ten o'clock, and our infantry left the area in numbers, all moving to the South. I joined them, as there was nothing I could do any further.

I felt very helpless in all this; first because of the dead Hauptmann, and then because of all this bombing and the piles of dead. In the afternoon, I rejoined my field police unit, and we were pulled back behind a defensive line further inland.

What was your role there?

It was chiefly catching our stragglers, the men who were moving around without orders or having 'misaid' their units. Some of these men were genuine, if you know what I mean, and they had been cut off from their units or misdirected. Others were trying to escape combat by going back to the rear, or they were trying to lie low and then surrender later on.

When an army is retreating, you get this big mixture of people, the front line troops, and rear echelon men, cooks, drivers, medics and all the rest of them, all churning around together in a mess. Some men take advantage of this and avoid their duties. We had to kick down the doors of barns and houses and pull these idlers out, and send them up to the front line. Most of them went, too, because very few wanted to face a field court martial.

Is that what happened to the men who didn't want to go?

A few of them refused to go to the line, and they were handed over to the command. It would have been better for them to take their chances with the Allies, frankly. The courts martial were held in a farm building nearby, and we could hear shooting in the courtyard at intervals, which meant the firing squads. Remember, this was still done under the original Wehrmacht punishment system, where there was a trial, or at least a hearing. After that summer, it changed to a 'mobile court martial' system where the field police officers could pick up anyone and have them shot immediately, without any kind of discussion.

This went on for all that day, and into the night, and all the time the shelling and bombing went on, and there was this constant flood of men and vehicles going into the line and coming out. On the second day, the Wednesday, some stronger units came up from inland and stabilised the line in that zone. We were withdrawn to the rear, and we slept like dead men in a barn full of straw. That was the deepest, longest sleep I have ever known.

May I go back to something you said, which is that you had already fought in the first war, in 1918. I would guess that you are a similar age to myself.

I was born in 1901, so I was seventeen when I fought in the first war, and forty-three in the second war at the time of the invasion. I didn't serve between the wars, of course; I was a civilian policeman until 1939.

What proportion of the combat troops on June 6th were aged in their forties?

It's difficult to say. I would guess about half were over forty years of age, or under eighteen. But that's a very rough guess. I'm talking there about the Static Divisions who were on the coast and took the weight of the first day. The inland units were made up of men of a more normal military age.

Among the men, like you, who had served in the first war, what was their attitude to serving again in the second war, do you think?

It was our duty to serve again. Our generation was not accustomed to hesitate over matters of duty, as you probably know. If the authorities said 'This is your duty,' then it had to be done. Of course, the regime took advantage of that willingness to serve, and, as we now know, the minds of many people, especially the young, were turned to evil things.

But while we are on the subject of that, don't forget that many French people served the German regime in this way as well; there were many young French in the Waffen SS, and the French civilian police worked closely with the German authority right up until the fall of France, as I saw myself on many occasions.

I realise now that in this respect, the second war was different from the first war. In the second war, the governments of Germany and France were more united, more closely linked.

That is a very controversial point to make. You say that Germany and France were 'united' in the Second World War?

No, I said that they were *more united than in the first war*. That is obvious, surely, if you think about the matter.

In the First World War, the government and the state of France remained at war with Germany for four years up until the 1918 armistice. In

the Second World War, on the other hand, there was a very short period of nine months at the beginning, from September 1939 to July 1940, and then another nine month period at the end, after August 1944, in which the government and state of France was at war with us.

Do you understand? I am pointing out that from July 1940 to August 1944, which is almost the entire war, really, the French government supported and cooperated with Germany in all areas. And not just the French government, but the French state: the police, the civil service, the factories, the transports and all the rest of it.

This was why I said to you at the beginning that we were so suspicious and distrustful of the French civilians, because although their government was completely on our side, we knew from experience that the French people had minds of their own and did not always do as they were ordered. That is what happened in the hotel, and that is how our officer of panzers met his death in that hotel room . . . which I can still see today in my mind.

Herr Lange, it seems to me that the war has affected you deeply, and you seem to be angry about it still.

That's a polite way of telling me I shouldn't drink schnapps in the morning. I can see why you were a propaganda writer, you have a good way of putting things. But I am surely not the only person who drinks because of the war, am I? And I saw only a small part of the war, a tiny part. My God, what was it like for the others?

Your account has been very valuable for me to hear.

The Infantry in the Houses

Helmut Voigt was a Grenadier (Rifleman) with the 716th Static Infantry Division, based in the Saint Aubin area, inland of Juno Beach.

Herr Voigt, you said to me that you were posted in the Normandy-Calvados area at the time of the invasion. I remember visiting that zone in April 1944, and I saw many of the strong points dotted around there.

I was fortunate enough, as I originally thought, to be assigned to Normandy, yes.

At first, this seemed a piece of good fortune?

Of course. I felt very fortunate to be posted there. To be honest, my friends mocked me and said it was because of my father, who was very senior in a large German bank at the time. The fact was that my father made loans available to German officers, or some kind of affair like that. When I say ‘officer,’ I don’t mean a Hauptmann (*Captain*) but someone at General rank. But I’m sure that this had no influence on my posting to France. I was classed as medically unsuitable due to my eyesight and flat feet, and I was assigned to the Static Infantry Divisions in France when I was seventeen. I arrived in January 1944.

I felt rather guilty about this, because some of the boys my age who had similar physical shortcomings were sent to the front line in Italy or the Eastern Front. My mother would write and tell me, ‘Do you remember so-and-so from the school, well, he has been killed in Italy.’ And I would think, ‘My God, I remember him from the school yard. That could have been me.’

Was it possible for German parents during the war to influence their sons’ military postings at all?

No, I don’t believe that was possible. Even Ribbentrop, that damned foreign minister of ours, the one who got us into the war, his son was on the

Eastern front in a panzer, wasn't he? So I felt very lucky to be in France, and also a little guilty. But fate was being patient with me, of course, and my time to experience the war was approaching fast.

May I ask, what was your personal view of the war, its reasons and your role in it? What was your thinking at the time?

My father, being in the banking profession, had affected my thinking about the war completely. My father was very sympathetic to the National Socialist (*Nazi Party*) view of the world. In this view, a United Europe was trying to assert its independence and its very right to exist, against certain powerful international forces. America and the English were in an unholy alliance with the Bolsheviks, and it was these Russians who were orchestrating world events from Moscow. Moscow – that word! During the war, so many bad things were explained by saying that ‘Moscow arranged it’ or ‘Moscow has done this to us.’ Even when the Americans and the English bombed our cities, when they began destroying whole towns, the newspapers would often say this was done ‘at the command of Moscow.’

From an economic perspective, my father said this was all connected to international finance, and the way that Moscow and the American banks wanted to take over the world. In 1944, I considered myself to be far more educated in these matters than my comrades, and I would sometimes give them small lectures about this angle, which they found interesting.

Since the war has ended, of course, I have come to believe the opposite of this, and I suspect that the Soviets actually had very little influence over the Western allies. Certainly, when you think how quickly the Americans and the Soviets became enemies, which happened within months of the end of the fighting in Europe, it is hard to believe that the Americans were interested in helping the Soviets at all. If they were, they surely could have bombed our German armies on the Eastern front as heavily as they bombed our cities – but they didn't do this.

Today, I think the reality was that the Americans and the English were *competing* with the Russians for control of Europe. The Normandy invasion, if you think about it like this, was the American and English way of keeping the Russians out of Western Europe! It was a way of stopping

the Russians reaching the English Channel, which they certainly could have done with their huge armies. Russia could have started at Calais. Anyway, that is my personal view now.

Did you expect the Normandy invasion to come when it did?

There was no doubt in our minds, I think, that the Anglo-Americans and the De Gaulle French, who called themselves the Free French, would try to invade Western Europe while the summer weather lasted that year. And when I saw the very intensive preparations being made along our part of the Atlantic Wall in the early months of 1944, all the fortifications and the defences, it was clear that our leadership certainly expected an attack to come soon.

Having said that, the atmosphere was in some ways rather unreal in early 1944 in Normandy. Everything was so pleasant, the landscape and the weather and so on, that the war seemed unrelated to it. But as the weeks went by, and we built more fortifications, minefields, anti-tank traps and everything else that we were creating, we all felt that war was coming.

What was your role?

I was the loader in an anti-tank turret which was fixed onto a bunker in a fortified village inland of the beaches near Saint Aubin. The village had been emptied of civilians before I arrived, and the houses were strengthened with concrete and extra brickwork, plus logs and earth mounds. These houses were quite hefty farmhouse buildings, with stone walls and narrow windows, and so they were very suitable to being adapted for defences. When I arrived, in January, there was a large team of International Workers pouring concrete into moulds to reinforce the ground floor walls, and digging several anti-tank ditches to the North of the place.

Who were the 'International Workers?'

Well, these were conscripted labourers who came from the Eastern countries. I think that a lot of them were Hungarian or Polish. I certainly did not envy them their task, as they dug and worked constantly, literally around the clock. In fact, the first deaths that I saw in the war were several

of these men who unfortunately died while they were working, and they were buried in the bottom of an anti-tank ditch. That unsettled me greatly, seeing that human bodies could be disposed of in that way, but later in the war I saw that this was not limited to the labourers. German troops, too, were often buried in craters or trenches.

Who labelled them 'International Workers?'

The officers called them that. We also called them 'helpers' or 'Eastern Helpers,' I remember. But by February, these fellows were all taken away, and we occupied the fortified houses.

The idea of the houses was that the anti-tank ditches and minefields North of us, towards the beaches, would force any attacking tanks to come within range of our buildings. We would then fire on them with PAK guns sited in the ground floor of the houses, and with the tank turret on my bunker.

Your bunker with the tank turret was not a house?

No, it stood slightly back from the houses. It was an earth mound with a hollow concrete block inside it, reached through a doorway at the rear, and on top of this block was a tank turret. The turret was very, very old; I think it came from a pre-war Italian tank. It had a 50mm gun, which was quite weak, but the range was intended to be very short.

My role was to stand inside the hollow block and reload the gun. The shells were not heavy, I must say. The gunner was a Gefreiter (*Private First Class*) who was aged about forty and had a lot of experience with PAK guns.

The fortified houses had a 75mm gun and a 37mm gun on wheeled carriages aiming through slits in the ground floors. The houses also had two platoons of infantry who had to fire guns and Panzerfausts (*disposable anti-tank rockets*) through loop holes in the walls. It was a good design, because I could understand the way that the enemy tanks would have to steer away from the obstacles and come onto our guns.

Our area was part of the 'Satan's Garden,' which was what we called the beach and coast defences. I felt quite confident that we could hold back enemy armour for long enough to allow the inland panzer reserves to

come up and counterattack against the enemy. This was the idea, that we were a way of holding back an advance, to give our own forces time to move up behind us and push them out of France.

What kind of training did you have?

We were well trained on the guns, and on small arms and use of the Panzerfausts. We were all trained on the different guns, in case we had to change roles, and we were taught in theory how to defeat tanks at close range with grenades and gasoline bombs, although we had no practical experience of this.

At the same time, work was going on all around us, with the minefields being extended and more ditches being dug so that the whole 'Satan' area was strongly fortified. We were very proud to be part of the famous Atlantic Wall, which was being featured very strongly in newsreels and in the press at the time, of course – as you yourself know so well. When I had a few days leave at home, my little sister asked me, 'How high is this wall? How long is it?' As if it was the Great Chinese Wall! Of course, I was forbidden from explaining to her any details, and so I told her it was a very high wall indeed.

And what was your involvement in the events of June 6th? How did it begin?

It started on the night of the 5th, which I think was quite humid and damp. Yes, it was a bit rainy, I recall that well. We were woken and moved at about four am from our sleeping barracks, in one of the houses, to take up our gunnery positions. The soldiers we were replacing weren't allowed to sleep, they were sent off to man slit trenches nearby.

The officer told us that an attack was expected, either from the coast or even from inland. This rather worried us, because all our training was based on shooting at tanks coming from the coastal zone. We had not practised shooting behind us, into the inland zone. In fact, I'm not sure that the turret on the bunker even rotated all the way around.

There was a huge amount of bombing happening to the South West, and a lot of noise of planes overhead. I only had a brief impression of this, because I went quickly down into the bunker when the other crew came out,

and I prepared the gun with the gunner. The noise was a bit muffled in there, and to light our work we had an electric torch with a red bulb. The red bulb was so that it would not affect our night vision if we went outside at night into the dark. That worked well; you could have the red torch on in the bunker, and then go out into the dark, and you could see in the dark.

When it got towards dawn, there began to be heavy bombing or shelling close to us, to the North. These explosions were big enough to shake the ground under the bunker. I had not been under attack before, and so this was very alarming for me. I knew that my turret bunker was the most secure of the fortifications in our strong point, and so I felt sorry also for the men in the fortified houses.

My gunner, who was a professional man and very calm, urged me to concentrate on having the ammunition to hand. He told me that he could see flashes and explosions for a long distance in front. Truly, to be confined in that concrete box, unable to see out, feeling these huge impacts close to us, that was a frightening time for me. At about six am, the explosions grew closer, and began striking very close. I think that these were shells from warships at sea, because there was a rushing noise, not a whistling noise like aerial bombs. This rushing sound would come, and then the whole bunker would shake and move. I could actually hear debris crashing into the tank turret; this made a sound like hammers striking the steel.

In my mind, I had always imagined shrapnel as small pieces of metal, but some of these impacts were enormous. That turret rang almost like a bell, making a ringing sound that hurt my ears painfully. Again and again these hammer blows came, and even the gunner was silent and tense, and he began praying in between the blasts. Just as he finished a prayer, we were hit directly on the bunker. This was a shock which stunned me. Pieces of concrete fell on me, and I am not embarrassed to say that I threw myself on the bunker floor and covered my head. I had trouble breathing, because the blast wave had knocked the air from my lungs, even through the walls of the bunker. I stayed like that for some time. My ears were affected, and all the sounds were like being underwater.

I looked up to see if the gunner was alright, and to my amazement the whole turret was gone. The complete steel structure had been blown off the concrete, with the gun and the gunner himself. There was just the hole, open to the sky. Up in the sky, I could see red flashes and white explosions which looked like stars. Everything was exploding, everything. I waited in

the ruins of the bunker while all this went on above me, on the ground up there.

What were your thoughts in the bunker?

Well, I had my carbine, and I had intentions of going out to help the men in the houses, which was my task if the bunker was knocked out. But it was impossible to venture out with all the explosions. Then a large piece of shrapnel came into the bunker, through the rear door, and hit the wall behind me. This metal was red hot, and I threw fire-sand on it to stop it setting off all the ammunition. This made me think that in fact I was sitting on a gigantic bomb, and if a piece of debris did fly in and blow up a shell, I would be finished anyway. So I crawled out of the bunker door with my helmet and carbine.

Outside, I saw the turret upside down about twenty metres away, and the body of my gunner near it. He was horribly shattered, even today it distresses me to remember the state of him. He was broken like a doll. I was sick at this sight, and I ran around the bunker to the front, to the houses. By now it was daylight, I think it was about six thirty am, but my watch wasn't working. I saw that one of the fortified houses was destroyed, but the other one was still standing. The bombardment was lessening, and I ran into the house to offer help. This was the house with the 37mm PAK gun. The men in there were crouching by the firing slits and watching the coastal zone. There was a telephone, but it wasn't working.

The most senior man there was a Feldwebel (*Sergeant*) and we followed his orders. We aimed our guns through the slits, and we waited for any enemies to approach from the coast, in the area between the ditches. Some of us were shaking, and the Feldwebel kept up a constant stream of encouraging words to sustain us. We waited like that, very tense and anxious, for what seemed like ages. The light came up, and it got well into the morning, and all we could see between us and the beaches was smoke and flashes of explosions . . . the waiting was awful. One of our men lost his nerve completely, and began shouting that he wanted to leave the house, and the Feldwebel was ordering him to shut his mouth. Just as he was speaking, there was a great roar overhead, and that whole house seemed to explode around us.

I saw that planes were passing over head, and they were dropping small bombs onto us from under their wings. I think these were Hurricane class planes, but they moved so quickly that I couldn't see properly. The bombs which they dropped as they came towards us flew out from under their wings and came skidding towards our house across the fields. I saw five or six of these bombs bouncing towards us and tumbling over in the air as they came. There was no time for any of us to react.

The bombs hit the house, and they exploded on the stone walls. The noise and shock wave was devastating; more powerful than the shelling, I think. Part of the house collapsed and buried some of the men at one end. I could see some of them moving under the rubble, but there was nothing we could do to help them. I looked around for the Feldwebel, and saw that he had been killed by a large wooden splinter, which had gone through his eye and into his head. We pulled his body out of the way – there was nothing else to do.

