

## The A.D. Coleman Attack

It all began on June 6, 2014, the 70th anniversary of D-day, when A.D. Coleman devoted his blog, which he calls "Photocritic International", to a Guest Post by J. Ross Baughman. entitled "Robert Capa's Troubles on Omaha Beach.

Baughman is a respected journalist who won a Pulitzer at 23, years ago, and has more recently devoted himself to lecturing on ethics in journalism. To mark June 6 he decided to study the ten Omaha landing photos held at ICP (only nine negatives) and was able to guess how and where Capa moved on the beach in the limited time he spent there.

Baughman does not disparage Capa's record although he refers to "Capa's own carefully crafted, devil-may-care persona" and quotes me as saying "Capa had a reputation as a great war-photographer...and was stuck with it." He praises Bob for helping save the life of the soldier first known as Edward Regan. He says that Bob had a problem reloading one of his two Contaxes. He also defends Bob from the charge that his pictures were "slightly out of focus." LIFE's caption writer for that story, Dennis Flanagan told me he had written that without really knowing. The explanation, as I have long maintained, is confirmed in Baughman's words: "In the dawn's early light, Capa's camera can give him no more than a modest shutter speed and a shallow depth of field." However, Capa was happy to borrow *Slightly Out of Focus* as the title of his D-Day memoir.

What Baughman does NOT accept is the explanation given to me that night by Dennis Banks, the young darkroom assistant, that three of the four 35 mm rolls were ruined because he had not only hung them in the locker which served as a drying cabinet, as usual, but closed the doors to make them dry faster – only to have too much heat melt the emulsion and the rolls appear blank. I accepted that explanation and so did Capa when he eventually heard it. He embroidered on it in his book *Slightly Out of Focus*.

What mattered to me that evening, and to LIFE, was that we had ten or eleven great pictures. Just after LIFE closed on Saturday, June 10, the editors cabled: "TODAY WAS ONE OF THE GREAT PICTURE DAYS IN LIFE'S OFFICE WHEN BOB CAPA'S BEACHLANDING AND OTHER SHOTS ARRIVED."

Just HOW the other pictures, IF more pictures were actually taken on the beach, were ruined, was of no great concern to me or to LIFE at that time. To Baughman and Coleman, however, it suddenly became of great importance. Coleman headlined it: "Guest Post: J. Ross Baughman on Robert Capa." The subhead: "Robert Capa's Troubles on Omaha Beach. A Careful examination of the D-Day negatives tells a very different story."

Coleman then proceeded to make up that "alternate history" in post after post on his blog. He announced in his first such post on June 10, 2014 that he would "summarize the version of the legend of Capa's negatives as told for 70 years by Capa and John Morris, and announce my doubts as to their truthfulness." In other words, he thought I was lying.

Coleman assumed in his first post of June 10 that I was the author of the "legend" that Capa's films had been ruined by overheating. I had simply repeated, time after time, what I had been told. I am not a darkroom technician – in fact I have never developed a roll of film in my entire life. My time in darkrooms, and I speak of LIFE's darkrooms in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, London and Paris, was to either deliver film or to pick up prints, or perhaps to write captions.

In his second such post, of June 12, Coleman quotes my account of how lab assistant Dennis Banks rushed into my office the evening of June 7 to say: "John, the film is all ruined. You were in such a hurry to have contacts that I put the films into the drying cabinet and closed the door. There was too much heat and the emulsion melted." I didn't want to believe it but "I ran back to the darkroom with him and held the rolls up to the light, one at a time, but there was nothing on the first three rolls. It was just pea soup. On the fourth roll (which I believe Dennis had not as yet looked at) there were eleven frames with images and I ordered them all to be printed."

I, foolishly according to Baughman, should have known better than to believe that. Baughman claims that the films were either vastly overexposed, or damaged by seawater. I think another explanation is also possible, that in the confusion of battle Capa simply got his rolls of 35 mixed up, but knew that he had shot at least those 11 frames. To insure that he had the right roll he bundled all four rolls of 35 into the one packet he gave to Dave Scherman at Weymouth for shipment to London and wisely wrote that note to me saying: "all the action is in the 4 rolls of 35 mm." I wish we had that note, but in my recollection it was little more than could be written on a scrap of paper.

I would love to believe that there was nothing on those three rolls because it would take the burden of guilt off of Dennis Banks, though I presume he is long gone. It also eases the burden of guilt I felt, as the overall chief of the operation, especially towards Capa.

