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Remarks Commemorating the United States Navy Role in the Normandy Invasion

June 6, 1994

Thank you very much, Mr. Rockwell, Mr. Secretary, Admiral, Captain Sprigg, Chaplains, distinguished leaders of the Congress, the Cabinet, members of the Armed Services, veterans, family, and friends. This new and historically accurate dawn reminds us of that dawn 50 years ago that brought a new era, when thousands of warships assembled to begin Europe's liberation. Allied naval guns unleashed a storm of fire on Normandy's beaches as the sky brightened to a cold gray. Legions of young men packed into landing crafts set out to take those beaches.

After more than a year of brilliant planning by General Eisenhower and his Allied staff and those who were here even before and one agonizing weather-caused delay, D-Day arrived at last, exactly 50 years ago this day. We gather in the calm after sunrise today to remember that fateful morning, the pivot point of the war, perhaps the pivot point of the 20th century.

But we should never forget that at this hour on June 6, 1944, victory seemed far from certain. The weather was menacing, the seas were churning, the enemy was dug in. Though the plans had been prepared in great detail, chaos of battle can overwhelm the best laid plans, and for some of our units the plans went awry. Indeed, General Eisenhower had already drafted a statement in case the operation did not succeed.

As H-Hour approached, everyone in the invasion was forced to prepare in his own way. We know now from the records then that some soldiers and sailors wrote to their wives back home or to children they had never held. Some played dice, hoping for a string of good luck. Others tried to read, and many simply prayed. One Jewish officer, Captain Irving Gray, asked the chaplain on his landing craft to lead a prayer "to the God in whom we all believe, whether Protestant or Catholic or Jew, that our mission might be accomplished and that we may be brought safely home again."

Back home, as news of the invasion reached our fellow Americans, Americans spoke softly to God. In one Brooklyn shipyard, welders knelt down on the decks of their Liberty ship and said together the Lord's Prayer. The soldiers who landed on Utah and Omaha needed those prayers, for they entered a scene of terrible carnage. Thousands would never return. For those who did, it was faith in their Maker's mercy and their own ability that helped to carry the day. It was also raw courage and love of freedom and country.

One of the most stirring tales of D-Day is that to which the Secretary of the Navy has already referred, the tale of the U.S.S. *Corry.* Ripped by mines while blasting enemy positions on Utah Beach, the *Corry* began to go under. But one man stayed aboard. He climbed the stern, removed the flag, and swam and scrambled to the main mast. There, he ran up the flag. And as he swam off, our flag opened into the breeze. In the *Corry*'s destruction, there was no defeat. Today, the wreckage of that ship lies directly beneath us, an unseen monument to those who helped to win this great war. Thirteen of the *Corry*'s crew rest there as well, and these waters are forever sanctified by their sacrifice.

Fifty years ago, General Eisenhower concluded his order of the day with these words: "Let us all beseech the blessing of almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking." As we begin this new day of remembrance, let us also ask God's blessing for all those who died for freedom 50 years ago and for the Americans who carry on their noble work today. May God bless them, and may God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:21 a.m. aboard the U.S.S. *George Washington* off the coast of Normandy, France. In his remarks, he referred to Dean Rockwell, D-Day veteran who introduced the President, and Adm. J.M. Boorda, commander in chief, U.S. Naval Forces Europe. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.