

THE BOYS OF POINTE DU HOC: RONALD REAGAN, D-DAY AND THE U.S. ARMY 2ND RANGER BATTALION¹

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Behind me is a memorial that symbolizes the Ranger daggers that were thrust into the tops of these cliffs. And before me are the men who put them there.

These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the men who took the cliffs. These are the champions who helped free a continent. These are the heroes who helped end a war.

Gentlemen, I look at you and I think of the words of Stephen Spender's poem. You are men who in your lives fought for life . . . and left the vivid air signed with your honor.³

On 6 June 1944 General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, gave the final order that set in motion the largest coalition of ships in naval history.⁴ He stated in his remarks to the thousands of Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen who served under him, that they were to “embark upon the Great Crusade,”⁵ a movement that even today remains “the largest sea borne invasion in history, involving almost three million troops.”⁶ From this date, D-Day, eighty-five days of fighting left its mark on Normandy and on the heart of a nation. In *The Boys of Pointe du Hoc*, historian Douglas Brinkley offers insight into one particular “band of brothers,”⁷ the 2nd Ranger Battalion, whose courage and bravery was relived and remembered by President Ronald Reagan in his famous D-Day anniversary speeches at Pointe du Hoc and Omaha Beach some forty years later.⁸ At first, it may seem inconceivable that the story of the 2nd Ranger Battalion, amidst a hundred or even a thousand stories of World War II bravery, would be the foundation for what one biographical resource referred to as a period of “national self-confidence” under President Reagan.⁹ But as Brinkley articulates early on, this particular narrative resonated with people, not only because it was “something you could get your hands around,” but also because it was a story that “opened the window” and made the events of D-Day all the more accessible and relevant to the American public.¹⁰

As Tom Brokaw notes in his book, *The Greatest Generation*,¹¹ “[f]or most of the younger Americans, D-Day has been a page or two in their history books or some anniversary ceremony on television. . . .”¹² Brinkley, however, brings D-Day and the efforts of the 2nd Ranger Battalion to the twenty-first century. In *The Boys of Pointe du Hoc*, Brinkley used the experiences of the 2nd Ranger Battalion to highlight the individual stories of leadership, loyalty, and bravery that defined a generation, and inspired the next.

¹ DOUGLAS BRINKLEY, *THE BOYS OF POINTE DU HOC: RONALD REAGAN, D-DAY, AND THE U.S. ARMY 2ND RANGER BATTALION* (2005).

² U.S. Air Force. Written while assigned as a student, 54th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at 226, 227 (citing to President Ronald Reagan, Speech at Pointe du Hoc (June 6, 1984), The Official Website of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Foundation, Speeches, <http://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan/speeches> (follow the Fortieth Anniversary of D-Day (Omaha Beach) hyperlink or the Fortieth Anniversary of D-Day (Pointe du Hoc) hyperlink) [hereinafter Reagan Speeches].

⁴ See U.S. Army Center of Military History, *The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II: Normandy*, <http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/brochures/Normandy/nor-pam.htm> (last visited Sept. 18, 2005).

⁵ BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at 61.

⁶ Reference.com, Battle of Normandy, http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Battle_of_Normandy (last visited Dec 1, 2005).

⁷ BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at 144 (quoting WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, KING HENRY THE FIFTH act 4, sc. 3).

⁸ *Id.* at 225-36 (citing to President Ronald Reagan, Speech at Pointe du Hoc and Omaha Beach (June 6, 1984)); see also Reagan Speeches, *supra* note 3].

⁹ See The Whitehouse, *Biography of Ronald Reagan*, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/rr40.html> (last visited Dec. 1, 2005).

¹⁰ BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at 14.

¹¹ TOM BROKAW, *THE GREATEST GENERATION* xxx (1998) (“The Greatest Generation” is a term coined by Tom Brokaw that is used to describe the generation of individuals who participated in World War II).

