



Normandy Dust Bowl, by Robert Hyndman [CWM 19740549-001]

# 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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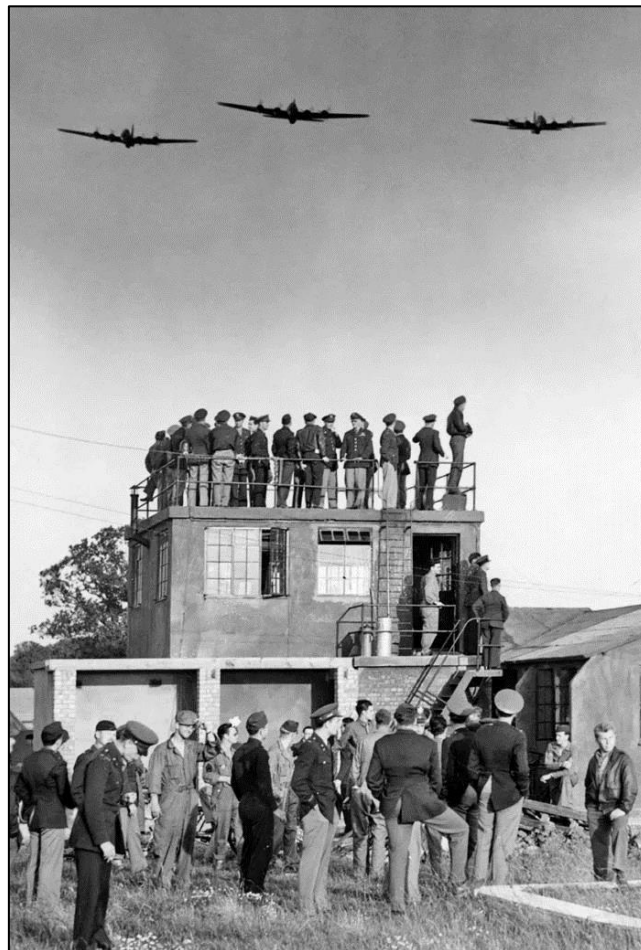
## PART SIX – THE ALLIED AIR FORCE

The Allied Air Forces began flying missions in preparation for the invasion long before anyone set foot on the beaches on 6 June 1944 and air power was key to the success of the landings. Without air superiority, the naval forces transporting the troops would have come under an aerial attack and sustained unacceptable losses even before they reached the invasion zone, and the soldiers wading ashore would have been decimated.

At the beginning of the war, the commanders of the RAF's Bomber Command believed their aircraft had the speed and the defensive armament to fly unescorted daylight operations against the enemy, but they quickly learnt that this was not the case. Following a series of utterly disastrous raids, Bomber Command changed tactics and became, almost exclusively, a night bombing force for the rest of the war. Under cover of darkness, the bombers were less vulnerable and enjoyed some early success. The Germans, however, were quick to counter the night bombing raids and created a defensive line, known to the RAF as the Kamhuber Line, by moving radar-directed night-fighters forward to patrol designated areas in front of the Ruhr through which the RAF's bombers had to fly. By the end of 1941, the Germans had secured air superiority over the night skies of the continent.

In February 1942, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris was appointed as the head of the RAF's Bomber Command and he was directed to carry out the Area bombing directive, which became an important part of the total war waged against Germany. At first the success of these raids was limited due to the small numbers of aircraft used and the lack of navigational aids. However, with the introduction of better aircraft and electronic navigation aids, Air Chief Marshal Harris began pushing for raids on a much larger scale, and the concept of thousand bomber raids came into being. The first "thousand bomber raid", Operation MILLENNIUM, was launched on the night of 30/31 May 1942 against Cologne. These massive raids became Air Chief Marshal Harris's mantra for the rest of the war as he believed that massive and sustained area bombing alone would force Germany to surrender.

