



D-Day and the Battle of Normandy: 75th Anniversary Debate on 4 June 2019

Summary

This year will mark the 75th anniversary of D-Day: the landings of Allied forces on the Normandy coast during the Second World War.¹ On 6 June 1944, the Allies launched a combined naval, air and land attack on Nazi-occupied France. Codenamed Operation 'Overlord', the landings on the beaches of Normandy marked the start of a "long and costly campaign" to liberate north-west Europe from German occupation.² On the morning of D-Day, airborne forces parachuted into drop zones across northern France and ground troops landed across five assault beaches. Naval vessels escorted and landed ground troops, carried out bombardments on German coastal defences and provided artillery support for the invading troops. By the end of the day, the Allies had established a foothold along the coast and began their advance into France. By the end of August 1944, the "Germans were in full retreat out of France".³

To mark the 75th anniversary, the Ministry of Defence in collaboration with the Royal British Legion and Portsmouth City Council have planned a series of events to take place in Portsmouth and Normandy in June 2019. This will include a specially-chartered ship, which will carry 300 D-Day veterans.

On 4 June 2019, the House of Lords is scheduled to debate a motion moved by the Deputy Leader of the House of Lords, Earl Howe, to take note of the 75th anniversary of D-Day.

Preparations for Invasion

The defeat of Germany was acknowledged as the western Allies' principal war aim as early as December 1941.⁴ Germany had occupied France since spring 1940 and was viewed as an imminent threat to the British Isles.⁵ The Allies believed that opening a second front in the west would relieve pressure on the Soviet Union, which was fighting Germany and its allies on the eastern front, and that the liberation of France would weaken Germany's overall position in western Europe.⁶

In early 1943, the Allies started appointing staff to begin planning the invasion.⁷ British officer, Lieutenant-General Frederick Morgan, was appointed to build a planning staff to lay the foundations for a cross-channel attack. One of the group's key tasks was to determine where the invasion would take place. Normandy was chosen as the landing site. It had a good road network leading inland and had the advantage that, if the landings were successful, the Allies would occupy the Cotentin Peninsula and secure the port of Cherbourg.⁸

Detailed preparations for an invasion of mainland Europe began in late 1943 after the Tehran Conference in November, which was a meeting of US President, Franklin D Roosevelt, British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and Soviet Premier, Joseph Stalin.⁹ The discussions centred on opening a second front in western Europe. Stalin agreed to an offensive in the east to coincide with the launch of a campaign in the west, and pressed the western leaders to proceed with formal preparations for their long-promised invasion of German-occupied France.

A command team led by General Dwight D Eisenhower was formed in December 1943 to plan the invasion. It was given the codename Operation 'Overlord'. In preparation for the campaign, British factories increased production and in the first half of 1944 approximately nine million tonnes of supplies and equipment crossed the Atlantic from North America to Britain.¹⁰ By 1944, over two million troops from over twelve countries were in Britain preparing for the invasion. On D-Day Allied forces consisted mainly of British, American and Canadian troops, but also included Australian, Belgian, Czech, Dutch, French, Greek, New Zealand, Norwegian, Rhodesian and Polish naval, air and ground support.¹¹

The Allies also devised a deception plan called Operation Fortitude. Its overall objective was to convince Germany that the invasion was going to happen at other locations and at the same time lead it to think that the landing activities in the Normandy vicinity were a feint.¹² False information was fed to the Abwehr, the German military intelligence, by turned German agents in Britain. Allied commanders created ghost divisions to convince the Germans that many new divisions were poised for the invasion, with radio operators transmitting false radio traffic regarding equipment supplies and men.

Operation Fortitude consisted of two parts. Fortitude North was meant to lead the Germans to think that the Allies were preparing an attack in Norway to keep the German divisions there; and Fortitude South, the main effort, set out to convince the Germans that any landings in Normandy were a large-scale diversion to draw German reserves away from the Pas-de-Calais.¹³ The real invasion was supposedly to come between Boulogne and the Somme estuary during the second half of July 1944. The Allies created a notional 1st US Army group which boasted eleven divisions in south-east England. Dummy aircraft and inflatable tanks, together with 250 fake landing ships, all contributed to the illusion. Invented formations, such as the 2nd British airborne division had been created alongside some real ones. To support this deception, two fake corps headquarters maintained constant radio traffic.

