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THE GREAT BATTLE FOR NORMANDY, 1944

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The 1944 battle for Normandy was the most important battle between the western Allies and German forces on the continent of Europe in World War II and the first and essential battle in "Operation OVERLORD," the invasion of Europe that preceded the final Allied drive to Germany. It began with the largest amphibious operation in history, in which more than 5,000 ships, the largest armada ever assembled, placed 130,000 Allied soldiers on a hostile shore in a single day. It established Allied forces in a secure lodgment from which they began the liberation of Nazi-occupied Europe and the destruction of German armed forces in the west. It ensured that Germany would never be able to concentrate all her military power against the Soviet Union and thus forced the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany.

The battle began on the northern coast of Normandy, France, between the Orne River and the Cotentin Peninsula, on June 6, 1944—D-Day. This location reflected the US view that eventually an attack across the English Channel from Britain would be necessary to place Allied armies on the shortest, most direct route to the German heartland, forcing the Germans to risk the destruction of their field forces in its defense. The battle expanded west to the Cotentin Peninsula and Cherbourg, south to Avranches and southeast to Argentan. The Allies chose this area because it exploited weaker German defenses than the Pas de Calaise; afforded surprise; offered wide assault beaches for landings and follow on support; was isolated from German counter-attack except from the south; and included the port of Cherbourg. The battle lasted until July 24, 1944, when the lodgment was sufficiently secure that break-out operations could begin. However, the strategic purpose of the battle really was not achieved until the liberation of Paris on August 25, 1944, when German forces were utterly defeated and fleeing back to Germany.

Adolph Hitler's priority was always in the East where he sought *Lebensraum* ("living space") for the master German race. The Germans' invasion of France in 1940 was to neutralize the threat from the west and free them to march east against the Soviet Union. The Germans were on the strategic defensive in the west from the end of the Battle of Britain in September 1940 onwards. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Germans used the western theater as a place to rest troops.

Although the Allies were relatively free to act in the west, choosing what to do and when was very difficult. When the US entered the war in December, 1941, the British were already committed in North Africa and in any case provided the preponderance of resources, which is why US forces landed in North Africa in November, 1942. Allied strategy from then on had to reconcile many contentious variables. First were the US and British views of how best to defeat Germany—for the US, via invasion from the British Isles across the English Channel directly on to the continent and thence straight to Germany; for the British, from a consolidated base in the Mediterranean basin through Italy, the Balkans and Turkey, the so-called "underbelly." Second was the identification of strategic priorities among three theaters (Europe, the Pacific and Southeast Asia); support for the embattled Soviet Union; defeating the German U-boats in the North Atlantic; sustaining the strategic

bombing offensive against Germany from the British Isles; continuing the build-up for an eventual cross-channel attack; and supporting resistance forces in the Nazi-occupied lands. As the US mobilized, resources had to be allocated among these priorities and production schedules synchronized accordingly—despite constant interruption by unfolding events. Remarkably, Allied strategy was coordinated in a series of conferences in 1942 and 1943 at Casablanca, Washington, Quebec, Cairo and Tehran. The Allies agreed early to the principle of a major cross-channel attack and, urged by Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, set the Spring 1944 date for it at the November 1943 Cairo-Tehran conferences.

Hitler believed that he could secure Europe behind an impregnable “Atlantic Wall” of fixed fortifications, coastal artillery and obstacles—“*Festung Europa*.” However, he made few resources available to fortify all 3,000 miles of vulnerable European coastline. On November 3, 1943, Hitler’s “Führer Directive 51” stated that the threat from the west now outweighed that from the east, due to the proximity of massive Allied forces in Britain to the German industrial heartland. The west was the likely site of the critical battle of the war and would not be further weakened in favor of the east. Hitler appointed Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, hero of the North African campaigns, to command Army Group B in northwest Europe and ordered him to begin inspection of the coastal defenses.

Rommel was at odds with his immediate commander, Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief—West, over the defensive concept. Rommel assumed Allied air, sea and numerical superiority and concluded that the invasion must be met at the waterline and destroyed there. He favored a system of fixed defenses along the coast with armor reserves close up for immediate counter-attack. Rundstedt assumed great difficulty discerning which of more than one probable Allied invasion would be the main effort. He therefore believed that defenses should be prepared in depth and that armored reserves should be held well back from the coast in readiness for a decisive counter-attack.

