

1944: D-Day - start of Europe invasion

D-Day 6th June 1944 - We Shall Remember Them!

The Normandy landings, codenamed Operation Neptune, were the landing operations of the Allied invasion of Normandy, in Operation Overlord, during World War II.

The landings commenced on Tuesday, June 6, 1944 (D-Day), beginning at 6:30 AM British Double Summer Time (GMT+2). In planning, D-Day was the term used for the day of actual landing, which was dependent on final approval.

The landings were conducted in two phases: an airborne assault landing of 24,000 British, American, Canadian and Free French airborne troops shortly after midnight, and an amphibious landing of Allied infantry and armoured divisions on the coast of France starting at 6:30 AM. There were also decoy operations under the codenames Operation Glimmer and Operation Taxable to distract the German forces from the real landing areas.

Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces was General Dwight Eisenhower while overall command of ground forces (21st Army Group) was given to General Bernard Montgomery. The operation, planned by a team under Lieutenant-General Frederick Morgan, was the largest amphibious invasion in world history and was executed by land, sea, and air elements under direct British command with over 160,000^[6] troops landing on June 6, 1944. 195,700 Allied naval and merchant navy personnel in over 5,000 ships were involved. The invasion required the transport of soldiers and material from the United Kingdom by troop-laden aircraft and ships, the assault landings, air support, naval interdiction of the English Channel and naval fire-support. The landings took place along a 50-mile (80 km) stretch of the Normandy coast divided into five sectors: Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword.

Operations

The Allied invasion was detailed in several overlapping operational plans according to the D-Day museum: "The armed forces used codenames to refer to the planning and execution of specific military operations. Operation Overlord was the codename for the Allied invasion of northwest Europe. The assault phase of Operation Overlord was known as Operation Neptune. Operation Neptune began on D-Day (June 6, 1944) and ended on June 30, 1944. By this time, the Allies had established a firm foothold in Normandy.

Operation Overlord also began on D-Day, and continued until Allied forces crossed the River Seine on August 19, 1944." Just prior to the invasion, General Eisenhower transmitted a now-historic message to all members of the Allied Expeditionary Force. It read, in part, "You are about to embark upon the great crusade, toward which we have striven these many months."^[8] In his pocket was a statement, never used, to be read in case the invasion failed.

Weather

Only 10 days each month were suitable for launching the operation: a day near the full Moon was needed both for illumination during the hours of darkness and for the spring tide, the former to illuminate navigational landmarks for the crews of aircraft, gliders and landing craft, and the latter to provide the deepest possible water to help safe navigation over defensive obstacles placed by the Germans in the surf on the seaward approaches to the beaches. A full moon occurred on June 6.

Allied Expeditionary Force Supreme Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower had tentatively selected June 5 as the date for the assault. The weather was fine during most of May, but deteriorated in early June. On June 4, conditions were clearly unsuitable for a landing; wind and high seas would make it impossible to launch landing craft from larger ships at sea, and low clouds would prevent aircraft finding their targets. The Allied troop convoys already at sea were forced to take shelter in bays and inlets on the south coast of Britain for the night.

It seemed possible that everything would have to be cancelled and the troops returned to their embarkation camps (which would be almost impossible, as the enormous movement of follow-up formations into them was already proceeding. The next full moon period would be nearly a month away. At a vital meeting on June 5, Eisenhower's chief meteorologist (Group Captain J.M. Stagg) forecast a brief improvement for June 6. Commander of all land forces for the invasion General Bernard Montgomery and Eisenhower's Chief of Staff General Walter Bedell Smith wished to proceed with the invasion. Commander of the Allied Air Forces Air Chief Marshal Leigh Mallory was doubtful, but the Allied Naval supremo Admiral Bertram Ramsay believed that conditions would be marginally favorable. On the strength of Stagg's forecast, Eisenhower ordered the invasion to proceed. As a result, prevailing overcast skies limited Allied air support, and no serious damage was done to the beach defences on Omaha and Juno.

The Germans meanwhile took comfort from the existing poor conditions, which were worse over Northern France than over the Channel itself, and believed no invasion would be possible for several days. Some troops stood down, and many senior officers were away for the weekend. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, for example, took a few days' leave to celebrate his wife's birthday. While dozens of division, regimental, and battalion commanders were away from their posts at war games, the Allied forces were attacking.

Allied order of battle

The order of battle for the landings was precisely as follows, east to west: (Information based on summary of first hand accounts):

British Second Army

- 6th Airborne Division Commanded by Major-General R.N. Gale was delivered by parachute and glider to the east of the River Orne to protect the left flank. The division contained 7,900 men, including one Canadian battalion.[12] The British 2nd Army landed three divisions on D-Day. Two were from I Corps and one from XXX Corps on Sword Beach, Gold Beach, and Juno Beach.

- Sword Beach

- 1st Special Service Brigade comprising No. 3, No. 4, No. 6 and No. 45 (RM) Commandos landed at Ouistreham in Queen Red sector (leftmost). No.4 Commando were augmented by 1 and 8 Troop (both French) of No. 10 (Inter Allied) Commando.

I Corps, 3rd Infantry Division and the 27th Armoured Brigade from Ouistreham to Lion-sur-Mer.

No. 41 (RM) Commando (part of 4th Special Service Brigade) landed on the far West of Sword Beach.

- Juno Beach

- I Corps, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade and No.48 (RM) Commando from Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer to Courseulles-sur-Mer.[12]

No. 46 (RM) Commando (part of 4th Special Service Brigade) at Juno to scale the cliffs on the left side of the Orne River estuary and destroy a battery. (Battery fire proved negligible so No.46 were kept off-shore as a floating reserve and landed on D+1).

Assault troops of the 3rd battalion 16th RCT, from the first two waves, shelter under the chalk cliffs, Omaha Beach.

- Gold Beach

- XXX Corps, 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division and 8th Armoured Brigade, consisting of 25,000.[14] from Courseulles to Arromanches.

No. 47 (RM) Commando (part of 4th Special Service Brigade) on the West flank of Gold beach.

79th Armoured Division operated specialist armour ("Hobart's Funnies") for mine-clearing, recovery and assault tasks. These were distributed around the Anglo-Canadian beaches.

Overall, the 2nd Army contingent consisted of 83,115 troops (61,715 of them British). In addition to the British and Canadian combat units, eight Australian officers were attached to the British forces as eyewitnesses. The nominally British air and naval support units included a large number of crew from Allied nations, including several RAF squadrons manned almost exclusively by overseas air-crew. For instance, the Australian contribution to the operation included a regular Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) squadron, nine Article XV squadrons and hundreds of personnel posted to RAF units and RN warships.

U.S. First Army

- Omaha Beach

- V Corps, 1st Infantry Division and 29th Infantry Division making up 34,250 troops from Sainte-Honorine-des-Pertes to Vierville-sur-Mer.

- 2nd and 5th Ranger Battalions at Pointe du Hoc (The 5th BN and A, B, C Co 2nd BN diverted to Omaha).

- Utah Beach

- VII Corps, 4th Infantry Division and the 359th RCT of the 90th Infantry Division comprising 23,250 men landing, around Pouppeville and La Madeleine.

- 101st Airborne Division by parachute around Vierville to support Utah Beach landings.

- 82nd Airborne Division by parachute around Sainte-Mère-Église, protecting the right flank. They had originally been tasked with dropping further west, in the middle part of the Cotentin, allowing the sea-landing forces to their east easier

access across the peninsula, and preventing the Germans from reinforcing the north part of the peninsula. The plans were later changed to move them much closer to the beachhead, as at the last minute the German 91st Air Landing Division was determined to be in the area.

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