Coleman shows no comprehension of what it was like to work in wartime London, a city which had been under aerial attack, off and on, for four years. Like other members of the London staff, I knew what it was like to take shelter during an air-raid, and all this took place at a climactic moment of this terrible war. For Coleman it seems more important to know which brand of film was being used.

I take pride in the June 19, 1944 issue of LIFE for many reasons. First, for its Eisenhower cover by an anonymous U.S. Army photographer. The cover selection

had to be made the Saturday before what turned out to be D-Day; fortunately the editors guessed right. Then of course for Capa's lead story, comprising not only the five photos of the Omaha landing, but two full pages, one showing "the invasion scene" as ships approached Omaha beach that morning and two dramatic pictures of the aftermath – one as casualties were treated on the small Coast Guard vessel that evacuated Capa, the second on the hospital ship to which he was transferred along with the dead.

This issue, like all LIFE issues, was a team effort, notable not only for Capa's pictures but also for Dave Scherman's pictures of invasion preparations, for nine wirephotos from official sources, for an excellent page of maps and Charles Christian Wertenbaker's detailed account of life aboard the command ship as crucial decisions were being made. Scherman's pictures were beautifully captioned – I think he even had a typewriter. They arrived in an advance packet on June 7, along with a similar take with handwritten captions from Bob Capa, which I had no need to edit and use. Capa had somehow managed to get his pictures of life on the *U.S.S. Samuel Chase* over to Scherman when Capa changed ships.

Thus only two of my six LIFE photographers assigned to D-Day actually made it into that issue of LIFE: Capa and Scherman. Bob Landry, who landed on Utah Beach, had the worst luck. All of his film, plus that of the newsreel photographers, fell into the Channel on its return trip to England. Frank Scherschel, assigned to the Air Force, was grounded by bad weather. Ralph Morse was kept in reserve for coverage of the later landing by Patton's Third Army. George Rodger saw little action as he "walked ashore" with the British, at Sword Beach, although he was rewarded by publication in that issue of four very moving photos he had previously taken, of the destitute war survivors of Sardinia, accompanied by a first-hand report by Corporal Paul Deutschman, who would later join the LIFE staff.

And that wasn't all. The issue also contained a report from West Point on the wives of American generals, a photo album personalizing Japanese history found on the body of a Japanese officer on the island of New Georgia, an essay on "The Taking of Rome" by Carl Mydans and George Silk, and a frightening story on Chemical Warfare by Andreas Feininger and other photographers.

But to get back to Mr. Coleman:

Encouraged by Baughman's critique of Capa's performance, Coleman develops his story line, or "Alternate History," which he has pretty much stuck to ever since. I quote:

"When the film gets processed in London, Morris discovers, to his horror, that LIFE's star photojournalist (and Morris's close friend) blew his assignment, arguably the biggest story of the war to date. A major embarrassment for Capa, for Morris, for LIFE, for Time-Life, and for the profession for which Capa has become the poster

boy – touted at that moment as 'the greatest war photographer in the world.'" So Morris concocts a tale of botched processing by a kid, covering the asses of all concerned, and turning Capa's 11 correct exposures into splinters from the true cross instead of the paltry results of a terrified bumbler."

Coleman continues: "Since it involves what we would have to call a conspiracy, the tale of the negatives' subsequent processing and subsequent destruction proves more perplexing." Coleman then speculates as to the route that the films must have taken through the London darkroom, condemning me for discarding the three rolls that turned up blank. Probably I also discarded the blank portion of the fourth roll, when we cut out the eleven frames for censorship. I see nothing wrong with all of that, a normal practice to discard bad or unusable film with no archival value.

Coleman concludes his first full post on this matter as follows: "In short, no one alive can corroborate Morris's account – or contradict it with direct eyewitness testimony. We have only that narrative, and the remaining fragments of physical evidence, and some verifiable facts to go on in confirming or disproving it. On that basis, let us proceed."

Proceed is what Coleman has done, implying that I am a liar, in 17 more posts of his "Alternate History: Robert Capa on D-Day." He has modified his attack on Capa's performance on D-Day. Now I am his target, but he has also targeted those who have retold my story: First and foremost Robert Capa himself in *Slightly Out of Focus*, curator Cynthia Young of ICP, Christiane Amanpour of CNN and many others.

Along the way he tackles marginal issues: Why were Capa's preliminary photos of the D-Day crossing not published at the time? (explained above). What about TIME magazine's promotional use of imitation Capa D-Day negatives? (TIME apologized). Why were Capa's handwritten captions on the invasion preparations not used? (Scherman's pictures were similar and his captions were better).