Battle of Normandy

On D-Day, 6 June 1944, Allied forces launched a combined naval, air and land assault on Nazi-occupied France. The invasion was conducted in two main phases: an airborne assault and then landings of ground troops from the sea.¹⁴

Shortly after midnight on 6 June, over 18,000 Allied airborne forces parachuted into drop zones across northern France to provide tactical support for infantry divisions.¹⁵ Ground troops then landed on the coast of Normandy across five assault beaches: Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword. In a 24-hour period, the Allied air forces flew 14,000 missions in support of the landings, and having achieved aerial supremacy prior to the invasion, many of these flights were unchallenged by the German air force, the Luftwaffe.¹⁶ Historian Ian Carter argues that the "decimation" of the German fighter force by US fighter aircraft in the spring of 1944 was a key factor in the Luftwaffe's "poor showing" over Normandy.¹⁷ Nearly 7,000 naval vessels, including battleships, destroyers, minesweepers, escorts and assault craft took part in Operation Neptune, the naval component of Overlord.¹⁸ Naval forces were responsible for escorting and landing over 132,000 ground troops on the beaches. They also carried out bombardments on German coastal defences before and during the landings and provided artillery support for the invading troops. In one day alone, the Allies had landed eight divisions and three armoured brigades on German occupied France; over 75,100 British and Canadian troops and 57,500 American soldiers had landed on the continent from the sea. In addition, 23,000 airborne troops had dropped into France.¹⁹

Germany tried to defend the northern coast of France with a series of fortifications known as the 'Atlantic wall'.²⁰ They were a complex coastal network of concrete barriers and gun emplacements. However, the German defences were often incomplete and insufficiently manned. The Allied deception campaign had been successful in convincing the German command that the main invasion force would

land elsewhere, in the Pas-de-Calais, in July 1944.²¹ The threat of a larger, secondary force kept German reinforcements away from Normandy. Carter also attributes the slow German response to the invasion to “the complex and often confused command structure of the German army”.

However, the Allied forces faced several setbacks during the Battle of Normandy, both on 6 June and in the months of campaign that followed.²² On D-Day, the US troops that landed on Omaha beach were nearly defeated.²³ It was the most heavily defended of the assault areas and casualties were higher than on any other beach. Preliminary air and naval bombardment had failed to knock out strong defence points along the beach and the experienced German 352nd infantry division was taking part in anti-invasion training in the area and was able to reinforce coastal defence units. Nevertheless, the US troops were able to gain a small foothold on the beach by the end of the day. Throughout the Battle of Normandy, the “technical superiority” of the German tanks and anti-tanks weapons, as well as the “tactical skill” of their commanders, gave the German forces an advantage over the Allies.²⁴ The typical bocage landscape—small fields surrounded by thick hedges and narrow sunken lanes—favoured the defenders. Casualties among the Allied infantry were heavy.

Despite this, Germany was never able to “fully exploit” its “successes or the weaknesses of the Allies in a decisive way”.²⁵ The German army was constrained by Hitler’s refusal to let his commanders make tactical withdrawals when required, which meant that the bulk of its forces were eventually trapped and destroyed by the Allies. By the end of August 1944, Germany was in full retreat out of France.

The historians Samuel J Newland and Clayton KS Chun describe D-Day as a “unqualified success”, with the Allied forces successfully establishing a foothold along the Normandy coast.²⁶ Ian Carter argues that while the series of offensives launched in the three months after the Normandy landings varied in success, the “bloody and protracted” Battle of Normandy was a “decisive victory” for the Allies: it “paved the way for the liberation of much of north-west Europe”.²⁷

In total, British and Commonwealth casualties (killed, wounded or missing) on D-Day numbered approximately 4,300.²⁸

Commemorations

Portsmouth will be the focal point of the UK commemorations.²⁹ Portsmouth was one of the key strategic locations for D-Day: from the city and from the surrounding south coast, thousands of troops left for the beaches of Normandy.

In January 2019, the Government announced its plans to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Normandy landings. The Ministry of Defence has organised, together with the Royal British Legion and Portsmouth City Council, a series of events to take place in Portsmouth and Normandy including:³⁰

- The “centre-piece” of the commemorations is a specially-chartered ship called the MV Boudicca, which will carry 300 D-Day veterans to key events in Portsmouth and Normandy in June. The ship, chartered with funds from the Royal British Legion and a grant from HM Treasury, will provide and fund veterans and their carer’s accommodation and travel for the duration of their visit. Veterans were able to apply for a place on the ship through the Royal British Legion.
- A ceremonial event on Portsmouth’s Southsea Common.
- A parachute display from the RAF and Parachute Regiment Ranville, Pegasus Bridge.

