

D-DAY



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On 6 June 1944, the Allies launched the greatest amphibious invasion in history. Codenamed “Overlord” but best known today as “D-Day”, the operation saw Allied forces landing on the beaches of Normandy in Nazi-occupied France in huge numbers. By the end of the day, the Allies had established a foothold on the French coastline.

The statistics for the invasion force involved in the operation are staggering. By midnight on 6 June, 132,000 Allied forces had landed in France, while more than 2 million were eventually shipped there, comprising a total of 39 divisions.

Thousands of vessels took part in the operation including 139 major warships; 221 smaller combat vessels; more than 1000 minesweepers and auxiliary vessels; 4,000 landing craft; 805 merchant ships; 59 blockships; and 300 miscellaneous small craft.

Eleven thousand aircraft also took part including fighters, bombers, transports and gliders. The invasion force also had the support of around 350,000 members of the French Resistance, who launched hit-and-run attacks on German targets.

From Omaha Beach to Operation Bodyguard this eBook explores D-Day and the beginning of the Battle of Normandy. Detailed articles explain key topics, edited from various History Hit resources.

Included in this eBook are articles written for History Hit by some of the world’s leading World War Two historians, including Patrick Eriksson and Martin Bowman. Features written by History Hit staff past and present are also included.

You can access all these articles on historyhit.com. *D-Day* was compiled by Tristan Hughes.

In October 1941 Winston Churchill told Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten to start thinking about an invasion of Europe: “Unless we can go on land and fight Hitler and beat his forces on land, we shall never win this war”

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US assault troops in an LCVP landing craft approach Omaha Beach, 6 June 1944.

How Did D-Day Unfold?

The D-Day operation began shortly after midnight with an Allied assault by three airborne divisions – the US 82nd and 101st on the right flank of the American forces, and Britain's 6th Airborne on the left flank of the British.

Seaborne forces were then put ashore on five Normandy beaches. These beaches were codenamed (from east to west) Sword, Juno, Gold, Omaha and Utah.

American forces were aiming for Utah and Omaha, with the former the target of the US 4th Infantry Division (part of the US VII Corps) and the latter the target of the US 1st Infantry Division (part of the US V Corps).

Gold beach, meanwhile, was the landing site of the British 50th Infantry Division (part of the British XXX Corps), and Sword the landing site of the British 3rd Infantry Division (part of the British I Corps).

The Canadian 3rd Infantry Division (also part of the British I Corps) was tasked with seizing Juno.

D-Day was originally planned for 5 June but had to be delayed by 24 hours due to poor weather

Successes and Losses

The initial air and seaborne landings had mixed results. On Utah, resistance from the Germans was slight and US troops were off the beach by midday. But on Omaha the Americans' lack of specialised armour meant the Germans were able to pin them down on the beach, resulting in a high casualty count.

On Gold and Juno, the specialised armour of the British and Canadian forces enabled troops to get off their beaches quickly. By the afternoon they were moving inland toward Bayeux and Caen. On Sword British troops were able to link up with airborne units that had been dropped further inland.

The operation was ultimately successful and marked the beginning of the liberation of western Europe from Nazi control.

How many casualties were there?

No one will ever know exactly how many people died on D-Day although it is commonly thought that there were around 10,500 Allied casualties (killed, missing or wounded). The death toll alone has traditionally been estimated to be 2,500 but recent research suggests it may in fact be twice as high.

The figures are even murkier for German casualties, with estimations ranging from 4,000 to 9,000.

Casualties were a mixed picture across the five beaches. On Utah the US 4th Infantry Division landed 21,000 troops at a cost of only 197 casualties.

But casualties were far higher on the other US target, Omaha beach. One US unit landing there in the first wave lost 90 per cent of its men. In total around 4,000 Americans were killed or wounded on Omaha.

On Gold beach, casualty rates were around 80 per cent lower.

The confusion around the death tolls is not unusual; it is often difficult to get accurate counts for a single day of battle or single military campaign. This is largely the result of fighters dying after the day on which they sustained their injuries, as well as just the general fog and confusion of war. And these issues were magnified for D-Day due to the scale of the operation.

*All information pertaining to the D-Day invasion was marked "Bigot",
a classification even more secret than "Top Secret"*

The Liberation of Western Europe: Why Was D-Day So Significant?

By Dan Snow

It was the largest amphibious assault in history. Over 150,000 men were landed on a heavily defended set of beaches on the western edge of Hitler's vast empire. To get them safely lodged ashore the largest fleet in history had been assembled – 7,000 boats and ships. From giant battleships, which hurled shells at German positions, to specialised landing craft, and block ships which would be deliberately sunk to build artificial harbours.

In the skies above 12,000 allied aircraft were available to intercept German aircraft, blast defensive strong points and interrupt the flow of enemy reinforcements. In terms of the logistics – the planning, the engineering and the tactical execution – it was one of the most stunning achievements in military history. But did it matter?

