

The disaster that could have scuppered Overlord By Ben Fenton
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At four minutes past two in the morning on April 28, 1944, the prosaically-named USS LST-507 was torpedoed as it approached Slapton Sands on the Devon side of Lyme Bay.

The moon had just dropped beneath the horizon of a calm, dark sea and, until that moment, all was going well with Exercise Tiger. Then the landing ship, packed to the gunwales with men and armoured equipment, erupted and was soon aflame from stem to stern. The initial explosion was the first sign for the commanders of Exercise Tiger, a 30,000-man, 300-vessel dress rehearsal for the Normandy landings, that things had gone horribly wrong. In the next 10 minutes, USS LST-531 had been torpedoed and sunk and USS LST-289 hit and crippled, its stern blown clean off. By the end of the night, 198 US Navy personnel and 551 US Army soldiers, including hundreds of irreplaceable specialist engineers and 10 senior officers, were dead or missing. The loss of three LSTs - landing ship, tank - meant that there would be no reserve of any kind for the actual landings, due to start 38 days later. But the scale of Operation Overlord, the name given to the D-Day landings, and the unstoppable momentum of its build-up meant that the great tragedy of Slapton Sands had to be ignored, hushed up and consigned to the later study of historians. Bad as it was, it could all have been far worse. In all, there were eight LSTs at sea that night when a nine-boat patrol of German motor torpedo boats sailed through the Royal Navy's protective screen. The landing craft were part of an eight-day exercise meant to foreshadow the June landings and Slapton had been chosen for the rehearsal because of its close resemblance to what would become Utah beach on the east coast of the Cotentin peninsula. Earlier in the day, LSTs had landed more than 20,000 infantrymen and amphibious tanks of the US 4th Infantry Division on Slapton, a three-mile stretch of shingle on the south Devon coast between Torbay and Plymouth. The night-time rehearsal was for the back-up teams that would be needed on Utah, the second wave consisting of army engineers and the heavy equipment that could not be put ashore in the vicious opening of the invasion. For security, the hard-pressed Royal Navy relied mostly on the picket of vessels strung out along the outer edge of Lyme Bay. Originally, a First World War-era destroyer, Scimitar, and a corvette, Azalea, were assigned to protect the convoy, but Scimitar was damaged in a collision the day before and had to put in to port. A communications failure meant that no replacement was sent to help the convoy until it was too late. On the night of April 28, the LSTs, unknown to any of the ships' captains, had followed inaccurately typed communications orders and were using a slightly different radio frequency from the corvette or the picket. The patrol of German vessels, attracted by the large number of radio communications obviously coming from the west side of the bay, closed in, passing through the picket line. They were seen by one of the naval ships, which reported the attack to the corvette. While the convoy's only protector moved off to find the intruders, its captain assumed the LSTs would have heard the warning and taken evasive action. But they did not and, unprotected, steamed on towards the shore, presenting an easy target to the nine supercharged E-boats of the 5th and 9th Schnellboote Flotillas. Fortunately for the remaining LSTs, the Germans carried only two torpedoes each that night instead of the usual four. They were enough to account for LSTs 507 and 531, which sustained 202 and 424 dead respectively. Another 123 were killed on board LST 289. But although the losses were awful, there was an even greater concern to Gen Dwight D Eisenhower and his team of D-Day planners. The 10 senior officers lost that night were all "bigoted", meaning that they were cleared to see information in the Bigot category, a classification higher than Top Secret, which was used for all Overlord material. If any of the 10 had been taken prisoner by the E-boats, something that the confusion of the night had made eminently possible, they might have been persuaded to part with vital information, including the location of Utah beach. The whole success of Overlord lay in convincing the Germans that the Normandy landings were a diversionary attack with the real assault to come opposite the Kent coast in the Pas de Calais. While those 10 men were missing, Eisenhower might have to work on the assumption that his landings would be met with the full force of the German army, with disastrous consequences. Huge efforts were made to recover bodies from Lyme Bay and, against all odds, the 10 officers were found. The US Army did not acknowledge the disaster of Slapton until well after D-Day but there was not, despite what post-war conspiracy theorists claimed, any effort to cover up the extent of the casualties. In the event, the 4th Infantry Division landed safely at Utah beach on June 6, 1944, suffering casualties only 10 per cent of the number lost in the chill waters of Lyme Bay.