The arrival the US Army Air Force in mid-1942, General Carl Spatz, the commander of the US Strategic Air Forces [USSTAF] in Europe, revived the idea of carrying out daylight bombing. The very first bombing mission carried out by the VIII Bomber Command, which became the US Eighth Air Force [8 AAF], was an attack on the railway marshalling yards at Sotteville-lès-Rouen in support the upcoming Operation JUBILEE, the amphibious landings at Dieppe. In the afternoon of 17 August 1942, eighteen B-17 bombers of the 97th Bomb Group [97BG] took off from RAF Grafton Underwood; twelve carried out the raid while the other six carried out a diversionary mission.



B-17s of the 97BG returning from the raid at Sotteville-lès-Rouen on 17 August 1942. [Photopress]

The attacking force was split into two formations: the first led by the commanding officer of the 97BG, Colonel Frank Alton Armstrong Jr in "Butcher Shop" (41-2578), and the second was led by Brigadier-General Ira Clarence Eaker, the

VIII Bomber Command's commander, in "Yankee Doodle" (41-9023). Escorted by four squadrons of RAF Spitfires, the 97BG's Flying Fortresses dropped 37,000lb of bombs, half of which hit the target area. All the aircraft returned safely to base, despite being engaged by flak and fending off the attention of 30 or more Focke-Wulf FW 190s as they crossed the coast on the return leg. Sergeant Kent R West, the ball turret gunner in "Birmingham Blitzkrieg" (41-9100), shot down the FW-190A-3 (4332) piloted by Leutnant Herbert Horn, to become the first 8 AAF gunner to receive credit for a combat kill.



Boeing B-17E Flying Fortress bombers of the 97BG form up over England, 1942. [USAAF B-26340]

Throughout this period the 8 AAF was starved of resources as aircraft earmarked for the campaign in Western Europe were diverted to support the invasion of North Africa, Operation TORCH, towards the end of 1942.

On 9 October 1942, 107 B-17s and Consolidated B-24 Liberators of Brigadier-General Eaker's 8 AAF set out to attack the steel, locomotive and freight car works at Lille. Only 69 reached and bombed the target, but post-raid analysis showed only nine bombs had fallen within 500 yards of the aiming point. Four American aircraft were lost and, although they claimed to have shot down 56 German fighters, only two Luftwaffe aircraft were lost. The American's early efforts were, however, thwarted by bad weather, and by the end of 1942 the 8 AAF attacks had all but ground to a halt.

At the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, the concept of a combined bomber offensive was discussed and agreed. On 4 February 1942, a directive was issued that set out a series of priorities for this combined bomber force. The primary objective was the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to the point where their capacity for armed resistance was fatally weakened. To this were added specific targets in order of priority: German submarine construction yards, German aircraft industry, transportation, oil, and other targets in the enemy war industry. Further targets could be considered if of importance, either from a political or military point of view. These included Berlin

when conditions were suitable, and the bombers could achieve results detrimental to the morale of the enemy or favourable to that of the Russians. The 'POINTBLANK' directive, as this became known, was formally approved by the Combined Chiefs of Staff with effect from 10 June 1943.

For the invasion of France, a new Allied Expeditionary Air Force (AEAF) was formed to support the Allied armies invading Europe. In August 1943, Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory was appointed as the commander of the AEAF. While the role of its fighters, fighter-bombers, and tactical bombers of the Second Tactical Air Force [2 TAF] and the US Ninth Air Force [9 AAF] was clear, less clear was how best to employ the RAF's Bomber Command and the United States Army Air Forces [USAAF] Strategic Bombers, which were the most powerful air force component.

The Allied strategic bomber forces were switched from the bombing of German industry to the destruction and neutralisation of the Luftwaffe's fighters and destruction of the transport network in Northern France. This change in emphasis was opposed by Air Chief Marshal Harris and he paid only lip-service to the plan and chose to concentrate on city raids.



Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory RAF.



Air Chief Marshal Harris RAF.



Brigadier-General Ira C Eaker USAAF.

The first American strategic bomber mission against a German target took place on 27 January 1943 and it was not a success. Only 58 of the 91 bombers that took part successfully attacked, and three were lost.