The Eastern Front

Hitler's dream of a 1,000 year Reich was under terrible threat in the early summer of 1944 – not from the west where the Allies were preparing their invasion, or from the south where Allied troops were grinding their way up the Italian peninsula, but from the east.

The titanic struggle between Germany and Russia from 1941 to 1945 is probably the most appalling and destructive war in history. Genocide and a galaxy of other war crimes were the norm as the largest armies in history locked together in the largest and costliest battles ever. Millions of men were killed or wounded as Stalin and Hitler fought a war of total annihilation.

By June 1944 the Soviets had the upper hand. The front line which had once passed through the outskirts of Moscow was now pushing against Germany's conquered territory in Poland and the Baltic states. The Soviets looked unstoppable. Perhaps Stalin would have been able to finish Hitler without D-Day and an Allied advance from the west.

Perhaps. What is certain is that D-Day and the liberation of western Europe that followed made Hitler's destruction a certainty. Any hope that Germany might be able to direct its entire war machine towards the Red Army came to an end once the western Allies were pounding up the beaches of Normandy.

The nearly 1,000,000 German troops Hitler was forced to keep in the west would have made a powerful difference if they had been deployed to the Eastern Front.

During the preparation and execution of D-Day, around 17 million maps were drawn up

Diverting German divisions

In the fighting after D-Day, as the Germans desperately tried to contain the allied invasion, they deployed the greatest concentration of armoured divisions anywhere in the world. Had there been no Western Front we can be certain that the fighting in the east would have been even more drawn out, bloody and uncertain.

Perhaps even more importantly, if Stalin had eventually won and defeated Hitler alone, it would have been Soviet forces, not British, Canadians and Americans, that 'liberated' western Europe. Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, France and other countries would have found themselves swapping one despot for another.

The puppet Communist governments that were installed in eastern Europe would have had their equivalents from Oslo to Rome. It would have meant that Hitler's rocket scientists, like the famous Wernher von Braun, the man behind the Apollo moon missions, went to Moscow, not Washington.....

Far-reaching significance

D-Day hastened the destruction of Hitler's empire and the genocide and criminality that it spawned. It ensured that liberal democracy would be restored across a large swathe of Europe. This in turn allowed countries like West Germany, France and Italy to contribute to the unprecedented explosion of wealth and advances in living standards that became the hallmark of the second half of the 20th century.

D-Day, and the fighting that followed, did not only change the course of the Second World War but of world history itself.

In the run up to D-Day Royal Engineers were dispatched in midget submarines to conduct covert assessments of the beaches including collecting sand samples.



Lord Lovat, on the right of the column, wades through the water at Sword. The figure in the foreground is Piper Bill Millin.

Who Did the Allies Face in Normandy on D-Day?

By Jonathan Trigg

In the early summer of 1944, Berlin knew the Allies would soon land in Continental Europe, and had assembled 850,000 men and over fifteen hundred panzers to face them. Who many of these men were is one of the most fascinating stories of World War Two.

Over 1.2 million tonnes of steel and 17 million cubic metres of concrete were used in building the Atlantic Wall's defences, and this included 92 manned radar sites.

Fortress Europe – Festung Europa

Amidst the barbed-wire entanglements and sandbag bunkers of Hitler's much-vaunted Atlantikwall, a stern-faced sentinel stares out to sea, eyes fixed on the horizon, watching for the Allied landing fleet. His Kar98k rifle is slung on his shoulder, and on his head sits his turban.

Yes, turban, because this was no member of the Nazi master race – the Aryan herrenvolk of Goebbels's delusional propaganda – but a Sikh rifleman in the Wehrmacht's Infanterie-Regiment 950 (indische), recruited by a Calcutta (modern-day Kolkata) lawyer from former British Army prisoners-of-war.

Several thousand strong, the origins of one of the Nazis' most bizarre and least well-known units lay in British India's powerful independence movement. Under the guidance of its spiritual leader – Mohandas Gandhi – the Indian National Congress believed in a non-violent path to self-rule.

However, not all its adherents were wedded to that approach, and one above all – Subhas Chandra Bose – thought freedom would only come through armed struggle.

Escaping house arrest, the bespectacled firebrand arrived in Nazi Germany in April 1941 and offered to form an army to help drive the British out of his country. With

German support he toured the POW camps filled with Indian soldiers captured in the fighting in North Africa. One such prisoner – Barwat Singh – remembered his arrival;

“He was introduced to us as a leader from our country who wanted to talk to us. He wanted 500 volunteers who would be trained in Germany and then parachuted into India. Everyone raised their hands.”

In no time the ‘Indian Legion’ – or more dramatically the ‘Tiger Legion’ as it was occasionally called – numbered almost three-thousand men and was being trained and equipped as the vanguard of a future Nazi invasion of the Raj.