The PAK gun was still working, being behind the reinforced concrete slabs, and the gun crew had it ready again in minutes. We had been told that when a bombardment stops, the enemy are very close, and this was the case, as the men said that they could hear tank sounds from beyond the fields. I myself could not hear this, as my hearing was damaged, and in fact with my poor eyesight I was not much of a soldier. But I helped the gun crew have the Stielgranate (*explosive cap*) ready for the 37mm.

What was the explosive cap?

These were large projectiles that fitted onto the front of the gun barrel and were driven by a shell fired from the breech. The projectiles had a Panzerfaust type of warhead, and they were said to be highly effective against tanks, as they had a shaped charge. Do you know what that means?

It is a type of warhead which flattens itself against a tank's armour, in the manner of a Panzerfaust or the American bazooka.

That's right. So all you had to do with this weapon was to hit the enemy tank at some point on its surface, and the shaped charge would send a shock wave through the steel plate and blast pieces of the metal off the other side, into the tank. This was the idea. We did not have long to wait to

see if it worked, in fact. We could hear a lot of shooting and detonations from the coast, and shortly we saw a Sherman class panzer come through the target area. This happened just as we had been told it would.

What was your feeling on seeing this enemy tank?

I was very surprised at its appearance. It was wet, and dripping with water, and steam was coming off it, I suppose from the hot engine. I could not understand why it was dripping wet, but afterwards I learned that the Allies used amphibious tanks on that beach. Frankly, if someone had asked me before that day, 'Is it possible to make a heavy tank float and swim, and then climb onto land and start fighting?' I would have laughed at the idea. I had no concept that this was even possible. This is why I was puzzled at the sight of this Sherman.

At the same time, I began to shake with excitement and fear, and I am not ashamed to confess that my bladder was weak for a moment. I cannot be the only soldier in history to have had that experience, I am sure.

I can assure you, Herr Voigt, I have spoken to many other veterans who had similar experiences in action.

Well, so it is normal, then. Such is the experience of the infantryman, who is a fragile human being under his uniform. But this Sherman advanced on us very quickly, perhaps believing that our house was completely knocked out.

In an instant, the PAK gunner fired off the projectile, and we saw this large, bulbous warhead fly off to the tank. It hit the tank straight on the front plate, low down, and it exploded. It was just as we had been trained to do. The Sherman gave a great jolt and lurched from side to side. I was astonished that it was so simple to knock out the famous Sherman tank. I began to have wild thoughts that we could knock out many more, perhaps dozens of them . . . The Sherman began to emit smoke, and the turret hatches opened. Two men came out, and they appeared to be badly wounded and covered in soot.

I am sorry to say that one of our men shot them with machine gun fire from a MG42, which was a very accurate and powerful gun. This caused an argument among us, because some of our boys shouted that this

was the wrong thing to do, and others were shouting that we must kill all the enemy troops in whatever way possible. This argument did not help the two Sherman crew men, because they were lying dead on top of their tank as it caught fire.

The speed at which that Sherman burned was remarkable; within a minute or so, there was an absolute column of fire coming up from the back of it. It shook from side to side, which I suppose was all the ammunition exploding within the hull. Barely two minutes after we had fired on it, the whole machine was invisible inside a wall of flames. However, we had provoked the enemy, and revealed our position to them, and they responded quickly.

We began to take high explosive strikes, which I think came from tanks beyond the ditches which we could not see through the flames and smoke. Most of these shells went wide, but several hit our house, and began to knock it to pieces around us. The strengthening of this house was all on the walls, not the ceilings, and so there was nothing to stop the shrapnel and masonry crashing down onto us below. Several men were crushed by falling blocks of stone, as if this was a medieval battle. If anyone was wounded, there was nothing to be done for them, nothing at all. They just lay there on the floor, crying out.

Was there any leadership or direction?

No; the Feldwebel was dead, and we were all basic soldiers. We also had no way of communicating with our company command, which was to our rear, so we were completely isolated. When the shelling paused, a few of our men jumped out through the firing slits and raised their hands in surrender, shouting that they did not want to fight any more. These men were blown up with a high explosive shell; I don't know whether this was a deliberate shot to kill men as they surrendered, or just bad luck. But the rest of us then resolved *not* to surrender, as we saw the bodies of those men lying literally in front of us, with smoke coming from their skin.

We saw no more tanks approaching us, but we heard the sounds of tanks moving to our East. This seemed to indicate that the enemy advance was going around our position, and moving inland that way. The morning continued, with a constant mass of aircraft going overhead, and explosions

in the fields around us, but our fortified house seemed to be forgotten by both sides.

It was only at about midday that an officer, a Leutnant from the Company command, came over to us with a handful of fresh troops. He told us that we were now in a pocket which was almost surrounded by the Allies, and that similar pockets existed all along the coast, because the enemy was deliberately bypassing resistance points that were not a threat to the direction they wanted to take. He said that these pockets were steadily being 'mopped up' by the supporting Allied tanks and infantry.

He was a very professional officer, we trusted him, and he ordered us to remain defending our house. We thought that he would then leave, but he stayed with us in the PAK position, and he had a field telephone on a cable reel that his men unwound, so we could see that he was in contact with the command. This gave us reassurance that we were not forgotten. His men also brought some rations, ammunition and medical kits.

How long did you remain defending this house?

This strange phase went on for about another hour. I say strange, because we could hear the Allies overhead and hear their tanks, but nobody came to fight with us. The Leutnant told us to be ready for action at any moment, because surely the enemy would deal with us soon.

Sure enough, around one pm, we were bombed again by the enemy Jabos. They bombed us in the same way, making their little bombs skid towards us across the fields. But these bombs were not explosive, they were filled with an incendiary material which burned with a very bright, pale flame and expanded in the air. These bursts of fire exploded on all the houses, and on our house some of this burning stuff shot in through the apertures and loopholes. This burning chemical was a horrible weapon, an absolute nightmare.

This was the incendiary that used phosphorous or magnesium?

Yes, I found out from some of our medics later that this was a phosphorous weapon. Our medics found it very difficult to treat people who were burned with this chemical, because the stuff ate its way through their flesh and entered their bones and internal organs. It was like an acid in that

way, like a corrosive acid. I didn't know this when the bombs exploded; all I saw was a very bright flash, as bright as a flash bulb on a camera but much longer lasting.

I saw lines of this white material fly in through the loophole slits where some of the men had set up their rifles. This stuff was like a burning powder, it is difficult to describe it exactly . . . I jumped back, but several of the men at the loopholes were caught by it. As soon as it touched them, it set their uniforms on fire. Some men were hit in the face as well, and they went around in a terrible way, clutching their faces, and screaming. It was a terrible scene, and we did not know how to stop this stuff burning. Even when the men rolled on the floor, or if we tipped sand over them from the sandbags, even then the stuff kept burning inside their skin. Some of these men were on fire inside their bodies.

I must pause for a moment, Herr Eckhertz, because this memory distresses me, and I have not spoken about this to anyone until now, not even to my wife.

Would it be better to leave this part? We could go on to a later part of the day. Or we could stop the interview; perhaps that would be better.

No, now that I have started to describe this, I want to tell you what happened.

The fact is that this phosphorous chemical went inside some of the men's bodies, I think because they inhaled it as they struggled around. This stuff was burning them from inside, in their throat and lungs. It was actually setting fire to them from inside.

The shrieks and cries that these men gave out were unbelievable, and there was nothing to be done for them. One man was absolutely convulsing in pain, and his mouth and nose were exhaling a white smoke as the chemical burned him up. The Leutnant took a rifle and smashed him on the back of the head with the stock, to knock him unconscious. That was a merciful thing to do, because the poor man then died in a state of unconsciousness.

While all this was going on, we were in chaos inside the house, and we didn't see the situation outside. Finally, someone shouted, 'Panzer out there!' The Allies had sent three tanks up to our house to finish us off, and these tanks were now surrounding us. These were Sherman type tanks. The

PAK crew fired on them with the explosive cap round, but the one they fired did not hit the Sherman properly, it deflected off the edge of the hull and went flying off into one of the other wrecked houses. Just a moment after that, the Shermans began firing on our house with high-explosive rounds. They had their gun barrels lowered right down, and they just stood there, about fifty metres away, and fired down into the house. The PAK gun was blown up straight away. I was hit by shrapnel from this explosion, and my uniform was ripped off my chest so that I was partly naked.

This was the end of the resistance point in that house, as you can imagine.

Did the men try to fight back?

It was not really possible. The house was on fire, and we only had four men still able to fight, including me and the Leutnant. One of the troops had the MG42, and he fired this from an aperture; he was shouting out that there were enemy troops approaching outside. He was a brave man, that man with the machine gun, because he stayed there firing on the enemy even though the house was being blown up around him. One of the panzers fired directly on him, I think, because the walls around him exploded, and he was thrown back onto us in the house. He literally landed on top of us, and he was completely shattered from the explosion. We had to get out from under all the parts of his body, which were all over us. Even the Leutnant was shaken by this, and he ordered us to leave through the rear door.

Were you planning to surrender, or to escape?

My intention was just to get away from the enemy. I was not sure what would happen if we tried to surrender. So we charged out through the back exit and ran out into the rear area, which was an open yard fortified with earth and sandbags. As soon as we came out, we rushed straight into a squad of enemy soldiers who were jumping in over the earth walls. This was a great shock to me, as it meant we were surrounded and completely cut off.

What was your impression of the enemy troops, face to face?

To be honest, they terrified me.

They were very large men, powerfully built, and their faces were completely emotionless. I saw, I think, half a dozen of these men taking aim at us with the sub machine guns called Sten guns. They had brown uniforms, and from that I thought they were English, although it turned out that they were Canadians. I recall their faces now, I can still see them in front of me, just as I can see you, Herr Eckhertz. They were very calm, not at all excited, just as if they were doing a job. Of course, this *was* their job, but the way they acted was very methodical, very cool. The Leutnant, who was next to me, raised his machine pistol at them, and they shot him down immediately.

That was it as far as I was concerned. I dropped down my rifle and raised my hands. One of the other German men was slow to do this, and they shot him down as well. The way they did this was also very methodical – not in anger or fury, if you understand me, but purely in a mechanical way. Shooting us meant nothing to them, it was just a job.

The end result was that the house behind us simply collapsed, and I was taken prisoner together with one remaining comrade, whose name I did not even know.

Was this the end of your fighting on June 6th?

That terrible day, which was so full of shocks and dangers, was not over for me at all. The time was about one pm or later. The situation around the houses was very confused. Although our resistance point was destroyed, we could hear a lot of shooting and firing from the South, where I knew there were other points. The Canadians who captured us went on in this direction, following their tanks. We two surviving Germans were left under guard of two Canadian troops who kept us with our hands on our heads, facing away from them. They did give us a drink of water and a cigarette, though. All around there were noises of vehicles and men shouting in English. I do not speak English, and I did not understand what they were planning to do with us. This went on for five or ten minutes.

Then there was a huge burst of firing from nearby. I could hear bullets flying through the air, and there were explosions of grenades or small bombs. I thought, ‘What the devil is happening now? Will this never end?’

I thought that by surrendering I would be out of the battle, but I realised that it does not work so smoothly! I was still on the battlefield, but now without a gun. I crouched down to protect myself, and I looked around at our guards.

To my horror – and I do mean that I felt horror – the two guards had been hit by the gunfire. One was obviously dead, and one was wounded and unable to move.

I don't know where these bullets came from, or even if they were German or Allied in origin. But now my German comrade and I were terrified of being discovered with these two shot men, in case we were accused of having somehow killed them. What were we to do? We discussed it quickly, and my comrade urged me to join him in running off to the German positions to the South. He said that he was going with me or without me, and he took the machine pistol from the dead Leutnant and began to run off towards the South.

Well, I decided to go with him, because he seemed a capable man and I thought that if I was found alone with the two Canadians things would go badly for me. In retrospect, what I should have done was to stay with the Canadians and tend to the wounded one, by giving him first aid and finding him some morphine and so on. I should have done that, because it would have shown the Canadians that I was a humane person. But my head was spinning with all these experiences, I was scared of being alone there, and so I took a German rifle and followed my comrade to the South.

This must have been a dangerous journey for you.

It was a foolish journey to make. Everything in that zone was in disorder and confusion. We realised that the fighting was certainly not over, because we could see Sherman tanks firing and lines of Canadian troops following them. We took cover beside a hedgerow along a road that led South, and we ran along there towards our lines. We aimed for a point that was South, but away from the Shermans. I knew this area well, and I knew that we had a resistance point with a dug-in panzer on a ridge down there, which was connected by sunken paths to the inland German forces.

I had the idea that we could get to those paths and get into the German zone again. But there was a great deal of firing all around, and Jabo planes coming over very low, firing towards the German lines.

At one point, we took cover in a ditch, and we found two other Germans who were equally lost, who had escaped from a bunker on the coast itself. These men were full of stories about the amazing weapons that the Allies were using: swimming tanks, and tanks that carried bridges, and battleships that could come onto the land, and that kind of thing. They were quite hysterical about all of this; the assault had affected them mentally very badly. They had rifles, but they refused to move and they were waiting for the battle to die down.

We left them, but we were very worried about these wonder weapons that the Allies had invented. Why hadn't the German army developed these machines? We were still muttering about this when we came in sight of the dug-in panzer on the ridge.

What kind of panzer was this?

This was some old French panzer, the type we captured early in the war. It was embedded in an emplacement, protected by mines and infantry in trenches. It was there to stop the enemy using the ridge to observe the area inland. I can only think that the Allies had such air superiority that they did not need to capture this position in the first hours of their attack, but they opted to push past it, relying on aircraft reconnaissance. Or possibly the ridge was too small as a feature to be important to them. Whatever the reason, the panzer emplacement was still there, and as we squinted at it (it was about one kilometre away) it seemed to be undamaged.

We took shelter under the hedgerow and observed it for a minute. We formed the impression that the area to one side of it was still in German hands, and so it marked the boundary, if you see what I mean, of the Allied invasion at that point. If we could get to it and enter the German lines, we would be among our friends again. The problem was – how to get to it? The area in front of it was mined, and if we showed ourselves out of the hedgerow, we were likely to be shot in all the confusion by both the Allies and the Germans.

As the minutes went past, we were joined by another German soldier, an engineer, who had retreated from a point near our fortified houses. We were also joined by a French civilian man, who was simply an ordinary farmer who had been caught in the open by the attack and was scared to leave the hedgerow for fear of being shot. This fellow was aged in

his fifties, and he seemed close to collapse from all the anxiety he was suffering. We really didn't know what to do with him or where he should go.

The engineer soldier had a flare pistol, and he said that by firing a green flare this would alert the Germans at the panzer emplacement that we were on their side; green smoke was the sign at that point for friendly forces. I pointed out that this would only attract attention to us and draw the Allies onto our location.

While we were debating this, the fields were strafed by Typhoon Jabo aircraft that were firing cannon. These cannon shells were devastating; they tore up big clods of earth from the ground and dug deep holes. The thought of those shells hitting your body - that was awful. We could only lie flat under the hedge and watch the planes going over us. The noise was terrible, with the screaming sound of the engines and the exploding noise of the shells hitting the earth. I don't know if the Typhoon had some kind of air siren, as the old Stuka originally did, for psychological effect. It certainly sounded like that to me. Maybe it was just the engine noise, but it was very intimidating, very frightening. I feel sorry for anyone who had to experience a Stuka attack, I can say that from my heart.

After that, another wave of Typhoons came in. The sheer number of planes that the Allies had available was incredible to us. There seemed to be no end to these planes, and still we had seen no Luftwaffe planes at all. This second wave of planes fired rockets, and they fired them down at the panzer emplacement. The rockets streaked down right above us, and exploded all along the ridge where the emplacement was. They kept exploding, and I could hear shrapnel flying around even at a distance of a kilometre. The shrapnel made a hissing and buzzing sound as it flew out.

That old panzer was completely knocked to pieces by the rockets. It just disappeared in all the explosions, and there was nothing left except smoke. In all this noise and shooting, I am sorry to relate that the French civilian collapsed died there where he lay. I imagine that he suffered a heart attack or some similar condition. It is impossible for civilians to be under such a bombardment, simply impossible.

What did you do with the body of this man?

There was nothing to be done; we left him where he was. That was the way of things in the war, I am sorry to say.

Did you manage to get back to German lines that day?

We waited until the late afternoon. There was constant firing and shooting, and many more aircraft going overhead. Our intention was to run out after dark, and try to make it to the paths behind the ridge which led to our inland forces. We still wanted to rejoin our army, and the risk in surrendering seemed very great. We only had a little water in our canteens, and as we lay there I personally felt feverish, I think from all the things I had seen and experienced. I was trembling a lot. Finally we crept up to the end of the hedgerow, near to the destroyed panzer. The engineer who was now with us said that he knew a path around the edge of the minefield, and we should take this track just as the light faded.