In the early days, the Americans bombed in elements of three aircraft. Grouping a pair of these elements improved their defensive capabilities. This ultimately led to the "combat box", a group of three squadrons stacked in a way that offered them the best field of fire, especially against head-on attacks. The 1st Bombardment Wing went further and created the "combat wing" comprising two or three combat boxes with each box being made up of aircraft from a single Bomb Group. What might have at first appeared to be the random disbursement of up to 54 bombers in the daylight skies became the maximum defensive formation and a standard for the command. It could be modified to open out in the event of heavy predicted flak or closed more tightly if intercepted by fighters.

The 8 AAF attacks in the first half of 1943 were largely trial and error. Of the 40 B-17 raids carried out between 27 January and 17 July 1943, 27 were directed against U-boat bases and supply depots, with the balance against miscellaneous industrial targets and airfields. From May 1943 onwards, the 8 AAF began to expand rapidly as more resources became available. However, as the losses of both aircrews and aircraft mounted, the USAAF Chief of Staff General Harley "Hap" Arnold was becoming increasingly disappointed with the 8 AAF's results.

The increase in resources gave Brigadier-General Eaker's 8 AAF headquarters more confidence, and they planned a major attack to take place in early August. Operation JUGGLER, the code name given to the raid, was carried out by two Combat Bombardment Wings: Brigadier-General Robert Boyd Williams's 1st Combat Bombardment Wing (Heavy) [1 CBW(H)] and Colonel Curtis E LeMay's 4th Combat Bombardment Wing (Heavy) [4 CBW(H)]. The 1 CBW(H) consisted of nine Bombardment Groups, including all the original B-17 groups, based in the Midlands, and the 4 CBW(H) consisted of twelve Bombardment Groups centred on East Anglia. There were two targets, the ball bearing production plants at Schweinfurt and Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter factory at Regensburg. The plan was for the two Combat Bombardment Wings to attack their separate targets in close succession to dilute the Luftwaffe's capacity to mount a concentrated fighter response.



The bombs of the 385th Bomb Group hitting Regensburg on 17 August 1943. [USAAF O-5-1-385]

Colonel LeMay's 4 CBW(H) was to attack the fighter manufacturing plants at Regensburg and then fly on to bases in North Africa, while Brigadier-General Williams's 1 CBW(H) followed closely behind before turning to the northeast to bomb the ball-bearing factories of Schweinfurt. It was hoped that by flying on to North Africa, the 4 CBW(H) would catch the German fighter force off balance and when 1 CBW(H) arrived on target the German fighter force would be on the ground rearming and refuelling after its action against the 4 CBW(H). Due to their limited range, the Republic P-

47 Thunderbolt fighters escorting the bombers could only protect the bombers as far as Eupen in German-occupied Belgium, and most of these fighters were assigned to support the Regensburg mission. In addition to the dual bombing missions, diversionary raids by medium bombers and fighters were also planned, with the intent of drawing away further attention from the larger inbound formations.

Also known as the Schweinfurt–Regensburg Raid, Operation JUGGLER took place on 17 August 1943, the anniversary of the first USAAF action in Europe. The weather was characteristically poor and the two combat wings took off with too large a gap between them. Consequently, the German fighters were able to rearm and refuel between attacks and took a heavy toll. Almost none of the P-47 Thunderbolt fighter units were able to take-off and rendezvous with their bomber groups. Of the 146 heavy bombers of Colonel LeMay's 4 CBW(H) that had set out for Regensburg, seven turned back, and 139 crossed the Dutch coast. Of that 139, 24 were lost during the raid. Of the 230 B-17s of Brigadier-General Williams's 1 CBW(H), that launched its attack later in the day, 36 were lost to German fighters and flak. At a time when 4 percent losses per sortie was considered the highest manageable loss rate the 8 AAF lost 17 percent of its bomber force in a single day, Operation JUGGLER was an unmitigated disaster.

Deep penetration strikes by the 8 AAF continued throughout the autumn of 1943. On 6 September 45 out of 407 bombers were lost on a strike against Stuttgart, and on 10 October 30 out of 313 were lost on a strike at Münster – 12 B-17s of the 100th Bomb Group failed to return, just one aircraft, Royal Flush flown by Lieutenant Rosenthal, landed back at Thorpe Abbots. The losses were such, that serious consideration was given to abandoning daylight precision bombing altogether and converting the aircraft of the 8 AAF to join in the RAF's night raids.

