

D-Day: 150,000 Men -- and One Woman

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/martha-burk/d-day-150000-men---and-on_b_5452941.html

June 6 marks the anniversary of D-Day, the day in 1944 when Allied forces in World War II invaded France from offshore. It was the largest seaborne invasion in history. Thousands never made it out of the water, making the landing on Normandy one of the deadliest days of the war. In an all-out push, 150,000 men - and one woman -- hit the beaches.

Why even one woman? After all, women weren't allowed to serve in combat in those days - that restriction wouldn't be lifted until 50 years later, in 1994. So how did a female slip through the cracks and land on the beaches with the boys in uniform? Two reasons -- she was a journalist, and she was a stowaway. In June 1944 the British government accredited 558



writers, radio journalists and photographers to cover the D-Day landings. By rights, **Martha Gellhorn**, an established war correspondent for *Collier's* magazine, should have been one of them.

Each news outlet could send only one person, and the *Collier's* nod went to a guy named **Ernest Hemingway**, who didn't work for the magazine but had a famous name. He also


happened to be the estranged husband of Martha Gellhorn. When Hemingway asked for her slot, he got it. The boys in charge turned down all the women who applied, forcing them to take "no" for an answer.

But not Gellhorn. She took action -- or more specifically took to the toilet. She stowed away in a hospital ship bathroom. The 5000-vessel armada stretched as far as the eye could see, transporting the men and nearly 30,000 vehicles across the English channel to the French shoreline. When it came time to land, Gellhorn hit the beach disguised as a stretcher bearer. In the confusion, no one noticed she was a girl. (And just incidentally, she got there ahead of Hemingway.)

By nightfall on June 6, 1944, more than 9,000 Allied soldiers were dead or wounded. More than 100,000 others - including that one female stowaway -- had survived the landing.

Other women followed, but not right away. Thirty-eight days after D-day, the first forty-nine **WACs** to arrive in France landed in Normandy. Assigned to the Communications Zone, they immediately took over switchboards recently vacated by the Germans and worked in tents, cellars, prefabricated huts, and switchboard trailers.

But Martha Gellhorn was the first woman - landing upfront, and the only female journalist with a brilliant first-hand story of the invasion.

**Martha Burk** Follow [Become a fan](#)
Money Editor, *Ms. magazine*; director, Corporate Accountability Project, National Council of Women's Organizations