German defeats at El Alamein and Stalingrad put paid to that fantasy, and the now - purposeless unit was instead sent west to help man the German defences against the anticipated Allied landings. The build-up to D-Day found it on France’s Atlantic coast at Lacanau, near Bordeaux, as part of Kurt von der Chevallerie’s 1. Armee.

As it turned out, the Allied fleet never appeared off Bordeaux, instead its destination was Normandy – some three hundred miles to the north.

The Germans in Normandy

There, the Allied troops would face Friedrich Dollmann’s 7. Armee, which, although without any Indian troops in its ranks, was itself a phantasmagoria of nationalities that mirrored more the polyglot forces of Europe’s Middle Ages than the national armies of the Twentieth Century.

On the beaches themselves, the Allied assault troops would face three of Dollmann’s divisions; the 352nd, the 709th and the 716th.

The latter two were ‘fortress’ formations; disparagingly called bodenständige (literally ‘rooted to earth’) divisions, or more simply ‘belly units’ – many of them equipped with but a single motor vehicle; the commanders staff car.

Only two-thirds the size of normal German infantry divisions, the ranks of the 709th and 716th were filled with the middle-aged, medically unfit or previously-wounded; men like Martin Eineg:

“Although I was tall, I had a chronic lung condition which technically classed me as ‘unfit for active service’. Nevertheless I was sent to France to man the Atlantikwall,”

There was also Gustav Winter:

“I suffered very badly from frostbite during the first winter in Russia...I lost the little fingers on each of my hands...also the tip of my nose, and my toes were damaged as well.”

Standing next to Eineg and Winter were thousands of men of dubious military value; the men of the Ost-Bataillone (‘East Battalions’), ex-Soviet prisoners-of-war or deserters, as well as thousands of beutedeutscher (‘booty Germans’) – ethnic Poles and Czechs caught up in the war against their will, men like Aloysius Damski:

“I am a Pole. I was working in the office of a munitions factory...when the manager called me in and said I could either go into the German forces or be declared ‘politically unreliable’, which almost certainly meant a concentration camp. I was only 20-years-old and I loved life, so I chose the army. After training I was sent to Normandy to a mixed unit of Poles, Czechs, Russians and some German NCOs and officers.”

D-Day – the beaches

On the morning of 6 June the Allies made swift work of much of the defences, as attested by Emil Thiem, an ethnic German farm worker from outside Warsaw who was on Utah:

“I was manning a mortar with my comrades, but it was in an open pit, so we stayed in a bunker a few metres away. The bombardment was terrible....one of my comrades put his head round the corner of the bunker to try and see what was going on, and as soon as he did he was hit by shrapnel – his whole head was gone, just like that...we climbed out of the bunker with our hands up and that was that, our war was finished.”

Not everything went the Allies way though, an intelligence lapse meant they hadn’t picked up that the ‘belly’ 716th defending Omaha had been reinforced by the 352nd.

The 352nd was no praetorian guard – its rankers were mainly 17 and 18-year-old conscripts with just a few weeks basic training behind them – but they had a core of experienced veterans and they were ready:

“The Americans were about four hundred metres away from us. I did not sight on them individually at first, but I began firing and swept the gun from left to right along the beach. This knocked down the first few men in each line; the MG 42 was so powerful that the bullets would often pass through a human body and hit whatever was behind it.

So many of these men were hit by a bullet which had already passed through a man in front, or even two men...”

The steel beach obstacles known as hedgehogs were later broken up and fixed to the front of tanks to help them grapple sections of hedgerow

Victory to stalemate

Despite German resistance the Allied landings were astonishingly successful. What followed would become known as the battle of Normandy as the Allied armies poured onto the beaches and came face to face with an all-together different German army, one characterised not by the belly soldiers of the fortress divisions, but by the *panzergrenadiers* and tank crews of the Waffen-SS and the Panzer-Lehr.

Bose and the Indian Legion

As for the Indians of the 950th Regiment, they found themselves spectators to the Normandy fighting. Transferred to Hitler’s élite as the ‘Indische Legion der Waffen SS’, they were ordered to retreat back to the Reich as Germany’s field army in the west was annihilated at Falaise in August.

Fighting occasional skirmishes against French résistants and the advancing Americans – including one in Burgundy’s renowned wine country at Nuits-Saints-Georges – the regiment reached Nazi Germany and sat – unemployed and unwanted – until the end of the war.

Derided by Hitler himself; “The Indian Legion is a joke...The whole business is nonsense”, the Legion surrendered to the Allies at the end of the war, whereupon its members were shipped home and quietly released. As for Bose, he had left for Japan in early 1943, where he founded the ‘Indian National Army’ from Indian POWs in Japanese camps.

