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## Operation overlord

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# **OPERATION OVERLORD**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts**

**in**

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in Liberal Arts**

**by**

**James Clinton Emmert  
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## **ABSTRACT**

On June 6, 1944, Allied soldiers assaulted the beaches of Normandy in France. In preparation for that one day, the Allies assembled millions of tons of supplies, hundreds of thousands of men, and thousands of ships in Great Britain. Allied leaders spent three years preparing plans and training troops. American and British intelligence agencies scoured Europe for information about German troops and fortifications and launched massive deception campaigns designed to keep their German counterparts in the dark about where and when the blow would fall. In the air, bombers rained destruction upon German factories and French railways while their escorts engaged the German defenders. By the end of May 1944, the Allies were ready to invade.

Beginning in 1942, the Germans prepared defenses to stop the invasion. The fortifications, named the Atlantic Wall, consisted of massive amounts of concrete, steel and barbed wire and contained millions of mines. The strategy that German leaders pursued to defeat the invasion, a product of rival views within the German High Command, resulted in chaos and ultimately defeat for their armed forces. The commander of Army Group B, defending the likeliest invasion sites, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, planned to meet the invasion at the water line and defeat the Allies before they could gain a foothold. Rommel's immediate superior and commander in the West, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, wanted to defeat the invasion further inland; outside of the range of Allied naval guns. Adolf Hitler compromised between the two commanders and created a plan that depended upon his own appreciation of the battle for the release of critical reserves. Added to the problems of strategy were German

manpower shortages caused by years of fighting a multi-front war and equipment and supply shortages due to bombing and attrition. By May 1944, the Germans knew the invasion was coming but could not foresee when or where.

On D-Day, the Allies dropped three airborne and landed six divisions in the initial assault on the Atlantic Wall. By the end of the day, they had carved a narrow beachhead and were in France to stay.

# INTRODUCTION

There were many d-days in World War II. The acronym itself is a tool used by military men to refer to an unknown, future date when something is planned to happen. Yet, for the past half-century, D-Day has meant one thing: the Allied invasion of France at Normandy on June 6, 1944.

When the United States entered the war, American leaders began to push for an early invasion of the continent. However, the British, embroiled in Africa, wanted help in the Mediterranean. As a result, American troops took part first in Africa, then Sicily and finally Italy. In 1943, with the battle stalemated in Italy south of Rome, the Americans renewed their calls for a direct confrontation in Europe. The British, feeling pressure from both the Americans and the Soviets, agreed.

With no one assigned to command the invasion, the Combined Chiefs of Staff created a planning group that could begin to gather the pieces of the invasion puzzle. Appointed in April 1943 to head this staff, British General Frederick Morgan spent the next few months gathering data and applying it to the questions of where, when and with what to invade. Normandy was chosen as the invasion site after much debate. The beaches were close enough to support with the masses of planes that the Allies felt were the ace up their sleeve. In addition, with the Germans expecting the blow to land in the Pas de Calais area because of the shorter distance from England, Normandy might give the Allies the element of surprise.

The appointment of General Dwight Eisenhower as supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe in December 1943 opened the decisive phase in planning for

OVERLORD. Eisenhower believed that the assault plan, governed by restrictions in men and landing craft, was too small to succeed.<sup>1</sup>

Upon assuming command in December 1943, Eisenhower and his ground commander, British General Bernard Montgomery, raced to increase the weight of men and materials that could be landed on D-Day. The revised plan included five divisions in the initial assault instead of three and added a larger airborne component. To land the added men and materials, the operation, code-named OVERLORD, required additional landing craft. The need for landing craft produced an intense debate, which nearly resulted in the cancellation of a supporting amphibious operation called ANVIL. Another intense debate swirled around control of the strategic bombing forces. Eisenhower demanded control of all air forces and wanted to use them in direct support of OVERLORD. Upon gaining command, he implemented the Transportation Plan, which ordered the heavy bombers to destroy rail yards and bridges all over France in an effort to paralyze the movement of German supplies in Western Europe.

The Germans began as early as September 1942 to prepare for an attempted invasion in the west of Europe. Beginning with ports and U-boat facilities, they sought to line the coast with fortifications, obstacles and mines in such numbers and strength as to make any attack suicidal. Several things worked against their attempt to create what Hitler called the Atlantic Wall. In 1942 and 1943, the threat of invasion was slight, but the war with the Soviet Union was becoming very costly. Materials that were needed to build the wall were repeatedly diverted to the Eastern front as the tide there turned against Germany. Units stationed in France were stripped of the best men and equipment to replace losses in the east. By the end of 1943, the wall was little more

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe, p. 217.



than a talking point in Nazi propaganda, but the Germans, believing that the invasion might come the following spring, decided to make a final push to complete their defenses. The man Hitler chose for the job was Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Having defeated the British on numerous occasions in North Africa, Rommel was certain that he could do it again. Understanding that the Allies would hit the beaches under an umbrella of fighter-bombers and with massive naval artillery support, Rommel decided that the invaders could only be repelled at the water's edge where his troops would be secure in bombproof bunkers. In addition, he wanted to station reinforcements near the beaches to minimize their exposure to air attack and where they could be committed to a battle for the beaches on the day of the invasion. Rommel's strategy did not enjoy universal support. His superior, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, thought that the invaders could not be held on the shore where the weight of their supporting fires would be too great to withstand. Instead, von Rundstedt wanted the Atlantic Wall to delay the attackers long enough for strong, mobile reserves to be assembled for a counterattack.<sup>2</sup> Both men, wanting control of the reserves, argued their case to Hitler, who decided to retain control himself.

While the debate over strategy was raging, Rommel was busy improving the wall. The placement of thousands of additional obstacles and millions of mines between January and May 1944, made the defense far more lethal. The Germans also flooded many areas behind the beaches and around rivers to isolate a landing and drown paratroopers. Rommel also received additional troops, which he positioned on or directly behind likely landing places as his strategy dictated. Despite the substantial

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<sup>2</sup> Günther Blumentritt. "Report of the Chief of Staff", David C. Isby, ed., Fighting the Invasion: The German Army at D-Day, p. 28.

progress, by May 1944, Rommel was still not satisfied with the defense. The men in his armies were not properly trained, he did not have control of the panzer reserves, his fortifications were incomplete and he was out of time.

In the early morning hours of June 6, paratroopers from the British 6<sup>th</sup> and American 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Divisions began landing in Normandy. Remnants of the foul weather, which caused Eisenhower to delay the landings by twenty-four hours, created havoc in the drops. Instead of parachuting into the concentrated areas planned, the troopers and their equipment were badly scattered requiring hours to assemble. Despite the confusion, the men gathered in small groups, attempted to achieve their objectives. The Germans, confused by reports of landings with no apparent pattern, did little to stop the paratroopers unless they were attacked. Consequently, the most critical objectives, the bridges on the Orne River and Caen Canal in the east, the town of Ste. Mère-Église and the beach exits behind the American beach named UTAH, were achieved by H-Hour.

H-Hour for the Americans was 6:30 a.m. At UTAH beach, the landing boats were unable to maintain their course against a strong current and landed 2000 yards to the south of their target.<sup>3</sup> The German defenses at the new landing site, however, were weaker than those at the original site and the troops moved ashore against only light resistance. By the end of D-Day, the assaulting forces had reached many of the objectives at UTAH and the troops were in good position to continue the next day. The assault at OMAHA nearly became a disaster. Once again, the current pushed landing craft away from their assigned sectors but at OMAHA, the beaches, backed by cliffs, were more heavily defended. Only strong fire support from the warships of the

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon A. Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 304.

invasion fleet and the dogged determination of the troops in the assault prevented a total loss. By nightfall, the Americans had carved a small beachhead, but had failed to accomplish most of the assigned objectives.

The British and Canadians, landing east of OMAHA on three beaches, made the most progress on D-Day. At GOLD, the British gained good ground through light enemy resistance, but failed to reach the town of Bayeux and to take Arromanches where a floating artificial harbor called MULBERRY was to be installed. Additionally, the failure to take Arromanches resulted in a gap between the American and British beaches into which the Germans mounted their only major counterattack on D-Day. Although some units penetrated to the beaches, they quickly withdrew to avoid being cut off. The Canadians at JUNO experienced defensive fires like those at OMAHA and took heavy casualties; nevertheless, they moved swiftly off the beach in most places. At the end of the day, they were farther inland than any other troops, although their final objectives remained in German hands. On the left flank of the invasion, the British at SWORD cleared the beach in good order and linked up with the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne. The city of Caen however, was not taken.

Despite the fact that Allied forces had failed to reach most of their tactical objectives on D-Day, they had broken the Atlantic Wall. The Germans, under pressure from Allied naval fire and bombing, had failed to take advantage of the weakened forces coming off the beaches. The beginning of the end was at hand.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INITIAL PLANNING**

Planning for a return to France began before the United States entered World War 2. After Pearl Harbor, the British were eager to utilize the resources of their new partner and convinced the Americans to commit troops in the Mediterranean despite Washington's reluctance to divert resources from the planned build-up for invasion. Senior American strategists continued to push for the invasion of Western Europe and, in 1943, the British finally committed to the operation. A planning staff, appointed by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, created an outline that formed the core of what later became Operation OVERLORD. After the appointment of a Supreme Commander in December 1943, planners fleshed out the outline and added tactical details.

Not long after the miracle of Dunkirk, where the British army and part of the French army escaped from disaster in May and June of 1940, Britain recognized that a final confrontation with Germany on the continent of Europe was necessary to successfully conclude the war. Although Britain was herself too weak to undertake such an operation, Prime Minister Winston Churchill foresaw a time when Britain, joined in the war by the United States, could carry out a cross-channel assault. The answer to the Prime Minister's prayer came on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and America entered the war.

Joint Anglo-American planning for the war began immediately, and over the next two years, a series of conferences occurred to plan strategic operations. In April 1942, General George Marshall, U.S. Chief of Staff, flew to Britain to propose an early opening of a second front in France. His proposal, codenamed ROUNDUP, was to

invade France in 1943.<sup>1</sup> Although the Soviet Union supported the proposal, the British were convinced that the immediate danger was in the Middle East, where the Germans were having some success. If the Germans defeated the British in North Africa and captured the Suez Canal, Britain would be cut off from her empire and the Germans would have access to the vast oil deposits in that region. Marshall was also trying reason his way through the host of ghosts that populated British contemplations of a return to the continent. The British generals of the second war remembered well the disasters of the first. On one occasion, Marshall was told, “It’s no use – you are arguing against the casualties on the Somme.”<sup>2</sup> Over Marshall’s protests, Churchill persuaded President Franklin Roosevelt to use American troops in the clearing of North Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Even as the Allies conducted operations in the Mediterranean, a series of conferences in 1943 set the second front in motion once more. The first of these conferences was at Casablanca in January 1943. There Allied leaders decided planning needed for the invasion needed to begin before the commander was appointed. To coordinate the planning, they created the position of Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (designate) or COSSAC. The man designated was British General Frederick Morgan. The first and most important question faced by Morgan and his staff centered on finding a location for the invasion. There were very critical parameters that had to be met in choosing the invasion site, the first of which was that it must be within range of Allied planes operating from Great Britain. Control of the air was essential to the success of Overlord. The invasion required thousands of ships to move tens of

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon A. Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 22; Winston Churchill, Memoirs of the Second World War, pp. 569-570.

<sup>2</sup> John Keegan, The Face of Battle, p. 285.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 31.

thousands of men and an almost unimaginable amount of supplies across the English Channel. Such a mass of ships without supporting air cover would be a much larger and easier target than the ships of Battleship Row at Pearl Harbor had been to the Japanese.

Next, a major port must be within early reach of the beachhead and must be assailable from the landside. Only a large capacity port could fulfill the supply needs of the Allied armies conducting offensive operations in Europe. The British and Canadians had found out the hard way that the Channel ports were very well defended during the disastrous raid on the French port of Dieppe in August 1942, and COSSAC realized that a direct assault on a port was not possible.

In addition, the beaches must be able to bear the unloading of thousands of vehicles and rapidly pass them inland. All stores had to be brought in over the beaches until a port was captured and put into use. To help reduce interference by the weather, the landing site must be somewhat sheltered from the elements. Allied planners also examined the terrain behind the beaches. The site must not be lined with cliffs, and the areas behind the beaches must be free of the risk of deliberate flooding, which would isolate the beachhead and give the Germans time to concentrate reserves at the point of attack.

Several areas met some of the conditions. In Holland and Belgium there were many good ports, which had the advantage of being very close to the final objective, Germany. However, the much needed air superiority would be difficult to achieve over invasion sites in Holland and Belgium. Due to the long distance from Great Britain, Allied planes would only have a few minutes operational time over the invasion

beaches, and the short distance to Germany meant that the beaches would be in range of the large numbers of German aircraft that were in Germany to defend the Reich. In addition, the terrain behind those beaches was flat and very easily flooded creating difficult natural barriers. The port of Le Havre was ideal for unloading, but landings with Le Havre as the objective would have to begin on both sides of the Seine River as the Channel coast east of Le Havre was lined with tall cliffs. Any force making landings on both sides of the river would be split, exposing it to attack and defeat in detail.

Allied planners also considered Brittany, with the large port of Brest and many smaller ports nearby. The proximity of the ports was outweighed by the distance from Great Britain, which was outside of the range of Allied fighters. Brest was also too far away from Germany. Supply lines based in Brest would have a long road to travel to feed troops operating around Paris and still longer to Germany itself.

The Pas de Calais region was the most tempting target. In addition to being the shortest distance from Britain, it was also the shortest path to Germany. Supply ships would have a short round trip to deliver supplies in Calais and the air forces would have no trouble covering the landing sites from their bases in southern Britain. Calais was also the obvious choice. “The Somme-Calais area seemed to us so much better, strategically, from your [Allied] point of view – because it was so much closer to Germany,” remarked Field Marshal von Rundstedt, commander of the German armies in the West at the time of the invasion, in an interview after the war.<sup>4</sup> The result was that, as Allied aerial reconnaissance revealed, German fortifications there were stronger than at any other place on the shores of Western Europe. The Allies knew that the

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<sup>4</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, The German Generals Talk, p. 236.

Germans thought that Calais was the most likely landing place. Messages intercepted and decoded as part of ULTRA clearly indicated that von Rundstedt felt that Calais would be the chosen site.<sup>5</sup>

The beaches finally chosen were at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula opposite Caen, in the Normandy region of France. The Normandy beaches were well within range of the fighters in Great Britain, and the port of Cherbourg, at the tip of the Cotentin Peninsula, was sufficient to handle the required unloading operations. Behind the beaches, there were few cliffs and these were penetrated by draws through which traffic might pass into the hinterlands. Small resort communities backed other sections of the beaches at Normandy, and the terrain beyond was flat and easily traversed. Situated on the northern and eastern sides of the Carentan Peninsula, the beaches were sheltered from the worst of the summer weather in the English Channel where storms usually blew in from the south and west.

Having chosen where to land, COSSAC now considered what to land. In this, Morgan did not have a free hand. The Combined Chiefs of Staff limited the number of landing craft he could use to the lifting capacity for three divisions in the initial assault plus two more in reserve, or about 4,504 craft.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the width of the attack could be no greater than the frontage of three divisions. Such a narrow assault, of course, would be more vulnerable to counterattack and might not provide enough room for the follow on forces to land and organize for offensive operations.

COSSAC also found that it was desirable to land above the Carentan estuary to permit an early assault upon Cherbourg, but that undertaking posed problems. The land

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<sup>5</sup> F. W. Winterbotham, The Ultra Secret, p. 178.

