

**MILESTONES**  
IN MODERN  
WORLD HISTORY

1600 1750

1940 2000

# D-DAY AND THE LIBERATION OF FRANCE



John C. Davenport

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JOHN C. DAVENPORT

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# The Waiting

## THE MEN

“Something’s in the air,” the soldiers muttered to themselves and their comrades.<sup>1</sup> They could all feel it. Some of the men had been in France for nearly four years, ever since the German invasion and conquest of the country in 1940. Others had only recently arrived from the frozen battlefields of Russia, where Germany and the Soviet Union were locked in a struggle for national survival. Regardless of where they came from or how long they had been in the country, the soldiers were now, in early 1944, part of a German army that had been given the job of defending the French Coast against the long-awaited Anglo-American invasion. It was an unenviable assignment. Many people back home believed that Germany was already losing



the war and that an Allied invasion of France would be the final blow. The troops knew instinctively that the upcoming battle would be bloody and decisive. The winner in France would in all likelihood emerge victorious in the titanic conflict known as the Second World War.

The German soldiers knew it was certainly coming, but where was the invasion? The men had heard some official news and many more rumors about the gathering of a mighty force less than 100 miles (160 kilometers) away across the English Channel that was destined to assault the beaches they had been ordered to defend. What these German soldiers did not know was that hundreds of thousands of American, British, and Canadian troops had been collected together in English transit camps. Training exercises were being conducted on beaches that were identical to those in France, especially those in Normandy. Armored divisions with modern tanks and other vehicles sat idly in motor parks. Artillery pieces of all sizes and calibers rested under tarps. Massed formations of Allied bombers and fighters clogged English airfields. At sea in the Atlantic, an immense armada of warships and transports rode at anchor, anticipating the call to ferry the invasion armies to their final destination. In all, a vast military machine waited in Britain for the command to cross the English Channel and open a second front in the war against Nazi Germany.

Curiously, though, the invasion still did not come. The waiting continued. “Day after day nothing,” wrote one lonely soldier stationed near a coastal gun position. “Nothing happened but the waves coming and going, coming and going.”<sup>2</sup> Another German, in a letter to his family, complained, “I hate this fleeting, uncanny quiet. There’s a feeling here that we’re waiting for something big.”<sup>3</sup> Yet another anxious defender remarked how he and the other soldiers in the bunkers and machine-gun pits could think of little else besides the imminent invasion. They waited for it, he said, “and our death.”<sup>4</sup>



In this circa 1944 photo, a German soldier stands on guard near German anti-invasion defenses in France.

## THE FIELD MARSHAL

Sitting amid the concrete fortifications and defenses, the Germans suffered an unnerving calm before the inevitable “storm in the west,” as one of them put it.<sup>5</sup> It was a gnawing anticipation shared by their newly appointed commander, Generalfeldmarschall (Field Marshal) Erwin Rommel. Known as the Desert Fox for his exploits fighting the British in North Africa, Rommel had been given command of Army Group B in France, a mix of infantry and armored divisions that would absorb the first and heaviest blows in any Allied invasion. Rommel was tense, to be sure; in the forthcoming battle he would be outnumbered in both manpower and equipment. True enough, initially the Allies would be fighting against the numerical odds; the German army in the West had more than 60 divisions. But Germany’s combat reserves were nothing compared to those the enemy could put on the battlefield.

The Allies could put thousands of bombers and fighters in the air, compared to the hundreds Rommel had available. Such lopsided figures guaranteed air superiority to the Americans and British. Allied planes, therefore, could prowl the French skies at will. Rommel’s tanks and artillery were vastly superior to those of his enemies, with thicker armor and larger guns, but he had far fewer of them. Allied trucks and other wheeled vehicles existed in such numbers that they would allow the enemy to swarm over the countryside. The British and Americans, in short, seemed to have an advantage in nearly every category.

Still, Rommel had confidence in his men. Many of the troops saluting the field marshal when he went about inspecting the German defenses, to be sure, were unproven. Some were too old; others were too young. A large number of the soldiers had been sent to France to recuperate from wounds suffered in Russia. A minority was not even German, having been conscripted from among the peoples conquered by German armies in Eastern Europe. Yet by and large, the

soldiers' morale was high. Most, in fact, brimmed with confidence in the Führer, Adolf Hitler, and in their own fighting spirit. German discipline and raw bravery would carry the day, they were told by their officers. As one German infantryman put it, "we confidently begin [1944] the year of victory."<sup>6</sup>

## THE DEFENSES

Rommel, in fact, was much less concerned with the quality and fighting character of his troops than he was with the condition of the defenses they manned. The field marshal had spent months worrying over the construction schedule of the beach fortifications that stretched from the Pas de Calais in the East to the Cotentin Peninsula in the West. Defeating the Allies before they could move inland depended upon complete and intact coastal defenses. Based on Hitler's orders to German builders, he was supposed to have an impenetrable wall in front of his army group. Instead, when he arrived in France in late 1943, Rommel found a rough patchwork of half-completed combat positions, empty bunkers, barren sand, and open space. Only near Calais was the field marshal somewhat satisfied with the condition of the defensive works. Normandy was nowhere near what it should have been.

Some gun casemates on the Norman Coast lacked the huge coastal artillery pieces that would be needed to sink ships far out at sea and thus break up the invasion force before it even reached the beaches. Long strips of shoreline were empty of the dense barbed-wire entanglements meant to slow the enemy troops as they struggled ashore from their landing craft. Underwater obstacles designed to rip through the hulls of transports and landing ships as they neared the shore had not been installed. Millions of land mines still had to be hidden under the sand of the likely landing sites and along the paths leading from the beach exit points. The drop zones where the Allied paratroopers were certain to come down in the opening hours of the invasion had been neither fortified nor flooded as





Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, center, studies a map with other German army officers in Caen, France, during an inspection tour of coastal defenses, circa May 1944.

Rommel had hoped, meaning that his forward divisions might have to fight with Allied troops both in front of and behind them. The so-called Atlantic Wall, it appeared to Rommel, was barely a fence.

### THE STAKES

The German commander doubtless had his work cut out for him. With each passing day, the invasion he was supposed to stop drew closer, and yet his preparations were incomplete. As winter gave way to spring, the field marshal was filled with a sense of the high stakes he and his army were playing for. Rommel confessed his hopes and fears routinely to his wife

back in Germany. Late in the spring of 1944, he told her that “if we still have time to prepare . . . I believe we can repulse the onslaught.”<sup>7</sup> What he needed was time.

Unfortunately, for Rommel, he was running out of that precious commodity. The Allies could be expected anytime. The dwindling window for bolstering Army Group B’s defenses made Rommel ever more keenly aware of the fact that he bore the full weight of responsibility for success or failure in the coming battle. If he proved able to throw the invading British and American forces back into the sea, as he planned, Rommel would join the pantheon of German heroes. But if the Allies were successful in landing and gaining a foothold on French soil, if the Allies ultimately won, the field marshal would be held personally liable for Nazi Germany’s greatest defeat. As Rommel remarked to his wife, “If I fail here, then everybody will be after my blood.”<sup>8</sup>

Burdened as he was, Rommel addressed his jittery troops in May 1944 near the vitally important city of Caen. There he laid everything out. The battle for France would begin on the beaches and would test their skill and courage as never before. It would be a bitter contest; many of them would not see Germany again. There was no avoiding the fact, Rommel told his soldiers, that the invasion was coming, and he was counting on them to stop it. “I can tell you,” the field marshal guaranteed them, “the [Allies] will choose a landing ground where they don’t believe we’re expecting an invasion. And that will be here, in this spot.”<sup>9</sup>

## THE DAY

To his men, looking to their commander for reassurance and comfort as the invasion approached, Rommel presented a front of cool professionalism. He read daily intelligence reports, inspected gun positions, talked to soldiers, held staff meetings, and watched armored units training to smash any Allied beachhead that might be established. He hoped it would inspire

and calm his men. Inwardly, though, Army Group B's chief was concerned. He knew that the opening hours of the invasion would be crucial: "The war will be won or lost on the beaches. We'll have only one chance to stop the enemy and that's when he's in the water."<sup>10</sup>

Considering the situation, Rommel grew philosophical. He wondered what might be going through the minds of his adversaries in England. Rommel knew from his intelligence division that the combined Allied armies were under the command of his old nemesis from North Africa, General Bernard Law Montgomery. Above Montgomery was U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Rommel had also been informed that one of the Allies' best tank commanders, General George Patton, was also in England. These were formidable foes one and all, but it was Montgomery that Rommel knew best. Perhaps Montgomery was worrying over the dangerous sea crossing or the many ways in which a daring seaborne operation could fail. Maybe his counterpart assigned to assault France was plagued by doubts concerning the supply and reinforcement of his divisions once they made it ashore. Monty, as he was known, had a reputation for being cautious. This might prove to be his undoing, Rommel thought.

No matter—Rommel had enough to occupy his thoughts without putting himself in his enemy's position. Mines had to be laid; wire had to be strung across sand dunes; ammunition had to be stockpiled. Armored crews and their mechanics had to perform last-minute maintenance checks on the Panther and Tiger tanks that would soon shoot it out with American Sherman tanks and British Centurions. Pilots had to do likewise with their aircraft, getting ready for aerial combat in which they would be outnumbered perhaps 10 to 1. As May became June, the Germans raced to complete their preparations. Meanwhile, Rommel did the best he could to maintain calm throughout Army Group B, as he and his troops waited nervously for

Germany's destiny to unfold. He did not know what the future had in store for his armies, but Field Marshal Rommel was sure of one thing: When the day of the invasion came, as he told one of his officers, there could be no doubt that, for "the Allies, as well as Germany, it will be the longest day."<sup>11</sup>





# The Long Road Back to France

## **FESTUNG EUROPA**

The German Army had stormed into France in May 1940. Within a month, Paris had fallen, and the French nation lay defeated before Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Coming as it did at the end of a string of Nazi victories in the early days of 1940, the defeat of France represented a signal achievement for the German war machine and the beginning of four long years of occupation for the French people. Yet the triumph over France was only the first piece of an intricate puzzle being put together by Hitler and his generals. Along with the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, and Norway, all previously conquered by the Germans, France was the last part of a defensive barrier designed to allow for the uncontested German domination of

Western Europe. With France securely under his control, Hitler was determined to transform the entire continent into a vast German citadel: Fortress Europe.

The notion of a *Festung Europa*, as the Germans called it, was predicated upon the construction of a massive series of defensive artillery positions, strongpoints, and concrete fortifications along the Atlantic Coast. Hitler and his military engineers envisioned this Atlantic Wall as stretching from Norway to the French border with Spain and comprising more than 15,000 concrete defensive fighting positions, augmented by vast minefields, virtually impenetrable wire entanglements, and steel beach obstacles, all manned by more than 300,000 stationary coastal troops. The idea was to thwart any attempt by enemy forces to invade Western Europe and, in doing so, keep the Allies from opening a second front that would relieve the pressure on the Russian armies that had been battling Hitler's divisions since June 1941.

An ambitious scheme, the Atlantic Wall became the cornerstone of German strategy after the United States officially entered the war as Great Britain's ally in December 1941. After the United States declared war on Japan following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, Japan's Axis allies, Germany and Italy, declared war on the United States on December 11. Both the Allies and their German opponents knew that an Anglo-American army would eventually attempt to penetrate *Festung Europa*. Yet before a full-scale invasion could be staged, the Allies would need to assess and test Germany's Atlantic defenses and the German Army's ability to respond to a seaborne landing along the western shores of Europe.

The result was the ill-fated raid by Canadian units on the French port of Dieppe in August 1942. Outnumbered and lacking in heavy weapons, the Canadians were easily repulsed by the Germans; most of the Allied troops involved were



In a 1940 propaganda photo, German troops march down the Champs-Élysées in Paris, France.

either captured or killed. The assault, however, was far from a complete failure. Allied planners scrutinized it in extensive detail and concluded that any future operation of such a kind, particularly one on a much larger scale, would have to be preceded by the destruction of German beach defenses and include the nearly simultaneous introduction of Allied tanks onto the battlefield. Above all, German reinforcements would have to be prevented from moving toward the landing area from their inland stations long enough for a solid beachhead to be established.

The Germans likewise studied the Dieppe raid. Hitler's generals concluded that an Allied landing in France could be rolled back into the sea if met at the earliest moment by over-

whelming resistance offered by superior numbers of infantry, supported by tanks. They thus initiated the transfer of infantry and armored divisions from the Eastern Front to France. Hitler, for his part, felt vindicated by the Dieppe raid. The Führer was convinced that his fears of an imminent reopening of the Western theater of operations had been well founded. “The enemy will not abandon his attempts to form a Second Front,” he told his commanders. “I regard it as my duty to do everything humanly possible to improve the defensive capability of the [French] coast immediately.”<sup>1</sup> Hitler issued orders to the Organization Todt, a German military engineering and construction agency, to accelerate its programmed building of the Atlantic Wall. The agency’s director, Fritz Todt, was given a May 1943 deadline for the completion of the defense project, with an emphasis on the portion of the wall in France where Hitler was certain the Allied hammer would fall.

The German forces in France were similarly ordered to prepare for an Anglo-American landing. All ground units, save those assigned to the elite Waffen-SS, were reorganized and placed under the command of OB West Generalfeldmarschall (Supreme Commander, West, Field Marshal) Gerd von Rundstedt, who was headquartered in the town of St. Germain. German naval units in coastal waters were pulled together into Marinegruppe West (Naval Group West), led by Admiral Theodor Krancke. The German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, given the mission of defending the skies above France, came under the command of General Hugo Sperrle as Luftflotte 3 (3rd Air Fleet). Ultimate control of the combined German defenses, however, remained in the hands of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (Armed Forces High Command) in Berlin and its supreme commander, Adolf Hitler.

## THE INVASION DEBATE

By the fall of 1942, Germany was beginning to prepare for an Allied invasion of Europe. The Allies themselves, however, had

not even agreed upon where to launch their attack on Festung Europa, let alone when or how. The British preferred a patient approach to cracking Germany's defenses. They advocated a naval blockade of those portions of the continent occupied by the Axis powers, combined with the strategic bombing of German targets, a massive propaganda campaign designed to undermine Nazi credibility at home, and multiple Dieppe-like landings. All of this was to be in preparation for a final assault through Italy and into the heart of Hitler's empire itself. The American alternative was both simpler and bolder: marshal every available military resource and, at the earliest date, invade Western Europe through France.

The American plan had been championed by then-Major General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Eisenhower, in early 1942, had sketched out an invasion plan that rejected Italy in favor of France on the basis of the likelihood of success and expediency. The Mediterranean option offered by the British, he argued, would require Allied troops to cross the Alps in order to get to Germany without the benefit of air support, due to the lack of forward air bases in the region. Airfields in England, on the other hand, could provide constant and thick air cover for assault divisions in a French operation. Italy's terrain, furthermore, lent itself to defense, not offense. Dug-in German forces would undoubtedly exact a heavy price in blood from any Allied army fighting its way up the peninsula from landing points in Southern Italy. Lastly, the urban-industrial centers of Germany were much closer to suitable invasion sites in France than to similar areas in Italy.

Eisenhower laid out his thoughts in the March 1942 Marshall Memorandum, named after the U.S. Army chief of staff, General George Marshall. The document outlined a plan for a buildup of American, Canadian, and British units in England that coincided with strategic and tactical bombing of targets in France. Once the German defenses had been reduced, Allied armies would invade the continent, liberate





General Dwight D. Eisenhower, with pointer, at a meeting with the War Plans division in 1942.

France, and march across the Rhine River into Germany. The memorandum even assigned tentative dates and code names to the proposed operation. If the Soviets held out through 1942, Operation Roundup would commence in 1943; if the Russians were defeated in that year, Operation Sledgehammer would be launched immediately. Regardless of the timing or titling, the British adamantly opposed any French invasion plan. To their eyes, it was just too risky.

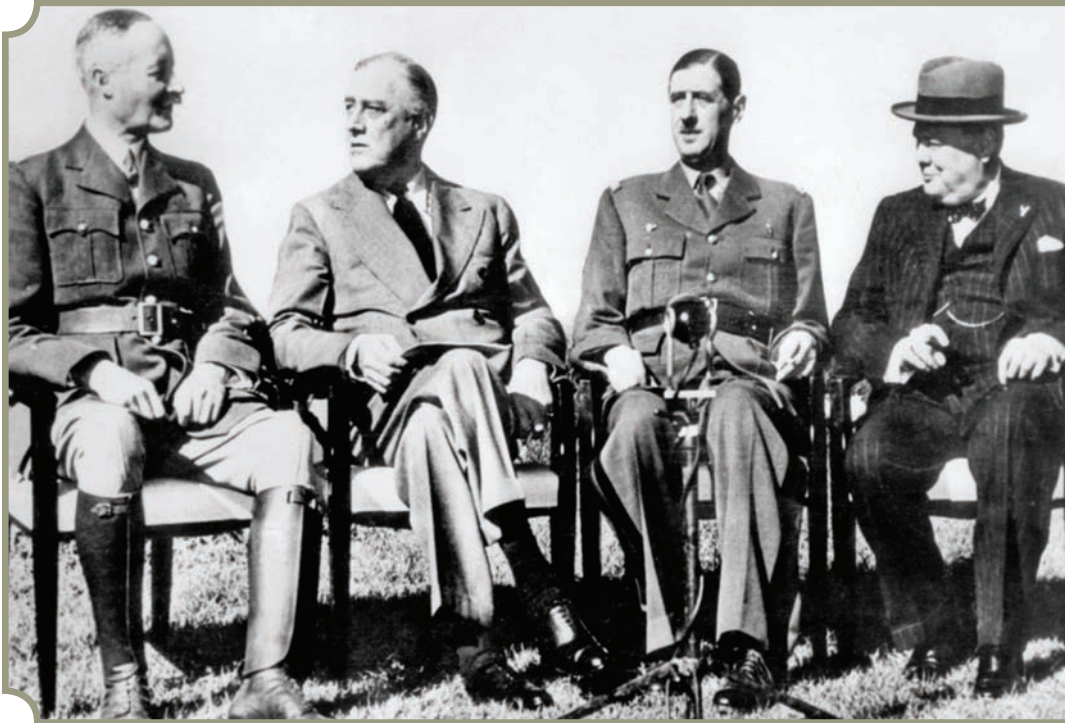
After much discussion, a compromise was reached in June. Operation Roundup would be considered but only after an invasion of North Africa (Operation Torch) had cleared the region of German and Italian forces. Then, operating from bases

in Tunisia, British and American armies under the command of the British 8th Army's General Bernard Law Montgomery would invade first Sicily and next Italy. Only with a Mediterranean front thus opened would the British consent to an invasion of France. The Americans agreed to accept the British proposal following the disaster at Dieppe that same month and a renewed German offensive began in Russia. Operation Torch would go forward; Italy would be attacked first. But the Americans continued to push for France as the ultimate stage upon which the final acts of World War II would begin.