Attempting to flee at the war’s end, he was killed in a plane crash in Taiwan.

There were around 350,000 Resistance members helping the Allies to prepare for D-Day from inside France, but only 100,000 of these had working weapons.



Members of one of the Wehrmacht’s Ost-Bataillone (‘East Battalions’). Image Credit: Ruffneck88 and Bundesarchiv / Commons.

The Crippling Losses of the Luftwaffe During Operation Overlord

By Patrick Eriksson

The attainment of air superiority over the Normandy landing area and hinterland was an essential prerequisite for the Allied Invasion in June 1944.

Luftwaffe reaction to the landing at Salerno, Italy in September 1943, where ground attack machines, supported by bomber aircraft armed with the new remote controlled glider bombs, had caused serious problems. In a gradually intensifying battle of attrition, the Allied daylight aerial assault on the Continent culminated in the bombing of Germany on a massive scale.

However, *Luftwaffe* defensive success in the second half of 1943 was only negated by American long range, high performance fighter escorts, led by the P-51 Mustang, which enabled adequate air superiority over the German heartland six months before D-Day.

Hauptmann Georg Schröder, *Gruppenkommandeur II/JG 2* recalled:

'Already in April-May 1944 it became clear to us at the front, through the increase in enemy escort fighters, now also with much greater range, and thus also the expansion of the four-engined bomber attacks on the German motherland, that a definite change was approaching.'

D-Day

By 6 June 1944 cumulative German fighter losses, especially of unit leaders at all levels, had made the *Luftwaffe* a spent force.

Luftwaffe fighter operations over Normandy concentrated on attacking the landing fleets and the beaches initially and then the congested beachheads, and they also flew many free chase missions.

The planned dispatch of German fighter reinforcements to Normandy duly took place after the landings, encompassing 17 *Jagdgruppen* in addition to 6 already there (c. 800 machines altogether).

The Allies fielded 3,467 heavy bombers, 1,645 medium-light bombers, and 5,409 fighters and fighter-bombers over Normandy, and on D-Day itself flew 14,674 operational sorties (losses = 113, mainly to flak) as against 319 *Luftwaffe* sorties.

The Allies didn't lose a single plane to the Luftwaffe on 6 June, although anti-aircraft fire did shoot down 113 planes.

Crippling losses

During June 1944 Allied sorties were tenfold those of the Germans, who lost 931 aircraft in combat. Due to the vast Allied air superiority, largely the fruits of the Battle of Germany, losses were crippling; by the end of June available German fighters in France numbered only 425 machines.

Oberleutnant Fritz Engau, Staffelkapitän 2/JG 11, encapsulated the odds against the Jagdwaffe:

'On the Invasion Front the superior numbers of the Allies were particularly large. The Mustangs circled over almost every cross-roads, junction and railway station, with some pairs low down, the others high above them as cover. Spitfires and other fighter types were also there in profusion.

We suffered appalling losses, already on the transfer flight (actually on landing from it) from Germany to France on 7 June 1944. The only significant success our Gruppe had in Normandy was actually on this transfer flight, when flying over France we still had reasonable numbers, and we encountered an approximately equal-sized force of Mustangs over the Forest of Rambouillet on 7 June.'

'Hopelessly inferior'

Oberleutnant Hans-R. Hartigs, 4/JG 26 flew over the Invasion area until being badly wounded:

'The operations from 6 June 1944 in Operation Overlord, were particularly costly for us. Little more than 200-400 fighters were serviceable. We were hopelessly inferior to the English and Americans.

During this time I flew many low level attacks. We had two extra 2 cm cannons built into the outer wings and beneath the wings two 21 cm rockets that were very effective against tanks and flak positions.

In this campaign I also flew as Schwarm-, Staffel- and even Gruppenführer, though never with more than four-sixteen machines, except for a couple of missions where we flew with entire Jagdverbänden in the area north-west of Paris with between ten and twelve Gruppen with 20-100 aircraft at a time.

I was shot down twice in this campaign over Northern France, and bailed out the second time in August 1944. On this latter occasion I was surprised by American fighters while landing at my own base, and before I bailed out I pulled my aircraft up steeply and then when I was out I collided with the trimming tabs on the tailfin.

I suffered a broken pelvis, broken jaw and broken ribs, and was in hospital until October.'

Relocated to the west

Leutnant Gerd Schindler, an experienced pilot who had flown with III/JG 52 in Russia, was one of those in IV/JG 27 who flew in to Rommilly on 7 June 1944. They flew their first operations the same day and immediately became embroiled in combat with Allied fighters – Typhoons, Thunderbolts and Mustangs.

In an effort to aid recognition, all Allied aircraft were required to wear invasion stripes, except for readily identifiable heavy bombers and seaplanes.