Rommel had direct responsibility for the coastal defenses and planned them according to his concept. Hundreds of thousands of obstacles and mines were placed on likely landing beaches and thousands of fortifications constructed along the coast. Harbors were prepared for demolition. At likely landing beaches, the Germans paid particular attention to blocking the natural exits off the beaches that tanks and other heavy equipment needed to move inland.

Regarding the use of armor, Hitler decided in April to appease both commanders without really making a choice. Of the 11 “panzer” or armor divisions then in the West, he assigned three to Rommel’s Army Group B to be employed as Rommel wished; three more to a new Army Group G protecting the Mediterranean coast of southern France; and the remaining four he allowed von Rundstedt to retain as a central reserve near Paris. However, this reserve could not be committed without Hitler’s personal approval, nor could von Rundstedt shift forces among his army groups without Hitler’s approval. As he himself complained after the war, “My sole prerogative was to change the guard at my gate.”

Almost half of the German infantry divisions in the West were coast defense or training formations. Many were classified as “fortress” divisions and had no transport and only a variety of captured foreign arms. The infantry included many older men, convalescents, inexperienced officers and foreign volunteers, especially in the supply and administrative services. The infantry divisions included Russians, Hungarians, Poles, Yugoslavs, Czechs, Romanians and Dutch. Although the panzer divisions were powerful, three had never seen action, and the rest had been in the west only since January. Average battle strengths were low—some 75 battle ready tanks per division—and many of the soldiers were in need of rest after service on the Eastern Front.¹

To attack these defenses, the Allies assembled their most experienced commanders, many with recent experience fighting the Germans in the Mediterranean. The Allied command team was bi-national and built on the earlier work of a small planning team that crafted a very carefully phased operation of seizing beaches, then a lodgment area, and then a port sufficient for building up a force large enough to liberate France. American General Dwight David Eisenhower was the overall commander. British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery was land commander and also commander of the 21st (British) Army Group; Eisenhower would take overall land command once the US 12th Army Group was activated ashore.

Among the most difficult factors was weather, which turned prohibitively severe in early June with the invasion force loaded and putting to sea. Eisenhower had to decide whether to postpone the invasion for two weeks, when moon and tide conditions would next be acceptable, or delay for 24 hours, when a short break in the weather might allow the invasion to succeed under less than optimal conditions. He chose the latter—D-Day moved from June 5 to June 6, 1944.

There were five assault beaches along some seventy miles of shoreline. From west to east, they were Utah and Omaha to be seized by US forces, and Gold, Juno and Sword, to be seized by British and Canadian forces. US airborne forces were to parachute into the Cotentin Peninsula in the pre-dawn morning of D-Day to seize exits off Utah Beach and secure the west flank; British airborne forces likewise landed east of Sword Beach to secure the east flank. The plan called for seizing the city of Caen in the east on D-Day, as it was the nexus of roads leading east and southeast in good tank country along the Seine River to Paris. As soon as possible, US forces were to clear the Cotentin Peninsula and seize and open the port of Cherbourg to

¹ Matthew Cooper, *The German Army, 1933 – 1945*, pp. 496-497

hasten the delivery of war materiel by sea. They would then turn south to conduct the breakout and open more ports in Brittany.

Moving the invasion force by sea across the English Channel and onto the beaches was a formidable task involving advance reconnaissance by submarines, minesweeping, air and naval anti-submarine screens to the north and south, early positioning of the great battleships and cruisers of the shore bombardment force, and the careful sequencing of hundreds of troop ships to the off-shore locations from which they would launch their assault landing craft. The assault waves were thoroughly organized for bringing key weapons and capabilities onto the beaches in deliberate succession—tanks, then infantry, then engineers to clear obstacles.