When it was deep dusk, the sky was still lit up with flares and flashes of explosions, and a very heavy gun, perhaps from a naval ship, was firing over us towards the inland zone. Those shells going overhead made a roaring sound. All the light and noise made us confused, I think, and the engineer, who was guiding us, took the wrong way into the minefield and was blown up by a land mine. It was one of our anti-personnel mines, which were a very nasty device because they injured the lower body but often did not kill the person outright.

That was a terrible moment. The engineer had his legs blasted away, but he was still alive and conscious. He was unable to move, and he tried to call out to us not to follow him into the minefield. He was lying on his back, with his legs missing, and although the light from the flares was not like day, I could see that the ground all around him was dark with blood. His clothing was giving off smoke from the explosion. I saw that he tried to pull out his pistol, possibly to shoot himself, but he did not complete this action. He slowly went still in front of us. That was the end of that man, who had tried to help us.

Now my comrade and I were completely trapped. We could not get through the minefield, and there were Canadians all around us. We decided to surrender, and we stayed still with our hands up in the air. The mine explosion must have got their attention, because in a few minutes a vehicle

appeared near the hedgerow. This was the small, tracked vehicle which the British used. They were everywhere, these little things, all the time.

They called it the Universal Transporter or something like that.

Was that its name? Well, it was a very good vehicle. This transporter came up, with two soldiers in it. They fired a machine gun over our heads, and we shouted in German that we wanted to surrender. They took us on the transporter down to the coastal area, and handed us over to their Military Police. That was the end of things for us.

How were you treated as prisoners of war?

The Canadians were always very professional. If I was going to recruit soldiers today, I would start with Canadians. We were put into a house under guard and we were given water and biscuits, which we consumed ravenously, as we had not eaten all day.

This house was full of German prisoners: artillery men, drivers, infantry and all kinds of administrative troops. The Canadians were holding prisoners in there before interrogating them and leading them away.

When I was interrogated, the officer asked me about the battle at the fortified house and what I knew about it. I was very worried about this, because those two guards had been shot, and possibly the Canadians were going to link me to the shooting, especially as I had escaped because of that, even though I didn't even see them being shot. I began to deny being at the house at all, but in my bewildered state I made a very poor liar, I think, and I began to shake and stammer.

The Canadian officer who was interrogating me stood up and pointed his pistol at my head. He placed it right here, on my forehead, and he was closer to me than you are now, Herr Eckhertz. He told me to tell him the facts, and so I broke down and told him what happened, very quickly.

That night, they put me in a cellar room under a guard, and in the room next to mine I could hear some poor German fellow being beaten up by the interrogators. They were really pounding him, I can tell you. I think he was a Waffen SS man, and they were demanding to know about the SS locations, and this went on for a long time.

In the morning, they took me in front of that officer again, and he had with him one of the men who had guarded me when I surrendered at the fortified house. This was the man who had been wounded, and he was there to identify me. I could not follow their conversation, but the Canadian man spoke to the officer and it seemed that the officer was satisfied with my explanation, because I had been honest about the events.

I have no doubt that those Canadians would have killed me right there and then if they thought I was lying. I'm sure they would have shot me.

And yet you said that you admired the Canadians, that you would recruit them yourself?

Yes, of course. They knew how to use violence, when to start it and stop it. I was impressed by all this. They were always very professional. To be quite frank with you, having been a prisoner of the Canadians, I would like one day to live in Canada. Of course, that will never be possible for me now. But it is just the way I feel.

Were you a prisoner of the Canadians for long?

I was transferred to American custody, and eventually they put me on one of their ships. I was on this ship for several weeks, firstly in harbour in England, and then going across the Atlantic to America to be held as a prisoner there. This ship was very cramped, and we were all very sick, as none of us had been on the ocean before. That voyage went on for about ten or twelve days in the end. I ended up in a prisoner of war camp in Idaho.

How were you treated?

This is very strange to recall . . . the fact is that we were all astonished at how well we were treated. The food was superb. Every day there was corn, bread rolls, tinned meat and potatoes. Every day, Herr Eckhertz! I don't mean on Sunday, you understand. And this was in 1944. And we were prisoners . . . it was almost madness. Every mouthful I ate in the USA was a guilty privilege, if you know what I mean. So many other people were going hungry, or were starving.

I thought all the time of my parents, who I knew were living on almost nothing in the Reich; and since the war ended I have read about the poor people in Holland who were almost starved because of the Allies cutting them off in the war.

Were you treated well in other respects?

The Americans who guarded the camp were friendly. They gave us this excellent food, and they let us organise ourselves, by groups and ranks. But we were not allowed to work, as I believe prisoners in England were allowed to work.

We offered to work. We offered to repair things in the nearest town, and work on civilian machinery, but we were not allowed to. The strange thing was that many people in that town were of German descent. We knew this because some of our men went there to get medical treatment, and they saw store fronts with German names and newspapers with German-sounding names in the articles. But we were never allowed to help in that town.

Why did you want to help? Did the Americans really need assistance in the local town?

Oh, no . . . it was because of the boredom we suffered, because of the boredom of being behind the wire all the time. And, to be frank, many of our men had hopes of being allowed to settle in America after the war, because by the end of 1944, early 1945, we all knew the war must be ending soon. Many of us hoped that the authorities would let us assimilate into America.

But that changed when the films came across the Atlantic and were shown everywhere. The films changed many things.

The films? What films are these?

I mean, the newsreel films of the camps, the concentration camps.

You have seen these films, just as we all have. I remember when the films arrived, we were brought into the mess hall one morning, this was in May 1945, just after the war ended, and we had to watch the film. I think it

was called 'This was your Germany' or 'This was Germany.' It was specifically made to be shown to German people. They were showing it all over Germany, in every town and village. It went on for about thirty minutes, all the things from Dachau and Belsen and those camps.

When the film ended, the American guards refused to speak to us, or even to *look* at us. Even the guards who had been friendly and helpful, they refused to look at us. They just shouted commands and locked us in the camp with the food. There was some kind of regulation that said we had to be given food, and they could not break this regulation, apparently.

What emotion did you experience on seeing the films of the concentration camps?

Some of us said that it was a hoax. Most of us knew, I think, deep down, that it was true, and that this was what the regime of the Third Reich was capable of doing.

One man, who had also been in Normandy, said to me, 'Is that why we fought, then?' That was the question. Was that why we fought all those years?

Because we were soldiers being ordered to do our duty, and our duty was for nothing if it was to defend all of that in the films. It left us very confused, and also very betrayed. And all of the time, the Americans, who now refused to speak to us, kept giving us more food than we could eat, because of their regulations. We had no appetite, but the Americans kept giving us food.

That was a strange time, and a time which showed us more than ever the resources which the Allies had.

Herr Voigt, thank you for being so candid in your account to me of your experience.

You know very well that I was one of the lucky ones. We should ask God that our children will not have these experiences.

The Airborne Troops

Gert Hoffmann was a Festungswerkmeister (Fortification Development Officer) attached to the 352nd Artillery Regiment, 352nd Infantry Division, in the sector of Carentan on the Southern Cotentin peninsula, inland from the American Omaha beach.

Herr Hoffmann, when we spoke on the telephone last week, you told me that you had encountered the first American airborne troops on June 6th itself. I am very keen to hear of your experience. But can you explain what your role was in the Atlantic Wall?

Listen . . . if you want to take away a completely accurate and factual account of what I saw, I must first clarify that the phrase ‘Atlantic Wall’ is itself rather misleading. There certainly was a ‘wall’ along the North East coast of France, around the Pas de Calais, where there were enormous concrete bunkers and gun emplacements, the kind that featured regularly in the articles that you and your colleagues used to write. If you go to Calais today, you will still see our bunkers above the town. Most of those bunkers were overrun from the rear, from inland, of course, as the Allies spread out in that direction.

But the further West you went, the less substantial the fortifications became, because the Western area, including Normandy and Brittany, was not originally considered a likely site for an invasion. Up until the autumn of 1943, the Normandy defences were quite simple, being mostly small bunkers, minefields, anti-tank barricades and so on, with a few larger concrete emplacements. Many of the smaller bunkers were actually civilian stone barns or houses, which had been reinforced and fortified, not at all like those massive concrete blockhouses of the Pas de Calais zone.

It was when General Rommel was put in charge of the Atlantic Wall that the Normandy area began to be more heavily reinforced with more barricades, anti-tank ditches, much bigger bunker structures and so on. But this process was not finished when the invasion came, which was very fortunate for the Allies. We had many other plans for the Normandy coast which were only just coming to fruition.

I understand from your remarks that you were involved in the construction of the defences?

Yes. I was a Fortress Officer of the Divisional artillery. Our role was vitally important, although today it is largely forgotten. We humble Wehrmacht engineers and builders have been eclipsed by the panzer men and the infantry and all the rest.

I spoke a few weeks ago to a Wehrmacht engineer who was in the Courselles sector. He gave me a very interesting description of his attempts to use a 'Goliath' type machine on the beach there. Were you involved in similar programmes?

Not with the Goliath system. My role was in the creation of zones of fire on a large scale. This meant that we found ways of altering the landscape of the battlefield, using mounds, ditches and other means, in order to influence the way that an enemy attack, especially an armoured attack, would progress inland.

We have to be honest today and say that the function of the coastal defences, I mean the emplacements on the shoreline itself, on the sea wall, was only to slow down an attack and give time for the alert to be sounded and a counterattack to be implemented. Of course, the infantry men inside those sea wall emplacements didn't know this! On the contrary, they were told repeatedly that their mission was to drive the enemy back into the sea, to prevent them moving off the beaches, that not one enemy boot must step past the shore line, and so on. But this was purely to motivate them. We could hardly tell those boys on the sand, 'You're only there to slow the Allies down.'

It was expected that, at least in the first few hours, a determined Allied attack using armour would progress inland. In fact, it would be better if it *did* progress some small distance: this would bring large volumes of troops and armour into a prepared zone where they could be surrounded and ground down. This would destroy the enemy's capability and also, very importantly, deter future attacks.

Was this the official strategy?

Of course it was, at least from spring 1944 onwards. If anyone tells you, *'The Wehrmacht expected to defeat the invasion on the beaches, the Germans expected to halt the Allies right there on the sand'* – don't believe them, please. That would be a foolish objective for a defending army to have. We in the Wehrmacht were not foolish. My God, we had learned from our own mistakes by then.

You see, this was a bitter lesson which we learned in several places, but above all at the battle of Kursk in Russia in 1943. You may know the story of Kursk? Well, at Kursk we made the dreadful mistake of allowing the Soviets enough time to prepare a *defence in depth* against our panzer formations. Those Russian engineers took over a zone of ten thousand square kilometres, and they built a huge series of traps for our armour, with endless ditches, forts, traps, minefields and so on.

None of these defences was insurmountable by itself, and over several days they were finally overcome, but the cumulative effect was to bog down our panzers, and turn them from a thrusting attack force into a slow or static target.

The Russians showed us how to defeat an armoured attack properly! Not with a single line of fortifications, as the French tried to do with their absurd Maginot Line in 1940, but by taking a whole geographic zone and making it into a swamp for panzer forces, a swamp for men and vehicles. Making the entire landscape into a swamp for the invaders. That was what we planned to do in Normandy, in the absence of a true shoreline *'Atlantic Wall.'*

It was very fortunate for the invaders that they came in early June; if they had waited until late June, we would have had these defences in a much stronger state to entangle them.

Can you give an example of how you planned to 'alter the landscape' as you said, to build defences?

Yes, this was more complex than it might sound. You could not make these defensive systems too simple; for example, you could not place two minefields with a narrow lane between them, and hope that the enemy would come charging through the safe lane, because the enemy would very

obviously suspect a trap. It was more that we had to change the topography of the land to influence their advance, to manipulate their progress.

An example . . . yes, an example would be the landscape we created around the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. There, we opened the canal sluices and we flooded a wide area of fields to a depth of two metres, which panzers cannot cope with. Then, we placed a series of incendiary barges along one side; these were river craft fitted with burning material which would explode as the enemy approached, deterring them from trying to ford the water. We created a lane around one side which could be used to cross the floods, defended lightly so that the enemy would think they were fighting their way through.

As the enemy came out of this, they would be faced with an anti-tank ramp system camouflaged by nets, which would hold up their panzers as they broke through. Onto this zone, we had Nebelwerfer (*rocket mortar*) batteries calibrated to fire on the stranded vehicles. Any panzers that finally crossed the ramps would become caught up in a system of bunkers armed with PAK guns, firing down a slope. And so on, and so on.

The enemy would find himself with a long, thinly spread spearhead of armour which grew less powerful with each phase, very vulnerable to being isolated and ground down. This was all very closely based on what the Russians had done to us at Kursk. Now, if you multiply this by the dozens of such traps that we were preparing over hundreds of square kilometres, you see how difficult it would be for the invaders to advance. They would become bogged down and trapped within their initial bridgehead.

Finally, an armoured counterattack using our fresh mobile forces would sweep through the remnants of the enemy and demolish the threat. That was the plan, anyway.

You mentioned anti-tank ramps and also anti-tank ditches. These were different structures?

Yes, the ditches were designed to deter a panzer from trying to cross, because the vehicles would be trapped inside the gap.

The ramps were the opposite; they were preformed concrete obstacles, which were poured into moulds on site. They were high, concave shaped ramps, hollow inside, which would deter a panzer commander from

trying to climb up over them. They also prevented the panzer crews from seeing what was on the other side. If a brave panzer tried to climb, it would get stuck on the inside curved face and burn its engine out, or it would shed its tracks as it tried to get a grip on the concrete. The interior of these ramps could be fitted with mines or incendiary bombs, to destroy the trapped panzer. The cost of these ramps was very low, and they could be assembled quickly by conscripted labour directed by our engineers.

What conscripted labour was this?

The International Workers. They were men from Eastern Europe or elsewhere who were working under our command. I regret that we needed to use such labour, but our manpower was so limited we had no choice. So the cost of these anti-tank ramps was the food for the workers, plus the concrete, which was sourced locally. Given enough workers, we could put up many kilometres of these ramps, in addition to the anti-tank ditches, throughout our zone. But we were only at the very early stages of this programme when the invasion came.

And yet, when the invasion happened, you found yourself facing not panzers but American airborne troops. How did this happen?

Battles do not go according to plan for anybody, neither for the victor or the defeated. In my case, in the first week of June, I was encamped near to La Madeleine, where we were planning to build a belt of the concrete ramps and fit them with incendiaries.

By the way, this was part of a defensive landscape which comprised the local river, which we flooded, and a series of low hills which we were fortifying with concrete resistance points. The resistance points were a combination of PAK emplacements and two-man concrete box points. These were to be manned by the Static Divisions, so we put great emphasis on making the advance of the enemy predictable, so that the Static boys would know where to shoot.

The Static infantry were not expected to move quickly between firing points and fight improvised engagements, this was not manageable for them physically or mentally. So the anti-tank ramps would manipulate the enemy's advance onto the firing arcs of the Static guns. But all that we

had completed by June 6th, though, was to flood the land around the river. This meant flooding a number of civilian houses, and their upper windows were still visible. The area became unhealthy due to the floods, with many insects and bugs . . . it was an unpleasant place to be. I was certainly glad of that cool rain which came on the 5th, on the day before the beach invasion.

How close were you to the beaches?

About twelve kilometres. I was billeted in an empty civilian house, with two men to assist me. One of these men spoke East European languages, to liaise with the International Workers who were due to build the ramps with concrete. The International squads contained some people who were quite skilled civil engineers, and it was worth communicating with them over the building process. The Internationals were not in the area yet, they were being held at a point further inland. So on that night, the 5th, I was with my two men in the billet.

Were you in a state of alert on the 5th?

The Static Divisions on the coast were alerted on the Friday before, I think. It was noticeable that patrols were increased and Flak searchlights were used more heavily over the weekend. That's what I remember.

How did you personally feel about the possibility of invasion?

I shouldn't say this, perhaps, but at the time I was an ambitious young man, and I was quite fascinated by the challenge. In the few months I had been in Normandy, we had built up the defences greatly, and although the job was far from finished I wanted to see how they would cope. I wanted another month or so for the defences to be truly finished, so in my arrogance I was praying for the Allies to come later, in July or August.

You say that you were praying?

Yes, Herr Eckhertz; misguided as I was, I was actually praying. Why is that strange?

I am a religious man, and I often had discussions with the Chaplains of the Infantry about our mission in France. In fact, just on that Sunday, which would be the 4th June, I had attended a chapel service in Carentan at which the German regimental chaplain addressed some two hundred of our troops on their duty. The chaplain was very clear that our duty was to drive out any potential invaders. He evoked the spirit of Charlemagne, who was the great Christian king of early Europe, who stood firm against the enemy barbarians.

Do you think that the infantry men in attendance were religiously motivated?