The days were long, first take-offs at 05h00 already and last landings at 22h00. Schindler survived three days of this and having moved to Paris Guyancourt, on 10 June, only his fourth day in this theatre, he was shot down by a Thunderbolt, hit in

the thigh and bailed out; he landed in an active resistance area but was rescued by a French farmer that brought him to a local doctor.

As an example of the losses of a single *Staffel*, 7/JG 51 transferred from the Russian Front and arrived in Normandy with 15 pilots; within the first month of operations eight were dead, including its newly-appointed leader, and one a POW.

Their previous *Staffelkapitän*, *Hauptmann* Karl-Heinz Weber, highly experienced victor in 136 combats in Russia, was appointed to lead III/JG 1. Arriving in the evening of 6 June, Weber led his new *Gruppe* on their first operation over Normandy next day and did not return.

‘There were no successes we could report’

Leutnant Hans Grünberg, *Staffelkapitän* 5/JG 3:

‘In the first few days after arriving in Evreux each Staffel had to prepare one Schwarm for dropping bombs as Jabos. The targets were the Allied fleets, which gave such effective artillery protection for the landed troops, and the landing craft.

There were no successes we could report. It was almost impossible that we would be able to drop bombs in the landing zone. The enemy fighters controlled the airspace and the larger ships carried barrage balloons for extra protection.

Losses to the units of II/JG 3 were continuous. On our airfields we were constantly subjected to strafing and bombing.’

Allied air supremacy was total.

Britain’s Major General Percy Hobart devised several specialist vehicles for the invasion, including armoured bulldozers and swimming tanks, with around 30,000 practice launches for the swimming tanks undertaken.

Taxis to Hell – and Back – Into the Jaws of Death – The Story Behind the Photograph

By James Carson

Taxis to Hell – and Back – Into the Jaws of Death was taken on June 6 1944 by Robert F. Sargent, a chief photographer's mate in the US Coast Guard.

The photograph's title derives from a refrain in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade.' Written in 1854, the poem describes the last doomed charge of the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava, a key battle of the Crimean War. It strikes a delicate balance between nobility, brutality and tragedy, one that resonates with events on the five Normandy beaches.



Sargent's iconic photo has been evoked in films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1988), and is the one of the most widely recognised of the Normandy Landings.

The image sees men of A Company, 16th Infantry Regiment of the US 1st Infantry Division – known affectionately as The Big Red One – wading ashore at Omaha Beach.

All American service personnel had been required to take out a \$10,000 life insurance policy beforehand.

For many, D-Day is remembered chiefly by the bloodshed and sacrifice at Omaha beach. Casualties at Omaha were double that of any other beach.

The details of this image can be used to tell the story of this beach and the men who perished here in the defence of liberty.

1. Low cloud and strong winds



6 June brought banks of low cloud over the Normandy coast and strong winds in the Channel.

The troops, packed tightly into landing craft, endured waves up to six feet. Sea sickness was rife. The landing craft would reek of vomit.

2. The lack of armoured support

The choppy waters also account for a notable absence from this image.

8 tank battalions landing on D-Day were equipped with Duplex Drive or DD tanks. Amphibious tanks belonging to the family of quirky vehicles known as Hobart's Funnies.

The DD tanks provided invaluable support for the troops landing at Sword, Juno, Gold and Utah.

But at Omaha many of the DD tanks were launched too far from shore in conditions beyond their limitations.

Nearly all of the DD tanks launched at Omaha sank before reaching the beach meaning the men went ashore with no armoured support.

Almost 1 million US soldiers arrived in the UK between 1942 and 1944 in preparation for D-Day.

3. The steep bluffs of Omaha beach



Unmistakable in the image are the steep bluffs that characterised Omaha beach.

In January 1944 Logan Scott-Bowden led a reconnaissance mission in a midget submarine to produce a report on the beach.

Delivering his findings to Omar Bradley, Scott-Bowden concluded

“this beach is a very formidable beach indeed and there are bound to be tremendous casualties”.

To capture these heights, American soldiers had to make their way up steep valleys or 'draws' that were heavily defended by German emplacements. The Pointe du Hoc, for instance, had German artillery pieces installed a'top 100-foot cliffs.

4. Obstacles



The beach itself is also littered with obstacles. These included steel grills and posts tipped with mines.

Most notable in the image are the hedgehogs; welded steel beams that appear like crosses on the sand. They were designed to stop vehicles and tanks crossing the sand.

With the bridgehead secured, these hedgehogs were broken up and pieces attached to the front of Sherman tanks to create vehicles known as “Rhinos” that were used to create gaps in the notorious hedgerows of the French Bocage countryside.

5. Equipment



Facing these terrible odds, soldiers in the photograph are laden with equipment.

To offer some protection, they're equipped with the standard issue carbon-manganese M1 steel helmet, covered with netting to reduce shine and allow for scrim to be added for camouflage.