<sup>6</sup> Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 66.



behind the beaches was flat and easily flooded. Movement off the beaches would be restricted to the raised causeways that passed over the marshes and might not hold the heavy traffic created by armored units. Furthermore, Allied planners expected the Germans to defend the causeways fiercely or even blow them up. Without the causeways, landings in this area would come to resemble a beached whale, very large and unable to move. In addition, the Germans might easily bottle up the Cotentin Peninsula while the Allies took Cherbourg. Landings below the estuary were thus desirable, but how should an assault force of three divisions be split to invade above and below it, where they would not be mutually supporting? Morgan and his staff never resolved many of these difficulties. Obtaining more landing craft to land a larger force and widen the assault area was something that only a commander had to the power to accomplish.

In December 1944, Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to name American General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force. The choice was fortunate for several reasons. Eisenhower had a year of experience commanding Allied troops in North Africa, Sicily and Italy all three of which involved amphibious operations. He also possessed diplomatic abilities that were essential to conducting multi-national operations. "I know of no other person who could have welded the Allied forces into such a fine fighting machine in the way he did, and kept a balance among the many conflicting and disturbing elements which threatened at times to wreck the ship," General Bernard Montgomery said of him after the war.<sup>7</sup>

On assuming command, Eisenhower immediately expressed concern that the COSSAC plan envisioned an assault on too narrow a front with forces too weak to

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Montgomery, Memoirs, p. 484.

secure a proper lodgment.<sup>8</sup> Montgomery, appointed by Eisenhower as the ground force commander for the assault, agreed. Asked by Eisenhower to analyze the plan and act on his behalf until he arrived to take command, Montgomery began making revisions based upon their shared concerns.<sup>9</sup> He immediately determined to make the invading forces stronger and the invasion front wider. The proposed landing area began in the east at the Orne River in front of Ouistreham and ended north of the Carentan estuary in front of St. Martin-de-Varreville, a distance of over sixty miles. Into this area, Montgomery proposed landing five divisions, plus one or more airborne divisions to seize critical objectives ahead of the invasion.

To resolve the landing craft shortage, Montgomery proposed canceling, or reducing to a threat, the projected landings in the south of France, code-named ANVIL (later named DRAGOON). ANVIL was to occur simultaneously with OVERLORD. The purpose was to create a diversion in favor of OVERLORD and pin down German reinforcements far away from Normandy. If ANVIL were canceled, the landing craft allocated for that operation could be moved to Great Britain for OVERLORD. The British never liked the ANVIL operation. Not only would it divert assets from the armies in Italy, they argued, the forces allocated to ANVIL were too small to greatly affect the outcome in France. Without those troops, the Italian campaign might bog down. The British feared that a stalemate in Italy would allow the Soviets to move further into Europe, placing many more people under communist control after the war.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe, p. 217; Eisenhower to George Marshall, February 6, 1944, Alfred D. Chandler, The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, III, 1707.

<sup>9</sup> Montgomery, Memoirs, p. 189.

<sup>10</sup> John Keegan, Six Armies in Normandy, p. 55; Montgomery, Memoirs, pp. 198-199.

Although Eisenhower supported the strengthening of the initial assault forces, he rejected the proposal to discard ANVIL. Both Eisenhower and Marshall felt that ANVIL was necessary to the success of OVERLORD. "I regard 'ANVIL' as an important contribution to 'OVERLORD' as I feel that an assault will contain more enemy forces in southern France than a threat," Eisenhower told the Combined Chiefs. "The forces both US and French are in any case available; and the actual landing of these forces will increase the cooperation from resistance elements in France."<sup>11</sup>

Eisenhower thought that the landing craft shortages could be resolved without abandoning ANVIL. The date for OVERLORD would be moved back by one month, and the date for ANVIL would be moved back to the first feasible date after July 15, 1944. The delay in the date for OVERLORD would allow the accumulation of an additional month's production of landing craft in Great Britain, totaling nearly one hundred ships.<sup>12</sup> The postponement allowed the use in OVERLORD of landing craft allotted to ANVIL, with enough time to return them to the Mediterranean for the invasion of southern France.<sup>13</sup>

Eisenhower also looked to strengthen the airborne elements of OVERLORD. The initial plan called for the deployment of two airborne divisions to seize Caen, to secure river crossings and to attack certain German fortifications on the coast. Due to a lack of transport aircraft, the paratroopers were scheduled to land in a series of drops.

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<sup>11</sup> Eisenhower to Combined Chiefs of Staff, January 23, 1944, Chandler, The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, III, 1673.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Ambrose, The Supreme Commander, p. 337.

<sup>13</sup> Eisenhower to George Marshall, February 19, 1944, Chandler, The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, III, 1735.

General Morgan had only been allocated 632 transport planes to do a job that he estimated would require 1004 planes.<sup>14</sup>

Eisenhower proposed that the paratroopers be landed en masse and he changed their mission.<sup>15</sup> The expansion of the landing areas created new tactical requirements. The addition of another British sea-borne division in front of Caen eliminated the need for paratroopers to take the city. The beaches, however, needed protection from counterattack from the east where powerful panzer formations were ready to move down to the water and crush the invaders. In addition, the infantry units, moving inland from the beaches, would have to cross the Orne River. SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force) planners assigned the British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division the task of capturing and holding the Orne River bridges to allow rapid movement inland from the beaches.

On the opposite flank, the American 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division planned to land in the early morning hours of D-Day and capture the vital causeways leading over the inundated areas behind the beaches on the Cotentin Peninsula. Paratroopers also had standing orders to cut German communications and harass the enemy wherever he was encountered. In addition, the 1<sup>st</sup> US Army requested that another airborne division land on the Cotentin Peninsula to block reinforcements from the St. Lô area and help isolate Cherbourg from the rest of the German Army. For this mission, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division would drop near the town of St. Sauveur on the night of D-Day, which would place the 82<sup>nd</sup> three quarters of the way across the Cotentin Peninsula and far from the beaches.

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<sup>14</sup> Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> Eisenhower to George Marshall, February, 19, 1944, Chandler, The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, III, 1738.

The airborne plan changed again just before D-Day. By April 1944, there were enough transports available to land both US divisions at the same time, just after midnight on D-Day. The following month, intelligence reported that the German 91<sup>st</sup> Air Landing Division in the area between St. Sauveur and the Cotentin beaches.<sup>16</sup> Suddenly, the idea of placing an airborne division around St. Sauveur became much more hazardous. Allied planners rethought the American airborne mission and the changes they made resulted in a shift in landing zones for both the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Divisions. They switched the 101<sup>st</sup> to the south with one regiment to land west of Varreville, one west of Ste. Marie du Mont and a third northeast of St. Come du Mont. The division's main mission, to take the causeways, remained unchanged. The new focus of the 82<sup>nd</sup> was now east toward the beaches straddling the Merderet River with two regiments west and one east of the river. Their new mission was to seize and hold the bridges across the Merderet River and capture the town of Ste. Mère-Église, which straddled the important north-south road that ran parallel to the beaches and linked the two American sectors, codenamed UTAH and OMAHA. The road and the town were vital for the movement of German reinforcements and supplies behind the beaches. The Germans thus would be severely hampered in their defense with Ste. Mère-Église in American hands.<sup>17</sup>

The planning for deployment of troops on the beaches was also moving ahead. The Allies planned to assault five beaches on D-Day. From east to west, they were SWORD, JUNO, GOLD, OMAHA and UTAH. The British 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was to attack the three eastern beaches. Landing at SWORD would be the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division,

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<sup>16</sup> Ralph Bennett, *Ultra in the West*, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> *Utah Beach to Cherbourg*, pp. 9-10.; Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, p. 186.

at JUNO the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division and at GOLD the British 50<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The American 1<sup>st</sup> Army prepared to attack the two western beaches. At OMAHA the 1<sup>st</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions and at UTAH the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division were to land.

Individual divisions handled detailed tactical planning for each beach, so the plans varied from one to another. Each plan was intricately detailed. The landing plan for the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division at OMAHA Beach provides a clear example of the tight schedules that the planners expected to maintain throughout D-Day. Between H-5 minutes and H Hour, two companies of DD (Duplex Drive) tanks and another company of tanks carried by LST (Landing Ship, Tank) would land on the beach. One minute later, the first wave of infantry, companies A, E, F and G, was scheduled to land. In the ensuing forty-nine minutes engineers, antiaircraft batteries and artillery would land, followed by L, I, K and C companies in the second wave. By H + 180 minutes, the assault troops were expected to be off the beach and fighting their way inland as Navy salvage teams and heavy artillery landed.<sup>18</sup>

The strict timetables comforted some men. “It seemed so organized, that nothing could go wrong, nothing could stop it,” one private remembered.<sup>19</sup> Others such as Colonel Paul Good, commander of the 175<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, did not think the plan would hold up in combat. “Forget this goddamned thing,” he exclaimed to his men, holding the regiment’s written plan aloft. “You get your ass on

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Ambrose, D-Day June 6, 1944, pp. 121-124.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 125.

the beach. I'll be there waiting for you and I'll tell you what to do. There ain't anything in this plan that is going to go right.”<sup>20</sup>

The British relied more heavily upon armor in the initial waves than the Americans and developed a number of uniquely equipped vehicles to handle the various obstacles that were expected. Among these were the Duplex Drive (DD) tanks that could swim using propellers connected to the tank's engine and an inflatable canvas skirt to give the tank buoyancy. DD tanks were used at all five of the beaches. At Omaha, the DD tanks were to swim in from 6000 yards out and arrive on the beach at H-5 minutes to provide covering fire for the first wave of infantry. Other specialized vehicles included tanks that carried bridges and rolls of matting material to assist in the negotiation of obstacles on the beaches and tanks pushing heavy cylinders or flailing the ground ahead with rotating chains to explode mines. The British put these specialized vehicles to good use on D-Day.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **PRE-INVASION OPERATIONS**

Before D-Day, the Allies conducted operations in support of the invasion on several levels. To gain air superiority over Europe, the Allies launched massive raids into Germany to destroy vital industrial targets forcing the Germans into a battle of attrition in the air. Although the leaders of the bomber commands resisted, they were required, in the months leading up to D-Day, to attack French rail yards and rolling stock in an effort to hamper the movement of men and materials in Western Europe. The information required by the Allies to create detailed assault plans came from many sources. French Resistance fighters, operating under the noses of the Germans obtained detailed information about the fortifications in Normandy and the troops manning them. Teams of specialists decoded German radio communications and gleaned vital information from German status reports and requests for reinforcement. To confuse and paralyze the Germans Allied intelligence personnel produced and passed misinformation about the time and place of the assault. Through these methods, the campaign against Hitler's Europe began well before June 6.

Air support for OVERLORD began months ahead of June 6. The pre-assault air mission was two-fold: remove the Luftwaffe from the skies over Europe and destroy the transportation system in France. Allied airmen used the strategic bombing campaign to drive the Luftwaffe out of Western Europe. Throughout 1943 and early 1944, heavy bombers of the American Eighth Air Force and British Bomber Command flew countless missions in Western Europe. As the raids became more frequent and the



numbers of bombers participating grew larger, Reich Minister Herman Goring, head of the Luftwaffe, drew his fighters back to defend the Reich.

The most significant event in the battle to break the back of the Luftwaffe was the introduction of the American P-51 Mustang, the first fighter in the Allied inventory that could escort the bombers to their target and back. The Mustang freed other, shorter-range fighters to fly patrols over France. Their mission was to draw the Luftwaffe into combat and destroy as many fighters as possible. The resulting air battles over France and Germany inflicted heavy losses in German fighters and pilots.

Although the original plan did not envision the use of strategic bombers in support of OVERLORD, the defeat of the Luftwaffe over France created new opportunities. To take advantage of this, SHAEF drew up a list of railroad marshaling yards, repair facilities and bridges that, if damaged or destroyed, would hamper German efforts to supply and move their troops. Solly Zuckerman, a scientist working for SHAEF, carefully examined the effects of the bombing of Rome's marshaling yards in July 1943 and concluded that the systematic bombing of a few key rail installations could paralyze an entire rail system.<sup>1</sup> To be effective, the bombing must be pursued over an extended period and so the Transportation Plan was born.

Opposition to the plan was immediate in both the military and political spheres. General Carl Spaatz, head of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris of RAF Bomber Command both felt that the Transportation Plan was a mistake. They argued that the heavy bombers were doing real damage in Germany and that, if the bombers were diverted to France, the Germans would be able to repair much of the damage. Keeping the pressure on Germany was the single most important thing

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon A. Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 217.

that the bombers could do to help win the war. Harris argued that Bomber Command was structured and trained for night operations and that his crews would perform poorly by daylight. Furthermore, the air chiefs insisted that German reinforcements on D-Day would be traveling by road, so bombing the rail yards would have little impact on D-Day itself.

Spaatz devised a different plan to help OVERLORD. Calling it the Oil Plan, he proposed that the heavy bombers continue attacking targets in Germany but that the concentration be shifted to oil production with the emphasis being placed upon gasoline. Without gas, the Germans would not be able to fight off the invaders. Eisenhower rejected the Oil Plan for the simple reason that it would have no impact on OVERLORD. The Germans had stockpiled gas all over France and so any reduction in their refining capacity would only be felt after the current supplies had been run dry. That would not happen until after D-Day.<sup>2</sup>

Simultaneously with the debate over the Transportation Plan, another debate was raging. Eisenhower insisted, as Supreme Commander, upon control of all forces in England. This included the strategic air forces. Spaatz was already nominally under Eisenhower, who was American ETO Commander, but Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff were not inclined to give him control of Bomber Command. Instead, they desired independence from SHAEF but agreed that Bomber Command assets should be allocated to OVERLORD when the time was right. After much debate, Eisenhower

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<sup>2</sup> Eisenhower Memorandum, March 22, 1944, Alfred D. Chandler, The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, III, 1786-1787 (note); Stephen Ambrose, The Supreme Commander, p. 367-368.

finally told Churchill that if Bomber Command was not put at his disposal he would “simply have to go home.”<sup>3</sup> In the face of Eisenhower’s threat, Churchill gave in.

With command of the bombers now approved, Eisenhower moved to resolve the Transportation Plan debate. He called a meeting for March 25, 1944. Among those attending were Spaatz, Tedder, tactical air commander Leigh-Mallory, Harris, and Eisenhower. Tedder and Leigh-Mallory made the case for the Transportation Plan with Tedder arguing that the it “is the only one offering a reasonable prospect of disorganizing enemy movement and supply in the time available, and of preparing the ground for imposing the tactical delays which can be vital once the land battle is joined.”<sup>4</sup> Spaatz again made his pitch for crippling attacks against Germany’s oil industry. He freely admitted that such a tactic would not produce much impact on D-Day, but felt that the effects further down the road compensated for it.

In the end, Eisenhower chose the Transportation Plan and felt that the matter was closed. It was not. Just nine days later, the British War Cabinet met to consider the question. In 1940, the War Cabinet had forbidden air attacks upon occupied countries that might seriously damage the population. After the war, the British would have to face the consequences of populations angry over Allied bombing. Opponents to the Transportation Plan predicted that more than 80,000 French casualties might result from the bombing.<sup>5</sup> Eisenhower did not believe the estimates and made it clear that every effort would be made to warn the local populations before each raid. At the very least, Churchill decided, SHAEF should consult the French. When asked, General Pierre Koenig, head of the Free French forces in England, replied, “This is War, and it must be

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander*, p. 369.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 372.

<sup>5</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *Closing the Ring*, pp. 528-530.

expected that people will be killed. We would take the anticipated loss to be rid of the Germans.”<sup>6</sup>

Over the next two months, the Allied air forces pounded on the rail system in France and the results bore out Eisenhower’s decision. By the end of April, 1600 trains were backlogged in France, 600 of which carried army supplies. More importantly, the backlog of trains into Normandy and Brittany went from thirty on April 1 to 228 on May 1.<sup>7</sup>

Planning and preparing Operation OVERLORD required a massive amount of detailed information. To make decisions about where and when to land, the Allies had to gather such information as the characteristics of the terrain, firmness of the soil, the timing of the tides and the nature and disposition of the enemy, among other things. Some of these items could be found in records in England. Maps of the coasts and almanacs full of tidal information were readily available, although some records required updating.