Well, each man wore the Wehrmacht belt buckle that said 'Gott Mit Uns' ('*God With Us*') which was the battle cry of Charlemagne himself. I think that most of our men had a fundamental belief in God, yes. Atheists must have been very rare in the Wehrmacht. I don't think I ever met an atheist in the German army.

We are going off the point, but what you say about atheism, of course, applies only to the Wehrmacht . . . in the Waffen SS, for example, most men were atheists, surely?

Were the Waffen SS atheists? I don't know about that. The *German* SS, I suppose – they didn't like their troops going to church, except to get married.

But you have to remember that by 1944, a lot of the Waffen SS men actually were non-German volunteers. The French and the Belgians in the Waffen SS, they were devout Catholics with their own chaplains who wore the SS insignia. The East Europeans in the Waffen SS, all the pro-German Ukrainians and that bunch, they were Greek Orthodox believers. People said that they would often go into action smelling of the incense from their priests' blessings.

And, of course, there was the Muslim SS, who I think were from Yugoslavia; it was known that they were very devout believers of their faith. Very devout indeed. I heard that they were very conscientious in their prayer times and fasting and so on. By the way, those Muslim SS men were

considered very ruthless and effective troops indeed. We were glad to have them.

So you must not be surprised to hear of a German officer praying that the invasion would come later rather than sooner. In that sense, though, my prayers were not answered, and the invasion came sooner than we hoped.

And so it happened. You were describing the night of the 5th June, when you were in the flooded area around La Madeleine.

Yes. That was one of those long, damp twilights that you get in Northern France . . . the air was very tense. I did not have a telephone or radio set, and no orders were brought by courier, and so I was given no information. I admit that I had a supply of French wine in the billet, which I had acquired from a nearby wine cellar, and I got through a bottle of it as I stood watching the coast through my periscope binoculars. I had no immediate combat function, as I was an engineer, but I and my two men were armed with machine pistols.

I decided to get to sleep at about ten pm, as I wanted to be up well before first light in the morning. There was a lot of aircraft noise, but this seemed normal to me because of the recent bombing campaign. Foolishly, I allowed my two men to keep on playing cards in the kitchen of the house; that was something I would regret. Life in France made many of us lax and undisciplined, you see. We were becoming rather French in our behaviour. We would be punished for this casual attitude by the Allies.

I know that it was at three thirty am that I was awoken, because I checked the time immediately. I could hear planes in the sky, and there were flashes of Flak visible through the window. It was raining slightly. I kicked the wall of the adjoining room, where my men should be, but there was no response. I felt that something was wrong in the house.

I put on my uniform and boots and took my machine pistol, and I went to the kitchen . . . I saw one of the men at once, asleep at the table with his cards, the damned fool. There were beer bottles on the table, I remember that. I went out into the yard, and saw flashes in the sky all around; they were like flares, but lighting up quickly and then fading. I had not seen this before, and I was very alarmed.

What were these flashes?

I have never understood what they were, although other people who witnessed the landings also speak of them, I believe. Some flashes were green colour, and some were pure white. I think they were some kind of signalling system used by the Allies. It was a strange sight. But then, in the yard, I saw my second man; he was face down and completely still. I kicked him, but he didn't respond, and then I realised that he was dead. His throat had been cut, and there was a huge quantity of blood on the ground.

I stood very still, listening and watching. I wish I could tell you all the things I heard in that minute. There were Flak noises, plane engines, and various sounds of vehicles on the Carentan road. But closer to me, I heard sounds which I thought were men moving; it sounded like men in combat gear. There are metallic sounds and scrapes which are unmistakable. I also heard voices, but I couldn't make out what they were saying, or even what language. I can tell you that my hair was standing up, and my heart was pounding hard, because I knew that the men out there might be observing me.

My other man now appeared behind me in the yard, apologising for being asleep, and before I could stop him he began speaking in a loud voice. The fool! He was shot immediately, through the chest.

The shots came from a wood beyond the yard. I jumped back into the kitchen, and my man tried to crawl after me, but he was shot again in the back. He made a lot of noise about that, which only stopped when they shot him again. I simply had no idea what forces were out there or what was happening.

Did you assume these were Allied troops?

They could just as well be French fighters, but the French were known to shout out slogans and threats when they attacked, whereas around the yard it was all silent now. So I thought this was some kind of commando raid by the English – that's what came into my mind.

I was determined not to be found, because the English commandos had a reputation for cruelty, which is one reason why they were classed as terrorists from, I think, 1943 onwards. I certainly did not want to fall into their hands.

Sorry to interrupt, but the British commandos were classed as terrorists?

Yes, exactly; this was decided in late 1943, I think. After that date, all English commandos were executed; I mean, their commandos who operated secretly behind the lines, rather than on a battlefield. This policy was well known to us at the time.

By the way, I knew someone who saw the result of a raid the English made on the Calais coast in 1943; the English commandos had used barbed wire as a garrote to strangle and decapitate the German sentries. For this reason, they were called 'Churchill's Rats.' All of this was going through my mind while I sheltered in the kitchen of that damned house among the floods.

How did this situation at the house end?

Several aircraft were coming overhead, quite low down. The noise was very loud, and using this noise I ran over to the front of the house and went out of the main door. There was a road out there which led to the command of the regiment, and I planned to go directly to them to report the situation. There was no point delaying or hiding any more, and I was sure I would meet other Germans along the road.

I kept close beside a hedgerow and began to walk up this road. I didn't run, because I wanted to be quiet, and to listen. My heart, I can say honestly, was like a hammer in a barrel, slam-slam, like that. Just as I got away from the house, I came to the edge of the flooded area. There was a large, white shape in the water which puzzled me, and then I realised it was a parachute. I looked closer, despite all my haste, and I saw there was a dead man attached to it . . . I recognised an American type helmet. So they weren't English – they were Americans. He must have come down in the water and become entangled on his chute and drowned.

There were also various parachute canisters in the water; they seemed to be painted in luminous paint, or fitted with glowing lights of some kind, or possibly that was an optical illusion. I had to take all this in very quickly and then move on up the road.

In the middle of France, surrounded by great armies of hundreds of thousands of men, I felt like the last man on earth on that road! There was a silence, a lull that went on for several minutes while I walked alone along the road. That is my main memory of June 6th 1944, in fact. I remember walking quite alone, with my machine pistol, in a very strange silence that descended around four am. A terrible silence. It felt that the whole world was getting ready for the battle that we knew would come. It was close to dawn, and the rain stopped, and I remember that the roadside was full of flowers, but the air was full of smoke and explosive fumes. That is a strange, powerful memory for me: just those one or two minutes alone.

And then complete anarchy erupted on the road, and the peace of France was shattered forever. I believe that I had just lived through the final few minutes of peace that poor, innocent France would experience on that terrible day.

What happened on this road?

A group of six German soldiers came out onto the road from the hedgerow, and they challenged me. These were men of the Static Divisions, but very conscientious. They said that American parachutists were present all over the fields, and they requested orders. They wanted leadership in order to do their duty. I stopped to think about what to do with these soldiers, but as I stopped, other men broke through the hedgerows on either side of the road and attacked us.

There was a hideous, primitive fight in the middle of the road. I saw that these attackers were Americans, from their helmets, but I was completely unprepared for the aggression that they showed to us. The Americans cut the throats of two of the Germans immediately, without any request to surrender or put down their guns. The other Germans began to run, and the Americans jumped on them and broke their necks deliberately, like this . . . as you would do to an animal. They twisted and snapped their necks. Even on the Russian front, I had not seen such aggression. The sounds of such a fight are horrible, sickening. The rattling throats of the dying men, and the grunting of the attackers, the grunts of triumph they gave when they stabbed or twisted a man to death.

I came to my senses and shot at one of the Americans with my MP. My gun jammed, and the other Americans began to beat me up. I think that

two of our men got away from there, into the fields, but I was beaten up, kicked and smashed in the head by their gun stocks. You can see here on my face the lines from the wounds they inflicted on me. I am not complaining, because many men in that war suffered far worse than me. But still, I was astonished at how violent they were. If they had asked us to surrender, we might have done so. I was shocked that the American troops were primed to kill in that way.

Why do you say that? Why were you shocked?

They came there to kill us, to do violence to us.

But this was the war, Herr Hoffmann. How can this have been a surprise, a shock to you?

It is hard to explain. I think that in my mind, I always had some idea that the Americans were civilised, but they were misguided, or they were misled. Now that you ask me the question, I try to understand my own feelings and it's difficult for me. I think that I had the belief, the subconscious belief, that the civilised Americans would not wish to disturb the peace of France. We in the German forces thought that we had gone to such lengths to protect France, to guard its people against harm. I think that deep down I could not believe that the Americans would shatter this peace we had achieved.

Of course, I was utterly wrong.

You were wrong about the Americans?

I was wrong about everything. I know today, ten years later, that everything I believed during the war was a mistake. I understand today that we Germans were not in France to protect the people, we were there only to exploit and persecute them. We should never have been in France, or Russia, Italy, any of those places. The things that we did were appalling . . . everything was wrong. Why would those Americans hate us so much? Why would they cut our throats and break our necks like animals, in the road, without a word? Well, because they knew the truth of what we were doing, that is why.

I see . . . Herr Hoffmann, when we began this interview, I thought that you would give me a very cool, clinical description of the engineering, the anti-tank ramps and so on.

But now that you have told me your experience, I realise that out of all the veterans of June 6th whom I have interviewed, you are the only one, out of fifteen or sixteen men, who has shown such a complete understanding of his own mistaken beliefs and his own delusions during the war.

Is that correct? Well, but you must not be critical of the others. It is difficult for us, Herr Eckhertz. It is very hard for us . . . after everything that happened in the war years, for us to be brutally honest about ourselves, about our lives.

Would you like to halt this interview now?

Yes, I have told you everything that I have to say about June 6th.

Only . . . I would like to add that we in the Wehrmacht were only ordinary men, just as those Americans with their knives were ordinary men. We were not great thinkers, none of us were great psychologists or political experts. We were simple, ordinary men. And yet the other people hated us so much.

The Stug Crew

Paul Breslau was the gunner of a Sturmgeschutz III self-propelled gun with the 200 Assault Gun Battalion, 21st Panzer Division, based in the Caen area south of Sword beach.

Herr Breslau, I have long been fascinated by the type of vehicle which you served in around the time of June 6th. Can you tell me about it?

Well, if you ask me that kind of question, I could talk to you all day . . . you see, the Stug III (*assault gun type III*) was the vehicle that kept the Wehrmacht fighting for those six long years of the war.

The story was that its inspiration came from General Guderian, who before the war pointed out to the panzer designers that, for five centuries, artillery guns have entered the battlefield pointing the wrong way! He challenged our engineers to create an artillery piece that is not towed behind horses or trucks, but faces forwards permanently, and is always elevated and ready to fire with its crew standing at the breech. With this simple idea, which was totally radical in those years of the 1930s, the Panzer Inspectorate came up with the Stug III.

It was a Panzer III chassis with a low superstructure, fitted with a fixed 75mm gun. By the time of the Normandy invasion, it had been improved and developed into a very fine machine. It was incredibly reliable, and gave reasonable protection with its armour plate. It was damned fast, too, if the crew fiddled with the governor arm on the engine, which we all did. The best thing about it was that it was so low and easy to conceal. If you stood next to it, the thing was not much higher than you. Of course, that meant that inside the compartment, you could not stand up, and you were permanently hunched over. But few men ever complained of this, I guarantee you. This concealment meant that it was perfectly suited to a defensive role as a Jagdpanzer (*tank destroyer*), as well as an assault role as a Sturmgeschutz (*assault gun*.)

May I read you something I wrote for 'Signal' magazine when I visited the Atlantic Wall in spring 1944?

I wrote:

'In every field, our tank destroyers and assault guns lie in wait for any enemy who might be foolhardy enough to violate the peace of a United Europe under the guardianship of the Reich. Our gunners are crack shots, and all of them are members of the '1,000 Metre Club' – meaning that they can hit a target of one metre radius at a range of 1,000 metres with nine shots out of every ten that they fire. They train constantly, and they use the latest radio sets and telex devices to keep in touch with their command posts. Let us not fear a potential invader – but rather, let us pity him, for the onslaught that he will face at the hands of these cool operators.'

Well. Do you think that sums up those times?

It does. That's a good description, actually. I remember the '1,000 Metre Club' very well. It was a disgrace to lose your membership of that club.

On my visit to Normandy in the spring of 1944, I passed a group of three Stugs which were dug in around a village, I think it was Ranville. The vehicles were almost impossible to see from the road. I wonder if you were in one of those vehicles?

Ranville? Yes, it's possible that was me. We were based inland of Ouistreham, as part of the second line of defence, which meant that we were behind those poor boys in the Static Infantry Divisions on the beaches.

Why do you say they were 'those poor boys?'

I mean no insult in the phrase, but it is a fact that the Static Infantry were there to soak up any enemy attack, to slow it down and to alert us, the inland forces, of the danger. Nobody on earth expected the Static Divisions to defeat a serious landing, unless it was a very lightly-equipped raid. I'm sure you have met people from the Static Divisions, and I suppose that they told you that they were there because they were unfit, or for some other reason not allocated to be part of a mobile fighting unit.

It is true, many of the Static Infantry men have told me this. But I must pay tribute to their commitment and determination, whatever their level of fitness. I believe that they fought very hard.

Of course they did. I would never suggest otherwise.

But we must be realistic, and see the facts for what they are. It was accepted by everyone that if there was a real invasion on that coast, and not a commando-type attack with a limited objective, then the beach forces, the coastal forces, would probably be overrun at first by a focussed assault. This was why a counterattack by our mobile armoured forces was so critical to any plan to defeat an invasion. *Counterattack is the surest form of defence* – that was the thinking of the Wehrmacht, and it was very true. In the end, of course, our full-scale counterattack against the landings was late in being staged, and so the Allies had the chance to build up their strength in the coastal pockets that they captured on the first day. Even though my own Division, the 21st Panzer, did fight back at once.

I would be fascinated to hear your account of the counterattack phase. But can you tell me, what form did you expect an assault to take in the summer of 1944? Did you expect a massive invasion?

Our orders were to be ready for an invasion on that coast at any time. From about March 1944, that was the phrase: ‘at any time.’

The question of how the Allies would invade was much argued over, of course. It seemed highly unlikely that the Allies would succeed if they attacked *only* on the coast. We knew they would have to use airborne forces, and we were trained to watch for these and to counterattack the possible landing zones in the area. We discussed endlessly, as you can imagine, what else the English and Americans would try to do to back up a seaborne invasion. We felt that they had to do something else; after all, they had invaded Italy with seaborne forces, and their progress there was extremely slow. Italy was a mincing machine for those Allied troops. Surely the Allies would not want to repeat that mistake in France, otherwise their war in Western Europe might continue for many, many years.

None of us in 1944 expected that the war would end as quickly as it did.

That's an interesting point . . . you, as a skilled German panzer man in summer 1944, how long did you think the war was going to last?

My God, a long time! We knew about the Reich 'Wonder Weapons,' but even so, we suspected that the Americans especially, with all their scientists, would have wonder weapons of their own. Among my comrades, most of us in 1944 felt that the whole war would continue until 1950 or some time such as that. We expected to be defending Europe on both sides, East and West, for at least another five years.

Were you really ready to fight on until 1949, or 1950?

Yes, we were. And beyond that, even after that, if it was necessary. Some of us expected the war to continue into the 1960s, imagining that it would reach a stalemate in the West and the East.

This is why we felt that the Allies would try to do something to prevent a stalemate, and accelerate their occupation of France as they had failed to do in Italy. We thought that they might set up a false government on French soil, maybe installing De Gaulle as their figurehead, and incite a mass uprising among the French population. We wondered what we would do if we had to fire on French civilians. Or would the French organise themselves into partisan brigades, as the Reds did in Russia? I knew from my own experience that a partisan was a dangerous enemy for a proper army to face.

Another view was that the Soviets might move one of their regular armies to the West, and invade France with Soviet troops. I see you are surprised at this idea, but many of us thought this was possible. The number of Divisions available to the Soviets was massive, we must remember. It would have been possible to move a Russian army to Iran, then North Africa, and then to launch them across the Mediterranean into the South of France. All of these possible combinations of events were in our minds, you see.

We often talked this over for hours on end, in our bivouacs when we were camped out beside our Stugs in March, April, May of 1944. It's so strange . . . that was only ten years ago, but it seems like another world . . . like the Middle Ages or something.

*What was the life like for you, in that phase before the landings?
Physically and mentally?*

Physically, everyone said that France was a paradise compared to the East, and this was undoubtedly true. We camped in bivouac tents beside our vehicles, and we spent all day maintaining the Stugs, travelling around the whole area to become completely familiar with the landscape, and practising firing and manoeuvres in the places where we expected we would have to fight.