On 14 October 1943 the 8 AAF returned to Schweinfurt, for a second raid, also known as Black Thursday. US intelligence claimed the first Schweinfurt–Regensburg mission in August had reduced bearing production by 34 percent. Although that first raid had cost many bombers, a follow-up raid was planned. This had to be postponed whilst the 8 AAF rebuilt and plans for the return mission were modified based on the lessons learned. This time, additional fighter escorts to cover the outward and return legs of the operation were added and the entire force was concentrated on Schweinfurt alone. Of the 291 B-17 Flying Fortresses that took part in the mission, 60 were lost and 17 more were so heavily damaged that they had to be scrapped, and another 121 were damaged to one degree or another. These losses represented over 26 percent of the attacking force and aircrew losses were equally severe, with 650 men lost, 22.4 percent of the of 2,900 bomber crews. To add insult to injury, they found out that, during the time between the raids, Germany had found a foreign supplier of ball-bearings.

The unescorted raids by the 8 AAF in 1943 saw hundreds of American bombers shot down and they had asked for assistance from the RAF's Fighter Command. The RAF's fighters, however, were already employed carrying out their own missions. For much of 1943 and the first half of 1944, up to the launch of the invasion of Normandy on 6 June, the RAF's Fighter Command was occupied defending the skies over Britain and protecting the Allied Naval and ground forces as they built up the strength for D-Day. The beginning of 1944 saw the 8 AAF reinforced, and part of this reinforcement was the arrival of the long-range North American P-51 Mustang.



North American P-51 Mustang.

At the beginning of 1944, the Allied planners sought to identify suitable objectives for the heavy bomber force to support the preparations for the invasion of Normandy. Three key objectives were determined:

- Gaining Air Superiority – The degradation of the Luftwaffe’s fighters in the west to neutralise their ability to oppose an invasion from the air.
- Interdiction – The destruction of the road and rail network along which German reinforcements and supplies would need to travel to get to the invasion area.
- Neutralisation – The neutralisation of the Atlantic Wall and German units within the invasion zone.

Once the Allied Army had gotten ashore, battlefield interdiction and close air support would become the priority.

The neutralisation of the Luftwaffe’s fighters and the destruction of Germany’s fighter aircraft manufacturing bases was an important element in the preparation for the invasion of Normandy, as the failure to gain air superiority would make Allied bombing raids too costly and, unless Allied air superiority was achieved, D-Day itself would fail.

The development of bombing techniques to accurately mark targets at low-level by using one aircraft as a dive-bomber and releasing markers from 400ft instead of dropping them from 12,000ft by 617 (Dambusters) Squadron RAF eventually led to a raid being authorised against the Gnome-Rhone aero engine factory at Limoges, France. Wing Commander Leonard Cheshire, the 617 Squadron’s commander, championed this new technique and gave assurances that all bombs would be dropped on target. A compromise was reached, whereby the aircraft would make several dummy passes to allow employees time to get clear before dropping their bombs, and the raid took place on 8 February 1944. The marking of the target and bombing was faultless, the dummy passes allowing workers to escape before the target was demolished and the raid received considerable press coverage.

On 20 February 1944, RAF Bomber Command and the USAAF Strategic Bomber Command launched as sequence of raids, Operation ARGUMENT or, as it became known, 'Big Week', intended to attack the German aircraft industry to lure the Luftwaffe into a decisive battle. This was a series of systematic attacks on aircraft assembly plants and the factories proved more resilient than expected. Production was only partially affected, but the Luftwaffe, which had already been pulled back from France to defend German airspace, was decimated by free-ranging American fighters.

In late March, 617 Squadron RAF took control of two Mosquito aircraft to carry out the precision marking of targets and on the night of 5/6 April 1944 the RAF carried out a raid against the aircraft repair plant on the outskirts of Toulouse. Wing Commander Cheshire piloted one of the Mosquitos and accurately marked the target for its precision bombing by Air Vice Marshall the Hon Sir Ralph Cochrane's Number 5 Group RAF, which included 17 Lancaster bombers of 617 Squadron. Following the success of the raid Air Chief Marshall Harris authorised 5 Group RAF to act as an 'independent air force' using its own marking techniques. The "5 Group Method" of target marking could only be used when the Aiming Point was clearly visible and if cloud obscured the target, they, like the rest of Bomber Command, had to bomb blind.



