D-Day: The Invasion Of Normandy 2 Essay, Research Paper

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In midsummer 1943, a year before the Anglo-American invasion of Normandy that would lead to the liberation of western Europe, Adolf Hitler s Wehrmacht, or armed forces, still occupied all the territory it had gained in the blitzkrieg campaigns of 1939-41 and most of its Russian conquests of 1941-42. It also retained its foothold on the coast of North Africa, acquired when it had gone to the aid of its Italian ally in 1941. The Russian counteroffensives at Stalingrad and Kursk had pushed back the perimeter of Hitler s Europe in the east. Yet he or his allies still controlled the whole of mainland Europe, except for neutral Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, and Sweden. The Nazi war economy, though overshadowed by the growing of America s, outmatched both that of Britain and that of the Soviet Union except in the key areas of tank and aircraft production. Without direct intervention by the western Allies on the continent, and intervention that would centre on the western Allies on the commitment of a large American army; Hitler could count on prolonging his military dominance for years to come.

Since 1942 Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had been pressing his allies, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, to mount a second front in the west. It was impossible in the circumstances. America s army was still forming, while landing craft necessary to bring such an army across the English Channel had not yet been built. Britain had, nevertheless, begun to prepare theoretical plans for a return to the continental mainland soon after the retreat from Dunkirk, France, in 1940, and Americans, immediately after Hitler declared was on the United States on December 11, 1941, had started to frame their own timetable. Less inhibited than the British by perceived technical difficulties, they pressed from the start for an early invasion, desirably in 1943, perhaps even in 1942. To that end George C. Marshall, Roosevelt s chief of staff, appointed a prot g , Dwight D. Eisenhower, to the U.S. Army s war plans division in December 1941 and commissioned him to design an operational scheme for Allied victory.

Swiftly convincing himself that the priority of German First agreed by Roosevelt and Churchill at Argentia, Newfoundland, in August 1941 was correct. Eisenhower framed proposals for a 1943 invasion (Operation Roundup ), and another (Operation Sledgehammer ) for 1942 in the event of a Russian collapse or a sudden weakening of Germany s position. Both plans were presented to the British in London in April 1942, and Roundup was adopted. The British, nevertheless, reserved objective doubts, and at subsequent Anglo-American conferences, in Washington in June, in London in July; they first quashed all thought of Sledgehammer and then succeeded in persuading the Americans to agree to a North African landing as the principal operation of 1942. Operation Torch as the landing in North Africa was to be code-named, effectively postponed Roundup again, while subsequent operations in Sicily and the Italian mainland delayed preparations for the cross-Channel invasion through 1943 as well. The postponements were a principal cause of concern at inter-Allied conferences at Washington, Quebec, Cairo, and Tehran. At the last gathering, Roosevelt and Stalin combined against Churchill to insist on the adoption of May 1944 as an unalterable date for the invasion. In return, Stalin agreed to mount a simultaneous offensive in estern Europe and to join in the war against Japan once Germany had been defeated.

The decision taken at Tehran was a final indication of American determination to stage the cross-Channel invasion and a defeat for Alan Brooke, Churchill s chief of staff an the principal opponent of premature action. Yet despite Brooke s procrastination, the British had in fact been proceeding with structural plans, coordinated by Lieutenant General Frederick Morgan, who had been appointed COSSAC (chief of staff to the supreme Allied commander [designate]) at the Anglo-American Casablanca conference in January 1943. His staff s first plan for Operation Overlord was a landing in Normandy between Caen and the Cotentin Peninsula in a strength of three divisions, with two brigades to be air-dropped. Another 11 divisions were to be landed within the first two weeks through two artificial harbours that would be towed across the Channel. Once a foothold had been established, a force of a hundred divisions, the majority shipped directly from the United States, were to be assembled in France for a final assault on Germany. In January 1944 Eisenhower became supreme Allied commander, and the COSSAC staff was redesignated SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force).

Hitler had long been aware that the Anglo-American allies would eventually mount a cross-Channel invasion, but, as long as they dissipated their forces in the Mediterranean and as long as the campaign in the East demanded the commitment of all available German forces, he downplayed the threat. By November 1943, however, he accepted that it could be ignored no longer, and in Fuher Directive 51 he announced that France would be reinforced. To oversee defensive preparations, Hitler appointed Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, former commander of the Afrika Korps, as inspector of coastal defenses and then as commander of Army Group B, occupying the threatened Channel coast. As army group commander, Rommel officially reported to the longer-serving commander in chief West, Gerd von Rundstedt.

