



The Battle for Fox Green Beach by Navy Combat Artist Dwight Shepler, 1944. [USN Art Collection KN-570]

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE ALLIED 21ST ARMY GROUP D-DAY, 6 JUNE 1944

THE GREATEST SEABORNE INVASION THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN

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PART ONE – THE STRATEGY

Operation OVERLORD, the Allied invasion of Northwest Europe, is the greatest seaborne invasion that the World has ever known. It involved almost three million Allied service personnel from thirteen participating Allied nations: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, and the United States. Most who came ashore on the five landing beaches on the fateful day, 6 June 1944, were American, British, Canadian, and French soldiers.

The invasion took more than two and a half years to plan and prepare, and the Battle of Normandy culminated in the capture of Paris 81 days after the Allied forces had landed on the coast of France. It was the last great set-piece battle of the Second World War and probably the most important battle fought by the Western Allies against the forces of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany.

The fortunes of the grey tide of the German Armed Forces had been reversed by the end of 1943 and had begun to recede. On the Eastern Front, the German Army had been checked by the Soviet Union at Stalingrad and forced to withdraw westwards from the Caucasus and Don Vass relinquishing much of the territory that it had gained. In the

Mediterranean, the Germans had suffered their first great setback at the hands of the Western Allies when at the end of May 1943, they were defeated in North Africa and forced to withdraw to mainland Europe. In the Italian campaign that followed they were forced out of Sicily and then pushed back to the Gustav Line. The Armed Forces of Italy had ceased to play any active part in the war and Italy's Army, Navy and Air Force had been either disbanded or interned by the Germans. This meant that vital German resources that could have been employed on the Eastern Front against the Soviet Union or in the defence of occupied Western Europe had to be retained in Italy. By the end of 1943, the Western Allies had turned their attention from the Mediterranean to the long-awaited establishment of a second front in Northwest Europe, and the Mediterranean Theatre became something akin to a sideshow operation.

Operation OVERLORD was only the beginning of The Battle of Normandy. It was one of the riskiest military operations to have ever taken place, the first time that so many men, and so much equipment, had been picked up and transported across the sea to be deposited upon a fiercely defended hostile shore. The coast of Northern France was heavily defended and behind the coastal fortifications of Hitler's Atlantic Wall were some of the most formidable Divisions of the German Armed Forces. It was to be the swansong of many of these Divisions who, although they would later be reconstituted to fight in the final battles of Hitler's Reich, would never again fight with the same skill, tenacity, and determination that they exhibited in the fighting in and around the landing beaches, fields and bocage of the Normandy countryside. The defeat in France was a catastrophe and marked the beginning of the end for Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.

Some 156,000 Allied troops participated in the first wave of Operation OVERLORD. Approximately 75,000 British and Canadians, and 57,000 Americans, in six divisions and three independent brigades from the Allied 21st Army Group, landed on the beaches. The remainder made up the three airborne divisions that were delivered to their landing areas by air to secure the flanks of the invasion area. Opposing them were six German infantry divisions and one panzer division defending the Atlantic Wall of Hitler's Fortress Europe along the Calvados Coast of Normandy. Whilst the Allies would have more men in the field than the defending Germans, this was not significant; what was significant was the superiority of the Allied Navy and Air Forces.

The Battle of Normandy not only signified the beginning of the end for the Nazi German cause in the war, but had it failed the map of Western Europe would have been significantly different from that we see today. The restoration of freedom and democracy to the countries of Western Europe from under the yoke of Hitler's fanatical regime would not have happened and their fate would have been decided by the two tyrannies fighting on the Eastern Front: Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

The operations of the Allied 21st Army Group on D-Day have passed into history through films like 'The Longest Day' and 'Saving Private Ryan', and the TV series 'Band of Brothers'. These draw on the story of what happened on D-Day and the success of the Allied invasion forces in gaining a vital foothold on the Normandy beaches. Without this success, the establishment of the beachhead, lodgement and subsequent breakout would never have happened and ultimately the fall of Hitler's Third Reich could have taken many more years to achieve.

The German Strategy

From 1942 onwards, Adolf Hitler, the Führer and supreme commander of the German Armed Forces, determined every feature of German strategy. He aimed to protect the vast areas under German control in Europe and part of North Africa against any future onslaught by the Soviet Union and the Anglo-American Alliance. Adolf Hitler believed that Nazi Germany should be either a major world power or not exist at all. He consciously resolved to take control of all German military operations, which was made easier by his complete domination over the German High Command and senior German Generals. These quickly learned that, if they disputed the Führer's orders, they faced losing their commands or worse. Adolf Hitler's military strategy was to keep his forces stationary to protect the gains already made and the orders he gave were inflexible; whole armies were made to stand their ground in tactically hopeless situations and forbidden to surrender under any circumstances.