It almost seems a waste of time to recite the charges made in Coleman's subsequent "Alternate History" posts. However, in the interest of history, I continue:

In his post of June 12 he criticizes ICP's Capa curator Cynthia Young for repeating my account of what Dennis Banks told me.

In his "Alternate History" post of June 15 he criticizes "Morris's highly unprofessional decision to approve the use of a film-drying arrangement that would leave the films vulnerable to dust and damage when running the jury-rigged heater surely proved a foolish economy." – ignoring the fact that the equipment in LIFE'S London darkroom had been successfully used for years.

In his "Alternate History" post of June 17 Coleman mistakenly assumes that Capa's handwritten captions on his pictures of invasion preparations were written after rather than before he landed on the beach. Admittedly Coleman did not know that there had been an advance packet. I myself had forgotten it. Cynthia Young, although having no proof, guessed that there had been a first packet, and Marie Brenner of *Vanity Fair* also got it right.

Coleman also in his "Alternate History" post of June 19 totally confuses himself by trying to make sense of Capa's admittedly semi-fictional account *Slightly Out of Focus*, and concludes: "At 1:30 pm that day the last German gun fell silent, the last German defenders surrendered, and the battle of Omaha Beach, a turning point in the war, ended. Capa, 'the greatest war photographer in the world,' who'd volunteered to witness it from the beginning, had missed most of it." Ignoring the facts that Capa was the first press photographer to set foot on Omaha Beach – that he had to turn his back on enemy fire to be able to take his famous photographs – that in the midst of this terrifying scene, he managed to get his dazed self and his pictures back to safety, returning, after having been stripped naked and marked as a casualty, as soon as he could, to cover the continuing battle of France which went on for months. Capa's courage and performance on D-Day was acclaimed by LIFE, and he was given the Medal of Freedom by President Eisenhower.

In his "Alternate History" post of June 21 Coleman continues the attack on Capa. He concludes: "On this crucial occasion, the opportunity of a lifetime, he failed himself, his picture editor, his publisher, his public, and history itself."

In his "Alternate History" post of June 23 Coleman resumes his all-out attack on me. He sub-heads his post with a quote from Napoleon Bonaparte: "History is a bunch of lies," and then accuses me of lying for seventy years, saying that: "The myth of melted negatives in the London darkroom was concocted on the spot by John Morris, to hide Capa's abject failure to deliver the goods when the chips were down."

Coleman is not satisfied to simply attack me. In his "Alternate History" post of June 26 he pounces on the revelation by photographer Rob McElroy that a promotional video made for TIME magazine used digitally altered copies of the Capa Omaha landing sequence to illustrate an interview I had given TIME in which I repeated my usual version of the Dennis Banks story. This leads Coleman to conclude that the negatives held by ICP "constitute forgeries" and that the incident "mandates a reconsideration of the major players in the Capa industry, whose willingness to play fast and loose with the evidence now stands exposed."

Without checking with the editors of TIME, who were about to issue an apology for the incident, Coleman announced in his "Alternate History" post of June 29 that he is filing "a formal complaint" with the National Press Photographers Association, asking their Ethics Committee to investigate the apparent violation of their Code of Ethics.

In his next post of July 1, 2014, Coleman celebrates TIME's admission that their video was deceptive, and manages to drag me into it: "How could the Capa Archives, Magnum and John Morris – all of whom surely knew that these were fake – authorize and approve their use in this film?" Utterly untrue, so far as I am concerned. My only participation on that film was to tell my usual Dennis Banks story, I was never further consulted about anything else to do with the production of that video.

Next, in a post of his "Alternate History" dated July 6, Coleman devotes himself largely to debunking the bestselling book of Stephen Ambrose: – *D-Day: June 6, 1944 The Climactic Battle of World War II*. Ambrose even had Capa returning to London. In this post Coleman takes it relatively easy on me – saying there is no point in "badgering an almost centenarian."

In another post of his "Alternate History," filed at about the same time, Coleman makes his biggest blunder. On the basis of two visits to ICP he assumes that three of the rolls which ICP holds in the Capa Archive – three rolls of the initial channel crossing – are the three rolls which I discarded as useless on the night of June 7, because there was nothing on them. Imagine MY astonishment when I read the following in this post:

"Imagine my astonishment, then, at opening this binder to find these images staring me in the face. To put it mildly, John Morris's reports of the loss and/or destruction of these negatives have been greatly exaggerated."