To get up-to-date information about the invasion area, the Allies used a variety of sources. The single most important source was the French Resistance. The best sources were eyewitness accounts, and who better to give them than the people who lived with the Germans on a daily basis? Networks of ordinary Frenchmen, reporting anything they saw, gathered a staggering amount of information. Indeed, when Lt. Arthur Jahnke, commander of a fortification named W5 was captured on UTAH beach and interrogated, he was shown a silk scarf containing a drawing of the beach. Much to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 375.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 225.

his astonishment, the information was completely accurate. Everything was drawn to scale and the types of all the weapons were noted next to each position.<sup>8</sup>

The Allies had another source of reliable information in ULTRA – deciphered German radio traffic. The intercepts revealed that the Germans were using France to rest units damaged in Russia. They also revealed that the sixty divisions stationed in France were under strength and that the defenses were not complete.<sup>9</sup> ULTRA also revealed much about the units that would resist the initial assault. By June 6, it had identified and located over half of the garrison units that formed the main line of resistance. One notable exception was the failure to find any information on the location of the 352 Division at OMAHA beach where it caused considerable damage to the invaders.<sup>10</sup> It was through ULTRA that the Allies learned that the Germans favored Pas de Calais as the invasion site giving birth to the FORTITUDE deception operation.<sup>11</sup>

To keep the Germans guessing about Allied intentions in the west, Operation FORTITUDE was put into action as early as the fall of 1943. One part, called FORTITUDE SOUTH, was designed to reinforce the German notion that the invasion would come at Pas de Calais and that, before the invasion, other attacks would occur as a diversion from the main assault.<sup>12</sup> SHAEF chose General George Patton to head a dummy army group, First U.S. Army Group (FUSAG).<sup>13</sup> On paper, FUSAG, stationed in the east and south of Britain, contained many of the units that were, in fact, part of

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Carell, Invasion They're Coming!, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> F. W. Winterbotham, The Ultra Secret, p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Bennett, Ultra in the West, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Hesketh, Fortitude, p. 118; Bennett, Ultra in the West, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Hesketh Fortitude, organizational chart, p. 128; Omar Bradley, A Soldier's Story, p. 344.

OVERLORD along with units that either did not exist or were not in Britain. Special signal units passed fake radio traffic to simulate training operations of the nonexistent army group. To deceive German aerial reconnaissance, troops deployed phony equipment, including 225 fake landing craft deployed at eastern ports in Britain.<sup>14</sup> German agents, who had been discovered and forced to work for the British, reported troops movements and the build up of supplies and equipment in support of FUSAG. Everything that they reported pointed to the Pas-de-Calais as the place where the blow would fall.

The influence that FORTITUDE exerted may never be fully known; however, a measure of its success may be found in the emphasis that the Germans placed on the Calais area, where they built more obstacles, poured more concrete and laid more mines than in any other area. ULTRA intercepts showed that even after D-Day, the Germans continued to believe that another invasion was going to take place at Calais and maintained the 15<sup>th</sup> Army there even as the 7<sup>th</sup> Army in Normandy was disintegrating.<sup>15</sup> As late as July 8, Hitler issued a directive in which he predicted “a thrust forward on both sides of the Seine to Paris. Therefore, a second enemy landing in the sector of Fifteenth Army, despite all the risks this entails, is probable.”<sup>16</sup> In response to this perceived threat, Hitler ordered the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend to the Lisieux-Pont l’Evêque area on July 16, which took it out of the Caen area where it was in reserve, and not finished resting and refitting. Not until the second week of August did Hitler allow the transfer of infantry divisions from Calais to Normandy in reaction to the breakout of US 3<sup>rd</sup> Army under Patton, and by then it was too late.

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<sup>14</sup> Hesketh, *Fortitude*, p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> Bennett, *Ultra in the West*, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Reynolds, *Steel Inferno: 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Corps in Normandy*, p. 206.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THE GERMANS**

Adolf Hitler, in his Fuehrer Directive No. 51, dated November 3, 1943, emphatically warned that the critical juncture of the war was approaching.

The threat from the East remains, but an even greater danger looms in the West: the Anglo-American landing! In the East, the vastness of the space will, as a last resort, permit a loss of territory even on a major scale, without suffering a mortal blow to Germany's chance for survival.

Not so in the West! If the enemy here succeeds in penetrating our defenses on a wide front, consequences of staggering proportions will follow within a short time. All signs point to an offensive against the Western Front of Europe no later than spring, and perhaps earlier.<sup>1</sup>

To counter the threat, the Germans produced a series of fortifications along the coast of Western Europe designed to stop the invasion at the water's edge. In charge of the construction of the fortifications and protection of the beaches, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel devised many deadly obstacles to destroy an invader. Knowing that he could not counter Allied air power, Rommel wished to station his troops, including the panzer reserves, as close to the beaches as possible to reduce their vulnerability to bombing. Opposing him was Field Marshal von Rundstedt who wished to fight the critical battle inland using the panzers in a more mobile battle. Instead of supporting a single strategy, Hitler compromised and released some panzers to Rommel and retained the balance under his control far from the beaches. Beyond the strategic debate, Rommel had to overcome many problems created by the constant drain of the fighting in Russia. The men assigned to the Atlantic Wall were not first-class material and the equipment that they used was frequently of foreign make. Shortages of gasoline and vehicles and

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon A. Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, Fuehrer Directive No. 51, p. 465.

the use of combat troops for obstacle construction hampered training. By May of 1944, the Atlantic Wall was stronger but not complete.

The fortifications built to protect Hitler's Europe, known as the Atlantic Wall, began as defenses for critical ports and installations. To insure the safety of his submarines, Hitler instructed Organization Todt, a group formed in 1938 to build the West Wall defenses on the Franco-German border, to begin construction of bombproof U-Boat pens with special emphasis on the ports of Brest, Lorient and St. Nazaire. Hitler also ordered the Channel Islands fortified and garrisoned.<sup>2</sup> The islands were important because of the protection they provided for coastal shipping, and they were the only pieces of Great Britain that Hitler held.

In September 1941, Field Marshal Erwin von Witzleben, then commander of Army Group D and the officer responsible for the west, proposed to the OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres) or Army High Command, that work be started on permanent defenses. Despite a shortage of construction troops, Witzleben ordered units under his command to scout for likely sites to build defensive positions along the coast.<sup>3</sup> Although construction was to begin as soon as possible, very little was done until after the issuance of Hitler's 1942 Directive No. 40.

Directive No. 40 named Field Marshal Karl von Rundstedt Commander in Chief West in March 1942. Von Rundstedt now had sole responsibility for the defense of the west, including the Netherlands, and was placed under the Armed Forces High Command (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht or OKW), which was responsible for coordinating all branches of the German military to repel any attacks on North Western

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 131; David G. Chandler, The D-Day Encyclopedia, p. 411.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 131.



Europe. Hitler stipulated that any invading force be stopped on the water if possible; if the enemy managed to get ashore, however, he wanted a counterattack that would “annihilate landed enemy forces, or throw them back into the sea.” Von Rundstedt should allocate troops and fortifications based on “those coastal sectors that are the most probable sites for enemy landings.”<sup>4</sup> A system of strong points and active patrolling would cover the remaining areas.

Two important events occurred in 1942, after Directive No. 40 was issued, that greatly influenced German thinking about coastal defenses. The first, on March 28, was the British raid on the dry docks at St. Nazaire. Royal Navy vessels, including a destroyer, sailed up the Loire River and destroyed the only dry dock that was large enough to service the German battleship Tirpitz. The second event occurred on August 19 at Dieppe, where the Germans repelled a seaborne force of British and Canadians with great loss. The most important lesson drawn from these two raids was that the coast lacked adequate defensive works in many areas, as seen at St. Nazaire, but where defenses were solid, such as Dieppe, German forces could repel the enemy. On September 29, Hitler summoned the heads of all the branches of the German military to a conference at which he laid out his plan for the defense of the shores of Western Europe. This plan included some 15,000 concrete strong points defended by 300,000 men.<sup>5</sup> He wanted the program completed by May 1, 1943, but Organization Todt estimated that only 40 percent of the works would be ready by that time.

In the spring of 1943, von Rundstedt went to Berchtesgaden to meet with Hitler. The field marshal was concerned about the rate of progress on the fortifications and the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Fuehrer Directive No. 40, p. 460.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

lack of first-class combat units to man them. Hitler paid little attention to von Rundstedt's concerns. The latest developments in Russia absorbed all of his attention and he could not be bothered with bad news from the west. Upon his return to France, von Rundstedt ordered a survey of the defensive positions detailing how many were completed and the caliber of the men manning them. He forwarded a detailed report to Hitler's headquarters on October 25. After reading it, Hitler issued Directive No. 51. To make sure that the forces in the west would not be drawn down any further to reinforce other fronts, Hitler required OKW and OKH to get his personal approval for all troop transfers. In addition, No. 51 ordered more men, tanks, assault guns and antitank guns to strengthen the divisions already stationed in France.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, Hitler ordered that a new headquarters be created with Field Marshall Erwin Rommel at its head, designated Army Group for Special Employment, for use against the invasion when it came. To prepare for his new command, Rommel was to make a series of inspection tours of the Atlantic Wall and report on the state of the defenses and the readiness and morale of the troops stationed in the west. As he inspected each section of the wall, Rommel was directed to prepare studies for counterattacks, employment of reserves and the use of armor in each area.

Both Rommel and von Rundstedt disliked Rommel's assignment as inspector of the Atlantic Wall and head of a reserve headquarters. On December 10, 1943, von Rundstedt recommended to Hitler that Rommel's headquarters be assigned to OB West and designated Army Group B.<sup>7</sup> Consisting of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Armies, Army Group B, along with Armed Forces Netherlands, would defend the Pas de Calais and Normandy

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Fuehrer Directive No. 51, pp. 464-467.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Mitcham, The Desert Fox in Normandy, pp. 7-8.

regions – the most likely invasion sites on the Channel coast. Hitler approved the change and placed Rommel at the head of the armies that would directly oppose any attempted invasion in France. Although he could only guess at the time and place of the invasion, Rommel suspected that he had less than six months to complete what should have been done in the previous two years.

Rommel was the one man in the German Army uniquely suited to prepare the defense of the west. He had spent two years in Africa fighting against the British and Americans and he understood his enemy. He knew that the Luftwaffe was a defeated force and would not be able to protect his armies from the hordes of Allied fighters and bombers that would accompany the invasion. Any movement to the sound of the guns by reserves would be hampered by roving bands of fighter-bombers assigned to shoot at anything moving on the roads and rails of France. For Rommel the only sound strategy was to defend the waterline with everything he had at his disposal. All reserves must be well forward to shorten the distance traveled under Allied air attack and they must be immediately employed to destroy the enemy on the beaches. The panzer reserves were especially needed. Enemy forces would be at their weakest as they came up out of the water and attacked the fortifications in front of them. The initial waves would lack tanks and heavy guns, and as they broke through the beach defenses and began to move inland, would be badly fragmented and exhausted. At that moment, counterattacking panzers would have the best chance to destroy the invasion.<sup>8</sup>

Rommel's strategy had several problems. To defend close to the front, knowledge of where the enemy would attack was necessary. Otherwise, troops might be stationed in the wrong place and would have to make a long march to the fight under

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 26-27; Erwin Rommel, The Rommel Papers, p. 469.

attack by the dreaded fighter-bombers. Additionally, anything close to the coast would be subject to long-range naval artillery fire from the warships supporting the landings. These powerful guns were every bit as deadly as the enemy air force. The Germans knew from firsthand experience the effects of naval gunfire. Counterattacks against the Allied landings at Anzio in Italy had been stopped short of the beaches by the shells of the invasion fleet when nothing else could have stopped them.

There were others in the west with different opinions about how to defeat the invasion. One was Rommel's commander Field Marshal von Rundstedt. The other was General (Baron) Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg, commander of Panzer Group West. Von Rundstedt formed Panzer Group West for the express purpose of defeating the invasion after it had gotten ashore and penetrated the Atlantic Wall. They did not believe that the wall would be able to hold the invaders for long and they envisioned a great battle of mobility to be fought inland with concentrated panzer forces. This engagement was to be out of the range of Allied naval guns, which both men feared.<sup>9</sup> Neither man had experienced the power of the Anglo-American air forces. Von Rundstedt's last combat command had been against the Russians in 1941 when the Luftwaffe had ruled the skies. Von Schweppenburg was also an Eastern Front man who had little idea what enemy air supremacy could accomplish.

Only one man, Adolf Hitler, could resolve the dispute between Rommel and von Rundstedt. Ordinarily, a commander had access to higher levels of authority only through his chain of command, and so Rommel normally would have been forced to conform to von Rundstedt's strategy with no recourse to Hitler. However, all field

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<sup>9</sup> Geyr Von Schweppenburg, "Preparations by Panzer Group West Against Invasion (mid-1943 – 5 June 1944)", David C. Isby, ed., Fighting the Invasion: The German Army at D-Day, p. 75.

marshals had direct access to Hitler at any time, so Rommel could circumvent the chain of command. This access produced a strategic compromise that gave neither Rommel nor von Rundstedt what he desired. Both wanted control of the panzers but Hitler, faced with two of his top field marshals at odds, could not decide who should have them. The answer, so typical of how Hitler worked, was that neither would get what he wanted. He released three panzer divisions to Rommel for use on the coast and the rest he put under the direct control of OKW or, in other words, Hitler himself. The all-important panzer divisions that would make or break German chances to throw the Allies back into the sea could not be moved without the personal approval of a man in his headquarters at Obersalzberg in the mountains of southern Germany! This appalling situation resulted in Rommel's trip to Germany on June 5 to make another appeal to Hitler for control of the panzers, causing the field marshal to miss the most important battle of his career.

To understand the state of the Atlantic Wall, Rommel began an inspection tour at Copenhagen on December 11, 1943. What he saw was shocking. Nowhere did the Atlantic Wall resemble the fortress that Hitler's propaganda machine made it out to be, and only in the Pas de Calais region did it come close. Rommel called the wall a "figment of Hitler's Wolkenkuckucksheim" (cloud cuckoo land). It was an "enormous bluff," he remarked, "more for the German people than for the enemy . . . and the enemy, through his agents, knows more about it than we do."<sup>10</sup> Rommel completed his tour in late December and his report was harsh and pessimistic. The forces in the West were not adequate in strength or mobility to provide proper defense. The Luftwaffe and the Navy were both so weak as to be useless to the defense, there were far too few land

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<sup>10</sup> Cornelius Ryan, The Longest Day, p. 23.

mines in place, and the obstacles were incomplete in most locations and, in some, not started at all. Von Rundstedt agreed.

Rommel moved quickly to improve the Atlantic Wall. Only the immediate and rapid expansion of the defenses could turn Hitler's Wolkenkuckucksheim into Eisenhower's worst nightmare. To make the Atlantic Wall a reality, Rommel planned new fortifications, to be built in depth, that would slow the Allies and make them more vulnerable to counterattack. Rommel turned his own inventive mind to the task. On the shoreline, he ordered four bands of obstacles placed at varying depths of water during different periods of tide. These lines consisted of tetrahedrons, which were three pieces of angle iron welded together to stand up; Belgian gates, or large metal gates previously used for blocking roads; and "nutcracker" mines consisting of concrete housings with large artillery shells in them and large protruding poles that when struck by a landing craft, would set off the shell. Anything that could be mined was to have some type of explosive attached to it. The war diary of Army Group B recorded the progress. "Up to the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1944, a total of 517,000 foreshore obstacles were constructed along the Channel front, 31,000 of which were fitted with mines."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the underwater obstructions, Rommel had large bands of barbed wire strung along the shore in front of the bunkers, and every possible area was mined. The British had used massive minefields to stop his offensives in the desert and he had learned from his enemy. Rommel envisioned the use of minefields thusly:

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<sup>11</sup> Rommel, The Rommel Papers, p. 459.