Hitler's strategy for defence centred principally on constructing a belt of fortifications along the North Sea, English Channel and Atlantic coasts. These were designed to repel any seaborne invasion and consisted of minefields, concrete walls, concrete bunkers, trenches, barbed wire fences, wire entanglements, beach obstacles, observation posts and fortified artillery emplacements that became known as the Atlantic Wall. Not knowing where an Allied invasion would come from, made the Atlantic Wall a huge project stretching along 3000 miles of coastline across France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway.

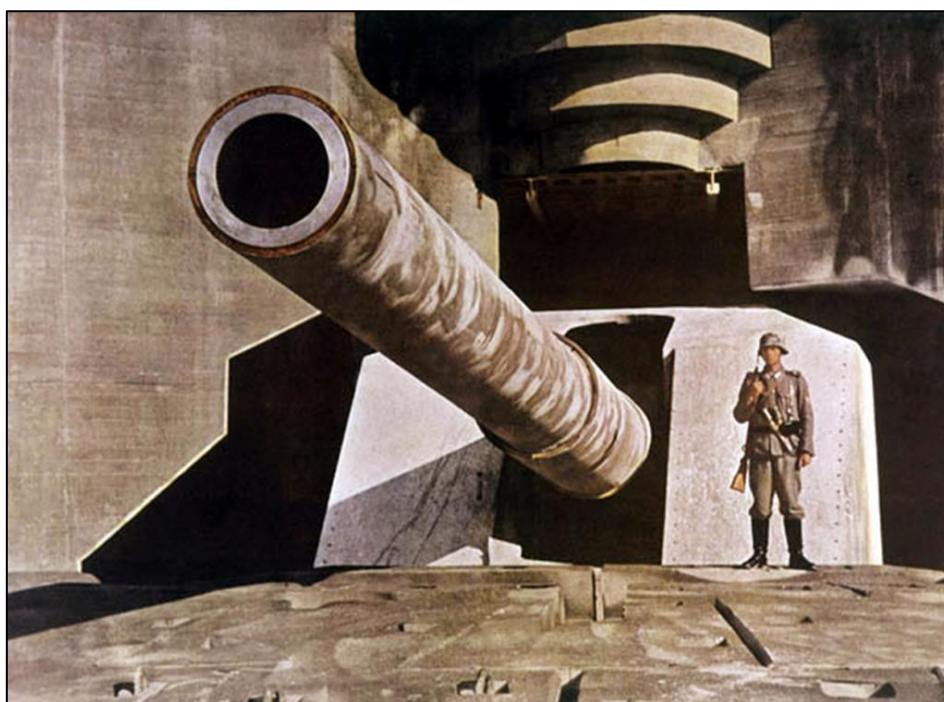


The coastline covered by Hitler's Atlantic Wall. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

The Germans based the strength of these fortifications on two assumptions. Firstly, any seaborne assault would be launched from the shores of England and the likely invasion area would need to be within range of air cover provided by Allied fighters based in Britain. The second was that the Allies would want to seize deep water ports or harbours to land follow-up troops once any seaborne assault had established a beachhead. To them, the most likely area for the invasion was somewhere along the English Channel between St Malo in France and the Dutch coast.

They thought it would probably come in the Pas-de-Calais region, as this had: several suitable ports, was the shortest crossing point between Britain and mainland Europe and was an ideal starting point for an assault into Germany's industrial heartland. Consequently, the Pas-de-Calais area was more heavily defended than any other part of the Atlantic Wall.

Organisation Todt, the construction group of the Nazi Party, was responsible for building the Atlantic Wall fortifications and the workforce consisted of over 500,000 men. Much of this workforce was made up of either prisoners of war or forced labour from the occupied nations. Albert Speer, the Minister for Weapons and Munitions, ran Organisation Todt and the German military exercised no direct authority over it. The work began in March 1942 and priority was given to constructing military and port facilities. In 1943, with the focus of the war in Western Europe centred on the Mediterranean Theatre, there was little sense of urgency and work progressed slowly. As 1943 passed, Hitler's ambitious plans for a continuous belt of fortifications remained unrealised and, in many places, the Atlantic Wall was far from complete.