### **CASABLANCA, COSSAC, AND QUEBEC**

The Torch landings took place in November 1942 on the beaches of Morocco and Algeria. The invasion signaled the beginning of the end for Germany's vaunted Afrika Korps, which had been fighting the British in North Africa since the spring of 1941, and its daring commander, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Within two months, the western portion of the invasion area was safe enough to allow for a meeting of Allied leaders in Casablanca between January 17 and 27, 1943. U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and the leader of the Free French forces, General Charles de Gaulle, attended. Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin was absent. His armies were then engaged in a fierce battle with the Germans for control of the Russian city of Stalingrad. If the city fell, the Soviet Union faced total defeat. Stalin believed he could not afford to be distracted by long-winded conference debates about battles to come when one for his country's very survival was already raging.

FDR, Churchill, and de Gaulle spent much of the conference arguing over the concept of a cross-Channel invasion as the main Allied line of attack against Germany. Churchill contended that Italy was and remained the best primary invasion option. Roosevelt, though, shared his top generals' preference for France as the central thrust and hoped to persuade



From left, French General Henri Giraud, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, French General Charles de Gaulle, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill pose during the 1943 Casablanca Conference, at which preparations were made for Allied invasions of France and Italy.

Churchill to support either Operation Roundup or some variant of it. The prime minister, however, remained steadfast in his opposition. Not only was France more heavily defended than Italy, he argued, the requisite equipment and troops were not available. Most of the Allied combat units, transport ships, and landing craft necessary for a cross-Channel invasion were already deployed in the Pacific against the Japanese. Reluctantly, Roosevelt agreed once again to delay a decision on France. Yet the president did wring one important concession from Churchill. In deference to Stalin's demands for a second front, the prime minister approved the opening of a front somewhere



in Western Europe and agreed to examine any plan drawn up for a landing in France. De Gaulle had no choice but to wait for his colleagues to make up their minds. For the time being, the general was forced to continue his exile from the homeland he had promised to liberate from Nazi tyranny.

With Churchill's grudging consent, the Allies moved forward with the creation of a battle plan for the proposed invasion. In March 1943, British Lieutenant-General Frederick Morgan was appointed chief of staff to the supreme Allied commander (designate); the designate was added because as yet no supreme commander existed. Morgan's orders were clear: Draft a plan that would put Allied forces into France by way of seaborne

## THE QUEBEC CONFERENCE

When President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met in Quebec, Canada in 1943, the stated agenda included a discussion of known German war crimes in Poland, the writing of a statement of understanding concerning atomic research, and a plan for the postwar reconstruction of Europe. But the centerpiece of the meeting was the proposed cross-Channel invasion of France. Promised to the Soviets for more than a year, the opening of a second front in Western Europe became an operational objective after FDR and Churchill agreed at Quebec to push forward with Operation Overlord. The text of the telegram informing the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, of the decision to proceed with the planning phase of Overlord is provided below:

SECRET QUEBEC, August 21, 1943. OPERATIONAL PRIORITY  
Secret and personal to Marshal Stalin from the United

landings along its Atlantic Coast. By the early summer, Morgan and his team had come up with a blueprint for simultaneous landings in northern France, either at Normandy or the Pas de Calais, and southern France. For the northern arm, Morgan himself favored Normandy. It was less fortified than Calais, and its port of Cherbourg would be invaluable as a resupply and reinforcement point for the Allies once they moved inland.

Morgan summarized the plan for FDR and Churchill at the Quebec Conference in August 1943. The general told his audience that the best chance for success lay in a Normandy assault by three infantry divisions landing between the Bay of the Seine and the Cotentin Peninsula. According to his plan,

States Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom.

In our conference at Quebec, just concluded, we have arrived at the following decision as to military operations to be carried out during 1943 and 1944.

The bomber offensive against Germany will be continued . . . The objectives of this air attack will be to destroy the German air combat strength, to dislocate the German military, industrial, and economic system, and to prepare the way for a cross-Channel invasion.

A large-scale buildup of American forces in the United Kingdom is now underway. It will provide an initial assault force of British and American divisions for cross-Channel operations. A bridgehead on the continent once secured will be reinforced steadily by additional American troops at the rate of three to five divisions per month. This operation will be the primary British and American ground and air effort against the Axis.\*

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\* Avalon Project, "The Quebec Conference—Reports on the Conference to Stalin and Chiang," <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/q004.asp>.

the crossroads city of Caen would be taken on day one of the invasion, Cherbourg within two weeks. A secondary landing would take place in southern France in order “to contain the maximum German forces” and keep them from coming to Rommel’s aid.<sup>2</sup> Morgan code named the southern component Operation Anvil; the Normandy assault was dubbed Operation Overlord and tentatively scheduled for May 1, 1944.

As Lieutenant-General Morgan finished his presentation, the conference participants made their revisions. The British would go along with Overlord if air supremacy was achieved before the landings took place and if no more than 12 German divisions stood in opposition. Britain could ill-afford to send its army, still recovering from the fighting in North Africa, into battle outnumbered and without complete mastery of the skies. The Americans wanted German submarines, the much-feared U-boats, cleared from the North Atlantic sea-lanes between the United States and Great Britain, to ensure the safety of U.S. troops en route to England. The American side further recommended that the Allied air campaign against the German homeland be reconfigured to target and cripple the German aircraft industry, a prerequisite to air supremacy, and cut the Third Reich’s oil supply. Lastly, the Americans asked that one of their own generals be appointed supreme commander. Agreed to on all points of discussion, Overlord went on the books as an active operation.

The Germans, meanwhile, were working feverishly to finish what the Nazi press called “the greatest and strongest line of fortifications military history has seen . . . [a] shield of steel and concrete as a safeguard of the values of Europe.”<sup>3</sup> Men and machines from Organization Todt responded to Hitler’s call for an impenetrable defense, building the gun casemates and pillboxes that they hoped would protect Festung Europa. One man in France, however, was far from impressed. “Do not be surprised,” von Rundstedt wrote to Hitler in the fall of 1943, “if—in spite of the Atlantic Wall . . . there’s no defensive success in the event of a major enemy attack.”<sup>4</sup>



# Prelude to Invasion

## THE BIG THREE AT TEHRAN

Although Roosevelt and Churchill agreed at Quebec to implement the Overlord plan for the invasion and liberation of France, the heated debate over that operation left a sense of suspicion lingering in the air. U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson, for example, felt certain that the British had not fully signed on to the idea of a Normandy assault. The British, he claimed in the late summer of 1943, were just waiting for an opportunity “to stick a knife in the back of Overlord.”<sup>1</sup> Stimson was correct in his assessment—to a point. Churchill was far from convinced that Overlord would succeed, and more than one British Foreign Ministry official made the case to the prime minister that “all this ‘Overlord’ folly must be thrown

‘Overboard.’”<sup>2</sup> Neither the Americans nor the British completely trusted the other, and both knew that the next step in the Overlord process, consulting the Russians, would expose any fissures in the Western alliance.

Until November 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt had been discussing and deciding upon the future strategy for France in Stalin’s absence. Engaged in a struggle for national survival, Stalin had been unable to meet with his Western counterparts. His contact with them had been confined to a series of letters and telegrams pleading for an invasion of France that would draw German men and resources from the Eastern Front. Without action somewhere else in Europe, the Soviet Union could not launch the type of counteroffensive needed to drive Hitler’s Wehrmacht out of Soviet territory. Allied operations in North Africa had eased the pressure on the Russian Red Army somewhat by compelling the Germans to commit some resources to the Afrika Korps’ defense. Moreover, the Anglo-American strategic bombing campaign against targets inside Germany had forced the Luftwaffe to reallocate combat aircraft away from the Eastern Front and toward the protection of air-space over the Third Reich. Still, the Soviets needed a full-scale invasion in the West in order to break the battlefield stalemate once and for all.

The significance of a Western attack grew as Germany suffered two devastating setbacks in Russia during the first half of 1943. First at Stalingrad and then at Kursk, the German Army experienced humiliating and costly defeats that resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of troops and hundreds of tanks. By the fall of that year, the German forces in Russia, especially Army Group Center, were rapidly collapsing, and Stalin longed to deliver the mortal blow that would push out the Nazi invaders. Toward this end, the Red Army regrouped and prepared to settle accounts with the Germans on the battlefield. An Allied invasion of France, and the subsequent strain it would put on





The Big Three—Premier Joseph Stalin, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill—are photographed at the Tehran Conference in November 1943, at which the invasion of France was planned.

German military resources, would virtually guarantee the success of the Soviets, if it came soon.

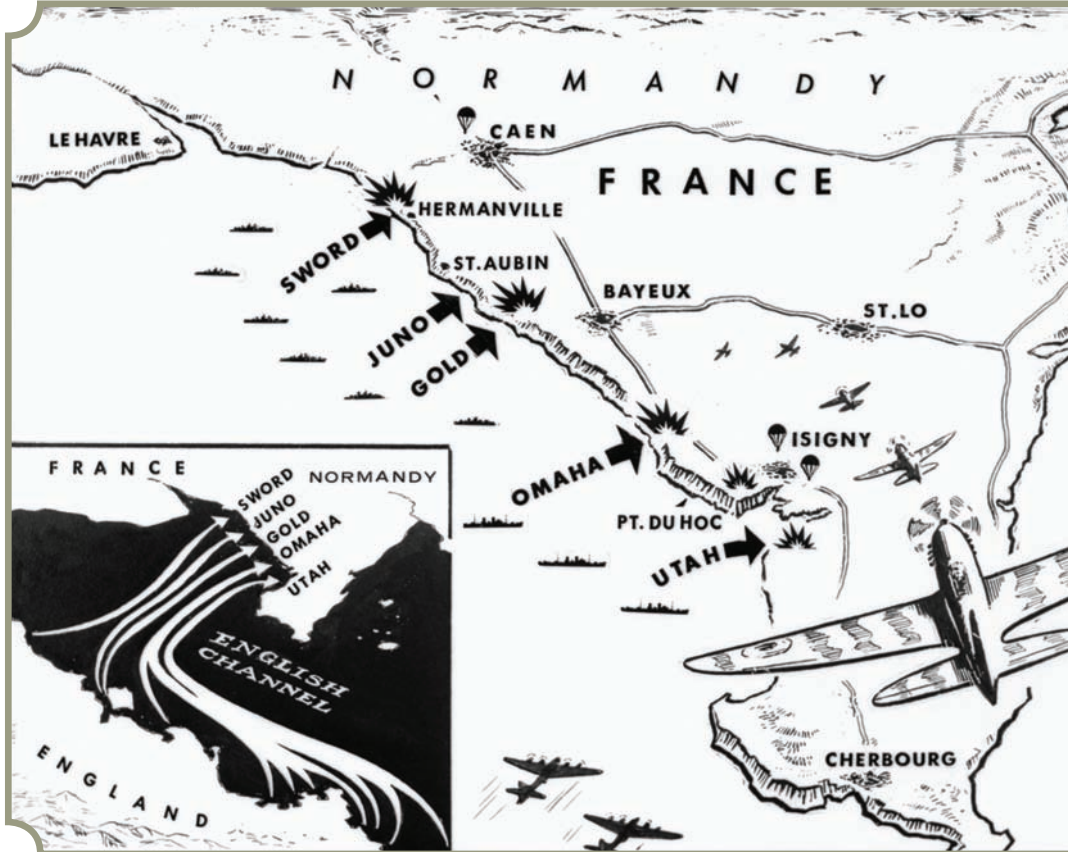
With this in mind, Stalin left Russia in November 1943 to meet with Roosevelt and Churchill in Tehran, Iran. He arrived for the conference amid tight security, made tighter still by a rumored plot to assassinate Roosevelt. Almost immediately, Stalin and FDR came to an agreement on what Churchill called “this bloody second front” business.<sup>3</sup> The invasion of Italy had already commenced in September, and it was there that Churchill wanted the Allied emphasis placed. Stalin, however, once briefed on Overlord, demanded that it become “the basic

operation for 1944.”<sup>4</sup> In terms of timing, Stalin told FDR and Churchill that it made no difference to him when the invasion came, only that it did. “I don’t care if it is the 1st, 15th, or 29th [of May], but a definite date is important.”<sup>5</sup>

The appointment of a supreme commander was similarly one of Stalin’s imperatives. To help prod his counterparts into action, Stalin promised to open a major offensive in the East to coincide with any western operation. Outnumbered two to one, Churchill eventually threw his support behind Overlord. Asked near the end of the Tehran meeting whether the British were ready to participate in something as grand as Overlord, Churchill responded unequivocally that “when the time comes, it will be our stern duty to hurl across the Channel against the Germans every sinew of our strength.”<sup>6</sup> The first face-to-face meeting of the Big Three thus ended, as the closing statement put it, with a joint commitment to “launch Overlord during May [1944], in conjunction with a supporting operation against the South of France, on the largest scale that is permitted.”<sup>7</sup>

## EISENHOWER

While at Tehran, Stalin had emphasized the need for the immediate selection of a commander to lead the invasion of Western Europe. The Allies had previously agreed that the commanding general should be an American, but Roosevelt’s ultimate choice surprised many observers. In early December 1943, the president selected Dwight D. Eisenhower to be the supreme Allied commander. Although he was at the time the senior American general in the Mediterranean and had successfully led the Torch landings, Eisenhower was viewed by many as a desk general unsuited to the daring Overlord operation. General George Marshall or perhaps General Douglas MacArthur, the Army chief in the Pacific, were both thought better choices. Neither man, however, possessed the management skills needed to coordinate operations between the jealous and combative British and American staffs, and neither Marshall nor MacArthur had the patience to smooth



In this map of the Allied invasion of Normandy, the basic outline of Eisenhower's invasion plan is depicted, with American troops landing at Omaha and Utah beaches, British troops at Sword and Gold beaches, and Canadian troops at Juno. More than 200,000 Allied troops took part in the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944.

out Anglo-American disputes and arrive at timely compromises. Eisenhower, though, boasted all of these qualities and more. He would prove to be the perfect officer for the job.

After accepting his assignment with a businesslike composure in January 1944, Eisenhower understood well his orders to “enter the Continent of Europe, and . . . undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her



armed forces.”<sup>8</sup> In order to accomplish these ends, Eisenhower gathered together an unparalleled collection of British and American commanders at his Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) at Bushy Park near London. Knowing how strained Anglo-American relations were, the general decided to soothe the British by giving their officers places of pride on his staff. As deputy supreme commander, Eisenhower named Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder. General Montgomery would serve as overall commander of ground units for the upcoming invasion. Also included on Eisenhower’s staff were Montgomery’s air and naval counterparts, Air Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory and Rear Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey, respectively. Ramsey was given responsibility for the organization and execution of Operation Neptune, as the Channel crossing and initial assault phase of the invasion were code named. The original architect of Overlord, General Morgan, became the deputy to Eisenhower’s chief of staff, U.S. General Walter Bedell Smith. The only other American of note on Eisenhower’s staff at SHAEF was the commander of the U.S. 1st Army, General Omar Bradley.

With his team in place, Eisenhower began fine-tuning the Overlord plan. Montgomery, shown the first draft in December 1943, complained that the proposed landing area was too small and that the projected assault divisions were too few. His superior agreed. Eisenhower first expanded the invasion zone so that it extended the entire length of the space between the Bay of the Seine and the Cotentin, rather than one small part. Next, he added two more divisions to the planned three, with 37 follow-up divisions on tap to reinforce the beachhead and facilitate a breakout from Normandy. Additionally, one British and two U.S. airborne divisions would drop behind the beaches hours before the first landings, in order to secure key beach exits and vital bridges. The American objective was finalized as the port of Cherbourg, while the British and Canadians were to focus on capturing Caen. Operation Dragoon, as Anvil was



General Dwight D. Eisenhower points something out to his deputy commander for the D-Day invasion, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery (with the two badges on his hat).

now named, would go forward in southern France, but its start date was pushed back to August 15 to ensure sufficient landing craft for the Normandy assault. SHAEF then set a firm timetable for Overlord: May 31 would be D-Day, with June 5, 6, and 7 as backups. Given the moon phases, tides, and, above all, weather predictions, they were the only possible dates that a successful Channel crossing and beach assault could be launched.

## ROMMEL

Across the channel that separated England from France sat an anxious Generalfeldmarschall Rommel, who had arrived in

France in November 1943 to inspect its defenses and report back to Hitler on their condition. Although he found the situation generally disappointing, he felt strongly that he could improve the odds of turning away an Allied invasion. So did Hitler. On January 15, as Eisenhower was taking command in England, Rommel was being given control of Army Group B.

Comprising the 7th and 15th armies, Group B had the primary task of beach defense. Rommel had at his disposal several static divisions of varying quality. Some, such as the 352nd Infantry Division, were solid fighting units. Others, like the 709th Infantry Division, suffered from shortages of men and equipment. The men that the 709th did have on hand were older reservists and, in many instances, non-German *Osttruppen* (Eastern troops) recruited from Eastern European countries Germany had occupied. These foreign soldiers, Rommel recognized, lacked the spirit and determination of German soldiers and could not be relied upon. As the commander of the 709th put it, “we are asking a lot if we expect Russians to fight in France for Germany against Americans.”<sup>9</sup> Rommel concurred.