¹² *Id.* at 27.

In the first half of the book, Brinkley offers a detailed and illuminating history of the 2nd Ranger Battalion known affectionately as “Rudder’s Rangers.”¹³ During the planning phase of the D-Day invasion, General Omar Bradley tasked Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) James E. Rudder and his 2nd Ranger Battalion with scaling a strategic promontory, the Pointe du Hoc. A mission President Reagan stated was “one of the most difficult and daring of the invasion.”¹⁴ Pointe du Hoc is a series of hundred-foot-tall cliffs located four miles north of Omaha Beach on the coast of Normandy, France.¹⁵ After climbing the seaside cliffs, “Rudder’s Rangers” were then supposed to locate and disable a battery of six 155-mm guns guarded by the Germans.¹⁶ Brinkley notes that if the Germans had ever fired the six 155-mm guns on Omaha and Utah Beaches during the Allied landing, the number of casualties would have increased exponentially.¹⁷

While some historians tend to focus more on military strategy, Brinkley appeals to the military novice by focusing on people with whom the reader can relate. For example, Brinkley describes a time when the Ranger physician rejected Private (PVT) William Petty because a physical examination revealed that Petty had false teeth.¹⁸ Private Petty bravely approached LTC Rudder and insisted that it was unfair to disqualify him saying, “Hell, sir! I don’t want to eat’em. I want to fight’em.”¹⁹ Brinkley recounts how LTC Rudder eventually allowed PVT Petty to join the Rangers and how the young Soldier would later receive a Silver Star for his actions at Pointe du Hoc.²⁰ Similarly, Brinkley features LTC Rudder, a decorated Ranger who Brinkley describes as a “gridiron leader,” tough but fair.²¹ Brinkley illustrates LTC Rudder’s brave, example-setting leadership by describing how his landing craft was the first to land on the beaches at Normandy.²² Brinkley, like Reagan himself, is able to portray both PVT Petty and LTC Rudder in a way that is accessible and inspirational to his audience.

Although LTC Rudder is not specifically named in President Reagan’s speech at Pointe du Hoc, Brinkley takes great care to identify LTC Rudder’s role in history. Lieutenant Colonel Rudder demonstrated exemplary service as a leader from the time he began training the 2nd Ranger Battalion for combat operations to the moment they set foot on the beaches of Normandy.²³ When LTC Rudder began training the Rangers, he told them, “I’m going to work you harder than you’ve ever worked.”²⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Rudder’s exceptional leadership helped motivate and unite “Rudder’s Rangers” under his command in such a way that they were able to accomplish the mission and save the lives of many who likely would have otherwise perished. For example, while the Rangers were training in England, LTC Rudder routinely ordered the team to get to a far away British town, at a designated time, by any means available.²⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Rudder’s goal in administering the test was to help the Rangers develop initiative, a trait the LTC Rudder valued most in his Rangers.²⁶ After all, LTC Rudder knew that the ultimate test of initiative would come on D-Day when the Rangers would have to move around German-occupied France, relying on their compass and initiative to keep themselves alive once they successfully scaled the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc.²⁷

Brinkley uses “Rudder’s Rangers” to demonstrate the valuable professional characteristic of loyalty. As Brinkley writes, “Anybody who underestimates mock battles-thinking they’re something akin to recreational paintball matches held by

¹³ BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at 39.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 226; *see* Reagan Speeches, *supra* note 3 (follow the Fortieth Anniversary of D-Day (Pointe du Hoc) hyperlink).

¹⁵ BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at 50.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 48.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 94.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 40.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.* at 37.

²² *Id.* at 79.

²³ *Id.* at 37, 79.

²⁴ *Id.* at 37.

²⁵ *Id.* at 46.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

weekend warriors all across America-is dead wrong.”²⁸ Despite frequent relocations, grueling trainings, and personal hardships, Brinkley shows how “Rudder’s Rangers” persevered because of their unbending loyalty to LTC Rudder and their country.

