

ALL ABOUT NORMANDY BEACH OBSTACLES

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To describe the average beach where an invasion might occur would be that the deterrents are usually placed as far out into the ocean as men can work at low tide, and separated by about eight feet in all directions. This might take months to accomplish but Hitler had time from the moment he occupied France. These obstacles, wood or metal are imbedded as deep as they can be pounded in to the wet sand. The shifting underwater currents then caused them to become too solid to dislodge with mere manpower. Those made from iron train rails were the most difficult to destroy requiring more pounds of TNT. The necessary extra explosives made it that much more dangerous to use with so many engineers in such close proximity to each other.

The height of an obstacle would be just underwater at near high tide. They were angled and braced sufficiently to punch a hole in small landing boats that they knew would be used in a landing. Usually each had a "teller" mine attached, teller meaning dinner "plate" in German. They were placed to detonate from the pressure of the weight of the landing craft and were powerful enough to demolish the front-end steel door, kill several soldiers, and sink the craft immediately. Our objective at Normandy was to invade at low tide and remove the teller mines. This could be accomplished without much danger to anyone except ourselves. Removing the obstacles was a different story and required much use of explosives while making sure no one was in danger from the blast. Tides run about 6 hours between high and low so work is done quickly so following waves of boats can discharge their contents and make more runs to supply ships.

You have read of the panic on Omaha Beach where wounded and frightened soldiers hid as best they could on and behind the obstacles. Confusion reigned...they had to be forced off and away as TNT concussion can kill if enough body is under water and directly exposed to it. We had to place the charges on the bottom, under the sand if possible...your legs can take the explosion and most metal debris but above the water shrapnel is deadly. Time was of the essence and the ocean was jammed with ships of all sizes...they wanted to unload and leave. The big LSTs were about twelve miles out and Navy personnel made dozens of trips ferrying men and equipment in landing boats. Many boats did not make it to shore before they were hit with artillery or machine guns. The desperately needed Sherman tanks, outfitted with canvas skirts so they could float, were overwhelmed by giant waves and most were lost and their crews drowned.

It took almost a week to remove enough obstacles so transport to shore could flow uninterrupted. There were nearly twenty five thousand engineers on the beach by that time, cleaning up all mines, barbed wire and corpses. Boxed supplies and equipment piled up on the shore as we waited for bigger ships bringing trucks and personnel to get material moving inland. At one point it was later reported General Bradley had come close to throwing in the towel and abandoning the invasion on Omaha. This would have doomed those that had made it to the beach. He relented when a destroyer came in as close to the beach as possible without foundering. Then accurate five-inch guns eliminated the German machine guns that had been causing havoc. That destroyer Captain risked his career and the lives of his crew but he saved the day. All the beaches were finally cleared and the Americans, Canadians, and British could not be stopped. Eleven months later Hitler ended his life...we had suffered many thousands of casualties but won the war. We were told it was worth it.