Their rifle is the M1 Garand, in most cases fitted with a 6.7 inch bayonet. Look closely, some of the rifles are wrapped in plastic to keep them dry.



Their ammunition, 30-06 calibre, is stored in an ammo belt around their waist. The handy entrenching tool, or E tool, is strapped to their backs.

Inside their packs, the soldiers carry three-days-worth of rations including tinned meat, chewing gum, cigarettes and a chocolate bar supplied by the Hershey's Company.

6. The soldiers



According to photographer Robert F. Sargent, the men aboard this landing craft arrived 10 miles off the Normandy coast on the Samuel Chase at 3.15am. They embarked around 5.30am.

The photographer identifies the soldier at the bottom right of the image as Seaman 1st Class Patsy J Papandrea, the bowman tasked with operating the bow ramp.

The man in the centre of the ramp looking left was identified in 1964 as William Carruthers, though this has never been verified.



7. The sector

Sargent locates the landing craft in Easy Red sector, the largest of ten sectors that made up Omaha, located toward the western end of the beach.



The sector included an important 'draw' and was defended by four primary defensive positions.

As they hit the beach, these men would have faced high calibre gunfire and overlapping machine gun fire. There would be very little cover for the men in the photograph as they fought their way to the bluffs.

Today, Omaha beach is overlooked by the American Cemetery where almost 10,000 American servicemen killed during D-Day and the wider Normandy Campaign were laid to rest; and where the names are recorded of more than 1500 men, whose bodies were never recovered.

*The oldest Allied battleship in action on D-Day was the USS
Arkansas. She was commissioned in 1912.*



Valentine DD tank with screen lowered and gun pointing towards the rear of the vehicle.

D-Day: A Tank Commander's Experience

History Hit Podcast with Captain David Render

I am a Normandy veteran from 1944-45. I was a lieutenant troop leader of Five Troop, a squadron in the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry for Nottinghamshire Yeomanry. I was 19 when I was in action against the Germans.

I had joined the army on my 18th birthday because it was the thing to do. It took a year and a half to train us from being a schoolboy to being a lieutenant and being able to command a troop of four tanks.

At that point we were in Sherman tanks, but we did have one Sherman Firefly later on.

*The only Victoria Cross awarded for D-Day went to Company
Sergeant-Major Stanley Hollis of the Green Howards.*

Landing tanks at D-Day

I went over to France on D2. The regiment went on D-Day, but I didn't know anything about them at that point. I was just a reinforcement. I took over 16 Cromwell tanks, and we went across to hand the tanks and the men over.

On D3 we floated about on a ship, which was rather like a snake going over the waves. We landed at about 4 o'clock on D4. The captain came over and said, "Get these tanks off." He used a very old English word to tell me to hurry up. And I said to the first tank, "Right. Off you go."

He went down the ramp. It went down and down and – woof! – upside down, complete with the men in it, and disappeared.

Obviously something had gone wrong. I didn't know what it was. The captain came over, and he gave me the most enormous ticking off for doing it.

I would rather have been at home with mum at that time.

I stood there frightened to death really. At the time, we were being machine-gunned and under attack by Messerschmitt 109s. It wasn't really a very nice place to be. I would rather have been at home with mum at that time.

The crew of the first tank drowned. There were only two people inside because it was only a skeleton crew. Normally, a tank's got five people in it, but we were just taking it to the front. We were a reinforcement.

My first command in Europe, and the first thing that happened was that we lost a tank. Immediately.

I was concerned about it, to put it mildly, and the captain didn't help because he was blaming me for doing it. I hadn't done anything.

He said, "Tell the bloke to get off the ship. Tell the driver to get off the ship." They went down the ramp and I couldn't understand what had happened.

My first command in Europe, and the first thing that happened was that we lost a tank.

They pulled the ship back, but they put a sea anchor out with a huge hawser and they had put the thing into reverse. Fortunately, the tide was still coming in.

They just managed to get the ship off the shore. As they did it, the hawser broke with a terrific crash.

It came back and it sawed all the sort of funnels and rails on the other side of the ship clean off, as if it were a knife.

We weren't standing on that side, but if we had been, we would have had it of course.

Then we came in again, and the ramp went down. Off we went with the other tanks.

Fifty years later, I went back and took a photograph of the area of Gold Beach, where we landed, while the tide was out. If you look at that area, with the way the tides are there, you will find that the sea has a habit of scooping trenches out.

We were right on the edge of a hole, and the tank went by a bit of bad luck. Instead of going into 8 foot of water, he went into 18 foot of water. That was the start.

We got the other the other 15 tanks off, and we were up on the on the shore. The crew on the ship were very nervous and edgy about the whole thing.

I didn't stop to talk. We went off. Then the tanks were taken off me very quickly because they were needed to fight.