I came to know the Caen area as if it was my home town. We knew where the ground was soft, where there were sunken roads with sides that could be climbed in a Stug, and which roadsides could not be climbed, and so on. We knew which copse had dense trees for concealing the vehicles, and where the rivers could be forded without bridges; all of this had to be known and memorised.

Of course, as this was France, we also quickly came to know which farms would exchange a few of our boiled sweets for a dozen eggs, or which houses would give us a chicken in return for some cigarettes. The French were crazy for our cigarettes and sweet rations, and prized them more highly than their own produce.

Physically, we were very well off, in fact you could say that we were living a healthy life. The exception to this was the Allied air campaign against us, which went on all through the spring and early summer. The air attacks wore us down psychologically, it has to be said. The explosive power of the small bombs which the Jabos dropped was horrible; for some reason, the English and American bombs seemed more powerful than ours or the Russian bombs. I don't know the technical reason for that.

The poor, helpless French suffered in this bombing as well, just as we did.

Can you think of an example of how the French suffered from Allied bombing?

An example?

I recall very well one evening in May, this was early May and quite hot, when two of the English Typhoon aircraft came over without warning and dropped these small bombs on the road where we were. That Typhoon

thing was a swine, a true bastard. We called it the ‘Schreckliche Flugzeug’ (*terror-plane*) and the French hated it too. The bombs that these two dropped went across the road, through a barn and straight into a farmhouse where a French family were sitting down to their supper. It did not damage our vehicles, because we had swerved off into the woods and we were hidden, but some of us went to look inside this farmhouse – my God. These six people, women, children, everybody, all laid out on the kitchen floor, lined up just like this, one after the other. All dead from the fragmentation shrapnel. Everything was wrecked in there, except for the pot of soup on the table, which was still steaming. Still steaming, yes.

I know for a fact that two young French lads in that village volunteered to join the Waffen SS French forces after that, so what did it achieve for the Allies? Today, when I see in the magazines and movies about how the English and Americans were greeted as heroes in Normandy, I am sure there’s another side to those stories, and a side that will probably never be told. And all this daily bombing, these almost random, indiscriminate air attacks, they made us very jumpy.

How did June 6th unfold for you?

I remember that on the weekend just before, there was a big alert, and the Divisonal command put the alert code to the highest level. I don’t know how they decided the levels, maybe due to intelligence or reconnaissance of shipping. So we actually expected an attack over the weekend. It was a warm weekend, and it seemed to go on forever, I remember that. But then on the Monday, the 5th, the weather broke and it rained, and the alert was reduced as well, and we thought, ‘Well, we’re ok again.’

On the Sunday, we had a big hare that we had caught, and we cooked that hare in French cider over a fire, I remember, which was excellent, and our mood was good. That’s a good memory, that rabbit in cider!

But then, on the Monday night, absolute hell broke out in that sector. The world just changed like that, like throwing a switch.

I think it was just after midnight on the 5th, when this tidal wave of aircraft came overhead. That is how I would describe it, a tidal wave. We were camped under trees, and when we went out to the edge to look up, we

could see the full moon, and lots of pale clouds, also many black clouds. Against these clouds were innumerable aircraft, all moving south in perfect formation. We stood and stared up at that. There was no Flak at first, no shooting, just these repeated formations going over, absolutely perfect in their alignment. It was like a damned air show.

Even when our Flak started, we saw that it brought down one or two planes, but it made little impact on those numbers. A plane crashed and exploded a few kilometres from us, somewhere near the river, and we discussed going to look at it, but our Feldwebels (*Sergeants*) insisted we stay with our vehicles. This went on and on, and with all the planes above us there were also many of our motorcycle couriers moving back and forth, and our reconnaissance teams moving around. The whole of France was awake that night, I can tell you. Don't believe anyone who says they were sleeping, and they didn't know what was happening! We were too expectant to be able to sleep, if you understand me.

Then, around three am I think, we were told that the enemy were landing paratroopers in the area, and that an aggressive parachute raid was in progress against our area. We had not noticed any parachutes, but we heard fighting to the East, and in the moonlight we saw a convoy of our troops in trucks moving that way. Everything was very confused.

This was the phrase that was used? An 'aggressive parachute raid?'

Yes, that was what our company commander said. To do him justice, it was impossible for anyone to know at that stage what was going to happen. We all believed that the paratroopers would try to capture Ouistreham, where there's a harbour. That seemed the most likely explanation. Many of us referred to the Dieppe attack in 1942, saying, 'Oh, it's just Dieppe all over again.' This gave us optimism, because at Dieppe, of course, the whole business was a disaster for the English and Canadians. Some of our boys said, 'We'll get our handsome faces in the newsreels for the girls to admire,' and things like that. Because after Dieppe the attack was in the newsreels for months.

But still there was no order for us to actually do anything, and so we remained, waiting and guessing at events all the time, until first light. When the light came up, we began to see that this was a major event, whatever it was.

What did you see at first light?

The aircraft overhead were fully visible now. We saw many twin-engined and four-engined planes, and a large number of fighter planes of the American Mustang type. All of these aircraft had black and white checks or stripes on them. I can say that over the next few days we grew very sick of seeing those black and white markings everywhere. I think I saw them in my sleep at one stage.

The Mustang planes were coming over very low, as if they were spying on us, looking for us. We stayed under the trees. I did see a couple of Luftwaffe planes around that time, which were definitely the Focke-Wulf fighter type, and they were chasing several Mustangs North towards the coast.

You are the only veteran I have spoken to, Herr Breslau, who saw Luftwaffe planes that early on the 6th. What time was this?

About six am, probably. We saw them go up to the coast, but I didn't see either of them come back from there. That Focke-Wulf was such a beautiful plane, like a sports car for the air. But we forgot about them quickly, because in front of us, on the coast, there began to be a huge amount of explosions. We went to the edge of the woods and looked. We could not see the ocean itself, but we had a view down the escarpment, which was mined in places and had various resistance points built into it. It was about two kilometres down to the sea. In front of the escarpment, the poor old Static Infantry were in position. There were huge explosions down there, absolutely massive.

We could see spouts of dust and earth rising up as high as a church tower down there. We said, 'God, the men on the beach are taking a terrible beating.' All we could do was watch. There were lines of fire in the air as well, which looked rather like arrows, and I recognised these from Russia as the 'Stalin Organ' type of rockets. These rockets were coming up from the sea and falling on the headland area. It was a real storm down there, with smoke and dust and the flames from explosions. The noise was very loud. We knew that this meant something important was happening.

Slowly, this carpet of explosions began to move inland, up the escarpment towards us. I know today that this meant that the Allies were on the beach and were bombarding further inland, but at the time, of course, we didn't know that the Allies had actually landed. All we saw was this dreadful wall of explosions coming up the slope, getting closer to us.

How did you and your comrades react to this?

I felt very sick in the stomach. It looked to me as if the attackers – and we still didn't know who they were – as if these attackers simply wanted to blow up a pathway inland. As if they were just going to explode everything in their way. How could we fight against that? Also, we started to notice people running inland from the escarpment area; through binoculars, I could see infantry men in small groups or singly, running or riding on motorcycles and trucks, trying to get away from these explosions.

I don't mean to say that *all* of our infantry retreated like that, but I definitely saw quite a number escaping from in front of this bombardment. Of course, that was the worst thing they could do, because then the bombardment caught them in the open. I remember that a group of Landsers (*foot soldiers*) were riding on a civilian car which was hit by one of the big shell blasts. That car was blown into many, many pieces, it simply disappeared, along with all the men in it.

We went back to our Stugs and we started the engines, and we checked over the guns and ammunition in readiness. My role as the gunner required me to clean the optics on the gun sight perfectly, and I got the glass ready and applied a small amount of soap to the gun sight lens.

Sorry, but why was that? And why do you mention such a small act?

This soap was to prevent the optic from steaming up with all the heat and fumes inside the Stug compartment. It was quite effective. I mention it because this was a ritual of mine, in getting the gun ready for combat. Other soldiers will tell you that they have their own personal rituals, whether panzer men or infantry, or pilots, I suppose.

I see. Thank you for explaining that.

Such things are important to the mind, in the moments before a battle. And condensation on the optics was a real problem. Inside the Stug hull, it was so very cramped, with four sweaty men and all the hot machinery inside a box that wasn't much bigger than the cab on a truck, and the condensation got everywhere in the mechanisms.

We waited for some time with the engines running, while our commander was conferring with the Company command. Then, at last, we were told to move out of the wood and take up our prepared positions at the top of the escarpment. These positions were points where we had practised our arcs of fire, and where we calculated that enemy tanks would approach to avoid the minefields. Our driver emplaced us in our position; our other two Stugs were on either side of us. As soon as we halted, I set the gun sight range for the field of fire we expected.

Through my periscope, I also saw units of our infantry take up positions in slit trenches just in front of us, so we were firing over their heads. These were infantry of our own panzergrenadiers, and all this was our prepared plan for defending the sector. The infantry were well-armed with heavy machine guns and grenades and so on. My commander leaned out of the hatch and had a long discussion with an infantry Leutnant; that officer told us that there were tanks moving up from the shore and that the attack was on a large scale, with dozens of tanks being placed on the beach by barges.

When did you first see the enemy?

It was about eight am.

The first tank I saw was a remarkable sight! It was equipped with a rotating mechanism on the front, which was whirling around at an incredibly high speed. It was literally whipping up the ground on the escarpment, raising a big cloud of dust.

The range was about 1,500 metres, which for my 75mm gun was quite manageable. The spinning drum on that tank was setting off mines in the minefield, and that was a problem for our plans, because if the other enemy tanks moved onto us across the minefield, we would have to change our positions to fire.

Remember that the Stug was just a gun on tracks, it had no turret, and so aiming the gun had to be done chiefly by adjusting the direction of

the hull left and right with the wheels, with the gunner only using a final few degrees at the end. As a defensive weapon it was excellent, like a PAK bunker, but moving the damned thing around was not ideal.

The mine-clearing tank, that you saw . . . that machine was called the Flail or Crab, I believe. Did you expect something like that?

Certainly not. I had no idea that such a machine had been invented. I found out after the war that the Allies had used it in Africa and Italy, but I had never seen such a thing on the Eastern Front. I must admit that I felt a kind of grudging admiration for the engineers who designed it, because it was an excellent idea. But all the same, I adjusted my optical gun sight onto the tank; that was my job.

It was a Sherman, and seemed to have no gun, and it was moving very slowly. My gun sight had a series of triangles inside the optic, depending on the range selected, and I used the hand controls to put the 1,500 metre triangle on this Sherman's turret. I can see the gun sight now as if it is still on my eye. And my hand on the firing lever, here. You squeezed it like this, you see.

Firing that 75mm gun always made my face jump off the gun sight, because of the recoil! When I looked again, after firing, I saw that I had shot off a big piece of the armour from the side of the Sherman's turret. This broken piece was rolling off across the land. The Sherman stopped, and then the drum and chains stopped turning. I shot again and I put the next round through the top of the hull. I saw this explode through the armour under the turret, because I could see a flash through the open part. Two of the Sherman crew came out of the hatches and tried to climb off. The Stug next to me shot them up with a high explosive shell. I personally found that unnecessary, but, there, it was done and that was the end of them.

I felt optimistic about turning back the enemy tanks now, because I thought the minefield was virtually impenetrable. It would take days to clear it properly, I knew that. Through the gun sight, I could see a number of other Shermans at the foot of the slope, and my commander fed me a commentary, telling me what was happening down there. The Shermans seemed to be hesitating, advancing and then moving back.

I put my triangle on one of them, and fired as he came forward, but the shell deflected off his front plate. That caused all the tanks there to

reverse, and we fired several rounds of high explosive to encourage them. I saw our grenadiers in the slit trenches cheering us on for our shooting. Then a big puff of smoke appeared in front of us; it was grey-blue smoke, and this smoke began to rise up into the sky.

My Feldwebel cursed. He said this smoke was a marker flare, fired by one of the enemy tanks to mark our position. This meant that they had called for an air attack on us. He leaned out of the hatch and shouted to the infantry to extinguish the blue flare, but they were slow to respond, and other blue shells or flares burst close to us then. So this was how the Shermans did battle! They fired smoke shells to mark us out for the air force to attack.

My mood changed again, with that sick feeling in my belly, because I knew that we had no real defence against the Jabos. You know, those mood changes were so hard to take, the change from optimism to fear all the time. That is in the nature of battle, but it drained me, it exhausted me. Were we just going to sit and wait for the Jabos? If we left, we would be leaving the infantry to their fate. I heard my commander shout 'Air attack!' And then hell on earth came to us in Normandy.

What form did this attack take?

I did not even see the planes. All I could see was their shadows moving across the slope, incredibly fast. That was all I could see through the gun sight. Then I heard a series of explosions, very loud and rapid, and I felt the Stug rocking around in the blast wave. There was a loud noise of shrapnel or something hitting our hull, really smashing into our metal plate, again and again. There was nothing we could do except brace ourselves and wait for this to stop. Through the periscope, I could see that the infantry trenches were badly hit, with smoke coming out of them, but I didn't realise how bad it was at that stage.

I could also see several Shermans coming towards us behind the destroyed mine-clearing tank. One of these had another rotating drum machine on its front, and it was obviously going to try to clear a pathway through the mines again. I heard my commander trying to speak to the other two Stugs on his radio set, but there was no response from them. That's when I thought, 'Well, things are going badly for us now.'

Did you stay and fight with the Shermans?

We tried to, I promise you, but the situation was chaotic. The mine-clearing tank that we had destroyed was burning up fiercely, and throwing out a lot of smoke that obscured our view of the slopes. I saw the second mine-clearer come through this smoke, making a path around his destroyed friend and then go straightening up to steer towards us. I laid a shot on him, and fired, but the round didn't seem to penetrate the front of his hull. I think that the spinning chains on his drum were deflecting the trajectory of the shells. I don't know why that didn't happen with the first panzer, or maybe I was shooting poorly now, or possibly the gun bearings were damaged in the bombing.

I fired again onto his turret, but I took the shot too hurriedly, and it clipped the side of his turret and deflected off. It's very difficult under those conditions to lay a shot precisely, with smoke and all the dust and debris that was coming out of the ground from his rotating cylinder machine. I was setting another shot onto him, because I was determined to stop him, when he pulled over to one side suddenly. Behind him, there was a queue of these damned Shermans, lined up as if they were waiting for a bus. I think there were four of them, lined up in the lane that the mine-clearer had made. They couldn't advance, but they were at a range of about 900 metres now, and that made me nervous, because even their short guns would start to be effective at that sort of range.

Sure enough, the first one in line began firing at us, and the round deflected right off our sloping front armour. What a noise that made! The whole optic system shook, and I had to wait for it to steady before I could fire on him. I just got that shot away before he fired again, and I hit him low on the front plate.

My commander congratulated me on that shot, because we saw it go through the front and then come straight out again from the top of the hull. That sometimes happens, you see, if the warhead ricochets around inside the compartment and hits a roof hatch or something. That damned warhead is going at a thousand kilometres per hour, and it's a piece of tungsten about the size of a big pebble. . . my God, the things it can do to the men inside the hull. Nothing can stop it, you see, and sometimes it just bursts out of the panzer again.

So that Sherman ran off to one side, hit a mine and started burning. Nobody came out of it, the destruction was too great, I think. The mine explosion set it on fire completely. But of course, behind him was the next Sherman in line, and behind that one was another two or three. I remember thinking, 'How many do they have?' I also couldn't understand why our other two Stugs were not firing on these enemy panzers. We in my Stug seemed to be defending France all alone, single-handed.

Would it have been wise to reverse, retreat?

But that was the vehicle commander's decision, not mine. A gunner in the Wehrmacht panzer troops could not ask his commander to reverse the vehicle to safety, Herr Eckhertz! Such a thing was not possible. My commander told me to keep firing, keep firing . . . as we were fully stocked with ammunition, and our gun was obviously effective against the Shermans.

The next Sherman gunner, though – now, he was a good shot, an excellent shot. They should have made him the leading panzer, really. He fired and hit us exactly under the gun mantle, just between the mantle and the hull front. Our Stug had the 'Saukopf' (*pig's head*) type of mantle, which was a single piece of cast steel that deflected shots well. But there was a shot trap under the pig's head itself, which deflected an incoming round into the gun elevating system. All I felt was a huge crash as this Sherman round came right under where I was hunched on my seat. That was a moment of fear and panic, I can tell you. To be in a panzer when a round comes in is awful . . . sudden darkness, and smoke, the engine cuts out, and the crew men are shouting and cursing . . . it is a terrible few seconds after a panzer is hit. The fear of fire is always in your mind; should you open the hatch and jump, or is the panzer going to survive?

My commander was very cool, and he told me to check the gun. I found that the gun was dislocated from its mounting and could not be aimed at all. The driver reported that the engine would not restart. There was also a strong smell of gasoline building up in the compartment. The danger in a panzer is that the fumes will ignite without warning. I was desperately relieved when the commander opened the hatch and told us to leave the vehicle. Of course, the Sherman gunner took no pity on us, and fired again as we were climbing out. This round deflected off the cupola, but pieces of

metal hit my commander in the legs. We helped him off the vehicle and took cover behind the raised wall of the emplacement.