Between and around the stationary tanks, strong point groups, strong points and resistance nests, minefields of great depth will be laid. The minefields will contain mines of all kinds and are likely to be highly effective. If the enemy should ever set foot on land, an attack through the minefields against the defense works sited within them will present him with a task of immense difficulty. He will have to fight his way through the zone of death in the defensive fire of the whole of our artillery. And not only on the coast, for numerous and extensive minefields will also exist round our positions in the rear areas. Any airborne troops who attempt to penetrate to the coast from the rear will make the acquaintance of this mined zone.”<sup>12</sup>

The numbers of mines envisioned was staggering. Rommel wanted an initial laying of mines, one every ten yards, in a 1,000 yard wide belt along the whole coast of France. He wanted that belt to be backed by another, 8,000 yards wide. The first belt alone would use 20,000,000 mines.<sup>13</sup>

Rommel was also aware that the Allies were likely to use airborne forces to cover and aid the amphibious forces. It would be difficult to create obstacles for parachutists, but he knew that paratroopers carried little heavy equipment and would require gliders to bring in additional reinforcements, ammunition and light artillery. To prevent the landing of gliders in his rear areas, Rommel devised a system that became known as “Rommel asparagus”: ten-foot poles planted at 100-foot intervals in any clearing where gliders might land. The poles were designed to break up the gliders as they landed, causing casualties among men and equipment. To enhance the damage done, shells were to be attached to the poles with wires run between them. Tripping a wire set off the shells creating an instant artillery barrage. However, approval for the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 458.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 457.

shells came through only a few days before June 6 and there was no time to install them.

Another obstacle to invasion was water. Behind UTAH beach was a lagoon ten miles long and a mile wide. The only way for vehicles to cross the lagoon was by using four causeways, or narrow raised roads, which were easily defended or destroyed. Ten miles inland was an even larger obstacle: the valleys of the Merderet and Douve Rivers had been purposely flooded to trap paratroopers and to help isolate the beaches. Allied intelligence photographed the entire area many times using low-level reconnaissance aircraft, but the water was hidden by long grasses and the ground looked dry. These wide, flooded areas would become a death trap for many American paratroopers on the morning of D-Day.

The Germans also had obstacles to overcome. The war in Russia was an enormous drain on German resources. Most critically, the Germans required replacements to fill the ranks of the depleted divisions facing the Red Army. The armies occupying Germany's conquests in the West were the first and best pool of replacements available to the Wehrmacht. In addition, since the West was quiet, units that had been shattered in Russia could be sent there to rest and refit before returning to the east. In this way, France and the Low Countries became a rest home for weary soldiers. For a while, this arrangement worked well for the Germans, as there was little chance that the British would attack France with anything more than small raiding parties. Trouble of a worse sort was the French Resistance. In 1942, it became much better organized and caused considerable trouble, but it was still a small matter compared to the fighting in Russia.



After two years of war, and with armies deployed in Western Europe, Russia, the Balkans, Greece, Norway and Africa, it became apparent that Germany did not have the manpower resources to fight a two-front war and occupy her conquests. To fill the gaps in the ranks, Hitler permitted the drafting of non-Germans. The first to be drafted were the Volksdeutsche or “Racial Germans” – men of German blood from occupied territories that Berlin intended to integrate into the Greater Reich. Ideally, they could speak German but many could not and not all were friendly to Germany.

Despite the inclusion of the Volksdeutsche, manpower was still critically short. In the fall of 1941, Hitler authorized the recruitment of Russian prisoners of war. They were used chiefly as laborers, which freed Germans to fight, but as the war continued, they were formed into combat units called *Ost* Battalions. After the failure of the last great German offensive in Russia, in 1943, at Kursk, the German army began to transfer *Ost* Battalions to the West in trade for German troops stationed there. The *Ost* Battalions were deemed unreliable to fight against the Russians, who were now on the offensive and did not look at all like the defeated foe of 1941-2. The OWK established a ratio of two *Ost* Battalions in trade for one German battalion and by May 1944, one sixth of the rifle battalions in the 7<sup>th</sup> Army in Normandy were *Osttruppen*.<sup>14</sup>

Another way to increase manpower reserves was to loosen the requirements for service. Men who had previously been unfit because of age, too old or too young, and those who had minor ailments could now be inducted into the Wehrmacht in many capacities, including as combat troops. In 1944, the average age of the German Army

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<sup>14</sup> Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 146.

was 31.5 years. The average age of the American Army in 1943 was more than six years younger!<sup>15</sup>

Many of the young men in service in the West were victims of various types of ailments. Some had been critically wounded or suffered severe frostbite in Russia and were considered unfit for return to service there. Others had stomach, lung or ear problems that had previously made them unfit. One division, the 70<sup>th</sup> Infantry, was called the “Whipped Cream” or “White Bread” division because of the special dietary requirements of its soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

The men under Rommel’s command also lacked sufficient training. There were not enough laborers anywhere in the Reich. Slave labor was used for everything from building fortifications to making weapons and ammunition. The building program for the Atlantic Wall consumed an enormous amount of labor. There were not enough construction battalions to work on the fortifications even in 1942, and many thousands of French civilians were either paid or conscripted to work on the wall over the next year and a half. Despite these measures, German troops had to be put to work building the wall to make up some of the deficit. Many field commanders complained that their men were under trained and that the ever-growing construction details were hampering their efforts to remedy the problem. Rommel did not have time for these complaints. His mission, one that he passionately believed was the only chance the Germans had, was to build a wall so formidable that the Allies would dash themselves to pieces upon it. With any luck, they would not even dare to try.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>16</sup> Mitcham, The Desert Fox in Normandy, p. 14.

Gasoline shortages hampered training as well. The Allied bombing campaign against Germany's strategic oil assets was beginning to have an impact at the front. The gasoline that Germany did manage to produce had a long trip to reach the empty fuel tanks of the panzers in Normandy and the trip was full of its own hazards. Allied aircraft had a free hand over France, and fighters escorting bombers back from raids in Germany looked for targets of opportunity such as supply trains. The French Resistance also derailed many trains. If the fuel survived the trip, there was always the chance that the fuel depot might be spotted by Allied reconnaissance and be bombed. Training mobile units, such as panzer divisions, required large quantities of gas and, since OB West did not have large fuel reserves, training suffered.<sup>17</sup>

Heavy turnover was another problem for OB West. Units in the west were constantly being rotated through the Russian front. If they ever returned to the west, they were battered and needed refitting. The units that did not rotate as a whole were frequently combed out for men fit for duty in Russia. As a result, there was a massive turnover of units and replacements in the West. These problems created a heavy training burden in the west that was never properly met due to the fuel and labor shortages.

Despite the problems, OB West did have some first-class fighting divisions. Generally younger and almost entirely ethnically German these divisions were better trained and equipped and usually had better mobility. Among them were the 352<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, the 6<sup>th</sup> Parachute Regiment, the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division, the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division and Panzer Lehr. The commander of Panzer Lehr, General Fritz

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<sup>17</sup> Ralph Bennett, Ultra in the West, pp. 55-56.

Bayerlein, described it as “the best equipped panzer division that Germany ever had. It was 100 percent armored; even the infantry was completely armored.”<sup>18</sup>

Although the German Army of 1944 was not as young and fit as the one that had conquered Europe in 1940, it was by no means an impotent force. Even older and less fit troops could have good combat value when fighting from fortified defensive positions. Those facing the invasion had the additional advantage that their enemy would have to come at them in waves by boat and would have little or no cover from the fire directed at them when they landed.

Manpower was not the only thing that was in short supply. Materials of all kinds were critically short. Tanks, artillery, anti-tank guns, trucks and gasoline topped the list of items that were needed on all fronts. Many of the divisions in the West were so short of transport that they were considered static, meaning that they could not be expected to participate in any kind of mobile battle and could only be used to man fortifications. Other divisions were considered mobile because the infantrymen had bicycles and the artillery was drawn by horses. Divisions that did have trucks found that they were impossible to maintain simply because they had been captured from a variety of countries and there were no spare parts available.

The use of captured equipment plagued armored as well as infantry divisions. Germany could not produce enough tanks to meet the demands of her armies, which lost huge numbers of tanks in Russia. The 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division, stationed near Caen, had an assortment of French and Czech tanks along with German-made Mk IVs. Hitler aggravated the shortage of German-produced tanks, by insisting on the production of a wide variety of armored vehicles. Moreover, manufacture of his latest favorite fighting

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Ambrose, D-Day June 6, 1944, p. 115.

vehicle had created shortages of spare parts for existing tanks. In February 1944, General Oberst (Colonel General) Heinz Guderian, Inspector General of Panzer Troops, estimated that the number of tanks and assault guns awaiting repair equaled nine months' new production.<sup>19</sup>

The Atlantic Wall itself was full of captured guns. In Rommel's 7<sup>th</sup> Army, stationed in Normandy, there were ninety-two different kinds of artillery pieces. These guns used 252 types of ammunition, of which forty-seven were no longer manufactured. One division's artillery regiment called itself "the traveling artillery museum of Europe."<sup>20</sup> German supply organizations found it difficult to tell what kinds of shells should be supplied to a given unit. Due to the varying calibers, ammunition stocks for the captured guns were often limited.

Although it was not complete, by June 1944, the Atlantic Wall had become a far more formidable obstacle since Rommel's tour the previous December, and Berlin reinforced his troop strength. Indeed, the constant pleas from von Rundstedt and Rommel for more troops and the acceleration of the construction programs brought about rapid changes in the German state of defenses from January through May 1944.

By June 1944, the number of divisions at the disposal of OB West increased from forty-six to fifty-eight. These units were organized into two Army Groups, B and G, commanded by Field Marshall Erwin Rommel and Colonel General Johannes Blaskowitz, respectively. Panzer Group West, under General von Schweppenburg, had charge of the training of von Rundstedt's panzer divisions and advised him in their use.

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<sup>19</sup> Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> Mitcham, *The Desert Fox in Normandy*, p. 17.

Considered by many in the German High Command, including Rommel, von Rundstedt and Hitler, as the likeliest landing place, the Pas de Calais was defended by the 15<sup>th</sup> Army, which consisted of eleven divisions split into four corps. Covering the Cotentin and Brittany peninsulas, the 7<sup>th</sup> Army contained eleven divisions split into three corps. Army Group B reserve held two corps plus the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> Panzer Divisions.

No panzer divisions were assigned to any of the forward corps, and the only ones immediately available to counter an invasion were the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> Panzer Divisions in Army Group B reserve. However, the panzers were not concentrated. Due to the lack of intelligence about where the blow would fall, Rommel spread his panzer reserves to cover as many landing sites as possible. On D-Day, he had only one panzer division within reach of the beaches, the 21<sup>st</sup>. Because it was in army group reserve, General Dollmann could not order it to attack without approval from Rommel, and Rommel was in Germany trying to gain control of the panzers!

Throughout the winter and spring of 1944, the Germans continued to pour concrete and build obstacles at an ever-accelerating rate. “The whole division, including the supply units and the rear services, became construction troops,” wrote one division commander, “In a few months, at a working speed increased tenfold, a continuous, strong system of obstacles in several rows come into being close to the beach in front of the whole coastal sector for protection against an enemy landing at high tide.”<sup>21</sup> Even this massive effort did not complete the fortifications. The high

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph Reichert, “Employment of the 711<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division on the Invasion Front: Preparation”, David C. Isby, ed., Fighting the Invasion: The German Army at D-Day, p. 147.

water obstacles had been completed but very little had been done to protect against a landing at low water and nowhere had the required number of mines been laid.

On March 20, 1944, Hitler began to warn that the long-awaited landings might come on the Cotentin Peninsula. There is no record as to why he suddenly changed his mind, but thereafter he consistently warned his generals to strengthen Normandy. In response to the Fuehrer's concern, Rommel began to send reinforcements to the area. The 91<sup>st</sup> Air Landing Division, 6<sup>th</sup> Parachute Regiment, 206<sup>th</sup> Panzer Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Army Sturm (assault) Battalion, 101<sup>st</sup> Stellungswerfer (rocket launcher) Regiment, 17<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Battalion and the 100<sup>th</sup> Panzer Replacement Battalion all arrived in Normandy in May.<sup>22</sup> These troops were an assortment of well-trained and veteran units as well as ad hoc and green troops. Equipped with obsolete foreign-made and German light tanks, the two panzer units were of little use offensively and therefore were stationed further inland for anti-airborne operations. Although the movement of these units into the Normandy area provided, on paper, a strong enhancement of the defenses, their real value remained to be tested.

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<sup>22</sup> Mitcham, The Desert Fox in Normandy, p. 34.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **D-DAY**

On June 1, 1944, the Allies were poised to begin the invasion of Europe. On June 3, the weather began to sour. A twenty-four hour postponement moved D-Day from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup>. On June 4, a forecast of clearing weather gave Eisenhower the opportunity he needed and the invasion was on. Minutes after midnight on June 6, paratroopers of the American 101<sup>st</sup> and 82<sup>nd</sup> and British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Divisions began landing in Normandy. A reinforced British company seized the bridges that blocked German access to the left flank of the invasion. On the right flank, American paratroopers seized the exits behind the beach codenamed UTAH and took the town of Ste. Mère-Église. With these positions in American hands, the Germans could not move easily behind the beach to reinforce the defenses or counterattack the invaders. The American troops landing at UTAH beach, on the far right flank of the invasion, went reasonably well and casualties were light. At OMAHA beach, two American divisions too serious losses before overcoming German defenses and establishing a shallow beachhead. The British and Canadians landing three divisions on the left side of the invasion area at JUNO, GOLD and SWORD beaches, quickly subdued German resistance on the beaches but encountered heavier resistance inland. None of the divisions reached their D-Day objectives but established good beachheads. The Germans made their only major counterattack of the day between JUNO and SWORD beaches. The 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division fought down to the beaches but, finding itself



unsupported, had to withdraw. By the end of the day, the Allies had a foothold in France, which, although shallow, was there to stay.

By the end of May 1944, everything was set. D-Day was scheduled for June 5. Troops had been briefed and loaded. Paratroopers waited at the airfields. Ships bulged with supplies. Allied planners laid out a specific set of weather conditions that would be the absolute minimum requirements for the invasion to succeed. The wind over the beaches could not be more than ten to fifteen knots, seas must be relatively calm, visibility must be at least three to five miles and the cloud base must be over 1000 feet.<sup>1</sup> The clouds must also be well broken. If the seas were too rough, the small landing craft would have difficulty making headway and the naval bombardment might be inaccurate. Heavy clouds would prevent effective air cover and high winds would prevent the landing of paratroopers.

In November 1943, Group Captain J.M. Stagg of the RAF had been appointed to forecast weather for SHAEF and advise Eisenhower in matters relating to weather. For the months preceding D-Day, Eisenhower included Stagg in his briefings where the weather would be forecast for the coming week. Eisenhower would then compare the conditions as they occurred with the forecast as a gauge of Stagg and his team.

Based on the optimistic forecast given at the meeting on May 29, all plans for a D-Day of June 5 were set in motion. On June 3, Stagg delivered bad news to the officers assembled at Southwick House, Eisenhower's forward headquarters. The forecast for the critical date of June 5 was for stormy weather, high seas and strong winds. In addition, he declared, the situation was so volatile that forecasting more than twenty-four hours in advance was not possible.