The first building in France to be liberated during Operation Overlord was a cafe next to Pegasus Bridge.

The Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry

The next thing was I was directed to a thing called Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry. I had never heard of the Sherwood Rangers. I met this fellow, John Simpkin, who was a captain, because when the regiment was landing on D-Day the colonel was killed.

They had various casualties. They lost about 10 tanks getting onto the shore.

A squadron were landed dry – they weren't swimming tanks – and they went on down to Bayeux. I joined them at a place called Fontenay, just south of Bayeux, around D5 or D6.

You have to remember one thing about all this. You're only talking to a peanut. I was a little tiny speck when I was a lowly second lieutenant, a mere nothing.

We only had our own little bit of the area to look at and see. We didn't know what was going on. I didn't even know D-Day was going on.

You're only talking to a peanut. I was a little tiny speck when I was a lowly second lieutenant, a mere nothing.

When I got on the boat to take the tanks over, I said to the chap, "Well, I am supposed to just put them on the ship, put the tanks on and anchor them down."

I thought I had to get off to go and get some more tanks. This chap said, "Get off?" He says, "You'd better look through the porthole." When I looked through the porthole, we were at sea. I asked where we were going and he said, "France, of course."

That was my invasion of France. You have got to have secrecy in war, haven't you?

Essentially, you mustn't tell the other bloke what was happening. In the circumstances, that was secrecy gone barmy, because I had no idea and we just went to France. That was it. That's how it went.

Then I joined a regiment I had never even heard of. The next thing was when the squadron leader placed me as a troop leader under instruction from a chap called Neville Fern. He was a lieutenant who had been with them for some time.

He had to go and do something else. So I did one day, D6, under instruction. You hear about the fighter pilots having only 25 hours flying – I had one day under instruction.

The next day I was in charge of the troop. I was in command of three tanks, in battle. We actually fought. We did some shooting on D6, the day I was under instruction.

But there's nothing very clever about that. It just sort of happens. Suddenly you're there doing it.

John Steele, a US paratrooper dropping in to Sainte-Mere Eglise on the night of 5 June, was left hanging from the church when his parachute became stuck. He was taken prisoner by the Germans but later escaped. Today, an effigy of John Steele hangs from his parachute on the church in Sainte-Mere Eglise.

D-Day Deception: What Was Operation Bodyguard?

Sun Tzu said all warfare is based on deception. During the Second World War, the British certainly took his advice.

From conjuring up a phantom aircraft carrier at the mouth of the River Plate to enlisting a corpse into the Royal Marines. The lengths of British trickery knew no bounds.

In 1944, the art of deception was employed again as the Allies prepared to launch the greatest amphibious invasion in history.

Operation Bodyguard

The obvious route into Nazi occupied Europe was across the Straits of Dover. It was the narrowest point between Britain and the Continent; furthermore the crossing would prove easy to support from the air.

The First United States Army Group – FUSAG – dutifully assembled in Kent ready for action.

Aerial reconnaissance reported mass formations of tanks, transport and landing craft. The airwaves buzzed with orders and communications. And the formidable George S. Patton was placed in command.

Utterly believable and completely fake: a complex diversion, designed to conceal the true target of Operation Neptune, the beaches of Normandy.

The divisions were fiction. Their barracks were constructed by set designers; their tanks were drawn out of thin air. But the deception campaign designed to support Operation Overlord, code-named Operation Bodyguard, didn't end there.

As part of the D-Day operation, 2,240 SAS troops were dropped across the French coastline. They were tasked with diverting attention from the real invasion areas.

Window and Ruperts

As zero hour approached, the Royal Navy deployed diversionary forces in the direction of the Pas de Calais. 617 Squadron, the Dam Busters, dropped aluminium foil – chaff, then code-named *Window* – to create vast blips on German radar, indicating an approaching armada.

To draw yet more German strength away from the beaches, an airborne assault was conducted north of the Seine on 5 June that saw hundreds of paratroops land behind enemy lines. But these were no ordinary soldiers.

At 3 feet they were a little on the small side. And though you could never normally accuse a paratrooper of lacking guts, in this case you'd be right because these guys were made of sand and straw.

They were known as *Ruperts*, an elite division of brave scarecrows, each fitted with a parachute and an incendiary charge that ensured they'd burn up on landing. They were accompanied on their first and only jump by ten SAS soldiers, eight of whom never returned.

The full scale of Operation Bodyguard encompassed decoy operations and feints across Europe. The British even dispatched an actor to the Mediterranean, because he bore a striking resemblance to Bernard Montgomery.

The spy network

At every stage the operation was supported by espionage.

Germany had established a network of spies in Britain in the early years of the war. Unfortunately for the German military intelligence, the Abwehr, MI5 had succeeded in rooting out and in many cases recruiting not just elements of the network but in fact every spy the Germans had sent.