Yet perhaps the biggest problem for Rommel was Army Group B’s lack of sufficient mobile armored reserves. Six armored divisions were stationed in or near Normandy possessing nearly 2,000 tanks and other armored vehicles, including the formidable Mark V Panther and Mark VI Tiger tanks. Unfortunately for Rommel, these armored divisions were under the command of *Panzergruppe West*, led by General Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg. Von Schweppenburg guarded his armor jealously and refused to give any of the units to Rommel without explicit orders from Hitler. Rommel eventually persuaded Hitler to shift three of the six divisions to Army Group B (2nd Panzer, 116th Panzer, and the formidable 21st Panzer), but the rest remained under von Schweppenburg (1st SS Panzer *Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler*, 12th SS Panzer *Hitlerjugend*, and Panzer Lehr divisions). Further complicating matters, Rommel

possessed no authority over the combat-hardened Waffen-SS infantry divisions in France, nor did he have any power to issue orders to the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine (German Navy) forces in his sector. Rommel also had no access to the awesome new long-range V-weapons—sophisticated pilotless rocket planes and ballistic missiles Germany had begun deploying in France—that were capable of hitting targets well inside England. The German chain of command contained many weak links, and the snapping of any one of which might cost Germany the war.

Rommel, who was accustomed to making due with the tools at hand, went to work in the spring of 1944. His first objective was to turn the beaches of Normandy into death traps. He ordered his men to place more than 500,000 underwater obstacles and 4 million land mines of various sizes. The Norman Coast was soon studded with crossed steel beams called hedgehogs, while inland clearings—a prime drop site for paratroopers and glider-borne forces—bristled with pointed, often booby-trapped, stakes known as Rommel's asparagus, designed to tear low-flying aircraft to shreds. Army Group B's engineers and construction teams built miles upon miles of trenches, communications tunnels, machine-gun nests, infantry fighting positions, pillboxes, and artillery casemates. Guns of all calibers faced the Atlantic, from small field pieces to massive shore batteries and multiple-rocket launchers. Rommel planned to consume the anticipated invasion army in a firestorm of bullets and shrapnel in an all-out effort to comply with Hitler's order that everything the Germans had "which is fit for battle, will be hurled against the invader immediately."<sup>10</sup>

## **BOLERO AND BODYGUARD**

Like Rommel, Eisenhower was preparing for the invasion, but unlike his adversary, the American general had to gather his forces together from all corners of the globe. Troops and equipment had to be transferred to England from other theaters of

operation and the United States itself, from which 1.5 million troops and 5 million tons (4.5 million metric tons) of supplies would eventually come. The arriving units would squeeze into bases and training camps spread across southern England and begin practicing for D-Day. Together, the movement and stationing of the invasion force was code named Operation Bolero. By May 1944, it had succeeded in flooding Britain with more than a million troops, 12,000 aircraft, 1,200 warships and transport vessels, a multitude of artillery pieces, and vehicles of every description from tanks to staff cars. Simultaneously, work began on developing floating harbors for use in ferrying supplies ashore during the opening weeks of the invasion. These Mulberries, as they were called, would channel food, ammunition, and repair parts to the Allied armies until a usable port city, such as Cherbourg, could be captured. Fuel oil would reach Eisenhower's divisions via an underwater oil pipeline laid from England to France known as PLUTO (pipeline under the ocean).

With everything coming together smoothly, Eisenhower held a conference on May 15, attended by the SHAEF staff, Prime Minister Churchill, and King George VI, during which he revealed the full and final version of the Overlord plan for their consideration. The king approved wholeheartedly of the operation, and Churchill offered his enthusiastic support. With that, Eisenhower set the conclusive date for D-Day as June 5.

Bolero had been too massive for the Germans to miss. German spies in England knew that something big was happening; exactly what, however, was not known. Germany's military intelligence services, the Abwehr, thought that it might be the long-anticipated Allied invasion but could not figure out how all the pieces of when and where fit together. The Allies were determined to keep it that way for as long as possible. Toward this end, Operation Bodyguard was approved in January 1944. "Camouflage and pretense," Churchill had stressed, "on a most elaborate scale" were crucial if the Bolero buildup were not

to tip off the Germans as to the location and timing of the invasion.<sup>11</sup> Employing an array of deceptions, Bodyguard was designed to confuse the Germans and thus prevent them from concentrating their forces in Normandy. Double agents, such as Juan Pujol, the famous spy code named “Garbo,” fed false information to the German High Command about Allied plans to invade Norway in addition to northern France. Other agents, similarly trusted by the Germans, also tricked Hitler and his generals into believing that if France were attacked, the main Allied blow would fall at the Pas de Calais.

False intelligence purposely leaked by the Allies reinforced this assumption, as did the creation of a fictitious invasion army, the First U.S. Army Group (FUSAG), positioned in such a way as to indicate that Calais was Eisenhower’s target. Populated by nonexistent divisions living in empty tents and driving vehicles that were in reality inflated rubber mock-ups of actual trucks and tanks created by motion-picture set designers, FUSAG was “stationed” at the Straits of Dover, a mere 30 miles (48 kilometers) from Calais. Making the ruse that much more successful was the appointment of the very real General George S. Patton as FUSAG’s commander. Allied intelligence was well aware that Hitler considered Patton to be America’s “best general. That’s the best man they have.”<sup>12</sup> Naming Patton to lead FUSAG, however much it galled the prideful general to be in charge of a phantom force, convinced the Germans that Calais, not Normandy, would be the primary Allied assault zone. By the beginning of June, coded German messages broken by Allied cryptologists in possession of a replica of the Nazi Enigma code machine confirmed that Bodyguard had either thoroughly misled or at the very least confused the Germans as to Allied intentions.

## **POINTBLANK MOVES TO FRANCE**

Along with double agents and fake armies, a key component of the operational preparations for Overlord was a bombing



campaign designed to cripple the Germans' response to an invasion and help conceal the exact location of the Allied landings by spreading bombardment target zones throughout northern France. For this, air assets that had been previously committed to Operation Pointblank—the strategic bombing of the German homeland—had to be diverted to targets in France. Once in place, Allied bombers and fighters that had been used to hammer German oil, aircraft, and munitions production would be employed to destroy the French transportation system before turning to the systematic elimination of Luftflotte 3 and its bases.

## THE MAQUIS AND THE JEDBURGHs



While Allied aircraft pounded German targets in France in the weeks preceding D-Day, French Resistance fighters, working in tandem with teams of Allied agents, prepared to do what they could to complicate and thus slow the German response to the invasion. Founded by Charles de Gaulle in 1940, the Resistance remained a fragmented and fractured movement until early 1944. Groups ranging from the rightwing Secret Army and Council of National Resistance to the Communist Party fielded units of various sizes for four years, some with spotty records of success in their primary mission of harassing German troops. Together known as the Maquis, these scattered bands wandered France, haphazardly ambushing Germans whenever and wherever they found them. Only in February 1944 did the splintered Maquis movement pull together into a single organization: de Gaulle's French Forces of the Interior. From that point forward, the FFI focused its energies on

Eisenhower needed the French skies cleared of German aircraft and the French roads made unusable for German reinforcements if he hoped to move his divisions off the beaches and inland on D-Day. The key would be the dispersal of attacks to keep the Germans from guessing the precise location of the landings.

The generals in command of Pointblank, U.S. General Carl Spaatz and British General Sir Arthur Harris, vehemently opposed transferring resources to France. They held that intensifying Pointblank would do more to damage the German defenses in France than the widely dispersed, diluted campaign

the preparations for D-Day. In addition to collecting and forwarding vital intelligence to Allied planners, FFI units destroyed bridges and cut important German rail and communication lines. They also scouted targets that the Allies hoped to attack during the invasion itself.

In this capacity, the FFI operated together with Jedburgh teams—specially trained Allied commandos. Consisting of three men each, the teams were made up of British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agents from England, the United States, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The squads were trained in special-weapons use, hand-to-hand combat, survival techniques, language, and parachuting. Jedburghs were inserted into France just before and just after D-Day in order to assist and, if need be, lead FFI units. Although technically covert operatives, Jedburghs were kept in uniform to avoid being shot as spies if captured. The first Jedburgh teams parachuted into France on June 3; 13 more followed later that month and another 11 in July. All made invaluable, if unheralded, contributions to the success of the Allied invasion.



envisioned by Overlord's air chief Leigh-Mallory. Spaatz and Harris argued that the lack of concentrated bombardment would in effect waste bombs without hindering a German counterattack. Harris, in particular, advocated "the intensification of attacks on suitable industrial centers" in Germany "as the best and indeed only efficient support which Bomber Command can give OVERLORD."<sup>13</sup> Churchill himself worried deeply about the French civilian casualties that a broad aerial campaign would entail. In the end, though, Leigh-Mallory prevailed; American and British bombers assigned to German targets would be reassigned to ones in France.

Once the attacks began in May, the air marshal was quickly vindicated. The German 7th Army reported that despite aerial bombardment, no "perceptible point of main effort" could be discerned.<sup>14</sup> Bombs were falling throughout northern France with only a slight bias toward Normandy. The German general staff still could not say conclusively where the Allies would come ashore. Bodyguard had once again protected the Normandy secret.



# Parachutes in the Night

## THE FINAL PREPARATIONS

Bodyguard, Bolero, and the rest of the preparatory moves for Overlord were nearing completion by the end of May 1944. Millions of men and vast quantities of equipment were placed in staging areas stretching from one end of southern England to the other. Aerial bombardment of French targets was well underway, disrupting road and rail transport throughout the invasion zone. U.S. and British aircraft had also begun systematically clearing the skies of Luftwaffe fighters in order to ensure Allied air supremacy on D-Day. At sea, Allied warships ruled the waves. Despite the fact that the Germans knew an invasion was imminent, the screen of Bodyguard deceptions continued to frustrate Hitler's generals in their efforts to discern precisely

their enemy's intentions. Field Marshal Rommel, in particular, complained bitterly that, notwithstanding his staff's determined attempts, "I know nothing for certain about the enemy."<sup>1</sup> Everything, in short, was going according to plan for the Allies.

But there had been problems as well. In April, transports carrying U.S. troops to practice beaches at Slapton Sands, England, were discovered and savaged by German torpedo boats. Several of the LSTs (landing ship, transport) were sunk, and more than 400 of the soldiers and 197 of the sailors on board were killed. These men represented D-Day's first casualties. Several serious breaches of operational security had occurred that same spring. An officer briefed on the invasion got drunk and blurted out some of its details in a pub near his base. Another inadvertently revealed the date for Overlord to a friend at a dinner party. Perhaps most distressing, through May and into the first days of June, a series of crossword puzzles appeared in a London newspaper that contained as puzzle solutions the words Overlord, Mulberry, Neptune, and the code names of all five of the invasion beaches: Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword. The crossword episode turned out to be a bizarre coincidence, but, along with the other leaks, it provided cause for heightened anxiety at an already nervous SHAEF.

Across the Channel, other problems arose. The British SOE (Special Operations Executive) teams, dropped clandestinely into France to organize the French Resistance for D-Day missions, had enjoyed only limited success. The French fighters proved to be stubbornly independent, quarrelsome, and divided among themselves. Worse yet, the Germans had learned through the torture of a captured Resistance fighter that a coded message would be broadcast to France to alert the Maquis when the invasion was underway. Army Group B headquarters thus knew in advance that a two-part message would be sent over the airwaves by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC). Part one of the alert message would be sent at the beginning of the month in which Overlord was expected; part two,



U.S. troops and vehicles pour into the open mouths of landing ships at Brixham, England, in June 1944, shortly before D-Day.

when received, would indicate that the invasion was to begin within 48 hours. German radio intelligence posts in northern France, as a result, were instructed to listen for the signals and report their interception immediately.

All this aside, Overlord was still set to go forward on the command of one man: Eisenhower. Invasion orders had been issued

on May 25 for a June 5 assault. Block ships for the Mulberries had already weighed anchor and were putting to sea, destined to be sunk in order to create artificial breakwaters (structures designed to protect coasts or harbors) off the Norman Coast. Mail service to the troops had been stopped; cable, radio, and telephone connections to the transit camps had been cut; sailors had been sealed inside their ships and soldiers confined to quarters. Over 3 million men had been effectively sequestered pending the greatest amphibious operation in history.

With the wheels of Overlord rolling, General Eisenhower had the BBC transmit the first part of the coded message to France on June 1: "The heavy sobs of autumn's violins."<sup>2</sup> After the transmission was sent, a signals sergeant in the German 15th Army radio room intercepted it. Following orders, he forwarded the intercept to Rommel's headquarters at La Roche-Guyon and von Rundstedt's staff office at St. Germain. The 15th Army near Calais went on alert. Oddly enough, no one thought it worthwhile to notify the 7th Army in Normandy. Its units, the very ones that would soon face the Allied onslaught, went about their business as usual.

Back at SHAEF headquarters at Bushy Park, Eisenhower grew increasingly nervous. The general, under tremendous pressure, paced the halls of his headquarters, chain-smoking two packs of cigarettes a day. Playing bridge and badminton and putting golf balls did nothing to relieve Eisenhower's uneasiness. His vision had become blurred; he was bothered by a persistent and unexplained ringing in his ears; he suffered from chronic insomnia. Eisenhower had all of the classic symptoms of a stress disorder. Then, to add to his concerns, the weather turned bad. On June 2, with the troops on the transports and the warships at sea, a violent storm front moved in. Admiral Ramsey warned the supreme commander that the heavy seas accompanying the front might force him to recall his Neptune force. Air Marshal Leigh-Mallory told Eisenhower that if the winds grew any fiercer, the planned parachute drop



behind the invasion beaches would have to be canceled. The transport planes simply would not be able to fly. Overlord was coming apart. Eisenhower called a meeting.

## THE DECISION

At four in the morning on June 4, the general gathered together his senior commanders. The assault phase of Neptune was scheduled to begin later that day. Eisenhower, with the weather worsening by the hour, would have to decide on postponement before then. Ramsey, Montgomery, Bradley, and the British 2nd Army commander, General Miles Dempsey, were ready to go anytime, but it was Eisenhower's call. The general himself was holding off on any final determination until he heard from SHAEF's chief meteorologist, Group Captain James Stagg. As the meeting began, Stagg entered the conference room and posted the weather chart for June 4-5 and reported that in "all the charts for forty or fifty years [he] had examined, [he] could not recall one which at this time of the year resembled this chart in the number of depressions it portrayed at one time."<sup>3</sup> Across the North Atlantic, low-pressure systems were lined up and headed toward Normandy. Stagg's prediction for June 5 was thick low clouds, torrential rain, high winds, and heavy seas. Eisenhower had no choice; he postponed D-Day.

The general called another meeting at nine that evening. Once again thinking of the weather, Eisenhower polled his commanders. He asked Montgomery directly whether he saw "any reason why we should not go on Tuesday [June 6]."<sup>4</sup> Montgomery replied with characteristic confidence, "No—I would say 'Go.'"<sup>5</sup> Asked the same question, chief-of-staff Smith answered, "It's a helluva gamble." Early the next morning, with rain pouring down and the wind rattling the windows of the conference room, Stagg appeared before Eisenhower and his team one more time. "Gentlemen," the group captain began, "no substantial change [in the weather] has taken place," but he added that there was a slight chance that a break in the



General Dwight D. Eisenhower gives the order of “Full victory—Nothing else” to paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division in Greenham Common, England, three hours before the men board their planes to participate in the first assault wave of the invasion.

storm might come on June 6. Standing up from the table, Eisenhower walked to a window blurred by sheets of water, and he paused for a moment. As his generals waited for a decision, Eisenhower thought. Then, after breathing out a short sigh, he said, “Ok, we’ll go.”<sup>7</sup>

Overlord was on. As SHAEF officers leapt into action, Montgomery turned to Ramsey and asked the admiral, “What

are you going to do now?”<sup>8</sup> Ramsey stood, turned, and replied, “It’s too late to stop it now . . . I am going to bed.”<sup>9</sup> Churchill, informed of Eisenhower’s decision, immediately sent a telegram

## EISENHOWER’S ORDER

On June 5, General Eisenhower issued his final order to the troops already loaded onboard ships for the invasion. Eisenhower realized that the events soon to take place would represent a singular moment in human history. The defeat of Nazi Germany was critical, if Europe and the world were to live free from the terror that Hitler had unleashed in 1939. Eisenhower similarly knew well that Germany’s end would begin on the beaches of Normandy. The text of the supreme commander’s battle order is offered below:

Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force, you are about to embark upon a Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on the other Fronts you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world. . . . I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty, and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full victory!

Good luck! And let us beseech the blessing of the Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.\*

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\* David Stafford, *Ten Days to D-Day: Citizens and Soldiers on the Eve of the Invasion*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003, pp. 179-180.

to Stalin breaking the news: “Tonight, we go.”<sup>10</sup> The prime minister then retired for the night, remarking to his wife, “Do you realize that by the time you wake up in the morning twenty thousand men may have been killed?”<sup>11</sup>

### THE LAST MOMENTS OF CALM

Ironically, the same storm that nearly canceled Overlord aided the Allies in their efforts to deceive the Germans. Rommel and his commanders were convinced that no invasion would be launched in such terrible weather and made plans to be somewhere other than Normandy. Rommel seized the opportunity to take a short leave back to Germany, where he hoped Hitler would give all local panzer divisions to Army Group B. He also intended to surprise his wife with a pair of shoes from Paris on her birthday, June 6. In fact, throughout OB West, troops stood down on the eve of D-Day. Admiral Krancke canceled naval patrols due to the rough waters. The Luftwaffe grounded its aircraft. Half of the divisional commanders and one-quarter of the regimental commanders in the 7th Army left their posts to attend map exercises in Brittany aimed at developing tactics for repelling an invasion. One senior officer left Normandy on a pass to see his French girlfriend.

No one was in charge, therefore, on the evening of June 5, when a sergeant at the 7th Army Signals Command intercepted a BBC broadcast containing the words “wound my heart with a monotonous languor.”<sup>12</sup> Having picked up part one of the message days earlier, the soldier knew exactly what it meant: The invasion was coming. Once again, however, the 15th Army was placed on alert but not the 7th Army. Von Rundstedt’s headquarters suspected a clever Allied ruse and so decided to wait for confirmation. Confirmation was on its way.