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<sup>1</sup> David G. Chandler, The D-Day Encyclopedia, p. 588.

At 4:30 the next morning, Stagg reinforced his forecast with the qualification that the seas might be slightly calmer than expected. Visibility, however, would be limited and the cloud base would be lower than the minimum conditions required by the air forces. Eisenhower considered air power to be the ace up his sleeve. Since the landing forces were not overwhelmingly powerful, Eisenhower counted on air power to make up the difference. Stagg had just taken away his ace. Accordingly, Eisenhower ordered a postponement of 24 hours. D-Day was now set for June 6. Some ships had already sailed and had to be recalled using a prearranged signal.

The decisive conference took place on the evening of Sunday, June 4, when Stagg gave Eisenhower the break he was looking for by reporting that the weather would improve briefly the following afternoon. "For most of the time the sky will then be not more than half covered with cloud and its base should not often be below 2,000-3,000 feet," he said. "Winds will decrease substantially from what they are now. Those conditions will last over Monday night and into Tuesday."<sup>2</sup> Stagg went on to say that the weather might hold until Friday or it might deteriorate again after Tuesday. Admiral Ramsay, Naval Commander in Chief, pointed out that a decision would have to be reached within a half hour for the ships bearing the Americans to sail in time to make their rendezvous with H-Hour. He also pointed out that if those forces sailed and were again recalled, they would not be ready for a June 7 D-Day as the ships would need to be refueled.<sup>3</sup> That would postpone the invasion until June 19, the next date with the right tides. However, if the invasion were to go on June 19, the paratroopers would have to operate without a moon to aid them. It is important to note that the security

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<sup>2</sup> J. M. Stagg, Forecast for Overlord, p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Ambrose, D-Day June 6, 1944, p. 187.

concerns that a further postponement raised were immense. The areas where the assault troops had been marshaled before loading were now filled by follow-on units. The assault troops had been briefed for their missions. If the invasion were postponed until June 19, those men would have to be removed from the ships and security leaks were bound to occur.

Eisenhower polled his commanders. Montgomery wanted to go. Smith thought it chancy but worth trying. Leigh-Mallory doubted that the air forces could operate properly and wanted to postpone. Ramsay said that the navy could do its part. Eisenhower summed it up this way. "The question is just how long can you hang this operation on the end of a limb and let it hang there?"<sup>4</sup> At 9:45 p.m., he made his decision. "I'm quite positive we must give the order . . . I don't like it, but there it is . . . I don't see how we can possibly do anything else."<sup>5</sup> D-Day was on.

On the night of June 5-6, 1,012 British Bomber Command aircraft flew 1,211 sorties.<sup>6</sup> The number for the US Eighth Air Force were similar. These operations included direct attacks on coastal batteries and diversionary tactics designed to create confusion in the German High Command. Dummies were dropped in France that exploded with firecrackers when they hit the ground simulating paratroopers while other planes dropped dense sheets of foil strips, called WINDOW, over the English Channel to confuse German radar operators.

During the day on June 6, Allied planes swept over the invasion area in swarms. Planes continuously circled the area above the ships providing protection from air attack on the vital transports while fighter-bombers, medium and heavy bombers operated

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon A. Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 274.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Middlebrook, The Bomber Command War Diaries, pp. 522-523.

inland. The fighter-bombers, operating at low altitudes, attacked vehicles and troops on the roads or in the fields. Medium and heavy bombers attacked towns and rail centers to hamper German re-supply efforts and to slow reinforcements moving toward the battle. When newly minted 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. John Eisenhower visited his father in the beachhead a week after D-Day, he commented on the rows of vehicles parked bumper to bumper, out in the open, waiting to get into combat. “You’d never get away with this if you didn’t have air supremacy,” he said. The general replied, “If I didn’t have air supremacy, I wouldn’t be here.”<sup>7</sup>

The first cohesive unit action on D-Day was the coup-de-main operation to take the bridges over the Caen Canal at Ranville and the Orne River at Bénouville. At midnight, two groups of three Halifax bombers, each towing a Horsa glider, headed for the Caen area. Inside the gliders were troops of D and B Companies, 2<sup>nd</sup> Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, called the Ox and Bucks. The Ox and Bucks were part of the 6<sup>th</sup> British Airborne Division. Since the spring of 1942, Major Howard had been training the men of D Company for action. A physical fitness maniac, Howard pushed his men to be strong athletes and drilled them rigorously in the methods of light infantry warfare. The company developed a reputation for a hard-charging attitude and excellence in maneuvers. This reputation brought Howard and his men to Ranville just after midnight on June 6.

The mission was critical to the success of the invasion. The bridges at Ranville and Bénouville, together with the bridges over the Dives River, constituted the only open routes the Germans had to counterattack the invasion beaches from the east.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> Ambrose, *D-Day June 6, 1944*, p. 239N.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day*, p. 110.

plan was to destroy the bridges over the Dives and capture the bridges over the Orne and the Caen Canal thus denying the Germans any clear route of attack and securing an avenue of attack toward Caen. Howard's men were to land by glider as close to the bridges as possible, secure them by surprise attack and hold them until reinforcements reached them from the beaches. To accomplish these tasks, Howard had some special resources and additional troops. In addition to D Company, Howard would bring to the fight two platoons of B Company, and thirty sappers from the Royal Engineers who were to disable and remove any explosives that the Germans had set to blow up the bridges. To train his men, Howard laid out the bridges, with engineer tape and had his men assault the mock up constantly. He also had the authorities search the British countryside for two waterways that ran parallel and had bridges that crossed them at the same point. The location, in Exeter, was a more life-like training ground and Howard's men spent days assaulting it in any combination that Howard could imagine. He wanted the mission accomplished whether one platoon or all six made safe touchdowns in their landing zones. To make sure that the night would not hinder his men, Howard began to reverse night and day so that all training and normal operations would be conducted at night and the men would sleep their normal allotment during the day. All of the men became as accustomed to working in the dark as they were during daylight.

While Howard's men were training to take bridges, the men who were to land them there in one piece were enduring rigorous training of their own. Glider Pilot, Staff Sergeant Jim Wallwork participated in Operation Deadstick, an intensive series of training flights designed to train the pilots to land their large Horsa gliders in small spaces at night, with only course headings and stop watches to guide them. Wallwork,

who was to fly the lead glider on D-Day, had the additional burden of having to try to knock down the wire entanglement at the edge of the landing zone as requested by Howard.<sup>9</sup>

The men under Howard's command had more help accomplishing their mission than they realized. At the foot of the bridge in Ranville was a café whose proprietor, Georges Gondrée, frequently passed information to the Resistance about the bridge, its garrison and fortifications. The Resistance then passed the information to British Intelligence who kept a mock up of the bridges. Information about the bridges was rarely more than a day or two old before it would show up on the mock up. Through the Gondrées and the Resistance, Howard knew where the switch to blow the bridge up was located, who the mayor of Bénouville was, and the size and habits of the garrison. The remarkable functioning of this intelligence-gathering chain is clearly demonstrated by the fact that when the German officer in command of the garrison at the bridges cleared two buildings along the canal to gain a better field of fire, Howard saw the change on the mock up the very next day.<sup>10</sup>

At 10:56 p.m. on June 5, the men of D Company took off for France. At 12:16 a.m., Sgt. Wallwork set his glider down in a field just west of the river and south of the road and crushed the wire entanglement with the nose of his craft. Moments later Howard's men, led by Lieutenant Den Brotheridge, poured across the bridge at Ranville. Brotheridge dashed across the bridge and threw a grenade at a machine gun pit to his right. At that moment, Lt. Brotheridge was struck in the neck by a bullet and

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<sup>9</sup> David Howarth, *Dawn of D-Day*, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, p. 74.

became the first Allied soldier killed by enemy fire on D-Day.<sup>11</sup> In all, the assault on the bridges took less than ten minutes.

With the bridges secure, Howard and his men set up to defend their gains until relieved. The first expected contact would be with the 5<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade of the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, which began landing just after Howard's gliders touched down. Forces from the beaches were expected to arrive by noon.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne had another assault mission on D-Day. The Germans had built casemates for a battery at Merville that were thought to contain 150mm howitzers with a range of 14,000 yards. These guns could reach the British beaches and create havoc with the landing operations. The 9<sup>th</sup> Parachute Battalion, under the command of Lt. Colonel Terence Otway, was assigned to take and destroy the battery.

The battery position consisted of four casemates, each containing a gun, made of concrete six feet, six inches thick. The casemates, completely covered with earth, had steel doors to protect the entrances. The north side of the position had an antitank ditch fourteen feet wide and 300 yards long. Inside the ditch were two bands of concertina wire with mines in the space between the bands. Roughly 160 men were thought to be inside the position, which also contained machine guns and antiaircraft guns.

To conquer this formidable position, Otway devised a complicated and daring plan. First, the Royal Air Force would bomb the battery using 100 Lancaster heavy bombers at 2:00 a.m. Next, Otway's force of 650 men would assault the battery. The majority of these were to parachute into France and assemble at a rendezvous point. An advance party of ten men was to reconnoiter the battery site, cut the perimeter wire fence and clear a path through the minefield. Once all of the men assembled by at least

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<sup>11</sup> Howarth, Dawn of D-Day, p. 48

2:35 a.m., Otway would lead them to a position near the battery no later than 4:00 a.m. and wait. Thirty minutes later, the rest of his command, some sixty men equipped with Sten guns, flamethrowers and the heavy explosives for destroying the guns, would land on top of the battery by glider. The glider pilots were to look for a Morse code signal and the battery to be illuminated by flares. Bangalore torpedoes set in the wire would then be set off to signal the start of the assault. By 5:00 a.m., Otway had to send a signal by flare or carrier pigeon to the battleship HMS Arethusa or it would open fire on the battery in the assumption that his force had failed.

Nothing went right. The bombers missed the battery altogether with the result that the defenders were not stunned and no damage was done to the defenses. The pilots of the C-47's carrying the men ran into flak on the way to the target and began to evade, scattering the planes. Otway's men dropped in an area covering fifty square miles. Most never made the rendezvous point and by 2:30 a.m. Otway had only 150 men of the 590 who dropped and almost none of the heavy equipment he needed including the flares to signal the gliders. He decided that he must proceed with what he had.

At 4:30 a.m., just before Otway gave the signal to attack, he watched one of the gliders skim over the battery and then crash in a field behind him. He could do nothing to signal it. Moments later the troopers set off the bangalores and the attack commenced. It took the small force only twenty minutes to take the battery. Half of Otway's men were killed or wounded and only twenty-two Germans surrendered unhurt.<sup>12</sup> Troopers destroyed the guns using Gammon bombs and Otway sent the

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<sup>12</sup> Ambrose, D-Day June 6, 1944, p. 230.



success signal by pigeon and fired a yellow Very light. A spotter aircraft saw the signal, and notified the Arethusa less than fifteen minutes before she was to open fire.

For the rest of D-Day, the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne held the left flank of the invasion and prevented coordination between the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division east of the Orne and German forces west of the river. Through the critical hours of D-Day, the way was blocked.

At the end of May 1944, Air Vice Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory visited General Eisenhower at his forward headquarters in Southwick House near Portsmouth. Leigh-Mallory had come to see Eisenhower about the American airborne drop. He predicted 70 percent losses among the glider borne troops and up to 50 percent of the paratroopers even before they could get into action on the ground. “We must not carry out this airborne operation,” he stated emphatically. He also warned that the operation would amount to the “futile slaughter” of two fine divisions (the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup>).<sup>13</sup> Eisenhower told Leigh-Mallory that he would think about it, but after reviewing the operation and the role of the American airborne, Eisenhower decided that the operation would go as planned. The mission, to take Ste. Mère-Église, capture the causeways and bridges and protect the right flank of the invasion, was too important to leave to chance.

On the evening of June 5, the men of the 101<sup>st</sup> and 82<sup>nd</sup> Divisions were making last minute preparations. All of the men were overloaded recalled a private in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division’s 506<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment:

My equipment consisted of: one suit of O.D.s worn under my jump suit . . . [,] helmet, boots, gloves, main chute, reserve chute, Mae West, rifle, .45 automatic pistol, trench knife, jump knife, hunting knife, machete, one cartridge belt, two bandoliers, two cans of machine gun ammo totaling 676 rounds of .30 ammo, 66 rounds of .45 ammo, one Hawkins mine capable of blowing the track

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 178.

off of a tank, four blocks of TNT, one entrenching tool with two blasting caps taped on the outside of the steel part, three first aid kits, two morphine needles, one gas mask, a canteen of water, three days' supply of K rations, two days' supply of D rations . . . [,] six fragmentation grenades, one Gammon grenade, one orange smoke and one red smoke grenade, one orange panel, one blanket, one raincoat, one change of socks and underwear, two cartons of cigarettes and a few other odds and ends.<sup>14</sup>

Many men could not get up off the ground without help, let alone get into the planes. The Army required paratroopers, expected to live and fight behind enemy lines for days without support, to take everything they can carry - plus a few items more.

After taking off, the C-47s loaded with paratroopers assembled in a massive V-of-Vs over 300 miles long.<sup>15</sup> As the formation crossed the coast into France, it hit a cloudbank. All of the pilots instinctively moved apart, fearing of mid-air collision. When they emerged, the tight formation had disintegrated. Within moments, antiaircraft fire filled the sky causing many of the pilots to increase speed, change altitude and begin violent evasive maneuvers. These maneuvers threw paratroopers to the floor of the planes and caused injuries. Other men were wounded as the flak began to find the packed transports. The paratroopers waited anxiously for the green light as the pilots, some hopelessly lost searched for the drop zones. Pathfinders, who had been dropped an hour before, were supposed to mark the drop zones; however, most pathfinders misdropped and most of the drop zones were dark. The pilots hit the green light when they thought they were close to the drop zones and then "took off for England, full bore, like a scalded dog."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Donald R. Burgett *Currahee!*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>15</sup> Ambrose, *D-Day June 6, 1944*, p. 198.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 200.

As the men jumped, they realized that the planes had been traveling much too fast and were flying much too low. Many soldiers had leg bags containing rations, ammunition and weapons that were lost as soon as their parachutes opened at the much higher than normal speeds. Some soldiers swung once in their chute and hit the ground while others never had a chance to get their chutes open before striking the earth.<sup>17</sup> One paratrooper landed in sand. As he lay in the dunes and listened, he heard the cries of the rest of the men in his stick as they drowned in the Channel.<sup>18</sup>

Men drowned in other places as well. The Germans flooded the Merderet River months before D-Day causing a wide area of inundation to form. Paratroopers who landed there often found themselves over their heads in water and had to jettison equipment to survive. Even as the men straggled out of the marshes, they were confused about their location. Intelligence had found that the Douve River was surrounded by many marshes but the Merderet was shown on the maps as narrow and the ground around it, dry. Consequently, the paratroopers, including General James Gavin, the assistant division of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, thought that they were southeast of their actual position. These men, wet and weary from their struggle in the marsh, instinctively headed for high ground and that was their salvation. The most prominent high ground in the area was a railroad embankment that ran south through the flooded area. Gavin knew that rail line from studying maps before the drop and he realized that he was far away from where he was supposed to be.<sup>19</sup>

The misdrops did have one positive side effect. The Germans were just as confused as the paratroopers were; possibly even more. The paratroopers, lost as they

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<sup>17</sup> Burgett, Curraheel, p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 207.

<sup>19</sup> S. L. A. Marshall, Night Drop, p. 5

were, knew what was going on. In this regard, the Germans could only speculate, based on the fragmentary reports that the various headquarters were receiving. Something was happening, but it was initially unclear how large the drops were and what their objectives might be. Local commanders had been told to expect the invasion in good weather and on a high tide.<sup>20</sup> The weather in the days preceding June 6 had been stormy and the tide would be low at dawn.

