

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 6" 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 5**', 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 powerflll ... 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 lack 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

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 Sherman 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 Sherman.

The Sherman 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 Sherman 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.