Wow! Apparently Coleman grossly confused the preliminary channel crossing films, those taken aboard the *Chase*, with the actual landing pictures, as well as thinking that Capa's handwritten captions for them were written AFTER the landing. No wonder he thought I was a liar!

In the next post of his "Alternate History," dated July 9, Coleman wallows in his false discovery that he has actually seen the "mythical" images reported on by the "mythical" Dennis Banks. Now I am accused of not only inventing a story but inventing the man who told it!

In this post Coleman proceeds to analyze the pre-landing film, somehow concluding that there must have been a fifth roll – "Morris's well rehearsed account to the contrary." He does note, correctly, that this film was not edited at the time. As noted above, I had already edited and prepared for censorship Dave Scherman's similar photos – the ones used in LIFE June 19th.

In his following post – "Alternate History: Robert Capa on D-Day (16)", Coleman finds a new target: Robert Capa's authorized biographer Richard Whelan, and his "cavalier sense of scholarship." Coleman finds himself unable to fully attack Whelan because Whelan had the bad grace to commit suicide. So he returns to attack me:

"The tall tale of the overheated film-drying cabinet and the melted emulsion of Capa's D-Day images originated with John Morris," and charges that ICP's Capa curator Cynthia Young – "who has access to the same physical evidence – has perpetuated that falsehood by dragging this red herring further across the path."

In "Alternate History: Robert Capa on D-Day (17)", Coleman acknowledges getting a letter from me reiterating my Dennis Banks story, and in which I refer him to a recent interview by Mark Edward Harris in *Black & White* magazine. In this I welcome the possibility that there never were images on the three blank rolls, which I threw away in the LIFE London darkroom the night of June 7, 1944, as it would clear Dennis Banks of the responsibility for ruining them.

Coleman however clings to his false belief that the three other beach landing films survive at ICP. He has seen them! – of course confusing them with the pre-invasion films taken by Scherman aboard the USS Chase.

I now regret that I had forgotten and therefore did not make it clear long ago that there had been another June 7 delivery to the London office, containing the pre-invasion *Chase* films by Scherman (used in LIFE June 19) and Capa's *Chase* films (not used as they duplicated Scherman's).

And now for Coleman's final post (so far as I know) to date: "Alternate History: Robert Capa on D-Day (18):" here he finds an important new target: Christiane Amanpour of CNN. She happens to be a friend of many years, with whom I have shared platforms both at London's Frontline Club and at ICP in New York, where she presented me their Lifetime Achievement award in 2010.

Hearing that I would be in London, Christiane asked to interview me on November 11, Armistice Day. We spoke about the new book of my photos taken in wartime Normandy and Brittany in 1944, *Quelque Part en France*. Then we spoke of D-Day, whose 70th anniversary we had both covered, and I told my oft-repeated story of the London darkroom disaster. She replied, "It still makes me sick to my stomach to think that evidence may have been lost forever."

To which I replied. "Well, it now seems that maybe there was nothing on the other three rolls to begin with. Experts (I was referring to Baughman) recently have said you can't melt the emulsion off films like that and he maybe never shot them. So I now believe that it's quite possible that Bob just bundled all his 35 (35 mm film) together and just shipped it off to London, knowing that on one of those rolls there would be the pictures he actually shot that morning. So we may not have lost anything at all that he had shot. That remains to be seen."

To which, Amanpour replied: "That's...that's news!" And I replied, "That's new!"

I had not planned to talk to her about Capa's lost negatives. I think this spontaneous response reflected my growing awareness that Dennis might have gotten it wrong in the first place.

To me the most interesting thing about this final (?) post of Coleman's is its quotations from letters that Bob Capa wrote home to Cornell Capa's wife Edie and their mother Julia. In them he accepted the theory that much of his D-Day coverage had been ruined, but without saying how – he definitely did NOT blame Dennis Banks and never mentioned me by name at all.

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This is far from an adequate answer to the thousands of words of unfounded and defamatory accusations to have come from the computer of A.D. Coleman. In short he goes to great lengths to discredit not only me, but also all those who have honestly reported my story, in which I simply quoted what Dennis Banks said to me on the night of June 7, 1944, and which Ross Baughman and others have intelligently questioned. I shall be delighted if Dennis and I are proved wrong and gladly apologize to all those who have “bought” my story in good faith (including Robert Pledge of Contact Press Images, Marie Brenner of *Vanity Fair*, Simon Kuper of *The Financial Times*, producer Douglas Sloan of the film “Eleven Frames” and filmmaker Cathy Pearson of “Get the Picture.”)

We may never know the entire truth.

John G. Morris  
Paris, January 5, 2014