Loyalty can often drive people to perform brave and heroic deeds. Those brave Rangers who took to the beaches and climbed the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc were young, but they carried with them an understanding of the world beyond their years. They were eager to liberate Europe, and as Ranger Gerald Heaney recalled, “It was as if we were so well trained and so well prepared that nothing could stand in our way.”²⁹ The Rangers had only enough time to catch their breath at “Rudder’s cave,” an outpost at the base of the cliff, before climbing Pointe du Hoc, and that’s when the “insanity of their mission” truly sank in.³⁰ As the Germans high above hurled grenades, fired their weapons, and cut the Ranger’s ropes, the 2nd Ranger Battalion pressed forward with one goal in mind, to survive the climb.³¹

In 1984, President Reagan hailed the 2nd Ranger Battalion’s story of heroic leadership, loyalty, and bravery during the fortieth anniversary of D-Day.³² President Reagan used the same professional principles exhibited by “Rudder’s Rangers” to inspire all Americans and simultaneously warn the Soviet Union of America’s unending devotion to freedom. President Reagan successfully made the story of “Rudder’s Rangers” about the celebration of basic American values and professional principles, which helped create a new patriotic sentiment in America.³³

In *The Boys of Pointe du Hoc*, Brinkley utilizes personal anecdotes to demonstrate how President Reagan’s political views came to be. Through in-depth research, Brinkley bridges the years between the events of D-Day and the speeches that commemorated them over forty years later. Using a narrative style, Brinkley shows how President Reagan’s political views evolved over time. Beginning with President Reagan’s early years as a second lieutenant in the cavalry reserve, and continuing through the time Reagan served as Commander in Chief, Brinkley makes President Reagan’s story accessible to readers. As further background into President Reagan’s political outlook, Brinkley illustrates how President Reagan was a student and admirer of both Franklin D. Roosevelt and President Eisenhower.

President Reagan’s affiliation with the “Greatest Generation” was evident early in his life. In the late 1940s, when President Reagan finished an anti-fascist speech at the Hollywood Beverly Christian Church, a pastor responded by stating, “[D]on’t just deride Fascists, also add the imploding danger of global communism to your pulpit speech.”³⁴ President Reagan prophetically replied, “[i]f I ever find evidence that communism represents a threat to all that we believe and stand for . . . I’ll speak out just as harshly against communism as I have fascism.”³⁵ Here Brinkley poignantly captures a budding politician whose aversion to isolationism is reminiscent of Roosevelt and Eisenhower. While Brinkley employs the personal vignette for effect, his respect for historical accuracy is nothing new. As a prolific scholar and writer, Brinkley has written several biographies, such as *Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War* and *Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, His Company and a Century of Progress*.³⁶ In his works, Brinkley consistently relies on personal anecdotes to help analyze important figures in a way that provides his readers with a better overall understanding of history. Brinkley’s proclivity to humanize otherwise legendary icons can easily be attributed to his professional background. At present, Brinkley serves as a distinguished professor of history and director of the Theodore Roosevelt Center for American Civilization at Tulane University.³⁷

²⁸ *Id.* at 42.

²⁹ *Id.* at 51, 52.

³⁰ *Id.* at 80.

³¹ *Id.* at 84.

³² See Reagan Speeches, *supra* note 3.

³³ BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at 217.

³⁴ *Id.* at 112.

³⁵ *Id.* at 113.

³⁶ DOUGLAS BRINKLEY, *TOUR OF DUTY: JOHN KERRY AND THE VIETNAM WAR* (2004); DOUGLAS BRINKLEY, *WHEELS FOR THE WORLD: HENRY FORD, HIS COMPANY AND A CENTURY OF PROGRESS, 1903-2003* (2003); see also BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at book jacket; TIMES-PICAYUNE (New Orleans, LA), Apr. 4, 2004, available at LEXIS.