That Sherman gunner systematically shot our Stug to pieces right in front of us. He shot rounds off the front plate, and then he blew it up with high explosive rounds. All the gasoline went up at once, so hot that it burned our skin and we had to run. The Sherman fired on us with his machine gun as we tried to run.

What was your personal reaction to this?

I could not blame the Sherman gunner. We had just destroyed two of his comrades. But my overriding emotion was to get away from the shooting. We were now effectively unarmed, of course, as we had only our pistols left. As we were carrying our commander away, I saw what the Jabo bombing had done to our defensive positions. The other two Stugs were badly damaged, because the shrapnel had exploded through their engine covers. The crews had left the scene completely.

I caught a glimpse of our infantry trenches, which were a sickening sight. The bombs had fallen inside the trenches, I think, or exploded just above them. There were many bodies of our troops inside there, all jumbled together. Some men were wounded and were trying to surrender. I saw several of them shot by the Sherman's machine gun. My crew managed to get down onto a slope behind us, facing inland, so that we had the ridge of the slope between us and the enemy.

I can tell you that on the other side of this ridge, on the sheltered side, there was what looked like half the German army, all pressed down on the ground, waiting for orders. There were our Stug crews, plus various infantry men, some clerks from headquarters, and many others, all sheltering from the attack. Nobody was in command there, it was as if we were all frozen. We could hear the Sherman tracks getting closer, and I could feel the explosions from the enemy panzers firing into the ridge.

Did you consider surrendering?

Well, many of our men were shouting to each other to surrender. But this was a situation, which I'm sure many soldiers will know about, where trying to surrender was probably more dangerous than staying damned still.

Those Shermans were determined to clear us off the ridges there, and they were firing and firing like devils, and they were blowing up the top of the ridge with high explosive.

I saw a man stand up and raise his hands, but he was hit by shrapnel and he was bowled back down the ridge, over and over. I did not want to suffer that fate, and I also did not want to be taken as a prisoner. I was due to be married at the end of the summer, and I didn't want to be carried off to some prison camp away from my beautiful wife-to-be. I had a cousin who was in a prison camp in the USA, which sounded as far off as the moon. I was desperate to avoid capture.

Do you think that your attitude to capture was common?

This varied greatly between individuals, I think, and also on the stage of the war. I know that some of our men had the view that being captured by the British or Americans would be a relief, or even an adventure, and they felt they would be well treated compared to what happened on the Eastern Front. But I think that attitude changed after France was lost, when we saw the Americans attacking Germany itself.

My own experience, when I was a prisoner of the Americans in 1945, was very frightening, but that was a discovery I only made later.

Remember also what I have just said: that the immediate circumstances of the situation are often what decide a soldier to surrender or not. Does it feel 'safe' to surrender, compared to the risks of not surrendering? Every moment is different in that respect.

But for me, on June 6th, we were saved from the necessity of making this choice, because at that moment our own artillery began to bombard the Allied panzers very effectively. We started hearing the sound of shells coming over the ridge; they were good, fat shells too – it sounded like a battery of 128mm. We had a battery of these a long way down beyond the river, so I imagine they were finally on the ball. Our German artillery of the war is sometimes underrated, Herr Eckhertz, but in fact the fire that they could concentrate was impressive.

I heard the shells coming over, because they had a distinctive low whine, and I heard them explode beyond the ridge, towards the Shermans. The noise made my ears ring. I risked taking a look over the top of the ridge, and saw that the shells were exploding all across the minefield. One

Sherman, I think the one that had knocked out our Stug, was hit, and burning badly. I saw some of the crew trying to get clear, but they were hit by one of these blasts, and thrown through the air a long way. The other Shermans were reversing in disorder down the lane that the mine clearers had created.

Those of us behind the ridge took the chance to retreat then, and we ran like men possessed by the devil, towards our deeper line of defences. This was a distance of about a kilometre, and we were strafed by Allied fighters as we ran. I think these were Mustang type planes; they shot us up with machine gun fire very accurately. My commander, who was being helped across the open ground, was killed in this strafing, and so was the man with him. We could do nothing to help them, because they were so slow; it was every man for himself by then. We aimed for some woods that would give us cover.

I remember that one of those Mustangs was hit by small-calibre Flak just as he pulled up on top of us. There was a 20mm Flak near the woods, well concealed under netting. I didn't see the plane get hit, because I was running like a madman, but I heard the Flak firing. When I got to the woods a moment later, I looked up and saw this Mustang, which was a beautiful plane, cartwheeling across the open ground. It was literally turning over from one wingtip to another, and its fuel was all spraying out behind it and leaving a trail of flames. What a sight that was. We were all transfixed at this sight, despite the danger. That Mustang span over and over, wingtip to wingtip, many times, burning brighter and brighter. I could see the pilot still on the canopy, sitting inside there. I'm sure that crash is burned into the memory of everyone who witnessed it, because it was such a vision of destruction. In a few moments, the whole plane crashed flat onto the ground and burned up completely. A lot of ammunition came shooting out and flew towards us at the trees.

The other Mustangs came back within moments and went berserk on that Flak gun. My God, they were like a pair of dogs tearing a rabbit to pieces. They shot it up from two directions, so the gun didn't know which way to turn. They shot the whole Flak to pieces, and then they came after us in the woods. We ran quickly to a ravine area inside the woods where our defences were set up, and we survivors of my Stug crew were taken to the rear to be assigned a new vehicle which was under repair. We were back in combat later that night in a new Stug.

Did you counterattack that same night?

We attempted a localised counterattack, yes. The spirit of the Wehrmacht was always that counterattack is the purest form of defence. That is why the Stug was such a valued vehicle for us: it could be used in attack and defence with equal effectiveness. By that stage, in the night of the 6th June, we were all exhausted, and we had to take amphetamines to keep us awake and energetic.

This was the 'panzer chocolate' amphetamine?

That's right. It was fantastic stuff at first, because it made you feel like new for three or four hours. But after that, my God! You had to take more of it, and then more, and it affected your judgement, by making you reckless or uncaring.

Were many panzer crews using these amphetamines?

The majority, I'd say. You had no choice, really. I mean, nobody forced you to eat it, but if you were fighting for twenty-four, thirty-six hours non-stop, you needed something, and if the officers offered it to you . . . why not? I have a very confused memory of the 7th of June, and after that we in the Stugs were pulled out of the line to refit the vehicles in the inland zone, although the Division stayed there fighting for many weeks.

I remember, on the way out of the line, we passed a lot of Hitler Youth boys in Panther panzers – these young lads were sixteen years old at the most. That shocked us a bit, seeing these boys coming in with these massive panzers. What kind of army was it that put Sunday School boys in Panthers? God alone knows what the Allies thought of those Hitler Youth kids. They must have thought we'd gone insane.

Were you eventually captured?

Yes, but I was taken prisoner in the Reich itself. This was in spring 1945.

How were you treated as a prisoner? Just now you mentioned that your experience was frightening.

It was a terrible time. I was taken prisoner with many thousands of other Wehrmacht troops, and we were marched out of Germany along the roads. We ended up in Holland, I'm not sure where exactly, somewhere near a large river. We were put into a camp – well, I say *camp* but this was more like a stockade with a wire fence all around it, and no huts or buildings inside it. The land inside the fence was bare, with no shelter, just grass and weeds. We thought this was a temporary holding pen for a few hours, but night came on, and we slept inside the stockade with no food or water given to us. We were probably three or four thousand men, all lower ranks, with no officers among us.

The next day came, and the guards, the American sentries outside the wire, they threw in some packages of food and canteens of water, but this was grabbed by the first men who caught it, and most of us had nothing. This went on for several days. Germans in that stockade were collapsing from thirst and hunger, and fights were breaking out all the time over the little food that was thrown in. And all that the American sentries did was to stand outside the wire and watch us. What do you think of that?

I have heard rumours that this happened in the last weeks of the war, but I have never had a testimony to it. How long did this go on?

I got out of there after three days. By that time, the prisoners were rioting and trying to break down the wire, and the sentries were firing low over their heads. Some of the unconscious prisoners were trampled in all of that and killed. So the Americans took out about half the prisoners, of which I was one, by chance, and marched us away to other camps.

Conditions in the other camps were far better, more in line with the Geneva Convention. But that experience shook me and made me very suspicious of the Allies, as you can imagine. I'm sure that stockade isn't mentioned in any official records, though.

I don't wish to be insensitive, Herr Breslau, but I suppose after what our forces did during the war. . . and in general the Western Allies were very humane in their treatment of prisoners . . .

Oh, so you think I should keep quiet about this and not mention it again? Well, one day, the facts of this will come out and people will know what happened.

Thank you for giving me this very detailed account of the Stugs on June 6th.

The Wonder Weapon

K.L. Bergmann was a specialist weapons officer who served with the Wehrmacht from 1941-45. He passed away in the early 1980's.

Editor's note: the German word 'Taifun' ('Typhoon'), when applied to German weapons of World War 2, causes some confusion. The name was used for an experimental ground to air missile, and also for a method of combat employed by the Wehrmacht Sturmpanzer (*Assault Engineer*) units, reflecting their use of shock tactics and assault weapons.

Confusingly, the word was also used for a powerful weapon using airborne explosive particles, which the Germans are known to have deployed several times on the Eastern front and again during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising in Poland. It is an experimental variant of *this* form of weapon which the next interview appears to be describing.

By coincidence, the British RAF used a fighter-bomber aircraft which was also named 'Typhoon.'

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Herr Bergmann, I appreciate you making time in your schedule to speak with me.

You are in fact the first person who has contacted me to discuss the situation in Normandy in June 1944. I find this rather surprising, considering my knowledge of the situation. To be honest, I have been waiting for someone to track me down and listen to my version of events in Normandy. I am glad that it is you who have located me, because you seem to understand the background quite well. How did you find me?

In a recent conversation I had with a certain German veteran of Normandy, I heard your name mentioned in connection with a rumour of an unusual type of weapon system. I have been unable to find out anything about this weapon, and probably all this was just a wartime rumour, but it

did not take me too long to locate you by researching your name. And so I wanted to come here and ask you what this was all about.

Well, I have never made any attempt to conceal my name, my role in the Wehrmacht or my activities during the war. The fact is that the world has heard a very one-sided version of the Normandy situation, in my view.

What I mean by this is that the German forces, contrary to what most Allied historians might tell you, were really quite close to defeating the Anglo-American armies in Normandy during the period from the landings up until late July, when the American 'Operation Cobra' armoured breakout happened. It is correct that the German military was substantially outnumbered in July, and also that the Allies had almost total air superiority. However, we possessed a number of radical weapons which could certainly have pushed the Allies back into the sea, in my view, if they had been used promptly and effectively.

You say 'radical weapons.' Do you mean by this the use of the regime's 'wonder weapons' such as the V1, the V2 and that class of systems?

Not really.

On the subject of V1 and V2, those missiles certainly could have been used in a more effective, tactical way in the summer of 1944. The command, of course, opted to use them strategically against London in the summer and autumn, thinking that this would destabilise the English government itself. This proved to be a false hope and a waste of priceless weapons. If only those systems had been used against the invasion beaches themselves! The V1 was ready at the time – it was used against London only a week after the Normandy landings. Using that weapon, we could probably have destroyed or damaged the Mulberry harbours and the fuel pipeline system which the Allies ran under the sea from England. This would have had a profound effect on the ability to land and refuel their vehicles. The same goes for the V2 rocket – if that had only been available a couple of months sooner, we could have destroyed the Mulberry harbours in June for sure. How the war would have looked different then . . .

But, look, what I am talking about, more than this, was the class of weapon which was already available to us, and which was in its explosive

effect actually just as powerful as the V rockets. I refer to the 'Taifun' (*Typhoon*) class of bomb.

I have not heard of the Typhoon bomb. Can you explain?

Let me give you an idea of how it operated.

Before my posting to France, I was attached as a technical officer to the German forces in the Crimea, where we used the initial version of Typhoon for the first time. I saw it used against the Soviet defences at Sevastopol, where the Russians were positioned in a series of very well-constructed concrete fortifications. These forts were huge structures, similar in concept to the French Maginot line bunkers, but in this case there was no possibility to go around them as there was in France. It would have taken the Luftwaffe many weeks of intensive raids to wear down these forts, but the thickness of their concrete meant that they could resist even heavy bombing.

When we used a Typhoon system on the site, however, these huge buildings were ripped open from top to bottom, literally torn apart by the blast wave. Even in the bunkers which were not blown open, the Russian occupants suffered massive trauma from the effects of blast. This was the largest explosion that any of us present had ever witnessed; I believe its explosive force was much larger than the British 'Grand Slam' bomb which is often claimed as the most powerful conventional bomb of the war.

How did this bomb function? How was it deployed?

This was not a bomb that you could drop from an aircraft, you see. This early version of Typhoon was actually a very crude system. Essentially, it pumped a mixture of oxygen and coal dust into the interior spaces of buildings such as bunkers or tunnels. Our assault troops would force a gap into the structure, and then they released an oxygen-rich mixture into the inside. This mixture was released from steel canisters containing the oxygen and a pump which blew simple coal dust into the building.

How could ordinary coal dust form part of a weapon system?

Well, the intention was to replicate the conditions which existed in a coal mine leading to an underground explosion. In coal mines, the air is full of coal dust, which is highly flammable, and if the circumstances are right a spark can set off a catastrophic explosion in which all of the available air, being full of this flammable dust and oxygen, simply explodes. There were several such terrible explosions in German coal mines in the nineteenth century and again in the 1920's, and it was realised that in effect the air itself in the coal mine was being turned into an explosive element. It was as if the entire mine was pumped full of explosive gas – that is how devastating simple coal dust and air can be if they are mixed and ignited.

That is what inspired the *first* version of Typhoon.

When we used it on the Eastern front, in the Crimea, we filled the target buildings with this type of mixture as I have described, and then we ignited it with a flamethrower. The explosive effects were as I described to you.

The Russians themselves regarded the Typhoon as a chemical gas weapon, and we began to realise that in response they were assembling mustard gas and other poison gases in the Crimean sector. I believe this was another reason why Typhoon was not used more fully in the East, because of the risk of provoking a poison gas attack by the Soviets, which would have led to a stalemate on the Eastern Front. None of us wanted that, and so its use was dropped. It was employed again against the Warsaw rebellion, which the Russians didn't care about, and again its effects were devastating against tunnels and closed buildings.

But the Typhoon weapon was the reason that I was in Normandy in July 1944.

This is all new to me. Do you mean that the German forces were planning to use a primitive coal dust weapon against the Allies in Normandy? But against what targets? Surely it was the German troops who were inside the huge bunkers, not the Allies.

You do not know the full facts. You must understand that during 1943, we had developed a *second* variant of Typhoon, a much more powerful version, which we named Typhoon B. As a weapons specialist, I was personally involved in the design and development of this weapon.

Typhoon B was a quantum leap forward in terms of the efficacy of this type of system . . . it was a very radical weapon indeed.

What was Typhoon B?

We had already learned to exploit the enormous explosive potential of mixing explosive dust or gas with air *inside* the target buildings, inside a closed space. Typhoon B was designed to use a similar airborne explosive system, but in a form which could be used out in the open, on the battlefield, against targets on the ground.

It was a battlefield bomb? How did this function, with the coal dust and so on?

The system was essentially an explosive vapour which was released into the open air. The vapour consisted of a kerosene base, similar to aviation fuel, blended with particles of charcoal dust and aluminium powder. The charcoal and aluminium particles, which are in themselves explosive, served to accelerate the force of the explosion, and also to make the vapour heavier and less likely to be dispersed by the wind.

The vapour was launched by low-velocity rocket, using a rocket-firing vehicle of the 'Stuka Zu Fuss' (*'Stuka on Foot' half-track*) type, which was widely available. The rockets fired canisters which were designed to release their vapour as they descended onto the target. This was extremely difficult to achieve, because of the probability of the liquid base detonating inside the canister. A vacuum system was used to prevent this. When a number of these canisters had been launched, they filled a large volume of air with their explosive gas; this volume could be up to one hundred cubic metres. Essentially, the target had this complete volume of explosive vapour suspended over it.

The volume then had to be ignited, and this was done by immediately firing a secondary bombardment of incendiary rockets. These incendiaries would simply detonate the complete mass of explosive vapour hanging in the air. The nature of the explosion was astonishing, because it created a blast wave which expanded across the ground for an enormous distance.