A fortified concrete gun emplacement in the Atlantic Wall.

In November 1943 Adolf Hitler issued his Directive No. 51 ordering the work on the Atlantic Wall to be stepped up and the German Armed Forces in Northwest Europe to be strengthened. Naval batteries and large artillery pieces were to

be mounted in near impregnable concrete bunkers, every beach was to be made impassable, and thousands of smaller artillery pieces, machine-gun and mortar positions were to be in place by the end of April 1944. Every port was to become a fortress provisioned and garrisoned to withstand a siege.

At the end of 1943, the Führer appointed Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel as the Inspector General Atlantic Wall Defences. Generalfeldmarschall Rommel, famous for his manoeuvre warfare campaign in North Africa, quickly applied himself to the task and inspected the Atlantic Wall along the coast of Northern France and Belgium. He determined that the existing fortifications were inadequate and immediately set about improving and strengthening them.



Generalfeldmarschall Rommel inspecting the beach defences of the Atlantic Wall. [IWM HU 28594]

Under Generalfeldmarschall Rommel's direction, a string of reinforced concrete pillboxes was built along the beaches and slightly inland to house light artillery pieces, anti-tank guns and machine guns. He had a series of anti-tank minefields laid along the coast, that were in places, up to ½ mile wide and it was intended to back these up with a further belt of mines that would extend up to 5 miles deep. The beaches were planted with various obstacles including lines of poles, log ramps, 'Hedgehogs' and 'Belgium Gates'. Many of these obstacles were mined, whilst others were positioned so that they were just under the surface of the water. In addition, he had likely airborne landing sites flooded and planted with log poles, known as 'Rommel's Asparagus', to deter airborne assault. Generalfeldmarschall Rommel intended to turn the beaches of Northwest Europe into a zone of death.

By May 1944, the defences in the Pas-de-Calais area were almost complete and those along the Calvados Coast of Normandy, whilst far from finished, were still quite formidable. However, their major weakness was that they had no real depth and once the defences had been breached an attacking force would not face any further significant fortifications. Two key vulnerabilities were the lack of appropriate ammunition for the various artillery pieces, many of which were captured French, Soviet or Czechoslovakian, and the inconsistent quality of the troops manning the Atlantic

Wall. Whilst there were some very formidable units deployed throughout Northwest Europe, many of those manning the Atlantic Wall defences were troops that were only fit for static duty, being too young, too old, suffering from a disability that would preclude them from any other form of military service or those recovering from their wounds sustained in other Theatres of War.

During April and May 1944, Hitler improved the strength of the German Armed Forces in Northwest Europe by increasing the number of divisions available from 53 to 57. The German 3rd Air Fleet of more than 1,000 aircraft was sent to France and in the event of an invasion they were to be backed up by aircraft from Germany. Whilst the Atlantic Wall remained the principal line of defence, Hitler despatched Panzer Group West to France as a Theatre Reserve. Their main task was to counterattack any invasion and contain the lodgement whilst reinforcements were transferred from other sectors or fronts.

The Allied Strategy

The British had begun to prepare theoretical plans for a return to the continental mainland of Europe shortly after the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in 1940. The Americans started to formulate their plans immediately after Germany declared war on the United States on 11 December 1941. General George C Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff, appointed his protégé, Major General Dwight D Eisenhower, to the US Army's War Plans Division and commissioned him to design an operational scheme for an Allied victory in Europe.



Major General Dwight D Eisenhower in December 1943. [IWM TR 207]

Between 22 December 1941 and 14 January 1942, the American President Franklin D Roosevelt and the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met in Washington DC at the ARCADIA Conference. It was the first meeting on military strategy between Britain and the United States and began an unparalleled period of wartime cooperation between the

two countries. This Anglo-American cooperation was formally embodied in the creation of the Combined Chiefs of Staff which was not so much a body, but a system for consultation. They also agreed that the prime objective was the defeat of Nazi Germany, the 'Europe first' strategy, and to combine military resources under one command in the European Theatre of Operations.



The Combined Chiefs of Staff at Quebec on 23 August 1943. [IWM H 32416]

In early 1942, American forces began embarking for England including the newly formed United States 8th Army Air Force. This build-up was the first step to the invasion of continental Europe, which the Soviet Union's leader, Joseph Stalin, had been pressing the leaders of the Western Allies to mount as a second front. Throughout 1942 this build-up continued, but with the necessary landing craft and transport shipping required to take such an army across the English Channel still to be built, many of these troops were redeployed to the Mediterranean Theatre.