In January 1944 the Allies also appointed an invasion commander. Bernard Law Montgomery, Rommel s desert opponent in North Africa, was nominated, under Eisenhower, as commander of the ground invasion forces. Walter Bedell Smith, an American, continued as Eisenhower s chief of staff, but his other principal subordinates were British: Air Chief Marshall Arthur Tedder as his deputy, Admiral Bertram Ramsay as naval commander, and Air Chief Marshall Trafford Leigh-Mallory as head of the expeditionary air forces.

Montgomery s first acts were (1) to demand and get five divisions to make the initial landing and (2) to widen the landing area to include the Orne River estuary and the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. As finally constituted, the invasion force was to consist of five infantry divisions, two American, two British, and one Canadian assigned to beaches code-named, from west to east, Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword. On D-Day, two American airborne divisions were to land behind the western end of the assualt area and one British at the eastern, while amphibious armour was to swim ashore with the leading waves. The Americans constituted the U.S. 1st Army, under Major General Omar Bradley, the British and Canadians the British 2nd Army, under General Miles Dempsey. The British divisions had been under intensive training since 1942, the American since 1943. Meanwhile, intensive logistic preparations provided, by May 1944, almost 6,500 ships and landing craft, which would land nearly 200,000 vehicles and 600,000 tons of supplies in the first three weeks of the operation.

The invasion would be supported by more than 13,000 fighter, bomber, and transport aircraft, against which the Luftwaffe (the German air force) was able to deploy fewer than 400 on D-Day. Between April 1 and June 5, 1944, the British and American strategic air forces, deploying 11,000 aircraft, flew 200,000 sorties, dropping 195,000 tons of bombs on French rail centres and road networks as well as German airfields, radar installations, military bases, and coastal artillery batteries. Two thousand Allied aircraft were lost in these preliminaries, but the air campaign succeeded in breaking all the bridges across the Seine and Loire rivers and thus isolating the Normandy Invasion area from the rest of France. The Luftwaffe staff was forced to concede that the outstanding factor both before and during the invasion was the overwhelming air superiority of the enemy.

The air campaign was designed not only to disrupt German anti-invasion preparations but also to serve as a deception operation. Two thirds of the bombs were dropped outside the invasion area, in an attempt to persuade the enemy that the landings would be made northeast of the Seine or the Pas de Calais area, directly opposite of Dover, England, rather than in Normandy. At the same time, through the top-secret Ultra operation, the Allies were able to decode encrypted German transmissions, thus providing the Overlord forces with a clear picture of where the German counterattack forces were deployed. By spurious transmissions, the Allies created an entire phantom army based in southeast England (opposite of Pas de Calais) and alleged to be commanded by the American general George S. Patton. In addition, on the night of the invasion itself, airborne radar deception presented to German radar stations a phantom picture of an invasion fleet crossing the Channel narrows, while a radar blackout disguised the real transit to Normandy. The Germans were not altogether deluded. Hitler himself declared a last-minute premonition of a Normandy landing. By then, However, the dispositions had been made. Rommel, in his brief period of responsibility for the Atlantic Wall, had been able to decuple mine laying, so that by June 5 some 4 million more mines had been laid on the beaches. He had not, however, been able to position the Germans tank divisions as he wanted. Rundstedt wished to hold them back from the coast as a reserve. Rommel, warning that allied aircraft would destroy them as they advanced, wished to place them near the beaches. Hitler, adjudicating in the dispute, worsened the situation by allotting some divisions to Rommel and some to Rundstedt, keeping others under his own command. The rest of Rommel s Army Group B was made up of the infantry divisions of the 7th Army in Normandy and Brittany and by the 15th Army in Pas de Calais and eastward. The reserve tank forces, given the name Panzer Group West and commanded by Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg, came nominally under Rundstedt s direct command.