We tested a small prototype version of this weapon on the Eastern front, in controlled conditions. I observed the detonation and the effects on the landscape, which were enormous. As you can imagine, the shock wave was able to pulverise any structure immediately below it, and any Russians who were either in the target area or in a radius of many hundred metres were killed outright. The effect of blast wave is to remove the air from a man's lungs and arrest his heart muscles, and death is almost immediate, although there are often no outward signs of injury.

I am amazed that I did not know about this system. How often was this used on the Eastern Front?

It was never actually used against Russian forces in the field, in combat.

Then how were Russians killed by it?

This was a controlled test.

Do you mean that prisoners were there, under the blast?

Let's move on. I was talking about the Typhoon B technical side . . . the problem with it was that it was such a difficult and unpredictable system to use, because local weather conditions had to be completely mild and calm, with no breeze to disperse the vapour, and if the concentration of explosive gas in the air became slightly too diluted, then absolutely nothing would happen. But when it could be made to work, the effect was almost Biblical in its devastation, I can tell you. And the conditions in Northern France in summer are far better for deploying a weapon like this than the wind-blown steppes of Russia, that's for sure.

Are you telling me that the German forces were planning to use this weapon in Normandy?

Well, it would be incredible, surely, if an army had access to such a weapon and did *not* plan to use it on a major battlefield which was pivotal to the outcome of the entire war. That would be like saying that we had the

Tiger panzers, but decided not to use them. And you must bear in mind that the Typhoon B system itself was evolving all the time and was greatly improved by mid-1944. We had developed a denser vapour, which was less likely to be thinned out by breeze, and a self-detonating canister which released its cloud of gas and then ignited the cloud itself as it hit the ground when it was empty.

This was an extremely complex munition with which I was involved closely, from late-1943 for about nine months. I was not a scientist, you understand, but I was a technical officer responsible for the launching system and the fuse arrangements on the new canister design.

How did these weapons come to be sited in Normandy?

We were moved from the test phase in the East, over to France in March 1944. When I say 'we,' I refer to my artillery unit of which I was the technical officer. We were two platoons of fifteen men each, equipped with the Famo-Hanomag type fully armoured half-tracks. The half-tracks were fitted with rocket launching racks in the 'Stuka Zu Fuss' pattern. We also had several Nebelwerfer class rocket mortars.

Our Typhoon B canisters could be adapted to fire from either system, although our preference was for the half-track launcher. The aiming system was crude, but with such a powerful weapon at close range it did not need to be extremely accurate. We were based at Saint Omer in the Pas de Calais region, which was generally considered the most probable site for an invasion if the Allies attacked France. We were briefed to be ready to deploy our system at six hours' notice anywhere in a one hundred kilometre radius inland of Calais. So it was clear to us that we were to be used in the opening stages of a landing, as a response weapon.

Could the Typhoon system, as you have described it, be used on a coastal target?

The weapon could not be used on a beach target, because of the effect of the offshore winds. But we must remember that in 1944, we expected the Allies to invade France by capturing a large port for unloading vehicles and supplies, because an army needs harbour facilities for this. We certainly did not think it was possible at the time to land large numbers of

tanks, trucks and so on directly from the sea onto a beach. At the most, we thought that the Allies would assault the seafront sector of a port city, as they had tried to do at Dieppe in 1942.

This is an important point; the regime expected the invasion to be achieved through an existing port, not directly onto beaches.

Absolutely. Because if you start to calculate the volume of armour, vehicles, supplies that would have to be landed in the days after a full-scale invasion of France – how could such volumes be landed directly onto the sand? We believed that it had to be done through a port, and Calais was the closest distance to England, only thirty kilometres. Of course, we made the mistake of thinking that if *we* could not do something, then it could not be done. We had no idea that the Allies would bring over their concrete Mulberry harbours and create an artificial port there on the invasion beaches.

So, with this expectation of a seizure of Calais, your Typhoon unit was intended to be used against Calais?

We would deploy it wherever we were ordered to deploy it.

We reconnoitred thoroughly in Calais and its surroundings, in addition to the port itself. We assembled enough of the canisters to be able to launch three separate Typhoon B explosions of the maximum power, which would be greater than the controlled test explosions we had caused on the Eastern front.

We planned to launch the canisters from a range of about five kilometres, which would mean that we would have to be in shelters to avoid being injured by the blast wave ourselves. The half-tracks would fire six of the vapour-delivery rockets, which had the canisters fitted as a warhead. The last rocket to fire was fitted with the self-detonating canister, which would ignite the vapour produced by the complete salvo. As a failsafe, in case the detonator failed, we would launch a salvo of incendiaries from a Nebelwerfer mortar into the vapour zone directly after the final canister was launched. In this way, we could be sure of igniting the volume of gas and producing the explosive effect.

I really must ask the question, Herr Bergmann. What would the effect of this explosion have been on Calais?

Well, it would certainly have destroyed the port facilities, if we had targeted that. It would have knocked over the concrete quays and destroyed any vessels moored there. The blast wave would have largely destroyed the warehousing zone, and also the residential zone across about half of the city. Remember: although the weapon was based on kerosene, the addition of the charcoal dust and aluminium meant that it was not an incendiary bomb, but a blast bomb. The shock wave would travel out at a rate which I think was roughly supersonic speed, and it would radiate outward in a circle.

The way that you describe this bomb, it seems to resemble an atomic bomb in its effects.

That is exaggerating, and of course we knew nothing of atomic bombs then, but this would still be one of the largest explosions yet produced by mankind. It would immediately deny the use of the port to anyone. Any Allied troops who survived the blast could then be swept up by our forces moving onto the zone from inland. Also, the psychological effect of the weapon would be massive, as a warning to the Allies not to attempt another invasion.

And was it anticipated that the civilian population of the city would be evacuated before the explosion?

That would have been impractical, you must understand. Even the German garrison soldiers themselves were unaware of the presence of the Typhoon system in France. There was no point in briefing them on our presence. If the port was captured, we then had to destroy the port; that meant that the garrison had failed in their task anyway, to be quite frank.

That was the official view that we were given, but I have another perspective to add. We have to remember that the German garrison at Calais contained many troops who had been posted there for two years or even three years. Some of these men, including some of the senior officers, had

started relationships with local women, and in some cases it must be said that there were children born as a result.

This is not a criticism of the garrison, because of course such things happen in any army when troops are posted to a city for any length of time. This is the way of the world, after all. But the result of this was that I would not have trusted the garrison to conceal the fact of the Typhoon weapon. Word would have spread, that is the way of these things.

Does this mean that you intended to use this weapon against Calais, knowing that the remnants of the garrison would be present, and that the city would be populated with civilians?

Really, Herr Eckhertz, the way you say this makes it sound shocking. But the Allies themselves were bombing French civilians on a daily and nightly basis. In the build-up to June 6th there was a very intensive bombardment by heavy bombers against railway junctions, roadways and storage yards. It was far more intensive than anything I saw the Luftwaffe do in Poland or France in 1940, and it went on from around February right up to June.

I'm not sure how many French civilians were killed by this Allied bombing, but our estimates at the time were around 40,000 French people – that is more than the British said were killed in the 1940 blitz against London.

Do you see what I am driving at, Herr Eckhertz? Surely my point is logical. Destroying Calais with the Typhoon B system was no more destructive than what the Allies were already doing to France in the guise of 'liberating' the country. Using Typhoon B would have been a necessary action in the defence of Europe; that is how we saw it. And it would have deterred further attacks on us, saving many lives of both troops and civilians.

Wasn't that the American justification behind using the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? To save lives in the long term?

Herr Bergmann, you are combining many separate issues here. My intention in interviewing you was purely to make a factual record of what took place in France on June 6th.

Would you prefer me to confine my comments to a description of the events?

The events, and also your personal reactions and thoughts; that was my intention. Forgive me, but your reference to the Typhoon B weapon and the plan for Calais has really taken me aback.

Then I shall tell you about my unit's activities in Normandy. I must ask that this conversation is not made available to the press in any form for the foreseeable future, unless I authorise it.

I give you that assurance.

Well, then.

To start with the day of the invasion, my team of course was still based near Calais. I recall that the night of the 5th to the 6th was noisy, with substantial bombing around Calais and to either side. This was not unusual in itself, as I have said, and I personally saw no reason to consider this anything other than a heavy night's bombing. I was billeted in a house in the Saint Omer district near to Calais; the building contained our two rocket platoons, and adjacent there was a sunken area where we stored our half-tracks and we dug a pit to store the Typhoon rockets and canisters themselves.

I can bring the scene to my mind now. That night of the 5th, I sat at the mess table with our commanding officer of artillery and the junior officer in charge of the men. The ceiling lamp swayed and the power cut out, and we sat there in the darkness. I was desperate for a cigarette, but we couldn't smoke on the site, and we all suffered in silence, drinking French red wine.

At around two am, a courier arrived by motorcycle, with an instruction to make ready our systems and to be ready for a possible landing or raid by the Allies. There was also a letter for us to present to all Field Police and security units, ordering them to give us the utmost cooperation. We immediately went to our magazine pit and moved the rocket and canister crates inside the half-tracks. This was an exciting phase, because the weapon was to some extent my child, and I wanted to see it at work.

Your emotion was excitement?

Yes, it was. I was excited to be in charge of the technical side, after such lengthy preparations. I had the utmost confidence in our system, while of course I regretted the necessity of using it.

Following our predetermined plan, we activated our radio sets and left our base for the higher ground to the West, from where we would be able to survey the Calais area. We had the three half-tracks, each with rocket cradles, the rockets and canisters, and two wheeled trucks following us with spares, extra fuel for the vehicles and supplies for the men. We were now a self-sufficient unit, and we could exist for at least ten days independent of the rest of the army. The men themselves were heavily armed, with the newest MP44 machine guns and MG42 mounted on the half-tracks, and a supply of Panzerfausts. With this formidable little battle group, we reached the high ground and began to observe what was unfolding.

What kind of overview did you have from your position?

We could see to the shore, including Calais itself, and to the South West we could see down towards Boulogne. Of course, we were a long way East of the invasion in Normandy, but there were Allied aircraft moving overhead in large formations, which were arranged like grids. This was a worrying sight as they moved through the rainclouds. Flak was not heavy, and the explosions of bombs from the South were very clear to see. From our vantage point, we could see the blast waves of the bombs radiating out across the landscape in concentric rings, because the wave threw up the rain droplets which were reflected in the moon and other flashes.

I knew that our weapon system would make a shock wave far stronger than any of those bombs, stronger probably than a thousand of them detonating at once. We made radio contact with our command, and awaited their orders. We waited throughout the night. When the light came up, there were still large aerial formations overhead, including Lancaster type bombers which were very distinctive in their black colouring. We noticed that all the aircraft had black and white stripes marked on them. No Luftwaffe planes were visible. In this way, we waited into the morning.

What information did you receive about the Normandy landings which were happening to the West?

It was a confused picture up until about midday on the 6th. We were told to keep radio silence, and then we were told to report every thirty minutes, and finally we were ordered to arm the Typhoon rockets in readiness. At that stage (although I did not know this at the time) the command firmly thought the Normandy beach landings were a diversion or feint, intended to distract us from the Pas du Calais. We had expected such a diversion to be staged in Normandy or in Belgium, so this only confirmed our view that Calais itself was the real target.

Arming the rockets was a simple process, and we equipped each of the half-tracks with the full complement of six rockets plus canisters. In the meantime, in the afternoon of that day, the 6th, we began to see groups of our vehicles moving West. These vehicles were often shot up badly by the Allied Jabo fighters. The worst Jabos were the American Thunderbolt type, which was noticeable for its wide engine radiator, and the British plane, called the Typhoon, which were both absolutely lethal to our ground forces.

I observed through binoculars in the late afternoon of the 6th, on a road to the West, when three of our Panzer IV vehicles were moving towards the West. These panzers were strung out with about one hundred metres between each one, and behind them was a support group of trucks and a mobile Flak on a half-track. Well, a line of these Thunderbolts came down from the West, out of the sun on that side, and just made one pass over this column. They were using rockets under their wings, and these rockets were tipped with explosive that caused an absolute storm of fragments to fly around where they detonated.

I was about two kilometres distant, but I saw clearly the explosions shoot up the roadway, looking horribly like red flowers . . . as if these huge red flowers were suddenly sprouting along the road, one after the other. These bursts ran right through our three Panzer IVs, and tore them up. Their armoured screens came off, and also the tracks, and the rockets went right into the engine of one of the panzers and simply blew it to pieces. Then the trucks and the Flak vehicle were hit, without the Flak even firing a shot. Those vehicles were completely torn up, with the wheels all flying off and the cabs exploding – all with the crews inside. This only took perhaps five

seconds from start to finish, but my God, after those few seconds the three panzers and all the support wagons were knocked to pieces and burning.

I began to be concerned for what would happen to our system if we were hit by such strafing, and we made huge efforts to conceal our vehicles in culverts under foliage and nets. When we finally received the order to move to the West, towards the beaches, we moved at night to avoid the Jabo planes.

But this was the following week, on the eleventh or twelfth of June.

By that stage, was the Normandy landing still regarded as a diversionary attack, or acknowledged as the main attack?

That is difficult to say. I was often in discussion with armour officers or the intelligence command. It became clear that the Allies were building up in great strength behind their beach heads in Normandy, which suggested they wanted to break out of where we were containing them, indicating that this was more than a diversion. At the same time, we found it difficult to accept that they would not want to capture a port. They were moving North towards Cherbourg, apparently, and there were also rumours that they were going to capture the Channel Islands, you know - Jersey and those strange places, and use them as a jumping off point, like a group of aircraft carriers.

Another view was that *everything* in France was still a feint, and the main attack would be through Holland to separate France from the Reich.

All of this uncertainty was very frustrating for us, and I heard some of the infantry officers say that it was hard to order their men to fight and die against a fake, diversionary landing. But I think in those days, around the twelfth of June, there started to be a general acceptance that the beach landings really were in fact the main strike, and it was in Normandy, around the beach heads, that we would have to push them back to the water.

As we moved West at night, in fact, this became clear to me as I began to see the amount of armour that we were assembling around the beach head pockets. This was in the phase when the 21st Panzer and the Waffen SS panzers were encircling the Allied pockets, which were still very small areas of land.

As we moved into Normandy, although it was dark, there were a lot of flares burning in the sky and I could see long lines of Panther type

panzers along the roads. They travelled with their turrets rotated to the rear, which I asked about and they told me that this was to disguise the typical outline of the panzer if seen from above. Most of these Panthers had foliage tied to their upper surfaces, and some of them had planks of wood and even roof tiles arranged over them, to resemble buildings from the air. This made an impression on me, and I halted our small column and had the men wrap foliage completely around our half-tracks.

What do you remember most strongly today about entering the Normandy battle zone in mid-June 1944?

The level of destruction was the most immediate thing. The destruction achieved by the Allied bombing was staggering, even for me. I can tell you this, Herr Eckhertz: if our Luftwaffe had been able to deliver such destruction on a battlefield in Russia in 1941 or 42, then we would have been more successful in our endeavours there.

As we came through inland of the Deauville area, towards the front line, there was a series of parachute flares from the North which forced us to take cover between two houses. I jumped down from the half-track and went up to the top of one of these houses to see the battlefield area with my binoculars. Everything was destroyed – everything.

A train line had a civilian train demolished on the tracks, with the locomotive and the carriages bunched up like some monstrous caterpillar frozen in its movement. To either side, cattle which had been in the fields were dead with their legs in the air – scores of these cattle. Cultivated fields were full of craters. A village of fifty or sixty houses was smashed apart. What impressed me most was a creek running close to the front line, which was literally on fire; I mean that the water was running with flames which must have come from spilled gasoline or some form of incendiary attack. This creek ran down over a weir and the fall of the weir was burning with fire.

In the middle of all that was the tail of a Lancaster bomber, just lying there and burning. The glass turret of this tail plane was pointing up, and the flames were burning inside the glass. I thought that I could see a human form in there, perhaps the body of the tail gunner – but as I looked, the whole structure dissolved away into the flames.

Beyond that, one of our tank destroyer vehicles had been caught in the open, and it was nose down in a crater. I saw its crew simply sitting on the ground, apparently stunned, with their bodies trailing smoke. Nobody came to help them. Everywhere around were wrecked cars and trucks with their tyres burning.

I remember that my father had told me about things he had seen in the 1914 war, where the mud, he told me, stretched out in front of him like a sea, full of burning craters. My father always impressed that on me: the burning craters of France. Looking at Normandy, I concluded that mankind had made some progress from 1914: not only the craters were burning, but every possible thing was smashed and wrecked.

What were your orders on entering the combat zone?

We were to be ready to use our weapon system not against a port, but against enemy panzer groups preparing to attack our lines. At this point, we were taken to the South and held in hiding with the reserves, first for a week, and then we were told that our system would have to wait for a critical moment to be used. This waiting and waiting was infuriating for us. We could hear the battles happening to the North, and we followed the news hour by hour on our maps. But we waited, into July, and right up to the third week of July. Finally, around the third week of July, we were told that the critical moment was now in sight, and we moved up to the front with our half-tracks and all our gear.