In England, Eisenhower smoked, paced the floor, and finally sat down to write a note. Knowing that the specter of failure hung over the entire operation, Eisenhower thought it best to prepare for defeat as well as success. “Our landings

in the Cherbourg-Harve have failed. . . . If any blame or fault attends to the attempt it is mine alone.”<sup>13</sup> The general then folded the note and left to visit the men of the 101st Airborne Division, who were preparing to board planes bound for France. After speaking to the paratroopers and giving them some final words of encouragement, Eisenhower reconciled himself to the irreversibility of the process he had set in motion. On the way back to his headquarters, Eisenhower looked at his driver and close confidante, Kay Summersby, and said, “Well, it’s on.”<sup>14</sup>

As the supreme commander sped back to his office, the paratroopers of the U.S. 101st and 82nd and the British 6th Airborne divisions were loading up. Final gear checks were performed; jokes and wishes of good luck made the rounds. As one American paratrooper recalled, “We all made our own peace in our own way. Some of us looked over our main chutes and reserves. . . . Some of us piddled around and sharpened knives and bayonets. Others of us wrote letters to ones that meant the most to us back home.”<sup>15</sup> The two American divisions were scheduled to drop behind the beach code named Utah with orders to gain control of the beach exits and the vital crossroads town St. Mère-Eglise. Reinforcements were to arrive by glider. Unlike the Americans, the British planned to go in with gliders first, followed by paratroops, and seize two crucial bridges, one over the Orne River and another spanning the Caen Canal. All of the other bridges across both waterways would be destroyed. Both the Americans and the British anticipated fierce resistance.

Just before midnight, the American drop planes and the British gliders took off and headed for Normandy. Passing over the invasion fleet sailing toward the Norman Coast, the lead planes in each flight carried Pathfinders who dropped over France at 12:15 A.M. Their job was to set up the radio beacons and krypton lights that would guide the main forces toward their drop and landing zones. Meticulous preparations had been





In the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, American paratroopers walk to their Douglas C-47 transports, ready for the invasion.

made for a smooth transition from pathfinding to landing, but things soon went wrong. Lost in the thick clouds and buffeted by high winds, the drop planes drifted off course and scattered Pathfinders all over the French countryside. Despite the use of aluminum strips known as “Window” to disrupt German radar, enemy anti-aircraft fire was intense, causing further miscalculations in the drop points. In many places, Pathfinders were killed in firefights with startled German defenders. Equipment was lost, damaged, or destroyed. Some zones were marked; others were not. No matter, the rest of the airborne troops were on their way in.

## THE AMERICANS FLOAT DOWN

At precisely 1:00 A.M., the paratroopers leapt from their C-47 Skytrain transport planes and floated down toward the fields and marshes of France. Initially, the drops in both the 101st and 82nd zones went very badly. Heavy anti-aircraft fire forced some of the Skytrain pilots to climb into the clouds and others above them, breaking up what were supposed to be tight formations. Such evasive maneuvers protected the planes but almost guaranteed that the paratroops would be widely scattered as they jumped. The failure of the Pathfinders to mark many of the drop zones only added to the woes of pilots trying to put all of their paratroops together in the right place. "There were no checkpoints to aid in maintaining the desired course," a C-47 pilot complained. "The pathfinders who were supposed to be on the DZ [drop zone] did not reach the area and no signals were emitted."<sup>16</sup>

The result of the haphazard drop was utter confusion on the ground. Some units were dropped miles from their target areas. Many of those who did make it close to where they were planned to be did not know it. Everywhere, units were broken up into small, isolated groups of men. Here and there, soldiers struggled to find anyone in an American uniform. Alone and lost, paratroopers turned to toy noisemakers called crickets to issue challenges and passwords in the dark to fleeting shapes they hoped were GIs. More than a few of the paratroopers were injured as they hit the ground and subsequently captured. Some, who had the misfortune of snagging their parachutes in trees as they descended, were shot by German patrols as they dangled from the branches. Where the Germans had recently flooded the fields and marshes, paratroopers fell into water up to six feet (1.8 meters) deep and drowned. A 101st trooper later recalled how the soldiers "had no idea where we were and which way to go . . . there were American paratroopers scattered over many, many square miles."<sup>17</sup>

The men of the 82nd Airborne, similarly dispersed, fared no better. Many of them dropped within yards of German

defensive positions or, in the case of those assigned to capture St. Mère-Eglise, directly on top of the Germans. At St. Mère-Eglise in particular, fierce combat took place as the Americans fought their enemies house to house and hand to hand, all of it witnessed by Private John Steele from his perch on the town's church steeple. Having landed there in a tangle of parachute cord, Steele survived the battle for St. Mère-Eglise by hanging limply and playing dead.

### GLIDERS AND BRIDGES

To the east of the Americans, the British 6th Airborne Division was fighting toward the Orne River and Caen Canal. British glider troops under the command of Major John Howard had landed in six Horsa gliders at midnight near the crucial Orne and Pegasus bridges and quickly seized both. The Pegasus Bridge, in fact, was captured rather simply by surprising the lone German guard on duty there. Within minutes, the exit route for the British divisions about to land on the Norman beaches was in friendly hands.

The airborne drop that followed the gliders by 30 minutes, however, proved as confused and problematic as the American one. As with the American effort, the British Pathfinders were scattered widely, and their equipment was lost, damaged, or destroyed in the jump. Six unfortunate men never even made it to France; they were mistakenly dropped over the English Channel. The British and Canadian paratroopers who followed the Pathfinders thus had a difficult morning in front of them.

Still, the operation proceeded. While Howard's glider troops patiently held their bridges in anticipation of the paratroopers' arrival and relief, the 6th Airborne dropped here, there, and everywhere. Heavy fighting broke out at each location where a British or Canadian trooper touched down. Bloody firefights pitted small groups of Allied and German soldiers against one another in a desperate struggle for control

of the target areas. Men fought and died in the predawn darkness. But by 3:00 A.M., despite the confusion and combat, elements of the 6th had linked up with the glider units and had secured the flank of the British 3rd Infantry Division scheduled to land in Normandy in a matter of hours. The destruction of the German artillery battery at Merville completed the British airborne mission for the morning. Now it would be up to the infantry to do its job.

## THE GERMANS

As British gliders and American paratroopers were descending through the clouds, reports of airdrops began pouring into Army Group B's headquarters. Rommel's men were reporting Allied troops in every sector. Confusion reigned as staff officers strove to sort out genuine sightings of British or American units from the reports of the hundreds of mannequins being used to deceive the Germans. These dummies, known as Ruperts, were very nearly indistinguishable at a distance from real men and were packed with firecrackers that went off upon landing. The ruse was so convincing that some German soldiers fought for up to an hour against the lifeless doubles of actual troops. Among the reports of genuine contact was that of the German 709th Infantry Division behind Utah Beach. "Since 0100 hours," the 709th reported to Rommel, "there have been strong air landings."<sup>18</sup> The 914th Panzer Grenadier Regiment told the staff at the 352nd Infantry Division near Omaha Beach that the American paratroops were being reinforced by "strong air formations with troop-carrying gliders."<sup>19</sup>

German units continued to issue a steady stream of reports when, at 2:15 A.M., Generaloberst (Colonel General) Friedrich Dollman, commander of the 7th Army, was finally awakened by a frantic telephone call from one of his field officers. "General, I believe this is the invasion," Dollman was told.<sup>20</sup> Panzer Grenadier commander Major Hans von Luck, stationed near Caen, was similarly informed: "Herr Major, paratroopers

are dropping. Gliders are landing in our sector.”<sup>21</sup> But perhaps no German soldier in Normandy that morning of June 6 was delivered the news of Overlord’s commencement more succinctly than a young machine gunner at a coastal battery near Omaha Beach. He was shaken from a deep sleep, and his sergeant said simply, “It’s happening!”<sup>22</sup> The Allied invasion of France and the liberation of Europe had begun.





# Hitting the Beaches: The Americans

## UTAH

Through the early morning hours of June 6, the fighting from one end of Normandy to the other intensified. The British and Canadian paratroopers and glider forces in the eastern sector had easily gained control of the two Orne River-Caen Canal bridges. The rest had been successfully demolished. Dempsey's soon-to-land beach assault units thus had an exit route, while the Germans had lost a key highway for reinforcements. How long the 6th Airborne could hold the bridges was another matter entirely. Rommel's 21st Panzer Division was massing for a counterattack against the airborne bridgehead. Far to the west, the U.S. 101st and 82nd Airborne divisions had secured the exits for Utah Beach, but the Germans' resistance stiffened

when they realized this was no raid or diversionary attack. It became clear they were facing the actual invasion when the 352nd Infantry Division's headquarters started to receive telephone calls from its coastal batteries reporting the sighting of transport ships and landing craft. At 5:37 A.M., the first call came in confirming that Allied warships had begun "to deliver fire on the beaches from their broadsides" and that more ships were appearing on the horizon.<sup>1</sup>

Ships were indeed approaching France, thousands of them. The Operation Neptune force contained ships ranging from battleships to troop carriers. The soldiers aboard the transports had embarked from England with orders to assault and hold the five invasion beaches designated in the Overlord plan. The British 3rd Infantry Division was assigned to Sword Beach on the eastern edge of the invasion area; the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division would take Juno Beach to the immediate west of Sword, while the British 50th Infantry Division would land at Gold Beach in front of the town of Bayeux. All three divisions were scheduled to rendezvous after securing their beachheads and fight their way to Caen, the pivot point for an Allied invasion front that would wheel through northern France toward Paris. Across a mile-long (1.6-kilometer) gap west of the British beaches that Montgomery planned to close as soon as possible after the initial landings, the soldiers of the U.S. 1st and 29th Infantry divisions were set to wade ashore at Omaha Beach and fight inland toward the highway connecting Bayeux and the town of Carentan. The U.S. 4th Infantry Division would storm Utah Beach, linking up with the paratroopers who had gone in earlier, to take the port of Cherbourg.

Whether British or American, the assault units had been fully briefed on their missions and had been given simple instructions before leaving England: "Hit the beach—hit it hard and go like blazes!"<sup>2</sup> Utah was the first to be hit. Rising gently from the sea toward a wide band of sand dunes, Utah fronted a series of causeways that led through flooded pastures



A U.S. Coast Guard landing barge, tightly packed with helmeted soldiers, approaches the shore of Normandy, France, on June 6, 1944.

to the inland towns and villages where the paratroopers were waiting for the 4th Infantry. Between these two American contingents stood the German 709th Infantry Division, manning 28 stationary gun batteries and dozens of fighting positions. Although it was made up primarily of older German reservists and non-German troops, including even some Koreans, Allied planners expected the 709th to resist the landing to the best of its ability. Utah Beach, it was presumed, would be contested.

The soldiers of the 4th, therefore, were ready for a fight as they climbed down the rope ladders draped along the sides of their transports into the LCVPs (landing craft, vehicles and personnel) that would carry them to the beach. The loading of the troops and their subsequent journey to Utah Beach were neither easy nor safe. A soldier in the 4th described how troops “in full battle gear had to climb down cargo nets hung over the ship’s side. Some had their arms or legs smashed as they tried to jump into the landing craft.”<sup>3</sup> As Group Captain Stagg had predicted, the storm over the Channel had subsided temporarily, but the sea was still churning. Huge swells lifted the tiny landing craft and then brought them back down in a stomach-wrenching cycle of pitch and roll. “I don’t believe anyone in the history of mankind ever got sicker than we did,” a Utah-bound soldier later recalled, “[we] were throwing up everything we had eaten for days. Our guts ached from the dry heaves. Scared as hell and sicker than the devil, we were drenched in salt water.”<sup>4</sup>

Soaked, shivering, and vomiting, the 4th Infantry sped toward Utah Beach. As the troops made their approach, the beach bombardment opened up. The battleship *Nevada* and cruisers and destroyers in its battle group laid down a blanket of fire over the beach and its defenders. The object was to clear the beach of obstacles and landmines, while silencing the German shore batteries. After the warships had done their job, 276 B-26 Marauder low-level bombers swooped in, dropping more than 4,000 bombs on the 709th’s defensive positions. At precisely 6:10 A.M., other aircraft flew over Utah Beach and began laying down a protective smokescreen for the invaders. Simultaneously, 17 specially fitted LCVPs began showering the beach with rockets. As the rocket fire lifted some 20 minutes later, the 4th Infantry came ashore. Accompanied by 28 amphibious DD (duplex drive) tanks, the men quickly noticed that something was wrong. German resistance was surprisingly light, where the 709th resisted at all. The soldiers lying on the sand did not know





American troops advance over the crest of a concrete sea wall after successfully landing on Utah Beach in Normandy.

that due to the smokescreen laid in their defense, the division had landed 2,000 yards (1,829 meters) off target. Undaunted by the error, the force commander, Lieutenant-General Theodore Roosevelt Jr., the eldest son of the former president, declared, “We’ll start the war right here.”<sup>5</sup>

Pressing forward from its new position, the 4th Infantry secured its beachhead within an hour, opening the way for 26 successive waves of reinforcements. Outflanked and soon outnumbered, the 709th collapsed quickly; its soldiers surrendered en masse. The 4th then moved inland, suffering only 200 casualties, and made contact with the paratroops as planned. Utah, the first beach of the morning, was secure.



## OMAHA

With courage, skill, and a little bit of luck, the assault force at Utah Beach had gained its D-Day objectives rather easily; the assault force at Omaha Beach would be nowhere near so fortunate. The 1st and 29th Infantry divisions were supposed to land at Omaha Beach, take it, move inland and capture the town of Saint-Lô, and then, working jointly with the 4th Infantry, seize the Cotentin Peninsula. A secondary objective was to make contact with the British 50th Infantry and close the gap between the British and American beaches. Ambitious as it was, the Omaha operation depended on two things: an easy landing and the rapid defeat of the German 352nd Infantry Division. Neither came to pass.

The beach itself, to begin with, conspired against the landing force. It had characteristics that were quite different from the other four Allied beaches. The far western end of Omaha was really not a beach at all but rather a narrow strip of pebbles backed by steep cliffs identified on maps as Point du Hoc. The German battery located there was of great concern to Allied planners, and the job of silencing it was given to elements of the 2nd Ranger Battalion that had been specially trained to scale cliffs. Farther eastward along the shore, Omaha transitioned into a broad plain of sand heading inland toward a double sea-wall (one natural, the other man-made) before rising to a series of bluffs that overlooked the entire beach. Perfectly suited to the needs of its defenders, Omaha Beach was heavily mined, thickly studded with beach obstacles, pre-sighted for extremely accurate machine gun and mortar fire, and garrisoned by perhaps the best of the German coastal divisions, the 352nd Infantry.

The 352nd was the most formidable division in Normandy on June 6. Recently reinforced by troops of the 6th Parachute Regiment, these German troops were well trained and highly motivated. In any case, the 352nd would have proved tenacious in defense, but surrounded as it was with the handiwork of Organization Todt, the division promised to give the Americans a tough fight. The waterline in front of the 352nd's

gun positions was covered with mined metal frames called Belgian Gates—seaward-angled wooden poles topped with mines, and crisscrossed steel I-beams the Germans had nicknamed hedgehogs. Anti-tank ditches ran parallel to the water's edge; minefields carpeted the sand. At this defensive point, the Atlantic Wall lived up to its name. Omaha Beach, moreover, was a veritable tangle of rifle positions, mortar batteries, machine-gun nests, gun emplacements, and casemated coastal artillery points. Rommel had gone so far in perfecting Omaha's defenses as to order that 47-mm gun turrets, taken from obsolete tanks, be lowered directly into the dunes so that their barrels were barely visible to troops coming ashore. Behind these sunken batteries stood 18 positions containing the most lethal and accurate artillery pieces produced by either side in World War II, the devastating 88-mm anti-tank guns. Six *Nebelwerfer* multiple-barreled rocket launchers rounded out the German arsenal. A maze of communication and supply tunnels and trenches linked all of these strongpoints together into a single deadly network. Smashing through the German battle line would be no easy task.

Yet the 1st and 29th divisions would have to break through the German defenses at Omaha to secure the center of the Normandy beachhead. As at Utah, the process of doing so began with soldiers climbing down cargo netting into wave-tossed landing craft. Like their counterparts at the other beaches on D-Day, the men assigned to take Omaha were very quickly transformed into a soaked, vomiting mass of soldiers racing toward a fate unknown. Preceded by minesweepers, the landing craft passed a line of battleships and cruisers commanded by Rear Admiral John L. Hall, who had confidently announced to his sailors that morning, "I do not expect to be repulsed on *any* beach."<sup>6</sup>

With dawn approaching, Allied ships filled the horizon beyond Omaha Beach. Looking seaward, the soldiers of the 352nd watched breathlessly as vessels of every type seemed to



American soldiers capture German soldiers on Omaha Beach shortly after the invasion.

rise magically out of the ocean until the entire fleet was visible. German officers all along the beach scanned the sea with their binoculars, slowly realizing that Rommel's "longest day" was at hand. Near Bayeux, one of those officers, a major commanding a shore battery, froze at the very sight of the Allied armada materializing in front of his position. Turning to one of his comrades, the major handed off his binoculars and said, "Take a look." "My God," his friend replied, "it's the invasion."<sup>7</sup>

Minutes later, Admiral Hall's ships opened a thunderous barrage. For 10 seemingly endless minutes, the assault fleet's

guns showered Omaha Beach with high explosives. A curtain of smoke and flame shot up into the air as shells exploded in quick succession. At exactly 6:00 A.M., the naval gunfire ceased and a bombardment by 480 B-24 Liberators began. The approaching troops were treated to a display of raw power few had ever witnessed in the history of warfare. The B-24s dropped more than 1,285 tons (1,166 metric tons) of bombs on the German defenders, but none of the men in the landing craft and certainly none of the bomber crews knew at the time that, due to the overcast skies and smoke, the American pilots had delivered most of their deadly cargo too far inland. Some bombs landed up to 3 miles (4.8 kilometers) off target. As a result, despite the fire and noise, the German fighting positions were left intact and fully operational. After the bombers had passed overhead, the German soldiers went to work pushing shells into cannons, laying belts of ammunition into machine-gun receivers, and snapping magazines into rifles.