May 1944 had been the time chosen at Washington in May 1943 for the invasion. Difficulties in assembling landing craft forced a postponement until June, but June 5 was fixed as the unalterable date by Eisenhower on May 17. As the day approached, and troops began to embark for the crossing, bad weather set in, threatening dangerous landing conditions. After tense debate, Eisenhower and his subordinates decided on a 24 hour delay, requiring the recall of some ships already at sea. Eventually, on the morning of June5, Eisenhower, announced, O.K. We ll go. Within hours an armanda of 3,000 landing craft, 2,500 other ships began to leave ports. That night, 822 aircraft, carrying parachutists or towing gliders, roared overhead to the Normandy landing zones. They were a fraction of the air armanda of 13,000 aircraft that would support D-Day.

The airborne troops were vanguard, and their landings were a heartening success. The American 82nd and 101st airborne divisions, dropping into a deliberately inundated zone at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula, suffered many casualties by drowning but nevertheless secured their objective. The British 6th Airborne Division seized its unflooded objectives of the eastern end more easily, and its special task force also captured key bridges over the Caen Canal and Orne River. When the seaborne units began to land about 6:30 am on June 6, the British and Canadians on Gold, Juno, and Sword beaches overcame light opposition. So did the Americans at Utah. The American 1st Division at Omaha Beach, however, confronted the best of the German coast divisions, the 352nd, and was roughly handled. During the morning, its landing threatened to fail. Only dedicated local leadership eventually got the troops inland.

Meanwhile, the German high command, in the absence of Rommel, who was home on leave, began to respond. Hitler was initially unwilling to release the armoured divisions for a counterattack. When he relented after midday, elements of the 21st Panzer Division drove into the gap between the British 3rd and Canadian 3rd divisions at Sword Beach and Juno Beach and almost reached the sea. Had they done so, the landings might have failed. Fierce resistance by British antitank gunners at Periers-sur-le-Dan turned the tide in the evening.

On June 7 the beachhead consisted of three separate sectors: the British and Canadian between Caen and Bayeux; that of the American 5th Corps, between Port-en-Bessin and Saint-Pierre-du-Mont; and that of the American 7th Corps, west of the Vire River behind Utah Beach. The narrow gap between Gold and Omaha at Port-en-Bessin was quickly closed, but it was not until June 12 that the American corps were able to join hands after a bitter to capture Carentan. The beachhead then formed a continuous zone, deepest southwest of Bayeux, where the 5th Corps had driven nearly 15 miles inland. Meanwhile, work had been proceeding pell-mell to complete the two artificial harbours, known by their code name, Mulberry. The outer breakwater of sunken ships was in place by June 11. The floating piers were half-finished by June19, when a heavy storm destroyed much of the material. The Americans then decided to abandon their Mulberry, while the British harbour was not in use until July. Most supplies meanwhile had to be beach-landed.

Fighting inshore, the Allies also encountered difficulty. Thanks to the success of the airborne landings, the flanks of the beachhead were firmly held, but efforts to break out the centre were frustrated by fierce German resistance and counterattacks, particularly around Caen in the British-Canadian sector. A British armoured thrust at Villers-Bocage was defeated on June 13. A large-scale infantry offensive west of Caen, called Operation Epsom was also defeated on June 25-29. There was gloom at SHAEF; it seemed that stalemate was descending. The gloom was deepened by Montgomery s strategy. His plan was to draw German armour toward the British front and win a battle of attrition between tank forces. The successful German defence, however, led the Americans to doubt the plan s viability. In fact, the Germans were also depressed, for their bitter defense was using up men and equipment that could not be replaced. Moreover, the Americans were now able to profit from the deployment of most of the enemy s armour against the British to break into the base of the Cotentin Peninsula and advance on Cherbourg. The last bastion in the heavily fortified city fell on June 28, and clearance of the port began at once.

These setbacks brought about a crisis in the German high command, which in any case now suffered unforeseeable casualties. Dollman, commander of 7th Army, died suddenly on June 28, just after the surrender of the main garrison in Cherbourg; his death was blamed on heart attack, though it is quite likely he committed suicide. Rommel was severly injured when his car was strafed by a British fighter on July 17. Worst of all, Rundstedt confessed defeatism to Hitler, urged him to make peace, and was dismissed on July 2. He was replaced by Gunther von Kluge, who soon came around to sharing Rundstedt s doubts. On July 20 a conspiracy of officers who believed the only hope of securing a peace lay in Hitler s removal made an attempt on his life at his East Prussian headquarters, Rastenburg. Its failure led to Hitler s taking draconian powers over the army and exacting terrible revenge on those suspected of complicity. Rommel was forced to commit suicide in October, Kluge did so on August 18. The German defense of Normandy had by then taken a turn for the worse. Though a large British armoured offensive west of Caen, Operation Goodwood, failed on July 18-19, the U.S. 1st Army conducted a bitter battle of attrition around Saint-Lo in the second and third weeks of July. Its success was to lay the basis for the long-awaited breakout.