De Havilland Mosquito FB Mark VI. [IWM HU81336]

The German losses prior to June 1944 were high and the casualty rate of their pilots rose alarmingly. Air Chief Marshall Harris said:

*"Without a doubt, the air campaign was a key part of reducing the Luftwaffe's capabilities, ... Between 1 February and 1 June, the Luftwaffe lost 8,445 fighters. That equated to pilot losses of 20 to 25 percent each month, resulting in a staggering turnover of crews. It also meant diminished experience and crippling losses that could not be replaced. The tremendous valour and sacrifice of Allied aircrews ensured marginal Luftwaffe presence over Normandy in June."*



This, combined with the losses on the Eastern front and in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, severely depleted the Luftwaffe's fighter capability as the trainees who replaced those lost lacked the experience to survive for long in this hostile environment.

However, the resistance of both Air Chief Marshal Harris and General Spaatz to having their forces diverted from their strategic bombing campaign to support the invasion was proving problematic. They were opposed to serving under Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory, who was formerly head of Fighter Command and had no experience of bombing operations. Several Allied commanders, who thought that tactical objectives were best dealt with by the light bombers of the AEF, supported them. Consequently, both the RAF's Bomber Command and the USSTAF were formally placed under the direction of General Dwight D Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force [SHAEF].

On 17 April 1944 the SHAEF issued a directive which stated the primary mission of the heavy bombers was the destruction of the Luftwaffe's air combat strength and the disruption of rail communications to isolate the designated invasion area in Normandy. The first part of this was already well on the way to being achieved thanks to the USAAF's aggressive action and RAF's precision bombing raids.

The disruption of rail communications had already begun with the initial raid against the Trappes railway yards on the outskirts of Paris on the night of 6/7 March 1944.



The damage to the Trappes railway yards during the night of 6/7 March 1944.

Similar raids were carried out against the railheads at Le Mans and Amiens that same month and RAF losses were light. New targeting methods and techniques made it possible for the RAF crews to deliver their bombs with greater accuracy

that helped reduce the number of French casualties and both the RAF and USAAF stepped up their raids aimed at disrupting enemy transport infrastructure.

In all, RAF and USAAF bombers carried out operations against 72 separate rail centres in France, Belgium, and western Germany before D-Day. These included locomotive depots, repair facilities, and marshalling yards. The 37 assigned to the RAF's Bomber Command were either destroyed or seriously damaged and Bomber Command's night raids proved more accurate than those carried out by the Americans in daylight. Large numbers of locomotives were destroyed, and wagon numbers reduced from 70,000 to 10,000.

The RAF's Second Tactical Air Force [2 TAF] and the US Ninth Air Force [9 AAF], that formed the AEF's main force, would bear the brunt of the interdiction and neutralisation missions in preparation for D-Day. 2 TAF drew its units from both Fighter Command and Bomber Command and was composed of four separate groups: No. 2 Group with 12 bomber squadrons; No. 83 Group with 34 reconnaissance, fighter, and fighter-bomber squadrons; No. 84 Group with 31 squadrons; and No. 85 Group with 21½ squadrons. On 21 January 1944, command of 2 TAF passed to Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham and by D-Day 2 TAF had 1,576 aircraft within its 98½ squadrons to support the invasion.

On 16 October 1943, the Ninth Air Force formations in the Mediterranean were reassigned to the Twelfth Air Force. A new Ninth Air Force [9 AAF] was constituted in England and Major General Lewis Hyde Brereton was appointed its commander. The newly formed 9 AAF came under command of the AEF.