Back at sea, LCT(R)s, (rocket-firing landing craft), maneuvered to either side of the LCVPs carrying the initial assault wave and began discharging salvos of screeching rockets. The small howitzers and heavy machine guns mounted on the LCVPs themselves similarly opened fire just as the loading gates on the lead craft started to drop the invasion force onto the beach. What took place next was nothing short of wholesale slaughter. The Germans had pre-sighted their guns prior to D-Day; the fire laid down by the 352nd's gunners hit home with pinpoint accuracy. One of the American survivors remembered the sound of "machine guns ripping into the ramps, and men tumbling just like corn cobs off a conveyor belt."<sup>8</sup> The whine of German bullets and the dull thud of mortar explosions filled the air at Omaha. As more Americans came ashore, more died. The German commander of one coastal position reported to the 352nd's headquarters that his men were slicing down American troops in bunches. "At the water's edge," he told his superiors, "the enemy is in search of cover behind the coastal

zone obstacles. . . . The fire of our battle positions and artillery was well placed and had inflicted considerable casualties upon the enemy. A great many wounded and dead lie on the beach.”<sup>9</sup> A young machine gunner later recalled how Omaha Beach was “strewn with dead, wounded, and shelter-seeking soldiers.”<sup>10</sup>

As the morning dragged on for invaders and defenders alike, American soldiers piled up on the beach, taking what cover they could from the withering German fire. With bullets and shell fragments flying everywhere, no one dared to move. And still the killing continued. Out in the waves, the DD (duplex drive) amphibious tanks assigned to provide close fire support floundered. Each had been fitted with a canvas apron that was supposed to allow the tank to float to the beach and land safely. But as the swimming tanks took to the water one by one, they sank, drowning the helpless crewmen inside. By 8:00 A.M., with two assault waves now pinned down on the beach, the carnage grew worse. “The beach was covered with bodies,” a 29th Infantry Division soldier remembered, “men with no legs, no arms—God, it was awful. It was absolutely terrible.”<sup>11</sup>

The Rangers at Point du Hoc fared only marginally better than their comrades on the beach. The Overlord plan envisioned an ascent by 225 men, scaling 117 feet (35.7 meters) of cliff, under fire, using rope ladders attached to grappling hooks launched skyward by rockets. Sectional ladders would also be employed, as would a firefighting ladder borrowed from the London Fire Department. The Ranger operation was practiced repeatedly in England and all went well, but the real thing in Normandy proved to be a different matter. The German defensive fire was more intense than expected; the sectional ladders were 5 feet (1.5 meters) too short. Rangers dangling from rope ladders were subjected to rifle and machine-gun fire, as well as grenades lobbed from the cliff edge and timed to explode on the way down. As the troops fought their way up the point, ladders disintegrated and Rangers plummeted to their deaths. Eventually, though, a few Americans reached the top, only to



find that their adversaries had retreated. Although puzzled by the sudden departure of men who only moments earlier had seemed so determined to hold the cliff, the Rangers moved quickly to seize their objective, the Point du Hoc gun battery. To their dismay, the soldiers discovered that the artillery pieces had long since been removed and replaced with logs painted to look like guns.

The scene below the 2nd Ranger Battalion was still one of utter confusion. By 8:30 A.M., landing craft were wandering the waves looking for somewhere, anywhere, to land their troops. The men already on the beach, meanwhile, were struggling just to stay alive. Through all this, destroyers fired nonstop from the sea at German positions, approaching so close to the beach that many sailors were certain the ships would run aground. General Bradley, watching the battle from a command ship, despaired: "I gained the impression that our forces had suffered an irreversible catastrophe, that there was little hope we could force the beach. . . . I agonized over the withdrawal decision and prayed that our men could hang on."<sup>12</sup>

Much to Bradley's relief, his men not only hung on but also began to make progress. Under the constant pressure of heavy naval bombardment, the Germans weakened. Here and there, small groups of American soldiers pushed forward. As they reached the seawall, the men cut through the barbed-wire entanglements using wire cutters or long pipes filled with explosive charges known as Bangalore torpedoes. Once over the wire, the troops destroyed whatever beach positions stood in their way and moved inland to the bluffs above Omaha. There, ferocious combat ensued as German strongpoints were cleared individually. Fighting with rifles, grenades, flame-throwers, and, where need be, knives, the Americans made a slow but steady advance. Over time, first one section and then another of the German defenses fell to the men of the 1st and the 29th. Reinforcements poured through the gaps made by the initial assault units; landing craft put tanks on the beach

## ***SAVING PRIVATE RYAN***

In an effort to capture the chaos and bloodletting on Omaha Beach in his 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan*, American director Steven Spielberg used modern special effects techniques, sound mixing, and innovative camera angles to reproduce the first minutes of the landings made by the 1st and 29th Infantry divisions on D-Day. Although not the first epic war film to depict the carnage on Omaha Beach (the movie adaptation of Cornelius Ryan's book *The Longest Day* did so in 1962), *Saving Private Ryan* was lauded for its combat realism and for its efforts to portray the human suffering and terror the initial assault wave endured.

The film tells the story of a Ranger company led by the fictional Captain John Miller. As his unit stumbles ashore on June 6, Miller and his men encounter death and destruction on a monumental scale as they storm the beach in the face of withering German fire. Moving through fields of barbed wire, Miller's company engages in fierce close-quarters combat with the German defenders amid the labyrinth of trenches and gun positions that lay behind the beach. From that point forward, the film develops into a rather standard war movie.

Because the film focuses solely on the American experience at D-Day, it does not present a complete picture of what occurred on June 6, 1944. Despite some attention to the development of German characters later in the film, at no point are the fears and anxieties of the men of the German 352nd Infantry given any real attention. While some critics believe the movie lacks depth and complexity, many agree *Saving Private Ryan's* depiction of the fighting at Omaha in the first hours of D-Day remains unsurpassed.

to provide supporting fire. By midmorning, reports began to come in confirming that the 352nd Infantry was in general retreat. The Germans were abandoning Omaha.

The afternoon saw the beach in American hands and the 1st Army on the move toward its inland objectives. The toll of dead Americans left behind stood at 2,400. The overall commander of the Overlord ground forces, General Montgomery, remarked after the battle that “if you saw Omaha Beach, you would wonder how the Americans ever got ashore.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, like the 4th Infantry Division at Utah, the 1st and the 29th did get ashore. The zones assigned to Bradley’s army were secure. Farther to the east, the British and Canadians were having their turn.



# Hitting the Beaches: The British and Canadians

## **GOLD**

Due to the tides and the characteristics of the beaches assigned to the British 2nd Army, commanded by General Miles Dempsey, the assault there began an hour after that of General Bradley's U.S. 1st Army. To the east of Omaha Beach, three divisions, two British and one Canadian, were scheduled to come ashore at separate locations almost simultaneously. The westernmost of these places, Gold Beach, was the responsibility of the British 50th Infantry Division. The unit's mission was to take the beach and capture the town of Arromanches before moving inland to seize Bayeux and link up with the Americans advancing from Omaha. The ultimate goal was to form a continuous Allied

beachhead by closing the dangerous mile-long (1.6-kilometer) gap between the American and British zones. This feat had to be accomplished within the first hours of the invasion, before the Germans had time to divide the invasion force. If the Germans succeeded in keeping the two armies apart, they could concentrate their counterattacks more effectively.

Opposing the British at Gold were some scattered elements of the 352nd Infantry Division and the bulk of the 716th Infantry Division, a weak formation consisting mainly of older German reservists and a large number of Poles and Ukrainians. (Most of these reservists were either Poles of German extraction or Ukrainians who had been living in the southeastern part of pre-1939 Poland.) Lacking the training, armament, and morale of the soldiers in the 352nd, the men of the 716th also stood behind beach defenses that were nowhere near as formidable as those erected at Omaha. The heavy weapons at Gold were fewer in number and the infantry strongpoints were less well constructed and were connected more loosely. The beach itself was narrower and better suited to the quick landing of assault troops.

Perhaps sensing the deficiencies in their position, the 716th waited more nervously than most for the coming invasion. When Allied warships began appearing on the horizon near dawn on June 6, Gold's defenders stood in awe of the approaching armada. One of the first German infantrymen to see the ships of the Eastern Task Force, under Rear Admiral Sir Philip Vian, panicked at the very sight of so many vessels of so many different types in one place. "Oh God," he exclaimed, "we're finished! We're done for now!"<sup>1</sup> The troops of the 716th were indeed to endure a morning of violence and death that began with a deafening naval bombardment. In addition to the British battleship HMS *Rodney* and the British cruiser HMS *Belfast*, an array of destroyers and rocket-firing LCT(R)s opened fire on





British troops await a signal to advance during the initial Allied landing in Normandy.

the German positions at Gold, just as the first companies of the 50th Infantry Division boarded their landing craft and began crashing through the waves toward the beach. “There were destroyers right in close to the beach firing like mad,” a 50th infantryman remembered. “Smoke hung over everything and we could see the flashes of exploding shells on land.”<sup>2</sup>

The barrage turned parts of Gold Beach into instant cemeteries for the Germans. Many pillboxes took direct hits from naval shells fired with such accuracy that they passed straight through the observation slits before detonating inside.

The result was German guns “twisted like pipe cleaners” and German “bodies blown to kingdom come.”<sup>3</sup> Only after saturating the beach with explosives did the naval guns lift their fire to allow the first British assault wave to land at 7:25 A.M. Despite the intense shelling and lopsided quality of the opposing forces in favor of the invaders, some German positions remained intact and offered stiff resistance, but it was short-lived. Gold Beach fell quickly to the 50th, and reinforcements poured ashore. The new arrivals were greeted by a scene “alive with the shambles and order of war. . . . There were dead men and wounded men and men brewing tea. There were men organizing for a battle advance and men doing absolutely nothing. There were some German prisoners waiting patiently for heaven knows what. There was a graveyard of wrecked ships and craft and tanks of every size.”<sup>4</sup>

For the French villagers living near Gold Beach and along the route to Arromanches, the noise and confusion of battle heralded their liberation. Hiding in cellars or makeshift bomb shelters, the French citizenry sat out the fighting and emerged free people. For many, the news of their liberation came as it did for one family with a knock at the front door. Cautiously moving to see who was there, the family was shocked to hear the voice of their neighbor announcing, “It is finished; we are free; the English are at the crossroads.”<sup>5</sup> The four dark years of German occupation were ending. The morning, however, was far from over for the liberators.

## JUNO

The assault on Gold Beach had gone smoothly and according to plan. British dead numbered 400, second only to Utah in the fewest casualties—a sharp contrast to the near-disaster just a short distance away at Omaha Beach and the bloody drama that would unfold to the east at the beach code named Juno. If the Canadians assigned to take Juno hoped for anything remotely like the scene at Gold, they were to be sorely disappointed.



Soldiers of the 2nd Canadian Flotilla carry bicycles as they disembark from their LCIs on Juno Beach.

Juno was assigned to the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division, whose job it was to secure a beachhead there before linking up with the British divisions on either side of it and moving inland toward Caen. As at the other four landing sites, the main ground attack was preceded by a massive naval and aerial bombardment of the German defenses. Next came the loading of men into landing craft and a race to the beach under the cover of close rocket fire. Held by mixed units of the German 716th Infantry Division, Juno should have fallen quickly to superior Canadian forces soon after they hit the

beach. Unfortunately for the men of the 3rd Infantry, the situation developed far differently.

“The bombardment had failed to kill a single German or silence one weapon,” or so it seemed to one of the Canadian soldiers stumbling out of his landing craft onto the sand and pebbles of Juno Beach.<sup>6</sup> The first assault wave encountered fierce resistance from German soldiers concealed in fortified positions often located inside the many beachfront villas that lined the shore. Everywhere, German gunners poured deadly fire into the Canadian ranks as they struggled through the water. The 3rd “hit the water waist deep. Men were falling in the water and they fell on the beach. The machine-gun fire was so devastating.”<sup>7</sup> A Canadian war correspondent accompanying the first wave wrote in his June 6 dispatch that “bloody fighting raged all along the beaches. . . . The Canadians ran into a crossfire. They were shelled and mortared . . . but they kept slugging away at the enemy.”<sup>8</sup>

The Canadian 3rd did indeed slug away at the Germans but, unlike the Americans at Omaha, the soldiers did not get pinned down on the beach as the enemy fire intensified. The Canadians pushed forward doggedly. Their refusal to allow the assault to bog down and men to pile up on the sand kept the momentum of the attack going. Better surf conditions than the Americans had experienced also made it possible for the 3rd Infantry’s DD amphibious tanks to make it ashore and begin laying down crucial supporting fire for the troops. The relentless forward movement and heavy fire from the tanks made for a slow but steady Canadian push inland, despite the losses inflicted by the German gunners.

By midmorning, the Canadians had suffered more than 1,200 casualties, but they held the beach. Successive waves of soldiers, wading ashore carrying bicycles (that soon proved useless to the troops due to balance problems on the rough Norman roads), encountered only scattered sniper fire. Their turn at combat, however, would come, as the 3rd Infantry moved to its



rally point with the British divisions landing on either side of it. In the small seaside villages and towns that lay between Juno Beach and Caen, the Germans were regrouping and preparing to counterattack against the British 50th, the Canadian 3rd, and the British 3rd Infantry that had just splashed into the war at the beach code named Sword.

## **SWORD**

“It looks peaceful enough now, doesn’t it?” commented a soldier in the British 3rd Infantry Division as he and his comrades approached Sword Beach.<sup>9</sup> The objective of the Sword landing was to create a continuous beachhead in Normandy by having the 3rd join the Canadians on its right while simultaneously pushing inland to relieve the 6th Airborne troops holding the Orne River-Caen Canal bridges. The main force of the Sword assault units was to advance on Caen with the rest of the 2nd Army soon after hitting the beach. Meanwhile a detachment of commandos, Lord Lovat’s Commando 4, would race to the east of the city to make contact with the glider troops and paratroopers at the bridges.

A complex mission by any measure, the landing at Sword Beach began at 7:30 A.M. following heavy air and sea bombardment. Although the naval and air forces did their job well, many of the German strongpoints remained intact as the 3rd came ashore. The result was stiffer resistance than Allied planners had anticipated. The German defenders, mostly composed of men from the 716th Infantry Division, raked Sword with machine-gun fire and dropped mortar shells on the British with lethal accuracy. Descriptions of the fighting spoke of “death and destruction all around . . . burning tanks, broken-down vehicles, and very many dead and wounded lying about in a narrow strip between the sea and the barbed wire at the back of the beach.”<sup>10</sup> Wading through the rolling, blood-stained water, Lord Lovat feared that panic might seize his men. Hoping to inspire his soldiers, Lovat ordered a division





British soldiers struggle ashore on Sword Beach during the Normandy invasion.

bagpiper to begin playing. Whether it was the sound of the pipes or the speedy arrival of reinforcements that lifted their spirits, the British were able to break through the German lines and capture Sword Beach by 10:00 A.M. In pushing the Germans off the beach, the division left 600 of its men dead on the sand.

Reaching the Orne River Bridge that afternoon, Lovat was greeted by one of Major Howard's officers. "Very pleased to see you, old boy," the officer said. Laying blame for his tardiness in relieving the airborne troops on the unexpected fight at Sword, Lovat responded flatly, "Sorry we are a few minutes late."<sup>11</sup>

The battle at Sword Beach had been fierce but brief when compared to Omaha or Juno. Yet Sword was the only one of the five invasion beaches to be bombed by the Luftwaffe during the daylight hours of June 6. Eight German Ju-88 fighter-bombers made a single bomb run against Sword, causing minor damage. A handful of other German aircraft made it aloft that day—two Me-109 fighters succeeded in strafing the American beaches—but the rest of General Sperrle's Luftflotte 3 had already either flown to safety in eastern France or been destroyed by Allied interceptors. Out of the 100 Luftwaffe sorties on June 6, except for those above, none even made its target. No Allied plane was shot down in aerial combat on D-Day. All of the 113 American and British aircraft lost were destroyed by ground fire.

### ARMY GROUP B REACTS

The ships and submarines of Marinegruppe West fared no better than their aerial counterparts. The few S-boat and U-boat attacks that were launched by Admiral Krancke ended in disaster. The U-boats, in particular, suffered severe losses at the hands of Allied destroyers. Of the 43 German submarines that sailed on June 6, 18 were sunk outright, 12 were heavily damaged, and the rest either returned to base or were never seen again. Relying mainly on the torpedoes of the S-boats, Marinegruppe West was able to sink just 15 auxiliary vessels before the chief of the German Navy, Admiral Karl Dönitz, conceded that his efforts at repelling the Allies had failed. "The invasion has succeeded," Dönitz reported. "The Second Front has been established."<sup>12</sup>

Rommel, however, working determinedly at his La Roche-Guyon headquarters, was not ready to admit defeat just yet. Having sped back to France from Germany, the field marshal struggled to restore his frontlines and mount an immediate counterattack in response to the Allied landings. He quickly shifted troops from the 15th Army's sector to that of the

7th Army and called up every reserve unit in the vicinity of Normandy. Rommel next sent an urgent request to Hitler himself for the release of the 1st SS Panzer Division *Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler*, 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*, and Panzer Lehr Division. Army Group B's 21st Panzer was holding its own near Caen, but Rommel desperately needed the armored reserves. By noon on D-Day, those divisions were ready to move, but no word came from Berlin about their disposition. With their motors running and ammunition loaded, the tanks of perhaps the finest armored divisions on either side during World War II sat idle in the face of the invasion. Their commanders lacked the single order from Hitler's headquarters that would send them into battle.

Rommel was furious. Requesting permission to fall back and regroup the 7th Army's left wing, Rommel was told by Hitler to remain in place: "You must stay where you are."<sup>13</sup> Nor did the High Command in Berlin give Rommel control of the V-1 rocket batteries in northern France that would become operational in a matter of days. With these new weapons, Rommel could punch back at the Allies by attacking England itself. The field marshal could use the V-1s to devastate London and other major cities and strike at the staging areas that were feeding a constant stream of men and equipment to the invasion beachhead. But the Führer was adamant; Army Group B would fight and, if need be, die where it was and with what forces it had.