By July 25, with most of the German tanks drawn westard by the British Goodwood offensive, the Americans faced a front almost denuded of armour. Reinforcement gave them a clear superiority in tank and infantry divisions, while the Allied Expeditionary Force had the bombardment power to devastate the German in their path. Operation :Cobra, scheduled for July25, opened with a devastating air attack. Through the gap thus opened, the U.S. 1st Army sped toward Avranches, taken on July 30. At this point George S. Patton s newly formed 3rd Army joined in the advance. A massive American spearhead now threatened to drive into Brittany and, by a left turn, to encircle the Germans in Normandy from the rear.

Hitler saw the breakout as an opportunity to restore the front. Bringing the 2nd, 116th, and 1st and 2nd Panzer SS Divisions hastily westward, he issued orders for Operation Luttich, designed to drive behind the point of the American spearhead and reach the sea at Avranches. However, Ultra interceptions of German cypher traffic alerted the Americans to the danger, and, when Luttich opened on August 7, heavy antitank defenses were in place. The offensive was stopped and defeated in its tracks.

Meanwhile, as the American encirclement eastward from Brittany developed, the British and Americans began a strong advance west of Caen toward Falaise. On August 16, the day after a Franco-American force had landed on the Riviera (Operation Dragoon ), Hitler at last recognized the inevitable and gave permission for a withdrawal from Normandy. The only route of escape lay through a gap between the converging American and British spearheads at Falaise. The positio, was held by the recently arrived Polish 1st Armoured Division. Despite its heroic efforts, the remnants of the German 7th Army and 5th Panzer Army succeeded in breaking through between August 16 and 19. Some 240,000 men, berefi of equipment, eventually reached the Seine River. They left behind in Normandy some 50,000 dead and 200,000 taken prisioner.

By 1944 the Germans, after two years of withdrawals in Russia, were expert at organizing retreats. They showed their expertise in the Seine crossings. Though all bridges had been destroyed by Allied air attack, they improvised pontoons and ferries and conducted skillful reaguard actions to hold off the Anglo-American advance between August 19 and 31, when all survivors were rescued. By then the Allies commanded the west bank of the Seine from the sea to Fontainebleau, while their spearheads were on the Meuse River, 186 miles farther on. The architect of the German withdrawal was Field Marshall Walther Model, the Fuher s fireman, a veteran of the Eastern Front had succeeded Kluge on August 17.

As Model drew the retreating Germans back across northern France at breakneck speed into Belgium, Resistance forces in Paris rose against what remained of the German garrison there on August 19. Fighting broke out, and, as news of the struggle reached the public in America and Britain, Eisenhower reversed his earlier decision to bypass the capital. The recently arrived Free French 2nd Armoured Division was ordered to libreate the city. Its vanguards arrived on August 24. Next morning the German city commander, Dietrich von Choltitz, surrendered to the Resistance and to Jacques-Philippe-Leclerc, the 2nd Armoured commander. On August 26, General Chales de Gaulle, head of the Free French, made a triumphal parade down the Champs-Elysees to the Cathedral of Notre Dame, where a mass of victory was celebrated.

The Normandy campaign had been a stunning success. By early September 1944 all but a fraction of France had been liberated. The American and British/Canadian forces had occupied Belgium and part of The Netherlands and had reached the German frontier. They had, however, outrun their logistic support and lacked the strength to launch a culminating offensive. The coming winter would see much hard fighting, and a German counteroffensive in the Belgian Ardennes, before the German army in the west was finally to be beaten.

Within a few short weeks, the Normandy Invasion passed into history and legend. In my opinion, the primary reason that the invasion of Normandy worked was deception. D-Day was a tremendous achievement for British, Canadian, and the American fighting men and their countries economy. I think that the invasion was the most critical event of World War II. If the invasion were to fail it would of totally changed the outcome of the war.