Aside from the weather, the Germans were confused by the random nature of the drops. Paratroopers were turning up everywhere without any kind of pattern. To add to the confusion, the Allies had also parachuted dummies into France, which the Germans initially reported as real paratroopers until discovering the hoax. German commanders now could not be sure if the paratroopers being reported to them were real or dummies. Another factor contributing to German paralysis was that a number of key officers were on their way to a map exercise in Rennes due to be held on June 6. Ironically, the topic was an invasion of Normandy.<sup>21</sup>

Slowly, the paratroopers began to gather. Many men found themselves surrounded by members of other companies, battalions or even a different division. Soldiers who could not find their own units often joined in with other outfits performing other missions.

The mission of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, to seize bridgeheads over the Merderet River and to occupy and hold the town of Ste. Mère-Église, began badly for two of the three regiments that dropped; however, the 505<sup>th</sup> PIR (Parachute Infantry Regiment) made one of the few good drops of the day just northwest of Ste. Mère-Église. By 4:30 a.m.

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Carell, *Invasion They're Coming!*, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Ryan, *The Longest Day*, p. 83.

the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had seized Ste. Mère-Église, established roadblocks and was in position to defend the town.

Uncertain about the situation of his 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Col. William Ekman, commander of the 505<sup>th</sup>, ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion to divert from its original mission, which was to take Neuville-au-Plain and establish the divisional defensive line in the north, and, instead, move on Ste. Mère-Église. When it arrived, the battalion immediately went into the line to repel a strong counterattack at 10:00 a.m. The troops in Ste. Mère-Église repelled several counterattacks on D-Day, blocking the movement of German reserves toward UTAH beach for the first critical hours of the invasion.

As he turned his 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion toward Ste. Mère-Église, Lt. Col. Benjamin Vandervoort sent a platoon under the command of Lt. Turner Turnbull toward Neuville-au-Plain in accordance with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion's original mission. Turnbull deployed the forty-two men under his command in the hedgerows north of Neuville-au-Plain. From that position, Turnbull and his men repelled German counterattacks for eight hours and kept much of the German counterpunch against Ste. Mère-Église from falling. Eventually forced out of his position, Turnbull returned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion with sixteen of the original forty-two men.<sup>22</sup>

Misdrops badly scattered the remaining two regiments of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, the 507<sup>th</sup> and 508<sup>th</sup>, with some men not rejoining their units for days. Furthermore, extricating men and equipment from the marshes around the Merderet River proved time-consuming, which delayed attempts to seize the crossing of the Merderet at la Fièvre. An assortment of small units from all three regiments seized the causeway at la Fièvre as troopers who landed in the marshes followed the rail line south to the town.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p 31.

Unfortunately, the units lacked coordination and having secured the crossing, several groups moved off to pursue other missions, leaving the position in the hands of four officers and eight enlisted men.<sup>23</sup> Within an hour, the Germans recaptured the western end of the causeway and began to press across to the other side. Only the timely reinforcement of la Fièvre by troops from Chef-du-Pont prevented the loss of the eastern end.

With most of its men trapped on the west side of the Merderet River by the loss of the causeway at la Fièvre, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne was in a precarious position at the end of D-Day. It had not accomplished most of its objectives and there was no contact with the seaborne forces. However, the capture and successful defense of Ste. Mère-Église somewhat mitigated the failures and the 82<sup>nd</sup> began to consolidate around the town by nightfall. Capturing its D-Day objectives provided the bulk of the fighting for the 82<sup>nd</sup> over the next few days.

Seizing the western end of the four exits from UTAH beach, destroying two bridges across the Douve, capturing the locks a la Barquette and establishing two bridgeheads across the Douve at le Port were the vital missions assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. The northern two beach exits were assigned to the 502<sup>nd</sup> PIR. The mission of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to capture the battery at St. Martin-de-Varreville and then remain in that area as regimental reserve. However, this battalion was badly scattered in the drop and was unable to perform any of its missions on D-Day. To make for the loss, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion moved to take the battery and then resume its own mission of securing beach exits 3 and 4. Reconnaissance determined that bombing had destroyed the gun position and it was deserted. Shortly thereafter, with the beach exits

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<sup>23</sup> Utah Beach to Cherbourg, p. 39.

secured and the paratroopers linked up with the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division coming off the beach.<sup>24</sup>

To seize the two southern beach exits the 101<sup>st</sup> assigned the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 506<sup>th</sup> PIR. The 2<sup>nd</sup>, however, was dropped out of zone and was delayed in accomplishing its mission. It did not reach exit 2 until 1:30 p.m. and found that the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry had already passed over and headed inland. Lacking information about the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Col. Sink, commander of the 506<sup>th</sup>, ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion to exit 1, unaware that General Taylor, commander of the 101<sup>st</sup>, had already sent the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion there with the same mission. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion captured Pouppeville, at the rear of exit 1 by noon and waited for the seaborne forces to arrive.

The capture of the two bridges over the Douve at le Port fell to a small detachment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion under the S-3 (operations officer) Capt. Shettle. This group reached the bridges by 4:30 a.m., crossed and set up defenses on the east bank. Enemy fire soon made the position untenable and Shettle withdrew his men to the west bank for the rest of the day. Meanwhile, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, having found the 3<sup>rd</sup> in control of Pouppeville, returned to regimental headquarters. Subsequently, it was used to take a previously unknown battery of 105mm guns northeast of Culoville. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 501<sup>st</sup> PIR, ordered to take the la Barquette lock, experienced disaster from the start. Its commanding officer was killed, the executive officer captured, and all of the company commanders were missing. Fortunately, a stroke of luck, in the form of an equipment bundle stuck in the door, caused Col. Johnson, the regimental commander, to land squarely in the drop zone. Johnson soon collected 150 men and within a short time captured the lock. He now wanted to complete the regimental

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

mission by destroying the Douve bridges west of St. Come-du-Mont but a patrol sent to reconnoiter came under heavy fire as they approached the target. Johnson concluded that his force was too small to blow the bridges and decided to hold the lock and await reinforcement.

Throughout D-Day, the other battalions of the 501<sup>st</sup> tried unsuccessfully to reach the bridges and take the town but enemy artillery fire stopped them and they became involved in fighting against German forces nearby. The bulk of the 501<sup>st</sup> ended the day east of St. Come-du-Mont.

The 101<sup>st</sup>, like the 82<sup>nd</sup> did not accomplish all of its D-Day missions. However, both divisions did carry out the most vital portions of their assignments, which made the landings at UTAH beach and the subsequent movements inland, relatively easy. To complete their tasks the airborne divisions suffered heavy losses, although not as severe as predicted by Leigh-Mallory. A revised estimate for the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne dated August 1944 calculated that 1,259 men had been lost, including 156 known killed and 756 missing (presumed killed or captured).<sup>25</sup> A report dated the same month from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne listed casualties of 1,240, including 182 known killed and 501 missing (presumed killed or captured).<sup>26</sup> Both divisions deployed roughly 6,600 men on D-Day.<sup>27</sup>

Assaulting UTAH beach was the job of Major General J. Lawton Collins' VII Corps, composed of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 90<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions. The 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, commanded by Major General Raymond O. Barton, formed the initial assault waves. Also assigned to VII Corps were the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Divisions. The success of

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<sup>25</sup> Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 284N.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 300.

<sup>27</sup> Utah Beach to Cherbourg, p. 14.



the seaborne landings depended heavily on the paratroopers' missions due to nature of the terrain behind UTAH beach.

The physical aspects of UTAH beach were vastly different from those at OMAHA. At UTAH, there was no high ground on the beach, only dunes. The beach itself was composed of compact, gray sand and was smooth. A masonry sea wall, from four to eight feet high backed the beach. Sand had piled against the wall in some places forming ramps but barbed wire lined the top of the wall. Gaps in the wall marked the end of the roads leading to the beach, but the Germans had blocked them. Just behind the beach were dunes from ten to twenty feet high that extended from 150 to 1000 yards inland. Behind the dunes, the terrain was very low and the Germans had flooded it by blocking several small streams. The inundated area ran for miles behind the beach and the crossings were raised causeways that could be easily blocked or blown up, stranding heavy equipment on the beach.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Division's plan for UTAH was to attack in column of regiments on a two-battalion front of approximately 2200 yards. The first wave, consisting of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry attached, was scheduled to land at H Hour, which for the American beaches was 6:30 a.m. Their task was to breach the defenses and push inland over the causeways to link up with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. The 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry's D-Day objectives were to occupy the towns of les Forges and St. Marie-du-Mont and the road between them. These positions along with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne's would form the southern flank of the beachhead. The following waves contained the rest of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry and the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry would immediately turn north upon landing and take the causeway at les Dunes de Varreville. Once the

causeway was in their hands, the 22<sup>nd</sup> would push north to capture Quinéville. The 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry, landing at H plus 4 hours, would move northwest to seize the high ground between the Merderet River and Emondeville. The 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne would become the western edge of the UTAH beachhead and tie with the 1/12<sup>th</sup> on its right and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne on its left.

In addition to the landings at UTAH, a detachment of the 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group (about 132 men) was to land at the Iles St. Marcouf at H minus 2 hours. The islands, just off UTAH Beach, were thought to pose a threat to the landing operations. At 4:30 a.m., the landings at the Iles St. Marcouf took place with no opposition. No garrison was found but extensive mine fields were encountered. Casualties, all due to mines, were light at two killed and seventeen wounded.<sup>28</sup>

At 2:30 a.m., Task Force U dropped anchor in the transport area off UTAH beach and began loading troops into LCVP's (Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel) for the run in to the beach. Supporting naval gunfire began at 5:50 a.m. and continued until a few moments before H Hour, seeking to destroy enemy fortifications and demoralize and pin down defending troops. Off UTAH, the battleship Nevada fired her 14-inch guns at German batteries inland while her smaller guns saturated the beaches. Numerous cruisers and destroyers joined the fray, laying down fire on beach obstacles and fortifications. B-26 Marauder medium bombers made runs on UTAH from 500 feet, destroying ammunition bunkers, anti-tank guns and field fortifications and driving the defenders mad. At UTAH, the terrain had not been suitable for fortification, so the Germans built concrete gun emplacements and Tobruks (concrete positions with tank turrets on top) on dunes. As the bombs fell, many positions collapsed or filled with

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<sup>28</sup> Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 304.

sand and the dazed defenders began to frantically dig out their positions as the landing boats approached.

The first boats to hit the beach were the twenty LCVP's of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry, each carrying a thirty-man assault team. Ten LCVP's were slated for Tare Green beach and ten for Uncle Red just to the south. The DD tanks were supposed to land first but had been delayed and did not land until H plus fifteen minutes. As the men rushed down the ramps and into the surf, they found that the terrain and obstacles in front of them were unfamiliar. A combination of the tide, smoke from the bombardment obscuring landmarks and the loss of three of the four LCC's (Landing Craft, Control) assigned to UTAH conspired to shift the landings almost 2000 yards south of the planned landing area. The misplacement was not necessarily a bad thing. Although the troops who had trained so long to overcome specific obstacles in specific places to accomplish specific missions were now on unfamiliar ground, the bombardment had dazed the enemy in front of them and the defenses were not as strong as those 2000 yards to the north. This enabled the commanders on the spot to reorganize and reorient their men without much confusion or interference from the enemy. A key figure in the reorganization of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry was Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, the Assistant Division Commander. Roosevelt landed in the first wave and he immediately recognized that the landing was in the wrong place. As his men began to clear the obstacles on the beach and move inland, Roosevelt held a brief conference with the commanders of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions and with the commander of the 8<sup>th</sup>, Colonel Van Fleet. Having figured out their position, the men decided to move inland rather than try to shift everything north to the original point. In fact, Fleet

had wanted to land at their current location from the beginning but the Navy had insisted that the water was too shallow.

Demolition and clearing of obstacles began in earnest as the engineers sought to ready the beach for the massive unloading operations to come. In this respect, the engineers were well ahead of schedule. The mislanding put them on beaches with fewer obstacles and with no enemy fire to stop them. They finished clearing the beach in an hour. With the obstacles out of the way the engineers began blowing gaps in the sea wall and laying matting over the sand to the exits. By 9:40 a.m., they had prepared the exits and vehicles were moving inland despite large traffic jams on the beach.

While the engineers were busy on the beaches, the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry was cautiously pushing across the causeways. The regimental missions remained unchanged even though the jump-off point was different and the 8<sup>th</sup> was heading toward Pouppeville to link up with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, which it effected 11:10. By nightfall, the 8<sup>th</sup> had secured its D-Day objectives. At 10:30, the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry began to land. Colonel Russell Reeder looked at the traffic jam on the causeway at Exit 2 and decided that the best way to get to his objectives was to wade the flooded area behind the beach. It took three to four hours, but the 12<sup>th</sup> did it without loss. Back on dry ground the 12<sup>th</sup> moved north toward St. Martin-de-Varreville and an expected hookup with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. By nightfall, the 12<sup>th</sup> had linked up with elements of the 82<sup>nd</sup> and had taken up positions just west of Beuzeville-au-Plain. This position was short of its D-Day objectives, but it had made good progress in spite of the mislanding. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry landed in the same wave as the 12<sup>th</sup>. Two battalions, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, received orders to wade the inundated area and move through St. Martin-de-Varreville to St. Germain-de-Varreville.

They bivouacked for the night along the high ground just north of St. Germain-de-Varreville. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, meanwhile, was moving directly north to roll up the German fortifications on the beaches. By nightfall, the 3<sup>rd</sup> had reduced the defenses as far north as Hamel de Cruttes where it camped for the night.

The landings at UTAH were virtually unopposed. Casualties for the 4<sup>th</sup> Division on were very light. The 8<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiments sustained a total of 187 casualties on D-Day, mostly from mines.<sup>29</sup> The number is more significant when compared to the over 700 casualties sustained during a dress rehearsal called Exercise Tiger at Slapton Sands southwest of Dartmouth at the end of April 1944.<sup>30</sup> The reasons for the relative ease in landings at UTAH are both Allied and German in origin. The Germans depended heavily on the terrain to dissuade or retard an attacker. The marshes might have created a very serious obstacle if fully alert, well-trained and equipped German troops had been in place to hold the causeways. However, manpower shortages prevented that reinforcement. The Germans had to rely on the marshes themselves as an obstacle. The construction of the fortifications at UTAH beach, moreover, were much more primitive than at OMAHA. The defender had used less concrete due to shortages caused by air attacks on the railroads of France, leaving the troops to man improved field fortifications instead of hardened bunkers. Those fortifications were no match for low-level bombing and concentrated naval artillery that the Allies employed.

When the landings occurred in the wrong place, American commanders on the scene were flexible enough to quickly adapt their plans to the current situation and

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<sup>29</sup> Ambrose, *D-Day June 6, 1944*, p. 292.

<sup>30</sup> Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, p. 270.

proceed with their mission. Lastly, the airborne operations, although chaotic, produced much confusion in the German command structure. Forces that should have been available to counterattack the beaches were busy chasing reports of paratroopers. Paratroopers and French Resistance fighters cut the communications grid used by the Germans to direct their troops, causing delays while commanders struggled to gain a picture of what was happening. The paratroopers held the western ends of the causeways and blocked German attempts to get anything down to the beaches. By the end of June 6, 20,000 troops and 1700 vehicles had landed on UTAH beach.<sup>31</sup> OKW Chief of Operations General Alfred Jodl estimated that it would take the Allies up to a week to put three divisions in France.<sup>32</sup> The Americans did it in one day at UTAH.