Even as the Allies were establishing a bridgehead in Normandy, double agents continued to feed intelligence to Berlin about the coming attack further north.

The success of Bodyguard was such that over a month after the D-Day landings, German forces were still poised to face an invasion in the Pas de Calais.

Although the Allied forces who took part in the D-Day operation were primarily from Britain, the US and Canada, they also had Australian, Belgian, Czech, Dutch, French, Greek, New Zealand, Norwegian, Rhodesian and Polish naval, air and ground support.



Dummy landing craft, part of Operation 'Bodyguard'.

The Daring Dakota Operations That Supplied Operation Overlord

Aviation historian Martin Bowman tells the story of a C-47 crew during Operation Freeport

'D-Day' is widely used to describe the momentous day on 6 June 1944 when the Allies invaded Occupied Europe with landings off the coast of Normandy. However, the thirteen troop carrying and resupply operations for the invasion were actually flown over three days: 5/6 June, 6 June and 6/7 June.

Three of them were mounted by the RAF ('Tonga', 'Mallard' and 'Rob Roy') and 'Albany', 'Boston'. 'Chicago', 'Detroit', 'Freeport', 'Memphis', 'Elmira', 'Keokuk', 'Galveston' and 'Hackensack' were flown by the C-47s of US Troop Carrier Command.

It is not widely known either that not all were American C-47 crews and their US paratroopers and RAF crews and their British paratroopers. Many of the operations involved American crews carrying their British allies from bases in Lincolnshire because the RAF simply did not have enough Dakotas on hand.

Operation Freeport

Our story though, is about one American air crew that took part in Operation 'Freeport', the re-supply mission carried out in the early morning of 'D+1', 6/7 June by C-47s in the 52nd Wing to supply the 82nd Airborne Division.

At Saltby at 1530 hours on 6 June, following their first mission the previous evening, crews in the 314th Troop Carrier Group were assembled for a briefing for 'Freeport'.

'Freeport' was scheduled with the time of the initial drop set at 0611. Cargoes were to consist of six bundles in each aircraft and six more in pararacks in all aircraft equipped with SCR-717. The normal load thus carried was only slightly over a ton, although a C-47 could carry almost three tons.

The difference lay in the need to get the cargo out within half a minute so that it would all land on the drop zone. No real difficulties were anticipated. The drops were to occur at daybreak. The men of the 314th returned to their Quonset barracks with the mission on their minds.

An ominous sign

In the barracks later in the evening after the briefing Staff Sergeant Mitchell W. Bacon, the radio operator on C-47 42-93605 in the 50th Squadron piloted by Captain Howard W. Sass was observed going through his barracks bags.

As he began to separate items and place them in different places on his bed, a few of his barracks mates approached to ask what he was doing. It was apparent he had something in mind as he placed items in various stacks.

Bacon replied that he knew he would not be returning from the mission that was to take place the next morning and was separating his personal belongs from those issued to him by the army. It would be easier, he said, for someone to send his personal items home when he failed to return the next morning.

This was not the kind of talk men anticipating a combat mission wanted to hear. Others in the barracks heard the exchange. They quickly joined in the conversation.

'You can't possibly know that!' said one.

'You shouldn't even be thinking like that,' others observed.

'You're crazy, 'Mitch'. Forget that stuff' said one, half jokingly.

'Come on, man,' another suggested, 'Get that out of your head!'

By various means his friends in the barracks tried to dissuade Bacon from what he was doing but he kept at it until he had his belongings in the stacks he wanted.

'I have this premonition,' he kept replying.

'I believe my plane will not return from the mission in the morning.'

'I just want to tell you goodbye...'

Breakfast the next morning was at 0300. As men were leaving the mess hall to board their planes, Bacon placed his arm around the shoulders of his friend, Andrew J. Kyle, a crew chief and said,

'I just want to tell you goodbye. 'Andy', I am certain I won't be returning from this mission.'

As the 314th TCG's C-47s approached the drop zone, 42-93605 piloted by Captain Howard W. Sass was hit by anti-aircraft fire and caught fire underneath the fuselage. The radio operator in another of the planes momentarily saw through the door of Sass' plane and described the crew compartment as a 'sheet of fire.'

Para-packs inside the plane were seen going out the door. Pilots, witnessing Sass' plane on fire, screamed to him on their radios for the crew to bail out. No parachutes were seen departing the plane. Sass went down with his burning plane, was catapulted into a hedge when it crashed and survived with comparatively minor injuries.

As late as 10 June Captain Henry C. Hobbs, a glider pilot who had landed near Boutteville, reappeared at Greenham Common after several 'adventures' during which he had noticed a crashed C-47 with only the tail left. The last three numbers were '605' and a flight jacket near it with the name 'Bacon' was the only identifying feature.

Approximately 9,000 children were born out of wedlock to American GI fathers.