³⁷ HarperCollins, *Douglas Brinkley Biography*, http://www.harpercollins.com/global_scripts/product_catalog/author_xml.asp?authorid=14213 (last visited Dec. 1, 2005).

By effectively weaving together historical fact with individual portraits, Brinkley presents an interesting and vivid narrative. Brinkley utilizes this technique throughout the book when he portrays “Rudder’s Rangers” and describes the key players of Reagan’s administration. Several speechwriters, such as Peggy Noonan and Anthony Dolan, helped President Reagan earn the title “The Great Communicator.” Brinkley describes how Noonan’s diligence and research ultimately led to the penning of the now famous Pointe du Hoc speech.³⁸ Brinkley also describes how Dolan crafted President Reagan’s foreign policy “voice,” and thus brought into the spotlight one of history’s most pivotal political figures. “Because Peggy Noonan had so effectively marketed herself in the 1990s and beyond as Reagan’s official wordsmith, the speechwriting efforts of Dolan have been largely ignored. That is an historical oversight in need of remedying.”³⁹ Throughout the book, Brinkley consistently shows a sensitivity and awareness of portraying historical truths, all the while with an appreciation for those whom he writes about.

Moreover, Brinkley uses his extensive historical background and research to refute certain commonly held misconceptions about the assault on Pointe du Hoc. For example, one of the greatest widespread misconceptions was that the assault on Pointe du Hoc was unnecessary because the six 155-mm guns were not immediately found atop the cliffs.⁴⁰ In fact, First Sergeant Len Lomell and his best friend Sergeant Jack Kuhn scaled the cliffs, located the 155-mm guns nearby, and rendered them inoperable.⁴¹ Unfortunately, Cornelius Ryan’s nonfiction classic *The Longest Day* adhered to the misconception and portrays the assault on Pointe du Hoc as a mistake because the guns were not at the top of the cliffs.⁴² Due to the accurate, revised history of events provided by Brinkley, however, this myth of unnecessary sacrifice at Point du Hoc is dispelled.

Obtained from museums, libraries, and private collections across the country, the primary sources (i.e. diaries, letters, notes, and memoirs) and secondary sources (i.e. biographies, books, and articles) Brinkley relies upon, and the photographs Brinkley incorporates into his text are another testament to Brinkley’s adherence to historical accuracy. For those readers who are unfamiliar with Pointe du Hoc or the stark imagery of the crosses at the Normandy American Cemetery, the photographs make for a silent, but compelling companion to Brinkley’s narrative.⁴³ When Lisa Zanatta Henn wrote to President Reagan about her father, Private First Class (PFC) Peter Zanatta, she wanted to honor her deceased father’s memory by fulfilling his last wish of traveling to Normandy and “seeing the beach, the barricades, and the graves.”⁴⁴ As a symbol and subject of President Reagan’s speech at Omaha Beach, PFC Zanatta represented the many forgotten heroes of World War II who risked their lives to liberate the European continent. A picture of PFC Zanatta as well as another of Lisa Zanatta Henn with the President affirms Brinkley’s contention that it was the individual heroes who truly inspired President Reagan.⁴⁵

Some critics of Brinkley’s work argue that he unduly credits President Reagan’s D-Day speeches as *the* catalyst for the “New Patriotism,” a movement that cemented President Reagan’s re-election in 1984 and defined his presidency.⁴⁶ Luther Spoehr, an instructor at Brown University, argues that Brinkley fails to prove the connection between Reagan’s D-Day anniversary speeches and the country’s new found “sparked appreciation for the Greatest Generation.”⁴⁷ Brinkley states: “Riding on a ‘D-Day’ remembered wave, Reagan, like Eisenhower, easily defeated his democratic opponent to win a second term as president.”⁴⁸ Brinkley, however, never intended his book as a political statement, but rather as a historical piece.⁴⁹ In

³⁸ *Id.* at 124, 125.

