

RANGER *in* TIME

D-Day: Battle on the Beach



KATE MESSNER

illustrated by
KELLEY MCMORRIS

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Chapter 1



THE LONGEST NIGHT

“Hold on!”

Walt Burrell clung to the railing of the ship as it rocked on five-foot waves. Three dozen men were packed together on his landing craft. It was one of thousands crossing the English Channel on a mission to free France from the Nazis. The Allied invasion had begun.

Last night, as Walt and the other men boarded the ship, they’d been handed an order of the day from General Eisenhower. “You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade,

toward which we have striven these many months,” the order read. “The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you . . .”

Walt had folded the order and tucked it in a pocket. He’d climbed on board with the other men to begin the longest night of his life.

The sea was stormy and rough. Home seemed a lifetime away. Walt’s stomach churned as the ship surged over another wave. He squeezed his eyes shut against the wind and rain and tried to remember his papa’s farm in Virginia. For a moment, he could almost smell the rich earth and baking corn bread he’d left behind when he joined the army. He was only sixteen, but he’d lied about his age and enlisted to fight for his country.

Walt’s unit, the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion, had spent months at training camp



in Tennessee. Like many other soldiers, they'd woken up before dawn to go on twenty-five-mile hikes through the woods. They'd run obstacle courses, crawling with their rifles under barbed wire fences. But this unit had a special mission – handling the enormous barrage balloons that would fly over the American troops in France, keeping enemy planes away. Walt and the other men had practiced launching and maneuvering the car-size balloons. The plan was to raise them over the beaches of Normandy, where the balloons would form a sort of defensive curtain in the sky, protecting Allied troops from German planes.

And now it was time.

The night journey across the sea had been dark and murky, but suddenly, the sky lit up in the distance. Searchlights swept the cliffs. The air thundered with the pounding of

bombs. Allied forces were trying to knock out German defenses before Walt and the other men came ashore.

“You ready, Big Walt?” his friend Ernest shouted over the waves.

Walt almost smiled at the joke. He was the skinniest man in his battalion. The nickname that had felt so lighthearted at training camp felt different here. Not a single man on the landing craft seemed big enough for what they were about to face on the beaches.

The blasts grew louder and louder as Walt’s boat passed the battleships firing at shore. The sky was growing lighter now, even in the clouds and rain. The sea was crowded with smaller landing vessels like the one Walt was in. Waves sloshed over their sides and tossed them about as if they were toys in a bathtub. German machine gun fire blasted over the water.