

The Push to Victory: The Normandy Landings

What Were They?

The Normandy Landings were part of Operation Overlord, the campaign for Allied forces to invade occupied Europe during the Second World War. Thousands of soldiers landed on the beaches of Normandy in France on the first day of the campaign, 6th June 1944, known as D-Day. It was the world's largest ever seaborne military invasion.

Background

In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, prompting Great Britain and France to declare a state of war. Over the next two years, most of the countries of the world were drawn into the conflict, which became known as the Second World War. Countries broadly divided into two military alliances: the Axis (Germany, Italy and Japan) and the Allies (Great Britain, France, USA, Soviet Union, China). The war is estimated to have claimed the lives of up to 85 million people worldwide.

One of the most chilling features of the Second World War was the Holocaust – the persecution and genocide of over six million Jewish,

Romany, homosexual, and mentally and physically disabled people – which was carried out by Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler, and supported and facilitated by other Axis powers.



Troops disembark onto the Normandy beaches.

By 1943, Germany had occupied much of continental Europe (including France, Belgium and the Netherlands) and it became apparent that the Allies needed to gain ground in France if they were to overcome the Axis powers. The Allies had regained control in North Africa; they had invaded and were pushing through Italy; they had control of the Atlantic; and in the Soviet Union they had won the Battle of Stalingrad. Pressure was mounting on the Axis powers.

It was decided that the Allies needed to start a new conflict or “front” in Europe. In late 1943, preparations began for Operation Overlord – the codename for a land, sea and air invasion of Normandy in northern France. The operation was headed up by American General Dwight D Eisenhower, with resources principally coming from America, Canada and Great Britain, although French, Belgian, Czech, Dutch, Australian, New Zealand, Norwegian, Rhodesian and Polish troops were also involved.



Soldiers move away from Sword beach, carrying supplies.

Creating a Smoke Screen

In order to maximise the chances of Operation Overlord, it was important to maintain an element of surprise. The Allies created Operation Bodyguard – a campaign of disinformation and deception to cover up the real details of D-Day.

As part of Operation Bodyguard, Operation Fortitude was born. This operation was specifically designed to draw the Germans away from Normandy before the landings. Fortitude North used secret agents to leak false information to the Germans that the Allies were planning to invade Norway. Meanwhile, Fortitude South leaked the myth that the Allies were planning to cross the channel north-east of Normandy, at the Pas de Calais. The scale of the deception was so large that a whole fictitious force, based in south-east England, was invented to fool the Axis powers. Fake equipment, such as inflatable tanks, was delivered to the pretend army base to keep up the elaborate deception.

Meanwhile, Operation Ironside, another offshoot of Operation Overlord, was allowing communications to be intercepted that indicated that the Allies would invade at the Bay of Biscay, and Operation Zeppelin implied

that troops would be landing in the Balkans. All of this created widespread confusion.

As D-Day drew near, efforts escalated to draw German forces away from the Normandy beaches. Roads and railway lines were bombed by Allied forces and the French Resistance movement, making the area difficult to reach for German soldiers. The night before the invasion, dummy paratroopers were dropped away from the beaches, so the Germans thought they were being invaded by air, and small ships simulated an invasion fleet at the Pas de Calais.



Landing ships moving cargo onto the invasion beaches.

Areas of Attack

To effectively coordinate the invasion, the 50-mile stretch of Normandy coastline was divided into five areas of attack by the Allies. These were named Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword. The idea was that these areas could be bombarded with troops who would then take over nearby towns and link the beaches together as they pressed forward into France. Each of the beaches was heavily defended with German bunkers and artillery, and some nearby towns had been taken over completely by the military.

D-Day

Just after midnight on 6th June 1944, around 20,000 paratroopers parachuted into the Normandy beaches; these were the advance guard for the forces arriving by sea (known as Operation Neptune). Over 7,000 vessels, carrying 132,000 troops, arrived around six hours later. Many of these stayed to provide artillery support to the disembarked soldiers.

Despite the successful deception campaigns which had been running prior to the invasion, the troops still met with strong resistance from the Germans. The beaches were heavily

defended with metal structures, mines and barbed wire, to make landing from both air and sea extremely dangerous. Gun emplacements overlooking the beaches kept up a steady stream of fire, and at Omaha beach, there was the added challenge of steep cliffs, giving the Germans an immediate height advantage over the invading troops.

At Utah beach, troops were swept off course by strong currents and landed far from where they had originally intended. However, paratroopers had arrived before them and, after periods of intense fighting, the forces managed to advance four miles into France.

Omaha was the deadliest of the five beaches, as it was the most heavily defended by the Germans. After a protracted battle, the Allies established their hold on the beach by the end of the day.

At Gold beach, troops managed to overcome problems caused by an unexpectedly high tide, and had pushed inland by six miles, to meet up with soldiers from Juno by the close of D-Day.

Stormy seas meant that troops at Juno had

arrived before their armoured defences, resulting in many casualties as they disembarked. Significant German fortifications also slowed progress.

At Sword, a narrow landing area and difficult tides meant that armoured support could not fully land. The key objective of the area had been to take the town of Caen, but this was not achieved until several weeks later.

