

PART 2

INVASION

Two kinds of people are staying
on this Beach – the dead and
those who are going to die.

Colonel George A Taylor,
Sixteenth Infantry Regiment,
Omaha Beach.

CHAPTER 16

0400 hours

Hauptmann Conrad Mundt walked along the crest of the sand dunes. The sand was powdery, sighing under his boots, transporting him back to his nights in the desert, a happier time in many ways. The full moon was on its downward arc, painting the wet sand like quicksilver; a narrow column of light unfurling across the still water like a tongue. He checked his watch. It was four. The air was cool and damp and the sun was over two hours away. He had walked this inspection every day since arriving in Normandy. He knew he didn't need to be up this early, but his body wouldn't let him rest. His demons still plagued him nightly.

In his latest posting, he enjoyed an almost mundane existence. He had comfortable quarters, good regular food, very little danger and plenty of sleep. He tried to convince himself that the reason sleep eluded him was because of the five years of the hard, unrelenting combat he'd endured, grabbing sleep whenever the opportunity presented itself. There had been a time, early in the war, when sleep had been the soft sanctuary at the end of a hard-fought day. In Russia, sleep had been a luxury unless it was that endless sleep borne by so many of his comrades. Since those dark days, sleep had been his subtle torturer. A malicious projectionist, flashing the images of the snowfields outside Leningrad,

and the faces he'd never see again, the slow eyelid-flutter of men trying not to die. At times he had been almost envious of those that had died quickly.

He walked towards the third bunker. The formidable concrete beast nestled at the apex of the dunes, a single hard-slitted eye staring out to sea. Mundt could hear a thin thread of radio music and make out the pale shaft of artificial light from within, illuminating the cycloptic eye of a heavy-machine-gun barrel poking menacingly from the slim aperture.

Mundt paused, lit a cigarette, and watched the smoke shred in the onshore wind. He glanced across the black water toward the invisible coastline of England. He remembered a younger, more idealistic man, who had looked across that stretch of water filled with thoughts of glory and conquest. Then later, in Berlin, standing amongst the thousands beneath the swastika banners, listening to the words of the Führer, his heart bursting with pride. Five years had done much to harden that same heart. Too much blood and death had cured him of such romantic notions. The Russian front had cured them all.

The German nation had done many things to be proud of and as many to be ashamed of. He had done things that made his gut clench with shame. He knew that one day the German army would look across the Channel and be greeted with the sight of hundreds of ships and thousands of men all coming for revenge. He knew that revenge could drive a man's soul to a dark place. He'd seen it at St Petersburg.

He drew the final smoke from his cigarette, discarded the stub into the foaming surf and strode purposefully towards the bunker entrance. He descended the short stairs, and hammered his fist on the metal barrier. A voice from inside called out a challenge.

“Hauptmann Mundt!”

The inspection flap snapped open, cold eyes scrutinising him, then the chunk of bolts and the door yawned open on grinding hinges. The music was louder now, and the inside of the bunker was wreathed in smoke and smelling of sweat, gun oil and coffee. There was a single metal table at the back of the room with the radio sitting on its surface, three chairs arranged around the edge.

At the door, the young Mannschaften stood rigidly to attention. Mundt searched his memory for the boy’s name. “Relax, Stein, at ease,” he said.

“Yes, s-sir,” Stein said, only relaxing slightly.

Mundt smiled to himself remembering his very first posting and the sadistic Sergeant who had made all their lives a living hell, and he felt some sympathy for Stein. Kurt Baum, the other soldier in the bunker, had also stood to attention as Mundt had entered. He didn’t like the Gefreiter, a man full of himself and eager to prove his worth. He could see his eyes darting to the ribbon on Mundt’s tunic and back again with a mixture of awe and envy.

After Mundt had been awarded the medal, he had taken to not wearing it. He had felt guilty, like a fraud. He had won it for simply surviving Russia and getting wounded, not for any glorious act of bravery. If courage had been the

qualifying factor for such a high honour then there should be thousands more such medals lying in the ground back in Russia.

A senior officer had noticed the absence of the medal on Mundt's chest and had reprimanded him for it. "You may not believe you deserve the medal," he had said. "But the men you command and those around you will glory in it, and in you, and will want to follow your example. Wear it for *them*, if not for yourself."

Mundt understood what he meant. And seeing the look on Baum's face confirmed what the medal represented. It was an honour to achieve, a rallying cry to all Germans.

"Would you l-like s-some c-coffee? Hauptmann?" Stein asked. "It's not f-fresh but it's h-hot and s-strong."

The question shook the Hauptmann from his thoughts. He said, "Thank you, Stein. I prefer my coffee strong."

The Mannschaften poured the dark liquid into a tin cup and offered it to Mundt. The Hauptmann accepted the mug and wrapped his fingers around it, feeling the heat flow into his cold hands.

"This reminds me of my time in Africa," Mundt said, smiling at the recollection. "The coffee there was always strong like this." He walked to the observation slit and stared out at the sea. He could see the white catspaws of surf surging in.