Adding to Rommel's frustrations was the fact that he knew exactly what his enemies were up to. At 10:00 A.M. on D-Day, a patrol of his 914th Infantry Regiment discovered a copy of the entire Allied battle plan in a boat abandoned by the Americans near Utah Beach. Acting with the utmost speed, Rommel shifted his infantry reserves to the American zone and concentrated his armor against the British, after learning from these captured plans that his opponents planned to use Caen as the pivot for a swing out of Normandy toward Paris.

## ORADOUR-SUR-GLANE

Army Group B's plight in the first hours of the invasion prompted the German general staff to shift armored assets from southern France to Normandy. Among the armored units sent north to reinforce Rommel was the battle-hardened 2nd SS Panzer Division *Das Reich*, recently arrived from the battlefields of Russia. Known for their fierce loyalty to Hitler and the Nazi ideology, the men of *Das Reich* belonged to the Waffen-SS, the combat arm of the SS organization responsible for the murder of 6 million Jews during World War II. Trained to see themselves as racially superior warriors, the 2nd SS Panzer soldiers were enraged by the constant Maquis harassment and incessant Allied fighter-bomber attacks that punctuated their journey from the south of France to the invasion front. A trip that should have taken hours became an arduous slog spanning weeks. On June 10, elements of *Das Reich* finally entered the small French town of Oradour-sur-Glane. The exhausted and furious SS men of 3rd Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Regiment *Der Führer* arrived at 2:00 P.M. and left at 7:30 P.M. During those five and a half hours, in a fit of homicidal fury, the soldiers executed 646 innocent men, women, and children. Oradour-sur-Glane's men were rounded up first and machine-gunned to death. The women and children were then herded into the village church. The SS men next locked the church doors and proceeded to set fire to the building, burning the screaming victims alive. The entire town was subsequently ransacked and burned. The culprits, who finally rolled up to the battlefield on June 26, were brought to justice facing the guns of the British 2nd Army near Caen. None of the men who took part in the Oradour-sur-Glane atrocity survived the battle for France.

The field marshal's adjustment did little to compensate for his lack of adequate armored reserves. The 21st Panzer, backed up by elements of the 116th Panzer Division, could probably stop a British attempt to take Caen, but the German tanks could not hold off the British 2nd Army for long. Rommel needed the Waffen-SS armored divisions that Hitler still refused to part with.

Finally, at 2:30 P.M., Hitler relented. Within 30 minutes, the 1st and 12th SS Panzer and Panzer Lehr were headed for Caen. At the same time, the 2nd SS Panzer *Das Reich* was transferred from Army Group G in southern France and began rolling toward Normandy. All of the German divisions had to advance through territory made deadly by a combination of French Resistance ambushes and relentless air attacks by Allied fighter-bombers. By the time the 12th SS reached the headquarters of the 716th Infantry Division near nightfall, its commander complained that he had "been on the way to [Normandy] for eight hours, and I have had to spend four of those in a ditch because of air attacks. . . . The division's columns are suffering serious casualties in men and material."<sup>14</sup>

Allied planes pounded the SS armor on the roads, while the French Resistance cut phone lines, blew up bridges, and launched raids on German reinforcements moving to Rommel's assistance. Everywhere, Army Group B was under intense pressure, yet the Germans did not give ground without a fight, and through June 6 they were able to mount ferocious local counterattacks. At one point, a column of 21st Panzer Division tanks actually succeeded in breaking through the Allied front late in the afternoon and reaching the coast between Gold and Omaha beaches. Having split the enemy in two, the tanks could have served as the point of a wedge capable of prying apart the Allied beachhead. Due to the lack of reinforcement, however, the unit was forced to withdraw at 7:00 P.M.

Thus Rommel's longest day ended with the German defenses battered but holding in most areas, and the Allies ashore in



France. As the day came to an end, the survivors on both sides reflected on the meaning of what had just taken place. They had been participants in a historic event in which thousands of brave soldiers had died, but they had come through it alive. Standing in a grove of trees near Gold Beach on the night of June 6, a staff officer of the 50th Infantry looked “back toward the sea,” and breathed a sigh of relief. “There would be life after the war,” he thought. “D-Day was over.”<sup>15</sup>



# Bocage Country

## COUNTERATTACK AT THE COTENTIN

The day after the invasion, with Hitler ranting about jet aircraft, guided missiles, and other miracle weapons that would soon hurl the Allies back into the sea, Rommel set his staff to work on planning a counterattack that would stop the Anglo-American forces where they were and begin to roll them back. “Everything must be done,” Rommel commanded, “to ensure that the enemy does not gain a firm foothold.”<sup>1</sup> Conferring with von Rundstedt at St. Germain, Rommel proposed a two-stage operation. First, using the newly released armored reserves, he would stabilize Army Group B’s front and block the American advance toward Cherbourg and the British advance toward Caen. Without Cherbourg, Rommel correctly

surmised, the Allied armies would remain dependent upon the Mulberries for supplies and PLUTO for fuel, which would dramatically slow their advance. If they were denied Caen, the crucial pivot point for the Allied sweep through Normandy toward Paris, the Germans could push them back. Cherbourg and Caen, therefore, had to be held. Stage two involved forcing the Allies to fight in places where their advantages in the number of tanks and aircraft would be minimized, while the German advantages in tank quality and the superior combat skills of German soldiers, especially those of the Waffen-SS, would be maximized. The best location for stage two, then, was in the hedgerows and sunken roads of Normandy's densely wooded bocage country.

Rommel, however, had to somehow get his forces into the bocage country in the first place, and German troops and tanks had to be concentrated around Caen and near Saint-Lô. Normally, their movement would not be a problem, given the superb quality of France's road system. But Allied air supremacy made every German that dared to travel by day a target. The commander of the Panzergrenadier Regiment-25, SS-Standartenführer (Colonel) Kurt Meyer, told his 12th SS divisional headquarters that he "was hunted relentlessly."<sup>2</sup> German divisions moving in and toward Normandy were subjected to unrelenting fighter-bomber attacks. Von Rundstedt's chief of staff, General Günther Blumentritt, complained that the "Allies had not only air superiority, but complete mastery of the air."<sup>3</sup> One of Blumentritt's officers spoke even more plainly: "We can bring out whole armies, and [the Allies] will smash them completely with their air forces within a week."<sup>4</sup>

Rommel's reserves crawled into position by traveling almost exclusively at night. By the middle of June, General Eugen Meindl's 2nd Parachute Corps and General Dietrich von Choltitz's 84th Corps had been repositioned, reinforced, and assigned the task of keeping the U.S. 7th Corps from capturing Cherbourg. Near Caen, meanwhile, the 12th SS and 1st



A photo of a massive landing and deployment of U.S. troops, supplies, and equipment the day after the successful D-Day action on Omaha Beach. This is only part of the invasion force Rommel believed he could throw back into the sea.

SS stood ready to assist 21st Panzer in its efforts to repulse the approaching British 2nd Army. The battle lines in the bocage had been drawn.

Known to American GIs simply as “that g-----n country,”<sup>5</sup> the bocage consisted of a maze of hedgerows, ranging in height from 3 to 5 feet (.9 to 1.5 meters), cut by sunken roads, forming irregularly shaped farm fields. These hedge-bounded roads were ideal for the type of small-unit ambushes that the

Germans, especially the Waffen-SS, excelled at. The fields themselves, usually having only one entrance, offered perfect opportunities to establish crossfire zones by placing machine guns at the far corners and triangulating their fire. Thus, Allied troops scrambling off the roads to escape an ambush would stumble directly into the muzzles of pre-sighted, heavily camouflaged machine guns. The losses inflicted on the Allies would prove even greater on the wider roads and in the larger fields, where the space permitted the Germans to often augment their machine guns with one or two concealed tanks.

Machine-gun infested fields and roads prowled by tanks guaranteed that the combat in the bocage country would be

## THE GERMAN V-WEAPONS

As the American divisions came ashore, the Germans were preparing a response that included two revolutionary weapons systems that would forever alter the nature of warfare: the V-1 rocket bomb and the V-2 missile. The V-2 ballistic missile, the forerunner of the Saturn V rocket that sent American astronauts to the moon in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was a gyroscopically guided, rocket-propelled weapon that became operational in September 1944, too late to influence the course of the fighting in France. The V-1, however, came into active service a week after D-Day and threatened to distract, if not disrupt, the Allied campaign. Begun in 1942, the V-1 program succeeded in producing a winged “flying bomb” capable of hurtling across the English Channel at nearly 400 miles (644 kilometers) per hour and delivering an 1,870-pound (848-kilogram) explosive warhead. The V-1’s effective range was 150 miles



slow and brutal for the Allied divisions. American units in particular measured success among the hedgerows one yard at a time as the advance into the bocage began in mid-June. Working in small teams, the U.S. soldiers painstakingly cleared each road and field in the face of determined German resistance. The fighting was vicious, as the attackers and defenders did battle often with just a few short yards or even feet separating them. Given such close quarters, it is not surprising that it devolved into a struggle involving mortars, grenades, pistols, knives, and, in some cases, bare hands. The combat was so gruesome, at times, that von Choltitz labeled it “a monstrous bloodbath.”<sup>6</sup> American unit commanders could do little but advise their men to “go forward slowly . . . take one hedgerow

(241 kilometers), thus giving it the ability to hit targets in Great Britain with ease.

Officially designated the *Vergeltung* (Vengeance) I, the rocket system was touted by Hitler as being one of Germany’s miracle weapons that would turn the tide of the war in Germany’s favor. First employed on June 15, 1944, the first V-1s were aimed at London; of the 244 that were launched from the Pas de Calais, nearly 200 struck home. Over the next three days, more than 500 V-1s streaked toward England, causing serious damage in the British capital. Antiaircraft guns and fighter interceptors brought down many of the V-1s before they could reach their targets, but enough got through to cause a near panic among London’s residents. The German V-1 raids ended only when the British Army overran the Pas de Calais launch sites. The V-2 sites were moved to Germany and there were subjected to air attacks by Allied bombers until they fell silent just before Germany’s defeat in 1945.

at a time and clean it up.”<sup>7</sup> Their opposite numbers on the other side of the hedgerows ordered their men to fight for every inch of ground as if the future of Germany depended upon it. In the end, it did.

As the fighting in the bocage began, Rommel met with von Rundstedt and Hitler on June 16. Both generals offered a bleak assessment of the situation to the Führer. Allied air power was overwhelming; Luftflotte 3 essentially no longer existed. Every German division was on the defensive. Counterattacks were taking place, but they were local and had done nothing to unhinge the Allied front. Here and there, Rommel noted, the Allied advance had been halted, but his men could not hold back the tide indefinitely. Worse yet, fuel for Army Group B’s tanks, self-propelled artillery, trucks, and other vehicles was running out. American air attacks in France had disrupted the fuel supply line, while those raids directed against German targets had crippled fuel production. Meanwhile, PLUTO and the Mulberries were keeping the Allies well supplied, as even more fresh troops came ashore in Normandy.

The Führer, listening quietly, responded with a reiteration of his earlier orders. Hitler commanded Rommel and von Rundstedt to hold Cherbourg at all costs and launch an immediate general counterattack. Push the Allies back into the sea, he ordered. Noticing his generals’ obvious dismay, Hitler reassured them that he had everything in order. Hitler promised Rommel and von Rundstedt that new weapons systems were on the way, which would not only turn back the invasion but also win the war for Germany. He spoke of jet airplanes, guided missiles, long-range submarines, monster tanks, and, above all, the new pilotless rocket bombs, the V-1.

First launched on June 15, the V-1s were indeed wonder weapons and caused serious damage to targets in London but did little to alter the balance of power in France. Despite repeated V-1 attacks, the Allies maintained their momentum in Normandy. General Lawton Collins’ 7th Corps clawed its way

through the bocage, pushed up the Cotentin Peninsula, and captured Cherbourg on June 27. German combat engineers, true, had already demolished the port facilities and mined key sections of the harbor before the Americans arrived, but the city had been captured. Rommel had based his entire battle plan on holding Cherbourg and denying the Allies a fixed port of entry for supplies and reinforcements. The field marshal's counterattack on the Cotentin had failed.

## THE GREAT STORM

Outside Caen and around the Cotentin, the British and American armies fought their way forward, inch-by-inch, through the hedgerows of the bocage country. The Germans offered stubborn resistance. Rommel knew that he had to hold onto Caen and, since Cherbourg was now in American hands, he could not allow Saint-Lô to fall. The field marshal did all he could to motivate and inspire his troops. Some, especially the SS men, needed little encouragement; they welcomed combat with the Allies. Others, however, were losing faith in their ability to withstand an onslaught backed by the seemingly limitless resources and manpower of the enemy. The average German soldier believed his foe lacked nothing.

As supplies poured into Normandy from England, the American 1st and British 2nd armies appeared to be better armed, equipped, and fed every time the men of Army Group B encountered them. Bradley and Dempsey's troops, with what appeared to be a huge surplus of men, tanks, trucks, artillery pieces, aircraft, and fuel, bore down on Rommel's soldiers unremittingly. In truth, however, the Allied supply line was stretched thin by its exclusive reliance on PLUTO for fuel and the Mulberries for arms, ammunition, and reinforcements. Until Cherbourg or a similar port was under Allied control, the true power of America's industrial capacity could not be brought into play; equipment and provisions arrived in England and piled up there, awaiting reshipment to France.

Not that the Mulberries, in particular, did not do their job. Mulberry A (American) alone funneled 197,444 troops, 27,340 vehicles, and 68,799 tons (62,413 metric tons) of supplies to the 1st Army. Mulberry B (British) brought in even larger numbers of the same to the 2nd Army. But the singular reliance on the artificial harbors meant that, if anything happened to them, the invasion might grind to a halt, allowing Rommel time to reinforce his line and perhaps even launch a general counterattack. True, the Germans did not present anything close to a credible threat. The Luftwaffe had disappeared from the skies, and the Kriegsmarine, with its submarines and S-boats being hunted constantly by Allied destroyers, did not dare venture into the Channel. Nature, however, was another matter entirely.

The Mulberries depended on seasonably mild weather. Late June was supposed to be a time of calm seas and light winds. Thus it was a cause of great concern when SHAEF meteorologists detected the first signs of a storm that struck the Channel region on June 19. Carrying winds of more than 30 miles (48 kilometers) an hour, the storm generated ocean swells topping 8 feet (2.4 meters). The wind and the waves were accompanied by rain that fell in torrents, creating an almost impenetrable haze of raindrops and sea mist. For three days, all Allied aircraft were grounded, giving the German commanders a much-needed respite from fighter-bomber attacks and thus an opportunity to rest their men and redeploy their units. Panzer divisions that only days earlier could barely move were suddenly free to shift into key defensive positions around Caen and to the south of Saint-Lô. The commanders of the heavy Panther and Tiger tank battalions, who had experienced the most difficulty executing night maneuvers, particularly welcomed the break.

During the storm, PLUTO transfers could not be continued; the fuel spigots had to be shut off, and shipping came to a halt, denying the Mulberries the supplies they were designed

to transfer to land. Even worse was the fact that the artificial harbors themselves, after having been towed to Normandy, were anchored in place. The only hope for Allied supply officers was that the Mulberries' breakwaters would hold back enough of the storm surge to allow the built-in flexibility of the harbors' floating supports to absorb the force of the wind and waves. For Mulberry B, this was the case. It was battered but still usable, as the storm subsided. Mulberry A, though, was destroyed.

As the winds died down and the waves smoothed out on June 22, Eisenhower's team assessed the damage. Mulberry A was out of action, but American supply ships could still deliver their goods to 1st Army via the invasion beaches themselves. It was not an ideal situation, but it would allow the American advance to continue, albeit on less fuel, food, and ammunition. Repairs to Mulberry B began immediately. The Allied push toward Caen and Saint-Lô, therefore, went on. Supplies ran short but did not run out. Tanks and trucks kept rolling, if a bit slower than before. Despite the wrath of nature, then, by the close of June, the Americans were in place and ready to move on Saint-Lô, and the British were preparing to execute Operation Epsom, the attack on Caen.

## OPERATION EPSOM

Because Caen was the crucial location of the Normandy campaign, its capture was essential. Montgomery had planned to take the city on Day Two of the invasion, but the first attempt to do so did not take place until June 13–14. It failed miserably. General Dempsey's lead units ran headlong into the tanks of the 21st Panzer and elements of Panzer Lehr. Indicative of the 2nd Army's fortunes in this initial assault was the destruction of 21 British tanks and assorted other armored vehicles by a single German Tiger tank commanded by SS Hauptsturmführer (Captain) Michael Wittman. The Tiger ace ambushed a column of British Cromwell and Sherman tanks (the latter



purchased from the Americans) brought them to a halt, and then systematically destroyed them.

Montgomery's next attempt, better organized and equipped, came on June 26 and was code named Operation Epsom. Delayed by the Great Storm, Epsom opened with a massive artillery and air bombardment of the German defenses, which had been recently strengthened by the redeployment of the 12th SS and several other SS armored divisions as part of a general movement around Caen by the 1st SS Panzer Corps under SS Obergruppenführer (General) Josef "Sepp" Dietrich. The barrage was followed by a ground assault by the British 8th Corps under General Richard Connors. Initially the British advance went smoothly but only due to the fact that the Germans, concealed in well-hidden fighting positions, allowed it. The troops had been ordered to hold their fire until the British had moved forward far enough to be caught in the crossfire. As soon as they had, the German guns opened up. The subsequent battle devolved into a confused series of running tank duels and bitter hand-to-hand combat. Smoke rising from the battlefield, some of it laid purposefully to mask the British attack, combined with an unexpected light rain to produce a dense mist that made the struggle even more chaotic. At some points, the Germans brought the British to a complete halt. The German troops had been told that every one of their positions "must be held to the last cartridge!"<sup>8</sup>

Heavy fighting continued on June 27, amid more rain that turned the battlefield into mire. The ever-deepening mud made armored combat virtually impossible for the heavier German tanks and severely limited the movement of even the lighter British ones. Allied air support disappeared, as the clouds and rain grounded the fighter-bombers. Yet neither side gave way, and they remained locked in brutal combat. By nightfall on June 30, after still bloodier fighting, the Germans and the British were both utterly exhausted, but the 1st Panzer Corps maintained its control of Caen. The British accepted the fact

that the German defenses could not be penetrated, at least not at the moment, and withdrew.