In August 1942, the Allies carried out a raid on the port of Dieppe in France that ended in utter failure. A force consisting of 4,963 Canadians, 1,005 British Commandos, 50 US Rangers and 15 Free Frenchmen attempted a frontal landing on the defended harbour. The operation had relied upon surprise as the basis for the attack, but on the way in they ran into an armed German cargo convoy and their cover was blown. As they approached Dieppe, they advanced on the shore under the guns of a German artillery battery that was on full alert. It was a complete disaster and of the 6,086 men who made it ashore, 3,367 (almost 60%) were either killed, wounded, or captured.

The sacrifices made by the force at Dieppe were not in vain as the Allies learned some important lessons. Firstly, that a frontal assault on a defended harbour should not be repeated and secondly, that the infantry carrying out a seaborne assault should be supported by armour capable of defeating pillboxes. It also became apparent that the ability to ship food, munitions, equipment, and reinforcements would be critical to the invaders right from the beginning and, consequently, the concept of taking a port with them came into being. Another important outcome of the Dieppe raid

was that it reassured the Germans that their strategy of the Atlantic Wall was the answer to defeating any invasion launched from the shores of Britain.

In 1943, the principal theatre of operations for the Western Allies was the Mediterranean and in January President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met again at Casablanca to plan their future military strategy. They had invited the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to attend, but he declined.



The Combined Chiefs of Staff with President Franklin D Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the Casablanca Conference 14 January 1943. [IWM NY 6074]

The CASABLANCA Conference primarily concentrated on the invasion of Sicily following the completion of the North African campaign, assigning forces to the war in the Pacific, and outlining operations in the Far East. Although the conference did not include any immediate plans for an invasion in Northwest Europe, Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Morgan was appointed Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (designate) [COSSAC] and tasked with drawing up preliminary plans for an invasion. An outcome of the CASABLANCA Conference was the demand for the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers by Britain and the United States.

In March 1943, Lieutenant General Morgan began preparing the outline plans for the invasion. By July 1943, the initial staff plan was ready, and he presented it to the British Chiefs of Staff Committee under a cover letter dated 15 July 1943.

In August 1943, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met at the QUADRANT Conference in Quebec and discussed plans for the invasion of Italy and France. Differences between the British and American strategies for coordinating the Italian campaign and the invasion of Normandy were not resolved, and they agreed to meet later that year in Cairo and Tehran.

In November - December 1943, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill had a series of meetings first in Cairo, then in Tehran followed by Cairo again. In Tehran, they met with Joseph Stalin and the chief topic was the creation of a second front in Northwest Europe.



Joseph Stalin, Franklin Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill at Tehran. [IWM A 20711]

The Soviet leader agreed to mount an offensive on the Eastern Front to coincide with the invasion of Northwest Europe, and the Western Allies agreed to proceed with formalising their preparations for the long-promised invasion in the West. It was also agreed that the date for an invasion in Northwest Europe would be set for May 1944, despite Winston Churchill's belief that this would be too early. At their second meeting in Cairo, the Combined Chiefs of Staff created the temporary position of Supreme Commander Allied Expeditionary Forces for the invasion and General Dwight D Eisenhower was appointed to this new post.

The task given to the Allied Expeditionary Force was to mount and carry out an invasion of Northwest Europe using forces established in Britain. The lodgement area had to contain enough port facilities to maintain the invasion force and allow follow-up forces to be landed. Naval and air cover for the invasion were essential and thus the area selected needed to be within fighter cover from airfields in England. To provide enough port facilities, the choice of the invasion area was quickly whittled down to three main options that were in the range of the necessary fighter cover:

1. The Netherlands

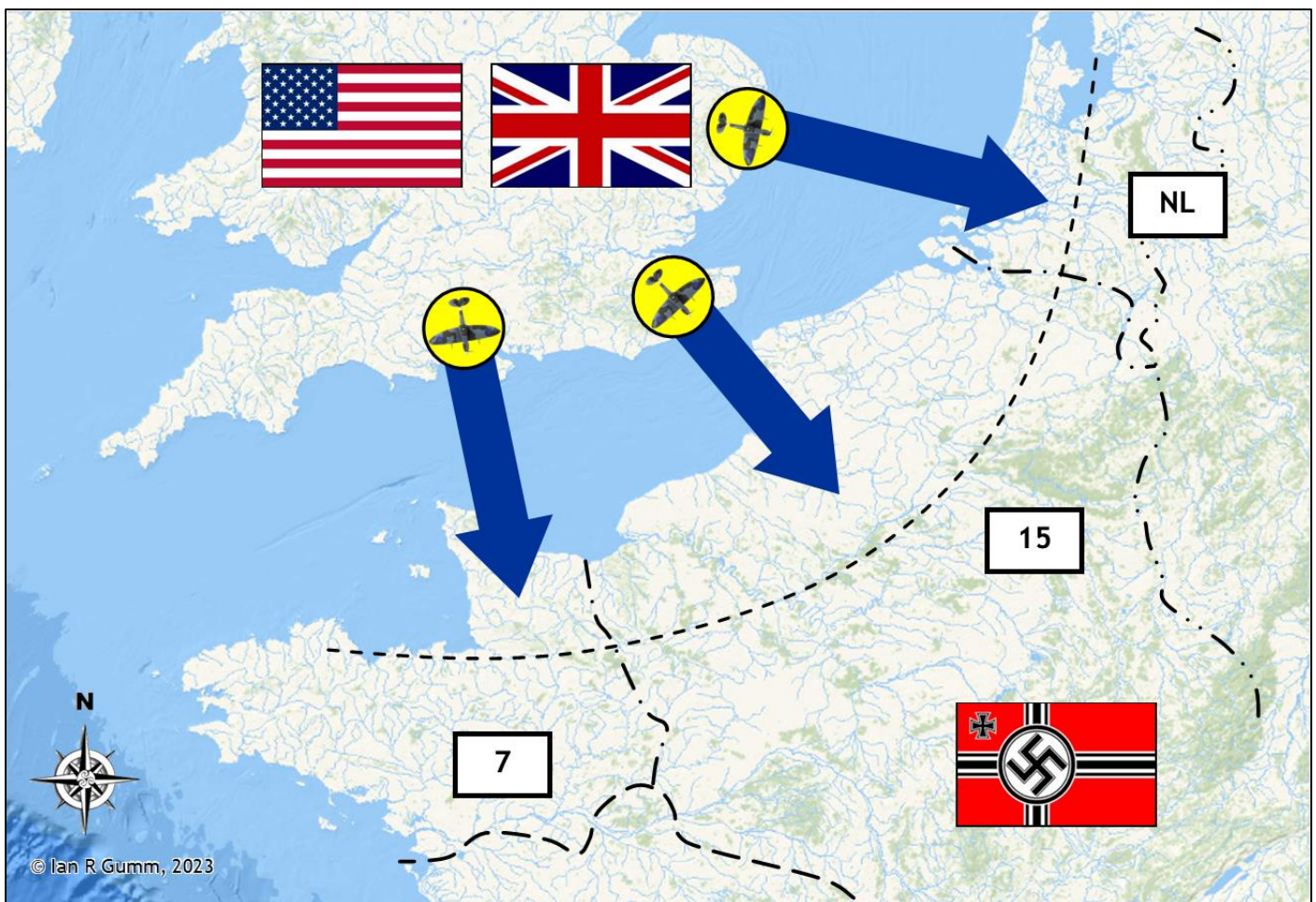
This option was ultimately discounted, as it would be too difficult to seize the seaports necessary to ensure that any invasion force could be supplied and augmented with enough follow-up forces to mount subsequent operations.

2. *Pas-de-Calais*

This was the logical choice as it had the highest capacity for delivering men and equipment and passing them inland once a lodgement had been established. It was only 22 miles from Dover, making it the shortest sea crossing, and provided the optimum air support and rapid provision of airfields. It was the obvious choice, and the Germans knew it. They had concentrated their most formidable defences in this area and positioned more of their armoured units within striking distance to mount a speedy response if the Allies landed there.

3. *Calvados Coast, Normandy*

This area was far enough from the obvious choice to have a decoy effect on the German defenders but was still within fighter range and was less well-defended than the Pas-de-Calais area. Cherbourg and Le Havre were suitable seaports, and their early capture would be invaluable to bring in the necessary supplies that would be needed for the vast body of men required for the campaign.



The Allied invasion choices. [© Ian R Gumm, 2023]

The beaches of the Calvados Coast in the Bay of the Seine, option 3, was the area selected as the most suitable for Operation OVERLORD.

Look Forward

In the next part of D-Day, 6 June 1944 - The Greatest Seaborne Invasion The World Has Ever Known, I examine the Opposing Forces employed within the invasion area on D-Day.

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