The fiercest resistance encountered by Allied troops on D-Day was at OMAHA beach. The terrain at OMAHA was especially suited for defense and the Germans made good use of the ground to make the beach one enormous killing zone. The beach was about ten kilometers long with firm, golden sand. At low tide, the beach stretched 300 to 400 meters from the waterline to the shingle, at high tide the beach was only a few meters wide. The shingle, made of small stones, was one to three meters and was impassable to vehicles. Behind the shingle on the western third of the beach was a sea wall partly of stone, partly of wood standing from one to four meters tall. Beyond the seawall was a small road and then a large anti-tank ditch. At the foot of the bluff was a swampy area. The bluff stood thirty meters high and was negotiable by foot only. The bluff was covered in long grass that hid any irregularities in its surface. Penetrating the bluff were five draws, one of which, at Vierville, contained a paved road; two more, to

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<sup>31</sup> Utah Beach to Cherbourg, p. 55.

<sup>32</sup> Ambrose, D-Day June 6, 1944, p. 292.

St. Laurent, to Colleville and the exit marked E-3, had dirt roads. The other draw contained a small dirt path.

The fortifications at OMAHA were extensive. Along the road, concertina wire was strung in depth. Behind the wire lay extensive mine fields at the base and on the bluff. In the tidal flat, the defenders emplaced extensive obstacles many of which they mined. The Germans created dozens of pillboxes and Tobruks all connected by an extensive trench system. The gun emplacements contained 75 and 88 millimeter guns for use against landing craft and tanks. All positions could deliver crossing fire that covered every inch of the beach. Positions that faced down the beaches had no seaward firing slits and were very difficult to spot from the water. These positions would cause the most trouble for the tanks and troops trying move up to the seawall. The draws were the sites for additional defenses and were blocked by concrete roadblocks. As long as the Germans controlled the draws, no vehicles could pass inland from the beaches.<sup>33</sup>

Allied intelligence estimates placed the 716<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in the defenses at OMAHA. The 716<sup>th</sup> was listed in the German order of battle as a static (*bodenstaendig*) division of limited capabilities. Divisions of this type had little or no transport and were made of those deemed too old or too young and those with infirmities which prevented more active service. The 716<sup>th</sup> also contained many (as much as 50 percent) *Ost* troops of Polish and Russian nationality who were considered unreliable, even by the Germans. Furthermore, the division was spread very thin due to the wide front it had to cover. In March 1944, the 352<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division moved into the area. The 352<sup>nd</sup> had been in reserve near St. Lo but Rommel had shifted it forward to the beaches. Thus, the

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<sup>33</sup> Omaha Beachhead, pp. 24-25.

716<sup>th</sup> was relieved of responsibility for the defenses west of le Grand Hameau and the 352<sup>nd</sup> took over. The 352<sup>nd</sup> was considered a field or offensive infantry division with good troops and a core of Eastern Front veterans. The addition of the 352<sup>nd</sup> on the beaches caused the 716<sup>th</sup> to shorten their line, which had the effect of reinforcing the troops in the defenses in front of the British beaches at GOLD, JUNO and SWORD. On D-Day, the Allies expected to find one battalion (roughly 800 men) of the 716<sup>th</sup> at OMAHA and instead found three battalions of the 352<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>34</sup>

On D-Day, even before H-Hour, things began to go wrong. The bombardment by the heavy B-17 bombers of the Eighth Air Force missed the beach defenses completely. Cloud cover had forced the bombers to bomb using instruments, which had a much wider margin of error than bombing visually. Because of this, Eisenhower allowed the bombers to delay the release of their bombs by up to 30 seconds so that bombs would not fall among the landing craft making their way to the shore. This delay caused the 13,000 bombs scheduled for OMAHA to strike up to three miles inland.<sup>35</sup> The Army had counted on the bombers to destroy beach emplacements and to put craters in the beach and bluff to use for cover from enemy fire. The air bombardment did produce an unexpected benefit in destroying large mine fields behind the beaches that the Germans had counted on to slow the invaders' progress off the beaches.

The naval bombardment also did little to aid the initial assault. Due to poor visibility from smoke and mist, the bombardment was inaccurate and was too short to have much effect on the concrete structures. In addition, the Navy targeted the heaviest

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<sup>34</sup> Ralph Bennett, Ultra in the West, p. 45; Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 319; Adrian Lewis, Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory, p. 282.

<sup>35</sup> Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, pp. 300-301.



guns specifically against large-gun positions, especially on or behind the bluff and not those on the beaches. The last phase of the naval bombardment was rocket fire from LCT(R)s firing over the heads of the landing craft just before H-Hour. It was hoped that the rockets would destroy the concertina wire belts on the beach and suppress the enemy just before the tanks and infantry of the first wave landed. Unfortunately, the LCT(R)s had difficulty seeing the beaches through the smoke. They launched their rockets too soon and most fell into the water. Thus, the infantry landing at H-Hour faced fortifications that had been left largely untouched by bombardment of any kind.

The first elements scheduled to hit the beach were DD tanks of companies B and C of the 743<sup>rd</sup> Tank Battalion at H-5 minutes. Thirty-two tanks were launched at H-50 minutes for the trip to the beach some 6000 yards off. As soon as they rolled off the ramps, the tanks began to have trouble making headway in the heavy seas and the canvas skirts that kept them afloat began to collapse. Only five of the thirty-two tanks made the beach. At H-Hour, eight tanks of Company A of the 743<sup>rd</sup> were scheduled to land by LCT along with tank dozers pulling trailers of explosives for the engineers. Company A's tanks landed without difficulty but German anti-tank guns scored several hits in the first few minutes and put some of them out of action.

The infantry experienced problems of a different nature. Seasickness weakened the men and the spray drenched them with freezing water. In the heavy seas, many of the boats began to ship water and the pumps had to be run constantly to keep the boats afloat. In other boats, the pumps could not keep up and the men had to bail with their helmets. Furthermore, the current, running at about 2.7 knots pushed the small LCVP's

and LCA's to the east.<sup>36</sup> Coxswains vainly tried to peer through the smoke to find landmarks as they made their run in to the beach as the current swept some of the boats as much as 1000 yards to the east. The mislandings by themselves destroyed the careful planning for the assault. Many units landed in areas that were unfamiliar and the loss of officers and NCOs made regrouping impossible.

At H-Hour, boats containing the first wave of men from the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry began to land. Many of the boats ground to a halt on sand bars offshore and when the ramps were dropped, the men stepped off into water from four to six feet deep. Immediately men began to sink under their heavy loads and many had to drop or cut away equipment that threatened to drown them. Also, murderous machine gun fire poured into the open ends of the boats killing the men in the front and forcing the men behind to jump over the side to avoid the beaten zone. Within minutes, Company A of the 116<sup>th</sup>, landing just east of the Vierville draw, was virtually destroyed. Its company commander was killed along with all thirty-one other men in LCA 1015.<sup>37</sup> Anyone who tried to cross the wide beach to the shingle was a target for the intense and accurate fire of the defenders. Many men, seeing the carnage, chose to stay in the surf and come in with the tide. Others tried to find cover behind the beach obstacles or behind tanks, but the men soon learned that staying close to a tank was hazardous as they attracted artillery fire.

While the infantry headed for the shingle, engineers, loaded with explosives, began to clear lanes so that the following waves could safely land on the rising tide, which would gradually cover the obstacles. As the men placed their charges, they were

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<sup>36</sup> Omaha Beachhead, p. 40.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Balkoski, Beyond the Beachhead, p. 125.

exposed to heavy fire, which took an appalling toll. Several teams were put out of action when shells set off their loads of explosives, killing or wounding most of the men. Their efforts were further hampered by the men sheltering behind the obstacles, by the rising tide and by the fact that many did not land in their assigned zones. Few lanes were cleared in the obstacles before the tide halted work, and even fewer were marked with the flags that the coxswains were trained to seek. Subsequent waves had to pick their way through the obstacles or try to bash through them and risk setting off a mine. More than 40 percent of the engineers on OMAHA were casualties by the end of the day.<sup>38</sup>

A German officer observing the beach from WN76 (*Widerstandsnest* or resistance nest) at 8:30 a.m. reported, “The enemy is in search of cover behind the coastal obstacles. A great many vehicles – among them ten tanks – stand burning at the beach. The obstacle demolition squads have given up their activity. Debarkation from the landing boats has ceased, the boats keep further seawards. The fire of our strong points and artillery was well-placed and has inflicted considerable casualties among the enemy. A great many wounded and dead lie on the beach.”<sup>39</sup>

What he could not see was the small groups of men slowly moving through the minefields and up the bluff. Several factors aided the movements of the first men to try the bluff. In some sectors, smoke from grass fires hid the attackers from the Germans. In other places, naval artillery destroyed troublesome emplacements or forced the defenders to seek cover. Some destroyers moved to within a thousand yards of the beach, their bottoms scraping the sand, so that they could spot targets and destroy them.

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<sup>38</sup> Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, p. 317.

<sup>39</sup> Robert J. Kershaw, *D-Day: Piercing the Atlantic Wall*, p. 126.

At the top of the bluff, these small groups turned right or left and began to assault the fortifications from the rear.

Brigadier General Norman Cota, assistant divisional commander of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, led one such group. Cota landed in the second wave and found his troops paralyzed by fear and shock. After assessing the situation, Cota began to rally his men and try to get them to move inland. Since no one had blown a gap in the wire in front of them, Cota directed covering fire while a man blew a hole with a bangalore torpedo. The first soldier to try the hole was killed. Realizing that his men would not move without an example, Cota threw himself through the gap. Behind him, several others passed through, then still more. Leading the way to the top Cota directed his men to move inland and take Vierville.<sup>40</sup> Other men duplicated General Cota's actions all along the beach. Men who looked around and decided that it was no worse moving ahead than staying behind. For the most part these men were junior officers or enlisted men. OMAHA beach was truly a soldier's battle.

By the end of the day, the V Corps had established a small foothold. Nowhere was this beachhead near the day's objectives. The assault troops seized the villages of Vierville, Colleville and St. Laurent but the penetration did not make two miles let alone the six miles called for in the plan. Only one exit was open and very few vehicles made the trip up the bluff on D-Day. The daylong battle put the landing schedules far behind their D-Day targets with the exception of men. Most of five regiments were ashore by nightfall. Of the 2400 tons of supplies that were expected to pass over OMAHA beach on D-Day, only 100 tons were actually delivered. Casualties for

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<sup>40</sup> Ambrose, D-Day June 6, 1944, p. 339.

OMAHA were estimated at 3000 dead, wounded or missing with the 16<sup>th</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> each losing about 1000 men.<sup>41</sup>

Point du Hoc is a small finger of land that juts into the English Channel between the Vire Estuary and Vierville on top of 100 foot cliffs. The Germans placed a six-gun battery of 155mm howitzers in strong concrete casemates on the Pointe. These guns, with a range of 25,000 yards, could hit ships off UTAH and OMAHA and posed a serious threat to the landing operations.<sup>42</sup> To neutralize these guns, the Ranger Provisional Group, under Lt. Colonel James Rudder, was assigned to V Corps. Once the guns were destroyed, the Rangers were to cut the Vierville-Grandcamp road and deny its use to the Germans.

Leading the attack were Companies D, E and F of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion under the personal direction of Col. Rudder. The 5<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion and Companies A and B of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, under the command of Lt. Colonel Maxwell Schneider, were to await a signal from Rudder that the mission was accomplished until H+30 minutes. If no signal was received, the Rangers would proceed to OMAHA beach and make their way overland to the Pointe to take the guns. Company C of the 2<sup>nd</sup> had a separate mission. After landing on OMAHA beach behind Company A of the 116<sup>th</sup> at Vierville, the Rangers of C Company were to proceed to Point de la Percée, between Pointe du Hoc and Vierville, and attack the emplacements there.<sup>43</sup>

The Rangers had no better luck at H-Hour than their counterparts on OMAHA beach. As the LCA's carried them toward the coast Rudder noticed that the coxswain had mistaken Pointe de la Percée for Pointe du Hoc and convinced him to turn west.

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<sup>41</sup> Omaha Beachhead, pp. 108-109.

<sup>42</sup> John Man, The D-Day Atlas, p. 51.

<sup>43</sup> Omaha Beachhead, pp. 87-88; Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 308.

Unfortunately, this delayed the landing by forty minutes and caused Col. Schneider to land his men on OMAHA when they were badly needed at the Pointe. Another side effect of the turn was to expose the Rangers in their landing craft to a long run parallel to the shore where German gunners directed heavy fire at them as they passed.<sup>44</sup> As the Rangers approached the Pointe, grapnels with long ropes attached were fired by rocket at the top of the cliff. Some did not make the top, as many of the ropes were soaked with seawater making them too heavy. Many other ropes caught and the Rangers began to ascend the cliff. Within ten minutes, the Rangers were at the top and heading for the guns.

On several occasions in the months before D-Day, the Pointe had been bombarded by the air corps and just before H-Hour, the navy had pummeled it yet again. When the Rangers reached the top, they found the Pointe to be littered with craters. A chaotic battle ensued as the Rangers cleared the craters and trenches to reach the casemates. The Rangers found the casemates to be heavily damaged, presumably by the bombardment. The guns, however, were missing and the Rangers promptly set out for the Vierville-Grandcamp road. There they established a roadblock and began to patrol the area south of the road. In a field not far from the roadblock, the Rangers found the guns unattended. Encamped close at hand were up to 100 Germans who were apparently unaware that the invasion had begun and that the Rangers were nearby.<sup>45</sup> Using thermite grenades, they silently disabled the guns and accomplished their mission.

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<sup>44</sup> JoAnna McDonald, The Liberation of Pointe du Hoc, p. 72-73; Omaha Beachhead, p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> McDonald, The Liberation of Pointe du Hoc, p. 111.

For the next two days, the Rangers fought off heavy counterattacks, and after two platoons from OMAHA beach appeared on D-Day, received no other reinforcements until they were relieved. Of the original 225 Rangers, only ninety effectives remained when the linkup with V Corps occurred.<sup>46</sup>

Assaulting GOLD beach was the British 50<sup>th</sup> Division. In support of the 50<sup>th</sup> were the 8<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade and elements of the 79<sup>th</sup> Armored Division (consisting of Hobart's Funnies).<sup>47</sup> Terrain restricted the landings at GOLD to a space between Arromanches and la Rivière. Once off the beach the terrain changed to marshy grassland divided by many dykes. Major points of resistance included large strong points at le Hamel, Asnelles-sur-Mer, la Rivière and Hable de Heurtot and a smaller strong point near les Roquettes. All strong points included wire entanglements, mines, machine guns, mortars and light and medium artillery. The 50<sup>th</sup> Division's mission was to establish links with OMAHA beach in the west and JUNO beach in the east and to advance to the road linking Bayeux with Isigny and Caen, capturing Bayeux as well.<sup>48</sup>

Overlord planners divided GOLD beach into three sectors. In the east was King, in the middle was Jig with Item in the west. Landing at King was the 69<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division. The 5<sup>th</sup> East Yorks and the 6<sup>th</sup> Green Howards supported by DD tanks, 'funnies' and self-propelled artillery performed the initial assault. H-Hour on GOLD was 7:30 a.m.<sup>49</sup> The East Yorks, initially pinned on the beach by the la Rivière strongpoint, received fire support from naval artillery, which soon silenced the position and they moved into the strong point and the village beyond. They also

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 160; Alfred D. Chandler, *The D-Day Encyclopedia*, p. 451.

