

The Pilot Who Led the D-Day Invasion

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Joel Crouch on June 5, 1944, just before the Normandy invasion. (CombatReels)

They took off under cover of darkness from North Witham Airbase in central England, more than two hours flying time from their targets in Normandy. At 9:50 p.m. on June 5, 1944, the small fleet of unarmed C-47 transports started departing at five-minute intervals, carrying a total of about 200 paratroopers from the 101st Airborne—the first “pathfinders” for the massive Allied invasion set to begin that night and the following morning.

The pathfinders’ job was to mark drop zones behind the Normandy beaches, placing lights and radar beacons so that more than 13,000 jumpers who would immediately follow in the all-out airborne assault could find their way to bridges and road crossings designated as strategic targets. In the planning for D-Day, Allied generals estimated that these airborne troops might take up to 70 percent casualties.

Flying the lead C-47 out of North Witham that night was 33-year-old Lt. Col. Joel L. Crouch of Riverside, California. As the first pilot in the vanguard fleet, he was, in the words of reporter Lorelle Hearst of the *New York Journal-American*, “the spearhead of the spearhead of the spearhead” of the high-stakes allied invasion. Before the war, Crouch (“everybody calls him Joe or Colonel Joe,” wrote Hearst) had been a pilot for United Airlines, flying passengers between Los Angeles and Seattle.

In the army, he became a specialist in pathfinder operations for aerial assaults, and had been the lead pilot in the invasion of Sicily a year earlier, and at Salerno, Italy, in September 1943. During the planning for D-Day, Crouch had run the "Pathfinder School" at North Witham to train both paratroopers and pilots for the job of setting up drop zones. Each pathfinder team had 18 paratroopers, including 12 men to carry the lights and navigational beacons. Crouch had his pilots make at least one jump themselves, just to experience what the paratroopers would be up against.



Dwight Eisenhower talks to members of the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment, the day before D-Day. (Library of Congress)

It was logical, then, that Crouch should pilot the lead C-47, No. 293098, on the night of June 5. His co-pilot was Capt. Vito Pedone of Mt. Vernon, New York ("a laughing, dark-haired boy, precisely 22 years old," wrote Hearst) and their navigator was 25-year-old Capt. William Culp of Denver, "a square-jawed thoughtful sort of man." In back, leading the paratroopers, was Captain Frank Lillyman of the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment.

Overall, the first pathfinder operation was a mixed success at best (you can read the after-action report [here](#)). Cloud cover made it hard for the pilots to navigate, and some of the jumpers ended up far from their targets, while others came under heavy fire. The first of four drop zone teams arrived in the vicinity of St. Germaine-de-Varreville about 15 minutes after midnight, and even though the men were scattered, Lillyman and his team were still able to set up some of their lights within 10 minutes. D-Day, which would end with more than 12,000 Allied casualties and 4,414 dead, had begun.

Reporter Hearst (her husband was publisher William Randolph Hearst Jr.) had met Joel Crouch a week before the invasion, at a time when the plan was still very much top secret. "When I met him they told me he was going to do a very important job on D-Day, and although I had no idea it was going to be that important, I instinctively knew it would be something very brave," she wrote in a story published on June 7, as the world was first learning about the invasion.

Upon his return to base in England, Hearst asked Crouch, who was now a little freer to talk, "what it had been like over in France....He thought for a minute and then said very seriously and carefully: 'Well, there is some activity over there. We put a lot of our men down.' " Her story continued:

These fliers, being the first out, were also the first back and they said that the paratroopers whom they carried into France and dropped there were singing all the way. No, I couldn't find out what they were singing—the door between was closed and anyway Col. Crouch and his crew were too busy to listen, I guess. They said if I want the name of that song I'll have to go to France and find Capt. Lillyman, who was in charge of the men who jumped from Col. Crouch's plane—and thus the first of the airborne infantry to set foot in France in this operation.

Joel Crouch continued specializing in aerial assaults and air drops for the remainder of the war, and survived to return home to his family. He died in Hawaii in 1997, at the age of 86.

This contemporary D-Day documentary, produced by the Army Air Forces, includes footage (at about the 9:15 mark) of the pathfinders taking off for Normandy.

Brothers In Arms - E Co., 502nd PIR, 101st Air Borne Division

<https://archive.org/details/BrothersInArms-ECo.502ndPir101stAirBorneDivision>