## SAINT-LÔ

The failure of Epsom cost the 2nd Army dearly, but it drew German forces off of the Americans preparing to assault Saint-Lô. A vital crossroads town, Saint-Lô was central to the American hopes for a breakout from the Normandy beachhead. The effort to take the town would pit the American 19th Corps, commanded by Major General Charles Corlett, against Meindl's heavily reinforced 2nd Parachute Corps. Meindl was not new to the Normandy battle, but his immediate superior had only recently arrived in France. Generalfeldmarschall (Field Marshal) Günther von Kluge had arrived from Russia at the beginning of July to replace von Rundstedt, in whom Hitler has lost confidence as conditions in Normandy deteriorated. Von Kluge was convinced he could succeed where his predecessor had failed. He assured Hitler that he would turn things around in France. Von Kluge issued explicit orders to Meindl and the 7th Army's new commander, SS Obergruppenführer Paul Hausser, to hold Saint-Lô at all costs. The field marshal knew well that if the Americans took Saint-Lô, an Allied breakout from Normandy was inevitable.

On this, von Kluge and Bradley would have agreed. Bradley saw Saint-Lô as the gateway to Brittany and beyond to Paris. He communicated as much to Corlett and made sure that the 19th Corps would have everything it needed when, on July 11, it opened the battle. With the 29th and 35th Infantry divisions in the lead, Corlett's attack began with an artillery barrage of such ferocity that it prompted General Meindl to report that his entire front had simply "burst into flame."<sup>9</sup> The thunderous bombardment was meant to blast holes in the German defense network around Saint-Lô and roll the Germans back, but Meindl's men held their ground. When the infantry advance began, the 2nd Parachute Corps fought tenaciously. For six bloody days, the Americans and Germans



A photo of Saint-Lô, shortly after the D-Day invasion. Although a major victory for the Allies, the battle that occurred there left the town in ruins.

traded blows around Saint-Lô, before the shocking news reached the German frontlines that Field Marshal Rommel had been seriously wounded in an Allied air attack. On its way back to La Roche-Guyon, Rommel's staff car had been strafed by a British fighter. The field marshal had been thrown from the vehicle and "lay spattered with blood and unconscious on the ground."<sup>10</sup> Raced to a field hospital, Rommel was forced to give up his command of Army Group B to von Kluge.

The change at the top meant little to the German 2nd Parachute Corps soldiers clinging stubbornly to Saint-Lô. They were determined to deny the Americans the prize they sought. Only the American seizure of a strategic hill overlooking the town was sufficient to convince Meindl that the position was no longer tenable. From its perch atop the hill, American artillery could pound the Germans into submission; Meindl had no intention of sacrificing his men needlessly. The general requested permission, through Hausser, to withdraw on July 17. The reply from headquarters was uncharacteristically subdued. "You take whatever measures are necessary," Hausser was told. "If you have to withdraw, go ahead."<sup>11</sup> Hausser pulled his forces back, thus capping a 17-day German fighting retreat that left the Americans in control of the Cotentin Peninsula and Saint-Lô. The German 7th Army had lost 250 tanks and more than 200,000 men in the process.

## OPERATION GOODWOOD

The American capture of Saint-Lô was a costly defeat for the Germans. By opening an exit from the bocage country, Saint-Lô's surrender translated into an imminent American breakout from Normandy and a likely move into Brittany. Yet Saint-Lô represented only one punch of a planned combination of blows directed against Army Group B. The other one, to be delivered by the British, would come at Caen, where General Montgomery was preparing to launch Operation Goodwood.

As commander of the 21st Army Group, Montgomery was second only to Eisenhower in the Normandy chain of command.

A hero of the campaigns in North Africa, the general's image had been tarnished by American accusations that he was too timid and overly cautious in his advance on Caen. Montgomery, for his part, acknowledged the slow pace of operations in the eastern sectors of the invasion area, but he reminded his detractors that the British 2nd Army, unlike the American 1st, had to contend with the vast bulk of German armor in Normandy. Von Kluge, like Rommel before him, decided to concentrate his tank reserves at Caen, forcing the British to move forward into the face of perhaps the best-armored divisions in the war. Montgomery argued that, in light of this preponderance of German armor, only a methodical advance would allow him to "retain the initiative and avoid setbacks."<sup>12</sup> That advance ended when Goodwood began.

Caen had been entered by the British and taken up to the Orne River on July 8, but the Germans maintained their hold on the parts of the city on the opposite shore. Montgomery had to clear them out before he could lay claim to Caen. His attempt to accomplish this began with a massive air attack that began at 5:45 A.M. on July 18 and involved 1,056 British and 482 American bombers. After nearly half an hour of saturation bombing, Montgomery's 8th Corps and its tanks moved out under the cover of close air support provided by rocket-firing Typhoon aircraft and an artillery barrage that fell only 150 yards (137 meters) in front of the leading British elements.

Throughout the rest of the day, British troops pushed forward against ever-stiffening German resistance. The Germans had prepared well-fortified positions in advance of the British attack and had put in place any number of weapons, ranging from machine guns to field artillery pieces. Many of the panzer units opposing Montgomery operated the new Mark VII King Tiger tank, a metal monster weighing more than 40 tons (36.3 metric tons), mounting an 88-mm main cannon, and possessing upwards of 185 mm of frontal armor. Nothing in the British arsenal could match the King Tiger,





American troops advance through the woods near Valognes on the Cherbourg front in late June 1944.

which was virtually impenetrable even to the largest Allied shells. Nebelwerfer multiple-rocket batteries augmented the German artillery units around Caen. Lastly, the elite 16th Luftwaffe (Ground) Division had reinforced the SS and other panzer divisions. Altogether, the German defenses at Caen were stronger than anywhere in Normandy.

Against such forces, Montgomery's units struggled to gain ground. After a day of fighting, the 8th Corps, spearheaded by the 11th Armored Division, came to a halt with little to show for its efforts. German air raids on the afternoon of July 18 highlighted the British failure. The next morning, the British assault resumed but made no progress, despite the arrival of

fresh Canadian units to relieve the battered 11th Armored. Heavy rain on July 20 and 21 sealed Goodwood's fate and compelled Montgomery to admit defeat.

It took Montgomery some time to explain Goodwood's failure to Eisenhower and Churchill. The British general claimed that although Goodwood had been a tactical defeat, it was in reality a strategic success. By drawing the 7th Army's tank reserves toward Caen, the operation had allowed the Americans to take Saint-Lô and position their forces for a Normandy breakout. Furthermore, Montgomery asserted, the battle had cost the Germans more than they had gained. The German armored divisions had lost tanks that could not be easily replaced, given the fact that German factories were being savaged by daily Allied bombing raids, and had burned up precious quantities of fuel that likewise could not be replenished due to the air raids over the Reich. Montgomery's contention that Goodwood had worn down some of von Kluge's finest panzer divisions, namely the 1st and 12th SS, had been corroborated during the battle by the commander of 1st Panzer Corps, General Dietrich, who had complained that he was "being bled white" by the British.<sup>13</sup>

Any reasonable post-battle analysis would have proved both Montgomery and Dietrich to be correct. Goodwood had presented the American 1st Army with an opportunity to effect and exploit the capture of Saint-Lô, and it had drained irreplaceable resources from the German 7th Army. Von Kluge, by late July 1944, had no choice but to pull back. The Allies and the Germans could now be certain that the next act in the drama of the battle for France would take place beyond Normandy.



# Beyond Normandy

## **COBRA: THE AMERICAN BREAKOUT**

With Army Group B barely holding the German positions in Normandy, word arrived of an attempt on Hitler's life. Organized by a group of army officers convinced that only the Führer's death and the overthrow of the Nazi regime could save Germany from total defeat, the July 20 assassination plot failed. It was followed by wholesale arrests of anyone, especially current and former Wehrmacht officers, suspected of disloyalty or harboring sympathy for the plotters of the coup. Rommel immediately criticized the attempted takeover as "imbecility,"<sup>1</sup> and von Kluge responded by pledging his "unflinching loyalty" to Hitler.<sup>2</sup> Despite these and other reassurances from top commanders, Hitler remained deeply suspicious of the army

leadership. An atmosphere of distrust grew within the ranks. According to General Blumentritt, “fear permeated and paralyzed the higher commands” after the July 20 plot.<sup>3</sup> Already in disarray and in retreat, the German Army in France was now shot through with nervous apprehension. With Hitler’s secret police prowling the officer corps in search of threats to Nazi power, real or imagined, halting the Allied advance and preventing a breakout from Normandy became even harder.

As Hitler’s spies and executioners went to work, General Bradley was preparing to burst through the German lines and unleash a new formation, the U.S. 3rd Army, on his beleaguered German opponents. Commanded by General George S. Patton, the 3rd Army was assigned the job of delivering the knockout blow to Hausser’s 7th Army, after Bradley escaped the tangle of the bocage country in a massive armored thrust code named Operation Cobra. Designed to roll over the remnants of the 2nd Parachute Corps and 84th Corps, Cobra would open the road to Paris while simultaneously releasing Patton’s tanks into Brittany to destroy the German forces located there and secure the 1st Army’s flank.

Given Allied supremacy in the French skies, Bradley chose to open Operation Cobra at 9:38 A.M. on July 25 with an awesome display of air power, as 550 P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers struck the German frontlines—occupied by the newly transferred Panzer Lehr Division—with high explosives and a type of jellied gasoline known as napalm. Twenty minutes later, 1,800 heavy and medium bombers saturated the battlefield with ordnance. Caught in the open without air cover, entire German formations simply disappeared. General Fritz Bayerlein, commander of Panzer Lehr, reported that his “position looked like the landscape of the moon. . . . All my panzers had been put out of action.”<sup>4</sup> The commander of the 2nd SS Panzer Division, *Das Reich*, whose tanks had just arrived from the south of France, marveled at the scale of the

American bombardment and admitted to himself for “the first time . . . that we had lost.”<sup>5</sup>

Everywhere in the target area, German tanks were burning, while German soldiers, dazed and deafened by the monstrous explosions, wandered aimlessly in search of their units. As the planes departed and the Germans began to recover, the tanks of Bradley’s 5th and 7th Corps tore a gaping hole in their lines. Over the course of the next five days, that hole widened, allowing the Americans to push through to the strategic town of Avranches on July 30. Hitler’s response to the American attack was typical. He ordered von Kluge to fight to the last man to stop Bradley. He then, as usual, promised to increase V-1 strikes against England and speed up the deployment of the V-2 ballistic missiles scheduled to become operational in September. These weapons would devastate Britain and might even be deployed on floating platforms towed into the Atlantic by U-boats. From these barges, the V-2s could be launched against the United States, Hitler claimed. The Führer, furthermore, assured von Kluge that waves of Luftwaffe fighters, including jets and rocket planes, would soon fill the air and bring final victory.

Such fantasies did nothing to console von Kluge. The general knew all too well that his soldiers were exhausted and his machines were destroyed. Reports sent to the field marshal’s headquarters confirmed the destruction of entire regiments and battalions. Bayerlein, in a fit of sarcasm, told von Kluge not to worry about Panzer Lehr. His men were “all holding their ground. Not a single man is leaving his post . . . they are dead. Dead!”<sup>6</sup> The 7th Army was bleeding to death under the force of the American onslaught, but the German troops fought on. General Meindl watched the men of his 2nd Parachute Corps fight and die, and remarked, “It’s heartbreaking to have to stand by and watch.”<sup>7</sup> But more suffering and dying awaited the Germans, as Hitler ordered von Kluge to counterattack.





A 1943 photo of German Generalfeldmarschall Günther von Kluge, who was given the unenviable task of halting the Allied advance with exhausted soldiers and limited supplies.

Hitler was convinced that the recapture of Avranches would stabilize the German lines and offer an opportunity to roll back the American gains. He ordered the 7th Army to counterattack using the 2nd SS Panzer as the spearhead of an armored strike involving the 5th Panzer Army, as the newly reformed Panzergruppe West was then called, commanded by General Heinrich Eberhard. The 5th Panzer's objectives were to retake the town of Avranches, split the American armies in western France in two, and destroy each in turn.

An ambitious plan by any standard, von Kluge's mission was complicated by the fact that the Allied command had recently been reconfigured. As of August 1, Eisenhower replaced Montgomery as overall ground-forces commander. Montgomery remained in command of the Anglo-Canadian 21st Army Group. Bradley was given control of the new 12th Army Group, consisting of the U.S. 1st Army, under General Courtney Hodges, and General Patton's 3rd Army. The restructuring consolidated the American forces in France and gave greater independence of operations to Bradley.

Regardless of the enemy's command alterations and the introduction of Patton's 3rd Army into the battlefield equation, von Kluge had his orders. On August 7, he launched Operation Lüttich. Envisioned as a fluid, swift armored assault, the attack quickly bogged down near Mortain, as the Germans encountered strong resistance from the Americans holding the town. For the next week, bitter fighting raged all around Mortain as the German tanks struggled to either take the place or bypass it and continue on to Avranches. Hitler, receiving daily reports of the advance's slowdown, spat out one hysterical order after another. "I command the attack be prosecuted daringly and recklessly to the sea," he bellowed at von Kluge.<sup>8</sup> The field marshal did his best to obey, but his panzers were eventually halted by a combination of fierce American armored attacks and devastating Allied air strikes. A week of fighting had gotten the Germans nowhere. Von Kluge decided

that further bloodletting was useless. With Hitler's grudging permission, he ordered the 5th Panzer Army to disengage and withdraw along with the 7th Army to prepare a new defensive line. General Bradley, elated by the news, openly gloated. The victory at Mortain, he exclaimed, had sealed the 7th Army's fate. "We are about to destroy an entire German army and when [Hitler] loses his Seventh Army . . . he'll have nothing left with which to oppose us."<sup>9</sup> The battle for France was entering its terminal phase.

### ANVIL/DRAGOON

As Army Group B was fighting and losing near Avranches, Army Group G was awaiting its turn to face the Allied armies in southern France. The German commander, General Johannes Blaskowitz, knew that an Allied landing in his sector was inevitable, but he hoped that a successful defense of Normandy might delay it or even force its cancellation. Such hopes were dashed, however, at 8:00 A.M. on August 15, when the U.S. 11th Corps, made up of the U.S. 7th Army and the French 2nd Corps led by an armored brigade and teams of French commandos, launched Operation Dragoon.

Like the Normandy invasion before it, the operation, originally code named Anvil, began with a 10-day bombing campaign on August 5 designed to cut transportation lines and weaken the defenses behind which the German 1st and 19th armies and 11th Panzer Division sat. As the bombing intensified, Allied fighters, as they had done over Normandy, systematically shot the Luftwaffe from the skies of southern France, denying Blaskowitz the air cover his troops desperately needed. The landings in the south likewise mirrored the northern counterpart. On August 15, just after midnight, 396 transport planes left their bases in Italy carrying more than 5,000 Pathfinders and paratroopers. Glider-borne troops would reinforce these men later in the day. At sea, a fleet of landing ships carried a Franco-American assault force

assigned to take three beaches code named Alpha, Delta, and Camel. The flanks of the first wave would be secured by the French commando teams, which had been ordered to silence German gun positions there before the landing. They had to accomplish their mission quickly and quietly.

Operationally, Dragoon was nearly identical to Overlord. Its execution, however, proved to be quite dissimilar. At precisely 5:50 A.M., 1,300 bombers pounded Army Group G's coastal positions from the air in four separate waves, while the Allied naval task force did the same from the sea. As the twin bombardments lifted at 8:00 A.M., the assault troops hit the beaches expecting the worst, but Dragoon was not Overlord. Weakened by the transfer of many of its units to Normandy, especially its elite panzer divisions, Blaskowitz's command could not mount the kind of defense seen at Juno or Omaha. Rather, Army Group G conceded the beaches to the Allies almost immediately and retreated inland in a preplanned effort to unite with Army Group B near Paris. The German high command had decided that southern France was not the place for a last stand; if that were necessary, the location would be the banks of the Seine River.

The Dragoon landings, therefore, met little or no resistance. Delta Beach, in particular, was so quiet that going ashore there was later reported to have been a "dream landing."<sup>10</sup> By the end of the day on August 15, the beachhead along the French shores of the Mediterranean Sea was secure, and the Allied advance from there toward a linkup with the armies in Normandy had begun.

## PATTON IN BRITTANY

With the Allies now pressing in on two fronts, Hitler realized he was losing in France. The Führer, therefore, decided to form a new consolidated defensive line between Normandy and Paris. In doing so, he effectively abandoned Brittany to Bradley's 12th Army Group. That did not mean that Patton's



From left to right, U.S. generals Courtney Hodges, Omar Bradley, and George Patton confer at Bradley's headquarters somewhere in France in August 1944.

3rd Army would romp through Brittany unopposed. Hitler had given explicit orders to the garrison commanders at the ports of Saint-Malo, Saint-Nazaire, Brest, and Lorient to fight “to the last man, to the last cartridge.”<sup>11</sup> With more than 200,000 troops spread between these fortresses, such diehard resistance would certainly complicate the 3rd Army's mission.

Still, Patton was Patton. Notwithstanding a desperate German holding action, the 3rd Army took Saint-Malo after brutal house-to-house combat. Brest, whose defenders were reported by U.S. intelligence as having “no intention to fold up right away,” took a bit longer.<sup>12</sup> Bradley's divisions had to



wait until September for its surrender. The Germans never did surrender in Lorient and Saint-Nazaire; they held both cities until the war's end. Their maintenance was irrelevant, though. Patton was already in firm control of the rest of Brittany and was prepared to join Hodges' 1st Army in pursuit of the crumbling German 7th Army.

## FALAISE

Patton and Hodges were wheeling northward at the precise moment that Montgomery's 21st Army Group was beginning a slight southward turn. As they looked at a map of France, it became clear to Allied planners that an opportunity had arisen for Bradley and Montgomery to encircle and entrap what was left of the 7th Army. To be sure, von Kluge and Hausser, and even Hitler, realized that a huge pocket had formed that contained the bulk of the withdrawing German forces. The mouth of the pocket was a narrow gap between the towns of Argentan and Falaise through which the 7th Army and the remnants of the 5th Panzer Army would have to pass, if they hoped to escape total destruction. If the Americans and British could close that gap, the war in Europe might well be over before the winter of 1944.