³⁹ *Id.* at 160.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 93.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 91.

⁴² *Id.* at 93.

⁴³ *Id.* at 35, 194.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 169.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 167, 200.

⁴⁶ See Luther Spoehr, *Review of Douglas Brinkley’s The Boys of Pointe du Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion*, <http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/13076.html> (last visited Sept. 18, 2005).

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at 217.

⁴⁹ Online Interview with Douglas Brinkley, Author and Historian, Book World Live (June 7, 2005), http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2005/06/06/DI2005060600802.html?nav=rss_nation/special.

an interview on *Book World Live*, Brinkley stated, “the point of the book is that I combine World War II history with World War II memory. The media’s been talking more about the Ronald Reagan aspect of my book, but it really should be shelved under military history.”⁵⁰ Later in the same interview, in response to a question about whether he was “one of those who think Reagan brought down the Soviet Union,” Brinkley replied “No, that’s far too simplistic . . . Reagan deserves some credit, but I’m not willing to go so far as to say he’s the one responsible for the breakup of the Soviet Union.”⁵¹ Brinkley makes it clear that he is not willing to overreach and try to attribute more to Reagan and his presidency than is apparent to him based on the historical data.

Despite any points of contention, military personnel and civilians alike should read *The Boys of Pointe du Hoc*. The relevance of this story is rooted in core values inherent in military life both then and now: leadership, loyalty, and bravery. When the images of our Soldiers, Sailors, and Airman fighting global terrorism flash across our television sets, we are reminded of “Rudder’s Rangers” who fought extensively for their country on enemy terrain and on foreign soil. The story of Pointe du Hoc resonates now because there are Soldiers who, at this very moment, are scaling walls, dodging bullets, and dying for their country. Like the Rangers themselves, they are young, and they are heroes. As U.S. Soldiers are patrolling abandoned buildings in Fallujah or riding in convoys along Baghdad’s airport road, we hope that there are individuals like LTC Rudder leading the way.

The military reader will also appreciate Brinkley’s perspective on the President’s role and the power of rhetoric to motivate and inspire. Brinkley often refers to President Reagan’s deference to President Roosevelt and President Eisenhower because they took ownership of their words. They were not merely props that spoke from rehearsed scripts, but “statesmen.”⁵² The Pointe du Hoc speech, while emotionally provocative, was not merely a fitting tribute for these World War II veterans, but also a reminder that like those who served before President Reagan, he would stand fearless and undaunted against anyone injurious to the United States. President Reagan’s underlying meaning is clear: “We learned that isolationism never was and never will be an acceptable response to tyrannical governments with an expansionist intent.”⁵³ Brinkley’s argument is also clear, and Reagan’s standing as the “Great Communicator” is affirmed. Brinkley concludes *The Boys of Pointe du Hoc* by stating, “The story of D-Day as the pervasive metaphor for American bravery and goodness, in part because of his presidential voice, endures for the ages to ponder.”⁵⁴

After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the United States became focused on ending global terrorism, both here and abroad. Never in recent years has the self-sacrifice of our military men and women been so real, so close, or so profound. Just as the images of our own warriors liberating Iraq has become a symbol of U.S.-led War on Terror, the image of the 2nd Ranger Battalion climbing the cliffs on D-Day is symbolic of World War II and their generation. Through Brinkley’s powerful and effective anecdotal narratives, leadership, loyalty, and bravery are attributes easily recognized and make the story of “Rudder’s Rangers” all the more compelling. Although some readers may be disappointed that the book is not all about “Rudder’s Rangers” and the events of D-Day, others will be just as equally pleased by Brinkley’s balanced approach that includes speeches that paid tribute to “Rudder’s Rangers” heroic actions and the manner in which the rangers were honored and received by President Reagan.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² BRINKLEY, *supra* note 1, at 117.

⁵³ *Id.* at 230.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 223.