"They bombed Calais again, sir," Baum remarked, just for something to say.

Mundt moved away from the narrow slice of sea. "They've bombed it every night," he said. "They've also bombed here a few times but mostly inland. I think they are trying to prepare the way from Calais. I think it will be soon."

"Rommel will be ready for them," Baum said.

Mundt nodded. He recalled the words of Oberst Kriek about the Field Marshal's glory days being behind him.

"The r-rumours say there c-could be a m-million coming," Stein said, anxiously.

Baum snorted, all bravado. "Let them come. We will wipe them all out."

Mundt regarded the soldier over his mug. "I doubt we'll get the chance."

The Gefreiter frowned at the statement. "We are here, on the front line."

Mundt laughed. "This is not the front line, Baum. This is where they put the older wounded soldiers like me and the young inexperienced men like Stein, and those they deem not good enough to face the invasion." He saw the words strike home with Baum.

"But you have won an Iron Cross," Baum said.

"I didn't win it for anything outstanding," Mundt said. "I won it for simply surviving a living hell in Russia." The Hauptmann gestured towards Calais with his mug. "That's why the best panzer divisions are in Calais, the elite troops waiting to repel the British and Americans. When they come we will be mere spectators."

Mundt noticed the young Mannschaften sag with relief at the prospect of not being on the front line. Meanwhile, the Gefreiter's shoulders slumped with a disappointment he couldn't quite mask. In his mind the prospect of The Iron Cross retreated a step.

"Don't worry, Baum," Mundt said, offering some scant consolation. "If the allies succeed and establish a foothold in France, you'll get your chance soon enough."

"And if they don't..."

"The perhaps you can be in the first wave when we invade England," Mundt said.

Dawn began to bruise the bunker with a thin red seep. Stein picked up his binoculars and went to the observation slit. He leaned his elbows on the sill and looked out into the face of a new day. "L-looks like r-rain again," he said.

"How can you tell?" Baum asked.

"There's a l-long dark cloud b-bank stretching across the h-horizon," Stein said.

Mundt went to the pot to refill his coffee and out of the corner of his eye he saw the Mannschaften stiffen and gasp.

"Dear God!" the youth hissed. He gave the lenses a quick wipe and lifted them back to his eyes to look again, his hands fumbling on the focusing wheel. "It c-can't be!" he groaned.

"What is it, Stein, report?" Mundt asked.

Stein thrust the binoculars at the Hauptmann. Mundt snatched up the glasses. The sea's edge was crowded with low, pale smudges swelling larger by the moment, and among them pinpricks of orange light flared and died. A few seconds later the air trembled, and the growling rumble reached them, lazy and inevitable.

"Thunder?" Baum enquired. "Another storm?"

"It *is* a storm, Baum," Mundt said, solemnly. "But this deluge will be made of steel and not rain. Looks like you will get your chance after all."

The first incoming whine rose, a teeth-aching, needle-fine sound. The beach detonated in eruptions of sand and smoke. The bunker shuddered. Dust sifted from joints and seams, turning the air to a bitter fog that tasted of concrete. All three men hit the floor instinctively.

The barrage was thunderous and deafening. Mundt crawled across the floor to the field telephone on the wall, cranking the handle and jamming the receiver to his ear. He heard the line connect and he shouted. "We have heavy incoming naval fire. I repeat, heavy naval fire. Landing craft observed. The Allies are coming here," he barked, voice ringing in the cramped space. The line hissed, squealed, and died with a flat, ominous click. He stared at the dead handset for a beat. "Verdammt."

He gathered himself and barked out an order. "Get those machine guns set up. Stein, get the spare barrels, Wechselrohre at the ready, every fifty rounds if she runs hot. Baum, set deflection and elevation on the traverse, pre-set for

beaten zones along the first and second surf lines. I want interlocking fields with the next bunker.” The words came as if he were winding a watch, precise and firm.

Baum scrambled to the mount, locking the MG42 into the fixed tripod, the weapon’s dark mouth now a living thing in the slit. Stein tore open an ammunition box with shaking hands, the canvas-tipped belt rattling like a chain.

Another salvo walked its way inshore, step by step, the ground outside leaping with each impact. Somewhere to their right, another bunker answered, three harsh reports of artillery.

Mundt chanced another look through the observation slit. The sun was slowly lifting above the horizon and he could see the ships, hundreds of them, maybe thousands, and in the near distance, the white wakes of smaller landing crafts surging through the water. The nearest boats bucked against the chop, their blunt bows rising and falling like fists.

For a heartbeat, the three of them hung there in a pocket of quiet, a false, fragile calm between the bombardments. The red seam of dawn had widened, bleeding into amber.

“First wave c-closing,” Stein whispered, binoculars pressed so hard to the sockets they must have hurt. “I c-can see f-faces.”

The last shell in the pattern slammed into the dune face with a hollow whump that shook even the bolts in the door. Sand avalanched down the slit in a gritty hiss.

“Stand ready,” Mundt shouted. “Here they come.”