<sup>47</sup> Chandler, *The D-Day Encyclopedia*, p. 115; Christopher Dunphie, *Gold Beach*, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Chant, *Operation Overlord: Gold and Juno Beaches*, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

captured the strong point at Mont Fleury. Meanwhile, the 6<sup>th</sup> Green Howards landed on the western side of King. With the help of the ‘funnies,’ the Howards took several pillboxes and advanced inland, capturing a battery of guns previously silenced by bombing and naval fire. At 8:30 a.m., the third battalion of the 69<sup>th</sup> Infantry, the 7<sup>th</sup> Green Howards, landed at King and moved inland toward Ver-sur-Mer, capturing a battery of four 105mm guns without a struggle. Throughout the afternoon and early evening, the 69<sup>th</sup> pushed south but did not reach its objectives by the end of the day.<sup>50</sup>

In the sector marked Jig, the 231<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade came ashore, armor and ‘funnies’ in support, with the 1<sup>st</sup> Dorsets on the left and the 1<sup>st</sup> Hampshires on the right. The main task of the 231<sup>st</sup> was the capture of le Hamel.<sup>51</sup> Instead of landing in front of their objective as planned, the 1<sup>st</sup> Hampshires was pushed to the east by the tide and came to rest in front of les Roquettes. Fortunately, the error did not cause much difficulty and the Hampshires did not incur many casualties. Within a short time, the 1<sup>st</sup> Hampshires took the village and moved west toward le Hamel where they were caught in heavy fire. They took Le Hamel by 9:00 p.m. with the aid of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Devons, which was part of the follow on forces of the 231<sup>st</sup>. On the other side of Jig, the 1<sup>st</sup> Dorsets made it to the beach without difficulty at H-Hour and passed through les Roquettes to take Buhot and Puits d’Herode, where they ended the day.

The 151<sup>st</sup> and 56<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigades formed the 50<sup>th</sup> Division reserve. Their missions on D-Day were to pass over the beaches already secured by the 231<sup>st</sup> and 69<sup>th</sup> and push inland to seize the area between Bayeux and the River Seulles, along with the road and rail lines in that area. The 56<sup>th</sup> had the additional task of taking Bayeux. The

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<sup>50</sup> Man, *The D-Day Atlas*, p. 65.

<sup>51</sup> Chant, *Operation Overlord: Gold and Juno Beaches*, p. 16.



151<sup>st</sup> landed at about 11:00 a.m. and began to push inland. Near Bazenville at about 4:00 p.m., the 151<sup>st</sup> ran into a battle group consisting of a grenadier battalion, a fusilier battalion and ten antitank guns.<sup>52</sup> This ad hoc battle group was made of units from the 352<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. Following a heavy engagement, the Germans were forced to retreat behind the River Seulles. By 8:30 p.m., the 151<sup>st</sup> had cut the Caen-Bayeux road and camped for the night short of their final objective.

The 56<sup>th</sup> also landed at 11:00 a.m. but the advance inland was slightly delayed by the chaos on the beaches. By noon, the 56<sup>th</sup> was moving southwest, straddling the Arromanches-Bayeux road. West of the road, the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Wales Borderers reached the town of Vaux-sur-Aure and secured the bridge across the River Aure. Patrols sent to reconnoiter south toward Bayeux found no enemy opposition. East of the road, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Essex encountered light resistance as it pushed toward St. Sulpice. They occupied the town by early evening and stopped there. Combat patrols encountered no enemy forces on D-Day evening between the night positions of the 56<sup>th</sup> and Bayeux, and it is difficult to understand why they did not make the extra step into the town.<sup>53</sup>

The 50<sup>th</sup> Division did not reach most of its final D-Day objectives including Arromanches, which was necessary for the planned installation of a MULBERRY artificial harbor. The one exception was that the 50<sup>th</sup> made the link-up with the Canadians coming off JUNO; it did not hook up with the Americans at OMAHA however, leaving a dangerous gap between the beachheads. Casualties sustained by the invaders at GOLD were light at 400 killed, wounded or missing on D-Day.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 18; Man, The D-Day Atlas, pg.65.

<sup>54</sup> Ambrose, D-Day June 6, 1944, p. 530.

The mission of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Division was to assault JUNO beach, move inland, and assist in the capture of Caen and capture Carpiquet, an airport 5 miles west of Caen. As at OMAHA, things went badly from the start. The air bombardment missed the beaches completely for the same reason as at OMAHA. The skies were full of clouds and the bombardiers held their bombs to avoid hitting the Canadians. The naval bombardment was inaccurate due to heavy smoke and dust thrown up by the bombardment. The naval bombardment destroyed only 14 percent of the bunkers on JUNO.<sup>55</sup>

To get the landing craft over the offshore reefs, OVERLORD planners had scheduled the assault at JUNO to occur at 7:35 a.m. on the rising tide.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, this placed the landing craft right where the Germans wanted them. On the rising tide, the obstacles were becoming submerged, and the mines that were attached became dangerous for the boats making their way to the shore. Many boats hit mines and sank before they could disgorge their contents and others were destroyed as they backed out for another load. By the end of the day, ninety had been sunk or damaged.<sup>57</sup> Demolition teams were supposed to clear the obstacles before the landing craft arrived, but weather delayed the engineers and many of the obstacles were underwater and unreachable.

The engineers were not the only ones to be delayed by the weather. The assault forces were up to thirty minutes late in landing. The naval gunfire lifted at H-Hour which gave the Germans thirty minutes to recover and man their positions. Another problem emerged when the DD tanks began their run to shore. The DD tanks could not

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 534.

<sup>56</sup> Chandler, *The D-Day Encyclopedia*, p. 119.

<sup>57</sup> Chant, *Operation Overlord: Gold and Juno Beaches*, p. 26.

make good headway in the heavy seas and took far longer than planned to reach the beach. This meant that the infantry beat the tanks to the beach, and therefore did not have the benefit of their covering fire at H-Hour.

The result of these problems was casualties almost as bad as at OMAHA in the first waves at JUNO. At OMAHA, the chances of being killed or wounded were one in nineteen. At JUNO, they were one in eighteen. At both beaches, the chances were one in two for troops in the first waves.<sup>58</sup> The major difference between the two beaches was, that once across the sea wall at JUNO, there was no bluff to surmount, only flat, open ground. In some areas, the infantry was off the beaches in a few minutes. At St. Aubin-sur-Mer, it took three hours to crack the defenses, but that was the longest amount of time that the Germans held their ground. Once past the initial crust of defenses, the Canadians found the going to be much easier. Many of the soldiers captured at Juno, mainly Poles and Russians taken from the 716<sup>th</sup> Division, surrendered at the first opportunity.

The main obstacle to progress off JUNO was the chaos on the beaches. As the tide came in, the beach became ever narrower. Vehicles could not move off the beach because of traffic jams. Even as the infantry moved inland, the armor and artillery that was supposed to support them remained tangled on the beach.<sup>59</sup> By the end of the day, the Canadians had extended their beachhead farther than any of the others but they were still short of their D-Day objectives. Carpiquet was still four miles away and Caen was still in German hands. Despite having fallen short of their goals, the Canadians on D-Day made a proper repayment for Dieppe.

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<sup>58</sup> Ambrose, *D-Day June 6, 1944*, p. 541.

<sup>59</sup> Chandler, *The D-Day Encyclopedia*, p. 119.

East of JUNO, the objectives for the forces assaulting SWORD beach were to link up with the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne and relieve the paratroopers at Ranville, capture Caen and establish a link with the forces moving inland from JUNO.<sup>60</sup> The British 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division planned to accomplish these tasks along with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Special Service Brigades (commandos). DD tanks supported the infantry along with ‘funnies’, and self-propelled artillery.

The run in to the beach went well and the troops disembarked under moderate machine gun, small arms and artillery fire. Casualties were heavier than at GOLD and UTAH but lighter than OMAHA and JUNO. Within a short space of time, the infantry, led by the ‘funnies’ and DD tanks, were moving inland. The major obstacle on D-Day, indeed for the next two days, for the forces moving south from the beaches; was the village of Lion-sur-Mer. In a wood just outside of Lion, the Germans emplaced a battery with infantry, dug in with trenches and sandbags, in support. Sixty minutes of fire from the 4-inch guns of the Polish destroyer *Slazak* neutralized this position.<sup>61</sup>

As at JUNO, the tide constricted the amount of beach area available to land men and vehicles. At high tide, there was no room for vehicles to move laterally and many had to wait for the tide to begin to go out before they could pass over the sea wall and advance on their objectives. In the meantime, German artillery took advantage of the immobile mass of men and material and maintained a heavy barrage on the beach using the barrage balloons in the beachhead as aiming points.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 121; Christopher Chant, Operation Overlord: Sword Beach and the British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Ambrose, D-Day June 6, 1944, p. 552.

<sup>62</sup> Chant, Operation Overlord: Sword Beach and the British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, p. 15.

While elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division were struggling to take Lion-sur-Mer, commandos from the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Service brigade landed and headed for Ouistreham. After a hard fight at a fortified casino, they took Ouistreham and found that the battery outside of town had telephone poles instead of guns. Local Frenchmen informed the commandos that the Germans had moved the battery inland just days before.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Special Services Brigade pushed on. Its commander, Brigadier Lord Lovat, had a schedule to keep. The paratroopers at the bridges over the Orne River and the Caen Canal needed to be relieved and Lovat had promised the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne that he would be there at noon. With Lovat was his piper, who played “Blue Bonnets over the Border” and other music to fortify the commandos as they marched.<sup>63</sup> Meeting only slight resistance, the commandos relieved Major Howard and his men at Ranville at 2:00 p.m.

At the other end of the beachhead, the 4<sup>th</sup> Special Services Brigade had the job of pushing west to find the forces coming off JUNO beach. Unfortunately, the Germans’ tenacious defense of Lion-sur-Mer prevented the commandos from moving farther west and no link up was made on D-Day. Into this gap moved the only German panzer formation to take offensive action on D-Day. Alerted in the early morning hours, the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division, stationed around Caen, reconnoitered toward Major Howard’s position at the Orne River bridges. The 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer’s commander, Generalleutnant Edgar Feuchtinger, knew exactly what he had to do to retake the bridges and was ordered to attack by General Richter, commander of the 716<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. However, the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer had not been released by OKW and Feuchtinger refused to move. The situation changed dramatically when landings began on the coast.

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<sup>63</sup> Ryan, The Longest Day, p. 227.

Now the invasion was beginning. At 6:30 a.m., Feuchtinger ordered the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer to move toward the Orne River and wipe out the paratroopers in accordance with General Richter's original instructions. As the panzers began to arrive in the staging area near the bridges, they received orders to turn around. The head of the column became the rear and commanders raced to get into position at the front of their units. OKW had finally released 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer to 7<sup>th</sup> Army, which ordered the 21<sup>st</sup> to counterattack the landings.

By noon, the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer reached its jump off point for the counterattack and the order was given. The thrust went straight into the gap between JUNO and SWORD beaches and by 8:00 p.m. leading elements of the 21<sup>st</sup> reached the coast, splitting the invasion in two.<sup>64</sup> It was exactly what the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer had been stationed at Caen to do, and it had done it easily. However, there was nothing to support it and many of the division's tanks became involved in fighting with the 185<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and could not disengage. Just before sunset, a prearranged glider landing took place to reinforce the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne. The men of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer saw planes and gliders fill the sky and watched as they circled and landed somewhere behind them.<sup>65</sup> General Feuchtinger ordered the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer to withdraw. In that way, the major crisis facing the British on D-Day was completely averted.

The troops who landed at SWORD fell short of their D-Day objectives. They did not take Caen, a gap still existed between SWORD and JUNO, and the Carpiquet airport was still in German hands. Casualties for the units at SWORD on D-Day were 630 men killed, wounded or missing.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Edgar Feuchtinger, "Counterattack of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division", David C. Isby, ed., Fighting the Invasion: The German Army at D-Day, p. 240; Man, The D-Day Atlas, pp. 69-70.

<sup>65</sup> Feuchtinger, "Counterattack of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division" p. 240.

<sup>66</sup> Ambrose, D-Day June 6, 1944, p. 566.

## CONCLUSION

The landings in France on June 6, 1944, spelled doom for Hitler's Third Reich. In his directive of November 3, 1943, Hitler had acknowledged that a successful landing would lead to "consequences of staggering proportions."<sup>1</sup> He made that statement in the face of powerful Soviet armies in the east, Anglo-American forces in Italy, and the unrelenting bombing of his cities and factories. In spite such pressures, he thought that the invasion in the West would determine his nation's chances for survival.

By 1944, although the Russians were making advances, the Germans could afford to trade land for time "without suffering a mortal blow."<sup>2</sup> To win victory in the east, the Germans had to remove the threat of invasion from the west thereby freeing many divisions for service against the Russians. In Italy, the terrain favored the defenders and the Germans were using every advantage to stop the Allies. An attempt to bypass the German front lines with an amphibious force at Anzio in January 1944, failed and Rome did not fall until June 4.

The bombing of cities and factories had the potential to bring German efforts on all fronts to a halt. In fact, men like General Spaatz and Air Marshal Harris argued against diverting the heavy bombers from their war-winning mission over Germany to support OVERLORD, feeling that the reprieve would be helpful to the enemy. Yet, as American and British bombers hit ball bearing factories, oil refineries and other targets critical to Germany's ability to make war, the bombings failed to produce paralysis in the German war machine. Between January 1942 and July 1944, German industrial

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Harrison, Cross-Channel Attack, p. 464.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

output rose 300 percent and, despite the massive raids in November 1944, continued at 260 percent of 1942 production.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, in December 1942, German factories produced 760 tanks, but turned out 1,669 in July 1944.<sup>4</sup>

The invasion was the straw that broke the camel's back. The subsequent campaign in Western Europe consumed German men and resources far more rapidly than the bogged down armies in Italy could, placing the Wehrmacht into a three-sided meat grinder. The Russians, pressing in from the east, and the Anglo-Americans, in the west and south, stretched German resources to the limit and beyond. By early December, the Germans were out of France, Holland, Belgium and most of Luxembourg. On December 16, the Germans mounted their last offensive in the west, *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine), called by the Allies, the Battle of the Bulge. Although bad weather and surprise combined to give the Germans early success, they were pushed back to their original positions by early January 1945. The Thousand Year Reich had four months left.

The Atlantic Wall held the Allies for less than half a day. Many reasons lay behind that defeat. The Germans did not have enough men or resources to defend the entire coastline of Europe and, in trying to protect every mile, they permitted the Allies to concentrate superior power against them in Normandy. Even at its widest point, the Atlantic Wall was a thin crust, too shallow to provide real resistance. Once the invader penetrated inland, there was little hope of stopping him without the use of powerful panzer formations. The muddled command situation in the west hindered German initiative and placed tactical control of critical reserves with Hitler in Germany.

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald Astor, *The Mighty Eighth*, pp. 486-7.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Reynolds, *Steel Inferno*, p. 52.



In addition to German defensive deficiencies, Allied fire support was overwhelming. American and British planes flew thousands of sorties on D-Day. The Luftwaffe flew a few hundred with only one attack actually reaching the beaches on D-Day.<sup>5</sup> Heavy bombers, fighter-bombers and fighters were unhampered in their efforts to destroy the German defenses and prevent reinforcements from reaching the battle. Allied warships sat unmolested in the waters of the English Channel and used their heavy guns to destroy German fortifications and break up troop concentrations.

On the American beaches, the landings, despite bad weather and disrupted plans, were able to succeed due to the flexibility of local, mostly junior, leaders. These men overcame shattering enemy fire, disorientation, lost or destroyed equipment and shocked subordinates to defeat their enemy. However, they were disorganized and greatly weakened by the battle at the shore. Their British comrades, having overcome weaker initial resistance, faced a stronger, better-organized enemy inland. For these reasons, Allied troops did not take most of the objectives assigned for D-Day. The race to build up sufficient force to break out had begun. It was a race that the Germans would lose.

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<sup>5</sup> John Man, The D-Day Atlas, p. 63.

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