Patton moved to exploit the Argentan-Falaise situation first. He ordered his division commanders to "push on slowly in the direction of Falaise [and then] continue to push slowly until contact [is made] with our Allies."<sup>13</sup> Montgomery similarly sent his 2nd Army forward, with the Canadian 2nd Corps and Polish 1st Armored Division in the lead. Von Kluge responded by calling for a fighting withdrawal out of the pocket, despite Hitler's direct order to hold in place. Von Kluge told Hitler that he did not care "how many orders are issued, the troops cannot defeat the enemy. . . . That is the situation."<sup>14</sup> The battle-hardened 1st Panzer Corps commander, Dietrich, agreed, informing Hitler that "unless every effort is made to withdraw or escape the forces eastward and out of threatened

encirclement, the army group will have to write off” the forces in the pocket.<sup>15</sup>

Hitler listened to neither man. Von Kluge, therefore, took it upon himself to act. Using Eberbach’s 1st and 2nd SS Panzer divisions in the South and the 12th SS and 21st Panzer in the North to hold the pocket’s mouth open, the field marshal began pulling his men out on August 13. Yet what began as an organized retreat soon degenerated into a rout under the pressure of relentless Allied air attacks and almost ceaseless artillery fire. German troops fled eastward in a panic. Entire divisions fell apart and ruined equipment piled up in open fields and along the roads. The 5th Panzer Army’s chief of staff, after being told to regroup and stop the Allied pincers from closing at Falaise, replied that his soldiers “aren’t troops anymore” but ragged, terrified refugees.<sup>16</sup> The men themselves wrote gloomy letters back home, predicting capture or worse. “Our future looks hopeless,” one man wrote, “most likely we’ll be taken prisoner.”<sup>17</sup> “The pocket is nearly closed,” wrote another soldier, “I don’t think I shall ever see my home again.”<sup>18</sup>

Day and night, in small groups, Army Group B’s shattered divisions crawled eastward, aided by a frustratingly slow British advance and the determination of the elite Waffen-SS troops, such as those of the 12th SS, who resisted to the last man. It was not until August 21 that the Falaise pocket finally closed, but by that time, nearly half of the German troops, minus their equipment, had escaped. More than 50,000 Germans were taken prisoner. A livid Hitler relieved von Kluge of his command, replacing him with Field Marshal Walter Model. The Führer then demanded that von Kluge return to Germany in order to answer for his failure in France. The field marshal knew that going home would mean arrest by the Gestapo and likely execution. A career soldier and German patriot, von Kluge chose suicide over dishonor. On August 19, while traveling to Germany, von Kluge wrote a final note to Hitler stating that he “could not bear the accusation that I sealed the fate of the

West.”<sup>19</sup> He then asked his driver to pull to the side of the road, stepped out of the car, and swallowed a cyanide capsule.

## PARIS

In the aftermath of the Falaise pocket debacle, the Allies and Germans alike recognized one thing: Army Group B's existence as a fighting force was nearing its end. “The West Front is finished,” many Germans concluded.<sup>20</sup> American intelligence, in the same way, confidently reported that the “German Army in the West has had it.”<sup>21</sup> The battle for France, however, was not completely over. One final act remained in the drama. Paris, the City of Light, awaited liberation.

Despite its historical and cultural importance and its supreme symbolic value to de Gaulle and the Free French Army, Eisenhower had initially planned to bypass Paris after the breakout from Normandy. The city simply did not possess, in Eisenhower's opinion, the strategic significance to warrant a pause in the pursuit of the fleeing Army Group B. General de Gaulle, however, was insistent. Paris had to be liberated in high fashion, and, he added, a French division had to do it. De Gaulle appreciated the immense morale boost the French people would get from watching their capital being freed from German occupation by French soldiers. He requested, therefore, that the French 2nd Armored Division, operating in tandem with the FFI (French Forces of the Interior) resistance fighters in Paris, be accorded the honor of entering the city first, following what was sure to be a hasty German evacuation.

But a German withdrawal was far from certain. The city's commander, General von Choltitz, had been ordered by Hitler to destroy the city, if need be, rather than surrender it. In fact, the German Army chief of operations, General Alfred Jodl, had explicitly warned Model that “Paris must not fall into the hands of the enemy except as a field of ruins.”<sup>22</sup> Choltitz reluctantly agreed to wire Parisian landmarks of cultural or political value with explosives and wait for the Allied assault. His hand was

## CHARLES DE GAULLE



Charles Andre Joseph Marie de Gaulle was born in Lille, France, on November 22, 1890. The son of a politically conservative and very patriotic professor, de Gaulle grew up devoted to France and was a keen student of French politics and history. Immediately after his graduation from college in 1912, de Gaulle joined the French Army. He later fought in World War I. During the postwar period, de Gaulle's movement through the ranks of the peacetime army's officer corps slowed, as did that of other officers. Yet, unlike his compatriots, de Gaulle did not spend his time sulking over his stalled career; rather he used it to indulge his intellectual appetite, writing several books on military tactics and strategy. When Germany invaded France in May 1940, de Gaulle rose to the defense of his country once again.

France's collapse that June sent a dejected but unbowed de Gaulle into exile, where he built a new army, the Free French Forces. He later created and led from exile the French Forces of the Interior resistance organization. Throughout the war years, de Gaulle worked tirelessly to promote French interests and ensure the respect of the other Allies. His triumphant entry into Paris in August 1944 represented the final fruit of those efforts. Following liberation, de Gaulle continued his service to France as president of the provisional government from July 1944 to January 1946, as prime minister and minister of defense from June 1958 to January 1959, and as president from January 1959 to April 1969. After a political and military career that had spanned nearly six decades, Charles de Gaulle died on November 9, 1970.

prematurely forced, however, by an FFI uprising that resulted in the Resistance taking control of key police stations and government buildings. Street battles between Resistance fighters and German troops soon broke out, and ambushes of German units became commonplace. Choltitz quickly saw that any defense of Paris, under these conditions, was hopeless and would entail a senseless waste of life on both sides. Demolishing Paris, worse still, would be a crime against the future of Europe. The general decided to surrender the capital intact despite Hitler's instructions. Choltitz ordered his men who could escape capture to do so. He then waited in his hotel room for the Allied army and his own imprisonment.

De Gaulle thus entered Paris as a conqueror on August 25, much to the chagrin of his Anglo-American comrades, who found the ensuing ceremonies and parades to be a pointless waste of time and energy when there were still German units to be hunted and destroyed.

## **BEYOND THE SEINE**

On September 1, 1944, Eisenhower moved his headquarters to France and freed Bradley and Montgomery to finish off their German adversaries, proceed to the Rhine River, cross it, and enter the German homeland itself. From that point, the Allied advance picked up momentum with each yard of French soil the Germans surrendered in their headlong retreat. The port city of Antwerp, in Belgium, was taken on September 4; the nearby V-weapon launch sites were silenced soon afterward, sparing London further destruction. A few days later, Field Marshal von Rundstedt was recalled from his retirement, given command of the forces still in existence in the West, and told to conduct a staged withdrawal to the string of fortifications on the German border known as the Siegfried Line. The fortress at Brest fell on September 18, and, although the German forts at Saint-Nazaire and Lorient continued to hold



out, the battle for France was effectively over. Hitler's Fortress Europe had been breached and the eventual collapse of Nazi Germany guaranteed.

Looking back on the invasion and liberation of France some years later, Eisenhower expressed the belief that the war in Europe had been won on the beaches, around the hedgerows, in the fields, and through the ancient towns of France during the spring and summer of 1944. "The war was won," he said, "before the Rhine was crossed."<sup>23</sup>



# Liberation

## **AMERICANS IN PARIS**

From August 1944 until well after the war's end in Europe in May 1945, the United States maintained a military presence in France, headquartered in Paris, as well as throughout much of Europe, as part of the Allies' postwar effort to rebuild the continent following the most destructive war in human history. During that time, a legend grew up that portrayed the American stay in Paris as one characterized primarily by selfless generosity. Having freed France from Nazi domination, the story goes, the U.S. Army remained to defend the French people and help them rebuild. As the Cold War developed between the United States and the Soviet Union, then occupying Eastern Europe, a weakened postwar France sought protection under



American troops parade through the Arc de Triomphe and down the Champs-Élysées as crowds throng the sidewalks during the liberation of Paris on August 25, 1944.

the umbrella of American military power as part of a new alliance aimed at keeping Western Europe safe from the imperial ambitions of Stalin's Soviet Union. All the while, American and French interests harmonized, and the relationship between the two nations matured, based on their shared democratic ideals.

This is a heroic tale; it is also not entirely accurate. After the liberation, the American and French governments were as motivated by each nation's own self-interest as they were by the benefits produced by their alliance. Although the U.S. and other Allied armies were initially greeted as liberators, relations

between the French and Americans quickly grew strained. De Gaulle and the provisional French government complained endlessly about the conduct and attitude of the U.S. Army. Many French people resented being treated by the Americans as freed foreigners rather than as liberated allies. Among senior American officers, it was understood that “all the Generals at SHAEF are violently anti-French.”<sup>1</sup>

Although American enlisted men sometimes acted dismissively toward the French citizenry, their behavior in France and throughout Europe during liberation and in the postwar period was for the most part respectful. By comparison, as Norman M. Naimark observes, the Soviet army, during the German retreat, frequently raped, robbed, and murdered civilians, particularly Germans, in part because the German armies had done the same to their citizenry earlier in the war.<sup>2</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose notes that violent acts by U.S. servicemen stationed across Europe were few:

There were some rapes, not many because the Army’s policy was to identify, try, and, if found guilty, execute rapists (forty-nine GIs were shot for rape or murder). Overall, it is simple fact to state that the American and British occupying armies, in comparison to the other conquering armies in World War II, acted correctly and honorably.<sup>3</sup>

In France, U.S. soldiers’ greatest misdeed involved black marketing. Servicemen, especially in major cities such as Paris, routinely dealt illegally in any number of rationed or restricted commodities, including coffee, cigarettes, gasoline, whiskey, soap, and canned meats. Nylons, coveted by French women, were a black-market staple. American soldiers often sold nylons to female customers or exchanged them for sexual favors. Trade in guns, ammunition, and war-surplus goods became so extensive that the military governor of Paris

*(continues on page 116)*

## RETRIBUTION



Liberation in 1944 was followed closely by a wave of retribution directed against those French men and women who had directly or indirectly collaborated with the Germans during the occupation. With the tacit and sometimes open consent of the other Allied powers, France sought to exact revenge for any act that had in any way aided the German Army or civilian authority. Women who had been romantically involved with German soldiers were seized by local mobs, were stripped, had their heads shaved, had swastikas painted on their bodies, and were paraded in humiliation before jeering crowds. Merchants who had dealt with the occupation authorities had their stores looted and burned. Anyone suspected of helping the Germans in their campaign against the Maquis could expect a brutal beating or worse. Summary executions of known or alleged collaborators and informants took place by the thousands. The punishment meted out to people who chose the wrong side during the occupation years led at least one observer to remark that there had never been “in the history of France, a bloodier period than that which followed the Liberation of 1944-1945.”\*

Trials of government officials who had administered the Nazi puppet-state of Vichy in southern France followed a similar track. The former Vichy head of state, General Henri Petain, and ex-prime minister Pierre Laval were both tried after the war on charges of having aided the enemy. Found guilty of crimes against France, Petain was given a life sentence and died in prison in 1951. Laval, likewise convicted of crimes against the French nation and people, received a sentence of death and was shot in October 1945.





*A Frenchwoman is accused of being a Nazi collaborator in Paris shortly after liberation. Her head has been shaved and a swastika has been painted on her forehead.*

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\* Sisley Huddleston, *France: The Tragic Years, 1939-1947—An Eyewitness Account of War, Occupation, and Liberation*, New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1955, p. 296.

*(continued from page 113)*

announced in January 1945, “Anyone found in possession of gasoline, arms, munitions, equipment or war materiel will be tried by court-martial.”<sup>4</sup>

Young soldiers only a few months removed from the bloody beaches of Normandy and the rigors of combat in the bocage country might perhaps be excused for such misconduct; the attitude of some American policymakers toward the newly formed French political state, however, is not as easy to explain. As the postwar world became divided into Communist and noncommunist spheres of influence, American policymakers often sought to influence the French state in order to produce a government that suited the ends of U.S. foreign policy. Because of the growing ideological and geopolitical tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, the U.S. government wanted to create a Western European alliance to counter the bloc the Soviets were forging in Eastern Europe. Thus, any French policies that ran counter to the U.S. game plan became suspect—and none more so than the initiatives of Charles de Gaulle, whose insistence on French sovereignty and the promotion of French interests around the world (including in its colonies) struck the United States as vaguely sympathetic to the Soviets. Not helping matters was the fact that the French Communist Party had gained in both popularity and credibility during the war and that the Communists repeatedly demanded an active role in the emerging postwar French government. De Gaulle’s belief that France should chart its own course in a world growing ever more bipolar, coupled with the Communists’ radicalism, prompted the U.S. diplomats to meddle in French national politics, hoping to engineer a French state that would aid American interests.

### **THE LEGEND OF LIBERATION APPLIED**

In 1966, seeking in part to demonstrate French independence, President Charles de Gaulle annulled France’s military commit-

ment in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the organization designed to thwart Soviet ambitions in Europe, although he did not remove France from the Western alliance itself.<sup>5</sup> Not long afterward, when the U.S. troops left the country, much of the French public received the news with a sense of relief. Yet the legend of a heroic liberation of France lived on in the minds of many Americans. And it was a distinctly American legend in two ways.

First, the story of liberation as told in the United States sometimes downplayed the contributions made by the British, Canadians, Poles, and the French themselves who fought and died in France from June to September 1944. Also, during the Cold War, little attention was paid in the United States to the role of the Red Army in creating conditions in Eastern Europe under which Allied success in France could be realized. Had it not been for the constant pressure of successive Soviet offensives in the East, Germany could have thrown its full military might—more than a million troops, thousands of tanks, and hundreds of aircraft—against the Western Allies. With such resources available to him, Rommel might have been able to toss the D-Day invasion force back into the sea.

Second, the legend of the liberation of France convinced many U.S. policymakers in both major political parties that military liberation as a form of democratic salvation would be welcomed by any people anywhere at any time. The legend often constructed a distorted prism through which American politicians viewed the world: Only by forcefully spreading democracy and repressing brutal regimes could the world's ills be cured. Although different mitigating factors were involved in each situation, the wars in Korea and Vietnam were informed by the American experience of challenging Nazi aggression, as were the more recent military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

D-Day and the dramatic liberation that followed rightly stand out as signal events in the history of armed conflict in

general and France in particular. They represent a Herculean effort on the part of the Allied American, British, Canadian, Polish, and French troops to free France and the rest of Europe from the grip of Nazi tyranny and repression. The battle for France is justifiably considered a crucial turning point in the six-year struggle in Europe to defeat Nazi Germany and close one of the darkest episodes in the human experience. Yet we must view D-Day and the liberation of France in the proper historical context of place and time. Anything else would do a disservice to the fighting men who gave their all in France during those crucial months in 1944.

# CHRONOLOGY

- 1939**     **September** World War II begins with the German invasion of Poland.
- 1940**     **April** Hitler's armies invade Norway and Denmark.  
**May** Germany invades the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France.  
**June** France falls to German forces.
- 1941**     **June** German armies attack the Soviet Union, Germany's one-time ally.
- 1942**     **November** Operation Torch brings American forces to North Africa.
- 1943**     **January** Allied conference at Casablanca confirms Mediterranean strategy of attacking Germany through Italy but gives approval to plans for invasion of France. **March.** Preliminary Overlord plan to invade France is drawn up.  
**August** Quebec Conference accepts preliminary invasion plan.  
**November** At Tehran Conference, final approval is given to invasion of France scheduled for May 1944.
- 1944**     **January** General Dwight D. Eisenhower is appointed supreme Allied commander in Europe; Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel is given command of Army Group B; final Overlord plan adopted.  
**March-June** Operations Bolero and Bodyguard gather Allied troops and equipment in England while deceiving the Germans as to Allied intentions.



- 1944** **April** The first American Overlord casualties are taken during the German S-boat attack on ships near Slapton Sands, England.
- May** Operation Pointblank air assets are shifted to France to strike at German targets; the French Maquis step up the pace of resistance operations before invasion.
- June** Overlord begins on June 5-6; the first V-1 rockets attack England; a storm slows Allied operations in Normandy between June 19 and 21; Operation Epsom fails to result in capture of Caen; Americans take port of Cherbourg;

## TIMELINE

1939

**September** World War II begins with the German invasion of Poland.

1939

1940

**June** France falls to German forces.

1943

**January** Allied conference at Casablanca confirms Mediterranean strategy of attacking Germany through Italy but gives approval to plans for invasion of France.

1943

1943

**March** Preliminary Overlord plan to invade France is drawn up.  
**November** At a conference at Tehran, final approval is given to invasion of France scheduled for May 1944.

Generalfeldmarschall Günther von Kluge replaces Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt.

**July** Rommel seriously wounded in Allied air attack; Americans capture Saint-Lô; Operation Goodwood fails to impose a complete British hold on Caen; German Army officers try to assassinate Hitler; Operation Cobra, the American breakout from Normandy, begins; Americans take town of Avranches.

**August** Army Group B tries to recapture Avranches but is stopped at Mortain; Operation Anvil/Dragoon, the invasion of southern France,

1944

**March–June** Operations Bolero and Bodyguard gather Allied troops and equipment in England while deceiving the Germans as to Allied intentions.

**June** Operation Overlord begins on June 5-6.

1944

1944

**August** Operation Anvil/Dragoon, the invasion of southern France, begins; Paris is liberated on August 25.

**September** Germans retreat to Siegfried Line; France's liberation is completed.

1945

1945

**May** World War II ends in Europe.

begins; Falaise gap closes, trapping 50,000 German troops inside; Paris is liberated.

**September** Germans retreat to Siegfried Line; France's liberation is completed.

**1945** **May** World War II ends in Europe.

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