The heaviest fighting on D-Day occurred on Omaha Beach. The German defenses there were anchored on 12 *wiederstandnesten* or fortified strongpoints sited to deny the exits off the beach. To open the exits, each boat landing team had a specific objective to seize or neutralize, and had rehearsed its mission repeatedly using maps, aerial photos, scale models and full-scale mock-ups. However, an offshore current, unknown to planners, helped shift many landing craft well east of their objectives and onto unfamiliar stretches of beach. A heavy overcast made planned tactical air support and naval gunfire less effective than desired. The dual-drive, floating tanks that were to lead the assault swamped and sank in the unanticipated heavy swells. The German *352d Infantry Division* had reinforced the beach defenses without being detected. The first wave (which landed at low tide so the landing craft pilots could see and avoid obstacles) came under continuous, heavy direct and indirect fire as soon as it was sighted and thence all the way to the feeble cover of the high tide line. Many landing craft took extreme evasive action, further scattering the troops, while many soldiers abandoned their craft into deep water to avoid being killed before they could fight. There many drowned, at worst, or, at best, dropped their equipment to swim ashore. By 7:30 AM, an hour after H-Hour, some 1,200 soldiers of the 16th and 116th Infantry Regiments were pinned down on the beach, disorganized, disoriented, missing leaders and key equipment, riddled by casualties.

Iron-willed soldiers and sailors of all ranks met this crisis. US Navy destroyers scraped bottom trying to close the beach from where they placed 5-inch direct fire on targets troops ashore were engaging. Colonel George Taylor commanding the 16th Infantry Regiment urged his men that only the dead and those sure to die would stay on the beach; they must advance to the bluffs above. Sergeant John Pinder repeatedly left the safety of the high tide line to search for radio parts among the battle debris on the beach; he was killed in the attempt. General Willard Wyman calmly walked along the beach under heavy fire giving orders and direction to individual soldiers. Private Carleton Barrett rescued many of his wounded comrades from certain drowning in the surf. Lieutenant John Spaulding found a crease in the German bluff defenses and led his rifle platoon through it and to the top. Lieutenant Jimmie Montieth commandeered the only two tanks to make it ashore, directing their fire in support of his platoon that likewise scaled the bluffs to attack German positions from flank and rear. These and countless others took the battle into their own hands, allowing some of the critical beach exits to be cleared from behind by the end of the day.

Nevertheless, the Allied beach-head was in a precarious state. Although 130,000 Allied troops were ashore, the beach-heads were not united, the beaches themselves were still under enemy artillery and mortar fire, the casualties on Omaha Beach had been heavy, Caen had not been taken, and German panzer divisions were en route. Had they arrived in strength and attacked immediately, they might have set back the invasion. But they did not.

Only one of the eleven German panzer divisions was in Normandy on June 6—the 21st, positioned in Caen, from where it successfully prevented the planned seizure of that town by British forces. Three more (*12th SS*, *17th SS* and *Panzer Lehr*) were close enough to have been on the battlefield the next day, but the German command was incapable of such a decision. Hitler's staff did not awaken him at first news of the invasion but only late in the morning; he did not give his personal release of these divisions until mid-afternoon. Low on fuel, battered by swarms of Allied fighter-bombers, harassed by French resistance forces, and delayed by the destruction of nearly every bridge and railroad along their routes, these divisions arrived piecemeal onto the Normandy front between June 7 and June 17 where they were used in stop gap measures to shore up the German line. Seven more arrived in similar fashion over the next eight weeks, never enough to mount a massive counter-attack.

Many factors explain the fitful German response. The Allied deception plan FORTITUDE played to Hitler's belief that the main Allied effort must come across the Pas-de-Calais. Hitler was fixated on the Pas-de-Calais and thought that Normandy was a feint. On June 8, he ordered seventeen divisions released from Calais to Normandy, but canceled the order on June 9. At a conference on June 17, von Rundstedt and Rommel both advised him the invasion force could not be expelled and that German forces must withdraw to a more defensible position. Hitler ordered no withdrawals -- German forces were to stand fast, fight to the last man, and counter-attack vigorously. He promised some reinforcement and new miracle weapons, but came to believe that his generals were defeatist and untrustworthy. He dismissed them both from a subsequent conference on June 29, replacing von Rundstedt with Field Marshall Gunther von Kluge, who vacillated on every decision. Allied fighters attacked Rommel's staff car in the open on July 17, wounding the disgruntled field marshal severely—he was out of the war. The failed assassination attempt against Hitler on July 20 implicated Rommel and Kluge (both of whom committed suicide) and many others, punctuating the toxic state of German command relationships.