Our intelligence was that the Americans were assembling a huge force, apparently of many hundreds of panzers of the Sherman type, apparently intending to break out of the Saint Lo zone and enter South across the plain. This is what is now known to be the 'Operation Cobra' breakout action. This was a grave danger, because if their panzers could break out they would advance rapidly to the South and East. There was also a concern that the English and Canadians were massing to break through past Caen. Taken together, these potential attacks had the capacity to drive the German forces out of Northern France, which indeed was what very soon happened.

But it was thought that our Typhoon weapon, if used accurately in the right conditions at this very moment, was capable of destroying a large concentration of armoured vehicles at one blow – potentially an entire

armoured Division. We could halt the American ‘Operation Cobra’ before it started.

How could one blast destroy so many tanks?

We knew from discussions with our own panzer troops that a tank does not have to be destroyed for it to be rendered out of action. The shock wave of the Typhoon B weapon would crush any tanks in a radius of about one kilometre, but tanks present to a radius of three or four kilometres would be prevented from moving. The shock travels through a tank, you see, and causes damage to the engine, such as breaking the fuel lines and starting fires. It also unbalances the gun mountings, and blows off the tracks – and of course, there is the damage to the crew inside, and the potential for detonating the ammunition.

We knew that the Allies had a tendency to amass their tanks in very tight groups before an attacking operation. Don’t take my word for this, just look in ‘Time’ magazine and those other magazines for pictures of the Shermans in Normandy. Some of them are packed so closely together that it looks like a parking lot. Of course, they did this because they had no fear of air attacks, but it certainly created a very dense and vulnerable target for a powerful blast weapon.

The technical aspect was complex. This was a different mission to what we previously envisaged, which was the destruction of a port city, and the new task was in some ways much more demanding for us technically. We would receive little notice of the exact location of the enemy tanks, and we would have to take up firing positions rapidly, coinciding with the right wind conditions.

On the other hand, because the tank concentrations were now many kilometres inland, the atmospheric conditions might be *more* favourable; on the coast in France, there is always a slight breeze, whereas a few kilometres inland in the middle of summer, the air can be very hot and still, at times completely windless, which would be ideal for the release of our explosive vapour. Of course, the French weather is changeable, and if a strong breeze blew in at the time of launching, then the vapour would be dispersed, the weapon would not ignite and so the whole launch would be wasted.

Given all these factors together, we moved to a point near Saint Lo, and we housed our weapons at dawn in a small stone quarry which was covered over with netting and foliage, an ideal concealment point. We constantly checked and maintained the vehicles, the canisters and rocket systems so that all was prepared. At sunset, a courier from the command came to us, with an escort of field police vehicles and a detachment of Panzergrenadiers. The courier was under orders to guide us to a firing point, which was within range of a huge assembly area for Allied tanks north of Saint Lo. When we arrived there, we were met by intelligence teams who briefed us in detail.

Intelligence from French and aerial reconnaissance had shown that there was a large assembly of tanks in fields near a place which was named Ariel. I took that as a good omen, as it's such a classical name. This was an area in a slight depression, which presumably the Allies intended for concealment, but in fact this would assist the concentration of the explosive gas, as it would hold the vapour in place. The weather conditions were ideal, being an estimated fifteen degrees Celsius overnight, and with no wind movement discernible at all. It was believed that the Allied tanks would break out at first light, and so we had to launch our weapon during the night. We decided on launching at one am, by which time we believed that the tank numbers would be at their greatest.

How many Allied panzers were involved?

I don't know exactly; possibly around four hundred armoured vehicles of different types, of which I believed we could destroy at least half by using the three groups of canisters together simultaneously across a zone. The blast wave would be destructive to a radius of about ten kilometres. The psychological effect on the Allied troops would be very shocking, of course, and their commanders would have no way of knowing whether or not we had further such weapons in reserve.

In reality, we did not yet have more supplies, but these were expected from Germany around the end of July. So, if the system worked, the opportunity was for us to stun the Allied advance, as a slaughterhouse man stuns a bull before slaughtering it. Once the stun blow was delivered at Ariel, our panzers would advance through the wreckage of the American zone, drive to the sea and split the Americans off. We would then have

more Typhoon weapons available to use against the British tanks in turn. As the intelligence officer said to me, and he expressed it well, 'The Allies thought they could kick in our door, but we will bring the house down around their heads.' This was the plan on the evening of 24th July.

We moved to a point just inside our lines, protected by our Panzergrenadiers. All our other armour was pulled back out of the blast zone. We had some infantry units in our front line, of course, and they would suffer in the blast, but this was an unavoidable factor.

You would sacrifice the German infantry in the blast?

It was not practical to remove them. The Allies would notice any withdrawal, and might surge forward, threatening our launching site. As it was, we expected that we ourselves would become casualties of the blast; perhaps not fatal casualties, but probably with permanent injuries, loss of hearing or lung damage. But we were facing the loss of France itself if the Allies broke out fully, because there was then nothing to stop the Shermans racing on to Paris and then beyond.

We knew that the loss of France would lead to a siege of Germany, potentially the loss of the Reich itself . . . the stakes were as high as for any action in the war, you must understand. We were saving the Reich itself with our Typhoon B explosion; that was the calculation, you see.

I need hardly enquire as to whether your Typhoon was used successfully. If so, this would have been one of the decisive moments of the war. Perhaps it would have changed the course of the war itself.

Of course it *might* have. If we could halt the 'Cobra' breakout, and drive the Allies from France, and then use our Typhoon system on the Eastern front, imagine the consequences. Let the Reds attack us with their armies of one thousand T34s or two thousand T34s. Our system was improving all the time, its technical aspects were becoming more manageable, and before long we would have it in a form that could be used in windy or cold conditions. The East might be ours to conquer again. All this was in my mind as we were readying the three half-tracks at Saint Lo. I felt the weight of history itself on me, I can say that without exaggeration.

What ultimately happened? Did you launch the weapon, and it failed to ignite, or what was the outcome?

It got to 12.45 am, and the whole device was primed. We had the vehicles pointing north towards Ariel, and we had deployed our infra-red rangefinder to adjust the rocket trajectory as precisely as possible. The escorting soldiers had been ordered to dig a protection trench, and they had created one about three metres deep and long enough for all of us in the Typhoon crew. We had the electrical firing cables running to the trench and connected to the firing battery.

My God, the night was so hot, it was so airless and still – it was perfect for our purposes. I warned the troops to take cover and to expect the biggest explosion imaginable, although in reality I knew that nobody could imagine the scale of the blast we were about to create. It came to 12.50 and 12.55, and I decided to fire the weapon earlier than planned, because the air conditions were so well suited at that moment. I felt the hand of destiny on my shoulder at that moment, believe me. I knew we were on the brink of a historic action.

Such thoughts are often punished by reality, of course. In reality, the launch was not destined to take place.

What happened to prevent it?

A soldier's bad luck, nothing more. The enemy began a bombardment on us – not, I am sure, because they knew what my unit was doing, but as part of some attempt to realign their front before their breakout. At first I was not alarmed, but this barrage came towards us across the meadows, and before we could move the half-tracks the shells burst on our position.

I had a periscope with me in the trench, because I wanted to film the launch process, and through this I saw one of the shells land close to the half-tracks. One of the vehicles was knocked onto its side, and with that blast, the canisters exploded. Because they were not dispersed into the air, their explosive power was not equivalent to the full-scale Typhoon system. The kerosene simply ignited in its liquid form, not the vastly more potent aerosol form accelerated by the charcoal dust. There was just a huge fireball

of the fuel, which completely destroyed the three half-tracks, and rose up over us to a height of maybe a hundred metres.

Everything stopped for a few seconds; I suppose that everyone on the battlefield must have watched this fireball. The Allies probably assumed that they had hit a fuel supply dump, because the explosion was about the same. Our infantry probably decided something similar. In the heat of this fireball, the metal end of the periscope, which was exposed, partly melted, and we down in the trench suffered burns to our skin. But that fireball was slow and burned in a messy way, not at all like the sudden, rapid explosion that was planned from the aerosol bomb.

Well, that was it. That was the end of our attempt, and we were not authorised after that to rebuild the system. And so the Allies escaped this demonstration of our power.

What impact would this have had on the Allies, do you think?

It would have been a body blow to them, both materially and mentally. We knew that they were afraid of our most modern weapons, especially the Panther panzers and the Messerschmitt 262 plane, and a demonstration of our rocket technology in this manner would have been devastating. I believe it could have prevented the loss of France in 1944. That was its power.

Why was the system not progressed after that?

After that experience, the launch at close range from vehicles was considered too unreliable and too prone to being disrupted by the enemy. Research took place into other ways of delivering the blast. We must also remember that the Reich had in preparation a number of weapon systems which could possibly have been adapted to delivering the Typhoon very effectively. Not the V2 rocket, because that was supersonic and simply too fast in its impact. But the V1 rocket would have been an excellent delivery weapon, if used in salvos fitted with the canisters. If you have seen newsreel films of a V1 falling to earth over London, the way it falls is ideal for releasing the gas mixture.

We were also working on a Typhoon bomb that could be launched from an aircraft such as the Messerschmitt 262, which was far faster than

anything the Allies had dreamed of. There were also glider bombs steered by remote control radio commands, which the Luftwaffe used very effectively against Italian warships in 1943, I believe. These glider bombs were in effect missiles steered by remote control, and if we imagine using them with our Infrared mechanisms, well, that would be a devastating missile indeed.

But our research in these delivery systems was slow under the chaotic conditions that existed in 1944-45, and no breakthrough was achieved. The other problem was the availability of the high grade aluminium powder for the explosive mixture, which was becoming almost impossible to obtain at the end of the war.

You see, Herr Eckhertz, there were many ways that Typhoon B could have been used, if we had pressed ahead with its development and matched it with the best delivery method. Truly, the Typhoon could have changed the outcome of the war, I believe, just as the atomic bomb finally did. But of course, *that* is one field, and one field alone, in which the Americans were vastly beyond us in technology: the atomic field.

You think that the German scientists were not close to creating an atomic bomb?

I think it is unlikely, because the fact is that none of us understood what an 'atomic bomb' was. I speak as someone who attended University and studied physics, and I often had discussions on this subject with other technical officers who also had an interest in atomic science.

I remember that, since the 1930s, there were theories that a powerful bomb could be created using radioactive materials such as radium. What I thought this meant, and my technical colleagues also thought this meant, was that a bomb could be made which would disperse radioactive material such as radium, and in this way it could poison a wide area by dispersing the dangerous substance. I did not understand that the radium itself would be the explosive matter.

In fact, in August 1945, when I read about the American atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, my first thought was 'Well, they have built a Typhoon weapon like ours! They have built a giant Typhoon bomb which works in the air and spreads poisonous radium. This is how they have blown up a city and poisoned the people with radiation.' I

thought that was what it meant when the newspapers said the Americans had ‘used the power of the atom.’ I had no real understanding of materials such as Uranium and the way it could be made to explode by itself. It was only by reading the press that I understood that this process was entirely new to science.

Where were you in August 1945, when you read about Hiroshima?

I can tell you exactly: I was in a factory converting German military vehicles into agricultural tractors.

I had surrendered to the Americans in April 1945, on the river Elbe, when they were overrunning the whole of Western Germany. By that stage I was in the role of a normal artillery officer, and I was considered to be nothing special at all. I was in an American prisoner camp until July 1945, at first in Germany, and then in a British camp in Northern Ireland. The Northern Irish were the most cheerful people I have ever encountered, before or since. Everything was a joke to them: the war, the world, life, everything was the subject of humour.

In August 1945, I was offered the chance to return to Germany to work in the tractor plant, as the authorities knew I had engineering skills. The factory took light tanks, half-tracks and similar vehicles and turned them into farm tractors. This was an excellent idea, because agriculture was a priority for us, and these thousands of tracked vehicles were available in running order.

But Herr Bergmann, what did the Americans and British say about your knowledge of the Typhoon weapon? You shared the design with them?

No, I did not discuss the Typhoon system during my interrogation. The questioning was very quick, and the interrogators were more interested in the location of supply dumps, concealed bombs and other immediate concerns. They had no reason to think that I was anything other than a basic artillery officer.

I *thought* of telling them, but then I thought that it would complicate matters for me, and the longer I kept quiet about it, the more problems I saw if I did tell them. And as the Typhoon programme had all come to nothing anyway, the concept was not a threat to them, surely. So my war

experiences came to an end, and I came back into the civilian sphere, where you find me today. If anyone was to ask me now, 'What do you know about Typhoon?' then I would tell them, as I feel that I have done nothing wrong, and I have nothing to hide. But, as I said to you when we began speaking, you are the only person who has made the effort to contact me regarding Normandy.

You have given me a remarkable account of an important aspect of the war. I need some time to reflect on what you have told me, to put it into perspective.

I ask only, Herr Eckhertz, that you do not publish this interview in the general press, I mean the newspapers and the like, without my express permission. I am glad that I have had this opportunity to discuss the events, but I do not wish to be under public scrutiny. I am sure that you can sympathise with my wishes in this respect.

I appreciate your sentiments fully, and I think you are right to ask for discretion in this matter. This is not something which I would want to publish for the foreseeable future.

Postscript

By Holger Eckhertz
July 2015

I sincerely hope that the reader has found new insights, understanding or interest in this second book of interviews with German veterans of D Day. Looking back over the transcripts, I am struck by a number of common elements which I would like to highlight.

In the first volume of these interviews, I noted that there were three themes which seemed to come out strongly in those particular conversations: the Germans' *motivation* in defending a 'United Europe,' their apparent shock at the *aggression* of the Allied troops, and the overwhelming *firepower* and air superiority of the Allies. In this second book, I feel that these three elements are again strongly present – but there are also further issues which are very noticeable in these veterans' remarks.

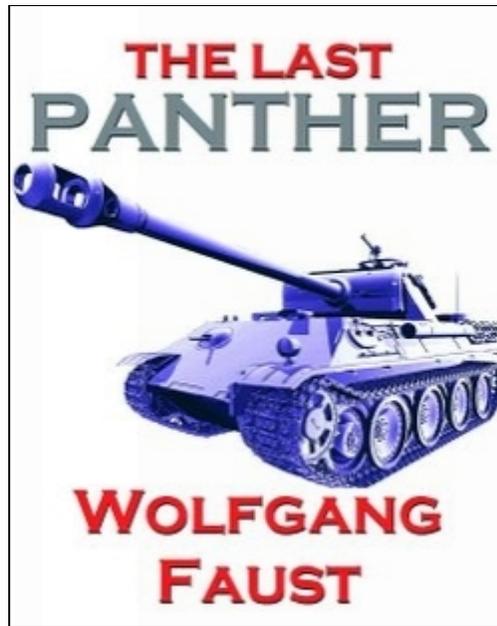
One such issue is the highly diverse and ambiguous *relationships* which sprang up from 1940 to 1944 between the German troops and the local French population. The question of the German attitude to the French is a complex one: part 'protector' and part exploiter, the individual attitudes of the Germans themselves seem to vary enormously depending on circumstances and prejudices. The added complication of the attachments between German servicemen and French women is a human aspect to June 6th which has, I feel, been chiefly lost to the historical record.

Another theme which emerges (which has also received surprisingly little attention from historians) is the presence of large numbers of *Russian* troops in Normandy among the Static Infantry Divisions. General Rommel is known to have remarked that he felt it was asking too much to order 'Russians to fight Americans for Germany in France' – but the exact combat performance of these troops on June 6th and the ultimate fate of those who surrendered (which must surely have been many) appears to be unclear. If, as one veteran in this book asserts, the captured Russians were taken directly from the beaches and repatriated to their deaths in the USSR, this is an event which should be explored further.

One last point which is noticeable in both volumes of these transcripts is the matter of the *Dieppe Raid* some two years before D day.

At Dieppe, Allied troops (predominantly Canadian) attempted to take control of the port and town for a limited time on 19th August 1942, in a 'coup de main' attack which proved abortive and highly costly in casualties and prisoners. It seems that the memory of Dieppe remained long in the Germans' minds as an example of Allied failure in seaborne landings, to the extent that the reaction of many troops on June 6th was to immediately make comparisons with Dieppe. Whether this psychological impact was ultimately beneficial to the Allied mission is something to be considered.

I hope that this book serves in some way as a marker to the incalculably important events of June 6th and all its military, political and human repercussions, both for those involved and for those of us born long after the battle ended.



For further astonishing WW2 reading on Amazon . . .
try Wolfgang Faust's shocking account of his breakout from the
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combat writing at its most intense and unflinching. It is a phenomenal
memoir of panzer warfare, the collapse of the Third Reich and the suffering
of civilians and troops on all sides, as World War 2 drew to an apocalyptic
conclusion in the fields of Germany.