By the end of the day, it is estimated that around 2,500 Allied soldiers died on the Normandy beaches, with a further 7,500 wounded or missing in action.

The Aftermath

D-Day was just the first day of what would be a long and bloody conflict. Once the initial wave of soldiers had pushed past the beaches, more troops landed and continued the onslaught into France. The German army fought back fiercely, and the French countryside, with its winding lanes and high hedges, meant that the Allies were at a considerable disadvantage. There were heavy casualties. Nevertheless, by 12th June, all five beaches were connected, meaning that the Allies had control of a large chunk of

coastline. They continued to push forward, and in August, the Germans began to fully retreat from France.

There was still a considerable effort for the Allied forces before the Second World War could be won, however. But the liberation of France meant that the Allies had a significant foothold in Europe and finally, in May 1945, the Germans surrendered.



The Royal Navy drop a depth charge on a suspected U-boat during the landing operations on the Normandy coast.

The Push to Victory Facts

D-Day

D-Day is actually the name given to the first day of any military operation – the 'D' comes from the word 'day'. Because of the significance of the Normandy landings, D-Day is now usually understood to refer to them.

Crossword Confusion!

In 1944, a school headmaster was arrested as it was suspected he was trying to leak information about D-Day to the enemy by including D-Day codenames as answers to crossword puzzles he was compiling for the Daily Telegraph. It turned out that he had got the words from his pupils, who had been visiting a nearby army base and overheard them being used there. Among the words, which appeared in the months before D-Day, were 'Gold', 'Sword', 'Juno', 'Utah', 'Omaha' and 'Overlord'. It was eventually decided the teacher was completely innocent of any deception and the leaking of the codenames had been an accident.

The Dummy General

The person in charge of D-Day operations in Britain was General Sir Bernard Montgomery,

a well-known military figure. To deceive the Germans, MI5 hired an actor, M E Clifton James, to impersonate Montgomery in Algiers in May 1944 and drop hints about a fictitious invasion of the south of France. It's not known how successful this plan was, but it certainly contributed to the general disinformation and deception which was crucial to the success of D-Day.

D-Day in Numbers

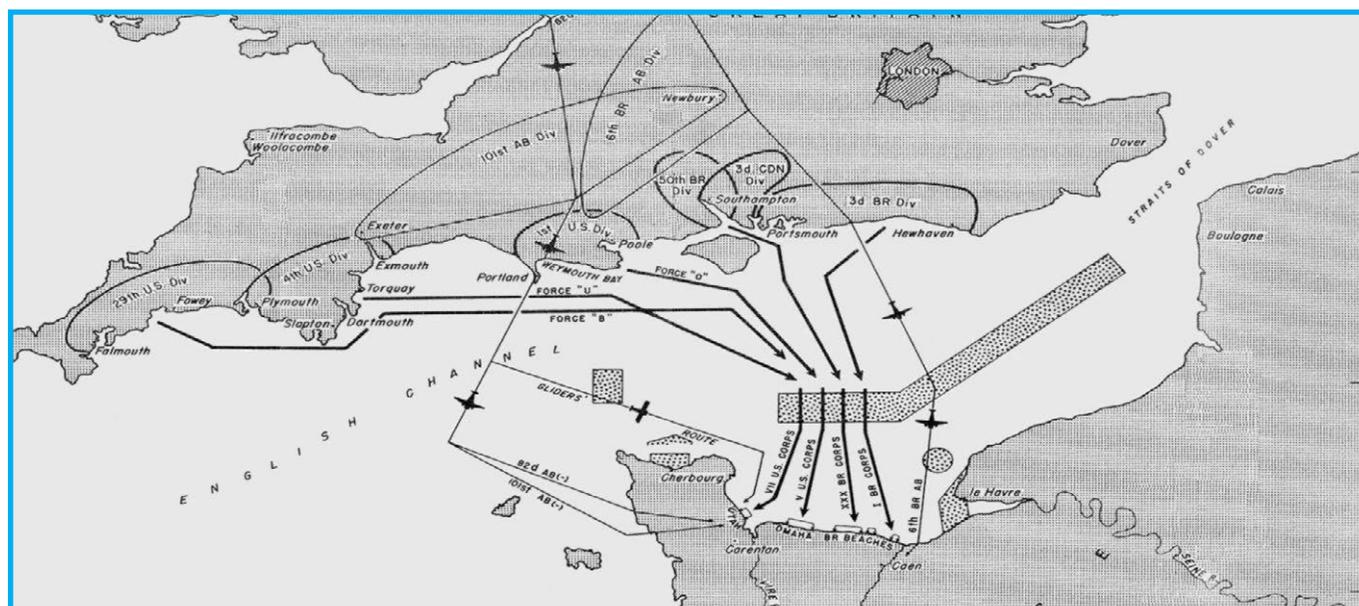
5: number of sections the Normandy beaches were divided into, for operational purposes.

2,000: number of tanks the Germans used in fighting the battle in Normandy. Only 70 survived.

10,000: estimated Allied casualties on D-Day.

150,000: approximate number of soldiers who invaded Normandy on D-Day.

9,000,000: tonnes of equipment which came to Britain from America to prepare for D-Day.



D-day allied assault routes to Normandy.