The Allies also had profound problems, however. On their eastern flank, despite repeated attempts, British and Canadian forces made little headway toward seizing Caen, where most of the arriving German armored forces were concentrated. On their western flank, US forces cleared the Cotentin Peninsula and seized Cherbourg by June 27 only to find that harbor so thoroughly demolished and mined that it could not be used until September. American forces pushing south from the beaches encountered the *bocage*, a seemingly endless expanse of small fields demarcated since the Middle Ages by thick stone walls entangled in heavy vegetation. These “hedgerows” and the fields they contained, some 34 per mile, constituted a maze of ideal defensive terrain in which the Germans stymied the US advance south for weeks. Meanwhile, a severe channel storm from June 17 to 22d halted further landings and supplies over the beaches, ruined the “Mulberry” artificial harbors, and wrecked nearly 800 Allied vessels. Because the storm also suppressed allied air operations, it might have afforded the Germans a last opportunity to counter-attack the beach-head, but they did not. On June 23, the Soviets launched Operation *Bagration* on the Eastern Front, a huge offensive that caused Hitler to cancel promised reinforcements from Germany.

Forced to extemporize, the Allies learned that they could beach LSTs (landing ships, tank) under an ebbing tide, offload them, and refloat them on the rising tide without harm to the vessels. This technique and other logistical feats put 32 fully equipped and supplied Allied divisions, including eight armor divisions, ashore by the end of July. With these forces and substantial air support, the British finally seized Caen on July 13. The Americans broke free of the *bocage* at St. Lo on July 18 and attacked south under a massive carpet bombing of the German defenses by strategic bombers from England on July 25. The Third US Army, recently activated ashore under General George S. Patton, swarmed past Avranches, into Brittany and, even more important, east toward Paris. Against the advice of Kluge, Hitler ordered a counter-attack west toward Avranches with his last remaining armored forces. Stopped at Mortain on August 10, they were unable to disengage and withdraw east fast enough to avoid near encirclement and destruction between the US and British forces in the Falaise Gap. Allied landings in southern France in Operation Dragoon on August 15 sealed the fate of German forces in most of France. Whether Hitler desired it or not, they were fleeing north and east by any means they could find, saved only by overstretched Allied logistics.

The Allies won the battle for Normandy because they defeated piece-meal German attempts to destroy their lodgment before Allied power within it became prohibitively superior. The Allied victory can be attributed to the defeat of the U-boats in 1943, which allowed the build-up in Britain in the first place; gaining air and naval superiority over and around the Continent; achieving surprise, in part by deceiving Adolph Hitler; fighting tenaciously and adapting tactics throughout the battlefield; winning the build-up race; and breaking out in order to pursue and destroy German forces.

There were at least three points at which the course of the battle might have been different. The first was on June 4 when General Eisenhower made the decision to land on June 6 rather than postpone the landings two weeks and into the storms. The second was on June 6, when a vigorous German counter-attack might have been organized against the Allies at their weakest moment. The third was between June 9 and 17. Had Hitler allowed the transfer of divisions from 15th Army between those dates and a counter-attack been launched during the storms, the lodgment might have been defeated. By July 25, however, even Hitler’s generals knew that the lodgment could not be destroyed and that therefore France and, most likely, Germany, could not be defended. The end of World War II was in sight.

The price for these achievements was high: some 10,000 Allied casualties on June 6 alone, including more than 4,000 dead. German casualties on D-Day are estimated between 4000 and 9000. Thousands more died in the preliminary air and resistance campaigns. The larger battle into July and August cost another 425,000 Allied and German troops killed, wounded or missing. Another 200,000 German troops became prisoners in the Falaise pocket. Between 15,000 and 20,000 French civilians were killed, mainly as a result of Allied bombing. Thousands more fled their homes to escape the fighting.²

The Battle for Normandy is important today because it was essential to the Allied victory in World War II. It further ensured that the Western Allies would reach deep into Central Europe, meeting the Soviets on the Elbe and not the Rhine, thus allowing a democratic West Germany to become part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and thus setting the stage for later victory in the Cold War. These benefits to generations of Americans and Europeans are very unlikely to have followed had the invasion not happened, or had it been postponed, or had it failed. Normandy stands as a testament to Allied (and especially US-British) partnership and cooperation, and to the valor of countless Allied soldiers, sailors and airmen.

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² <http://www.ddaymuseum.co.uk/faq.htm#casualties>, accessed April 9, 2012