- Services at Bayeux Cathedral and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Bayeux Cemetery.
- Music and entertainment for veterans beside the beaches at Arromanches.

In February 2019 on HMS Belfast in London, four British royal navy veterans were awarded the Légion d'Honneur medal, France's highest honour.³¹ The French Government awarded medals to Denis Haley, Charles Kavanagh, Patrick Reardon and John Nicholls, who all took part in the Allied Normandy landings.

¹ In World War II the chief Allied Powers were Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union (after its entry in June 1941), the United States (after its entry on 8 December 1941), and China.

² Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 5.

³ Ian Carter, '[What Happened After D-Day?](#)', Imperial War Museum, 8 January 2018.

⁴ Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 5; and Imperial War Museum, '[The 10 Things You Need to Know About D-Day](#)', 4 January 2018.

⁵ Samuel J Newland and Clayton KS Chun, *The European Campaign: Its Origins and Conduct*, 2011, p 23.

⁶ Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 5; and Imperial War Museum, '[The 10 Things You Need to Know About D-Day](#)', 4 January 2018.

⁷ Samuel J Newland and Clayton KS Chun, *The European Campaign: Its Origins and Conduct*, 2011, p 139.

⁸ *ibid*, p 142.

⁹ Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 5; Imperial War Museum, '[The 10 Things You Need to Know About D-Day](#)', 4 January 2018; and Imperial War Museum, '[The Big Three and the Tehran Conference](#)', 28 November 2018.

¹⁰ Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 5.

¹¹ Imperial War Museum, '[The 10 Things You Need to Know About D-Day](#)', 4 January 2018.

¹² Samuel J Newland and Clayton KS Chun, *The European Campaign: Its Origins and Conduct*, 2011, pp 168–9; and Anthony Beevor, *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy*, 2009, pp 3–4.

¹³ *ibid*.

¹⁴ Imperial War Museum, '[The 10 Things You Need to Know About D-Day](#)', 4 January 2018.

¹⁵ *ibid*; and Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 6.

¹⁶ *ibid*; and Samuel J Newland and Clayton KS Chun, *The European Campaign: Its Origins and Conduct*, 2011, p 178.

¹⁷ Ian Carter, '[Why D-Day was so Important to Allied Victory](#)', Imperial War Museum, 8 December 2017.

¹⁸ Imperial War Museum, '[The 10 Things You Need to Know About D-Day](#)', 4 January 2018; and Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 6.

¹⁹ Samuel J Newland and Clayton KS Chun, *The European Campaign: Its Origins and Conduct*, 2011, p 179.

²⁰ *ibid*.

²¹ *ibid*; and Ian Carter, '[Why D-Day was so Important to Allied Victory](#)', Imperial War Museum, 8 December 2017.

²² Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 6; and Samuel J Newland and Clayton KS Chun, *The European Campaign: Its Origins and Conduct*, 2011, p 171.

²³ Imperial War Museum, '[What You Need to Know About the D-Day Beaches](#)', 10 January 2018.

²⁴ Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 8; and Ian Carter, '[What Happened after D-Day?](#)', Imperial War Museum, 8 January 2018.

²⁵ Ian Carter, '[What Happened after D-Day?](#)', Imperial War Museum, 8 January 2018.

²⁶ Samuel J Newland and Clayton KS Chun, *The European Campaign: Its Origins and Conduct*, 2011, p 179.

²⁷ Ian Carter, '[Why D-Day was so Important to Allied Victory](#)', Imperial War Museum, 8 December 2017.

²⁸ Ministry of Defence, *70th Anniversary of D-Day 1944–2014*, 6 June 2014, p 8.

²⁹ Ministry of Defence, '[D-Day 75: Events to Mark 75th Anniversary of Normandy Landings Announced](#)', 16 January 2019.

³⁰ Ministry of Defence, '[D-Day 75: Events to Mark 75th Anniversary of Normandy Landings Announced](#)', 16 January 2019; and Royal British Legion, '[D-Day 75](#)', accessed 16 April 2019.

³¹ Ministry of Defence, '[D-Day 75: Légion d'Honneur Presented to D-Day Veterans on HMS Belfast](#)', 26 February 2019.

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