At D minus 50 days, the AEF began its interdiction attacks against rail centres. These attacks increased in ferocity and tempo up to the eve of the invasion and were accompanied by strategic bomber raids against the same targets. Part of the interdiction missions that the AEF carried out was targeted against military infrastructure to reduce the affect the Germans could have against the seaborne landings in Normandy. Fighters and fighter-bombers ranged across Northern France and the Low Countries attacking German airfields and bases, strafing enemy convoys and trains, and driving the Luftwaffe's fighters from the sky. They made it impossible for the Germans to move troops and supplies freely by day.

An example of an attack against the enemy's infrastructure is the raid that took place on the night of 3/4 May 1944 against the German Panzer Training centre at Mailly-le-Camp. 346 Avro Lancasters and 16 de Havilland Mosquitoes of Number 1 and Number 5 Groups RAF carried out a raid on the German Wehrmacht barracks and tank depot near the French village of Mailly-Le-Camp, 85 miles east of Paris. Mailly-Le-Camp was strategically located to make it possible for German tanks to be quickly mobilised against an Allied invasion and the Allied High Command decided to bomb the camp and training centre to remove the threat posed by these tanks. Although the target was accurately marked on schedule by Wing Commander Leonard Cheshire's Pathfinder Mosquitoes, the order for the main force to begin their bombing run failed to be sent due to radio communication problems. The delay resulted in several hundred fully laden Lancasters orbiting an assembly marker under a three-quarter moon in a cloudless sky, making them easy pickings for the Luftwaffe's night fighters. The Germans shot down a total of 42 Lancasters (some 11.6 percent of the attacking force) with the deaths of 258 RAF aircrew. The bombers dropped 1,500 tons of bombs on the barracks, causing

considerable damage. The Germans suffered heavy casualties with 218 men killed and 156 wounded, mostly Panzer Division NCOs. 114 barrack buildings and 47 transport sheds were destroyed, as were 102 vehicles, including 37 battle tanks. Despite the general accuracy of the bombing, the collateral damage sustained by the French was over 100 civilians killed.



A post-raid reconnaissance photograph showing the destruction at Mailly-Le-Camp during the raid on 3/4 May 1944.

The bridge campaign, which aimed at isolating the battlefield by cutting the River Seine bridges below Paris and the Loire bridges below Orleans, began on D minus 46. Fighter-bombers proved more efficient than medium or heavy bombers in these bridge raids, largely because their agility enabled them to make pinpoint attacks in a way that the larger bombers, committed to horizontal bombing runs, could not. The fighter-bombers also had the speed, firepower, and manoeuvrability to evade or even dominate the Luftwaffe. Though ground fire and enemy fighters did claim some attacking fighter-bombers, the loss rate was considerably less than it would have been with conventional attack.

The effect of the combined railway, infrastructure and bridge raids meant that German reinforcements, especially the panzer divisions which were heavily dependent on rail transport, had a far more difficult job reaching the front once the Allies were ashore.

By D minus 21, the AEF was attacking German airfields within a radius of 130 miles of the invasion area. Fighters strafed enemy aircraft on the ground and the bombers dropped their payloads to destroy the runways and airfield infrastructure. By D-Day, the Luftwaffe's presence in France and Belgium had been severely depleted and was only capable of offering a token resistance in comparison to the overwhelming number of Allied aircraft that would be supporting the invasion.

The AEF's fighters, fighter-bombers, and light-bombers also attacked the German Radar Stations covering the English Channel, thereby reducing the enemy's capability to detect the movement of shipping in large sectors.

Photoreconnaissance aircraft flew reconnaissance missions continually over Normandy and an equal or greater number were flown throughout occupied France and the Low Countries to keep the enemy guessing about the actual site of the attack. They provided vital intelligence for the planning of the D-Day assault, mapping out German positions and lines of communications.

In addition, minelaying operations by the RAF, an important but unsung part of Bomber Command's work, was also carried out. In the run-up to D-Day some 2,198 sorties were flown to sow mines in enemy waters on either side of the invasion corridor and at the mouth of harbours that sheltered German motor-torpedo boats [E-boats] and submarines.

On D-Day, 6 June 1944, a total of 171 British and USAAF fighter squadrons undertook a variety of tasks in support of the invasion. 15 squadrons provided cover to shipping in the English Channel, 54 provided beach cover, 33 undertook bomber escort and offensive fighter sweeps, 33 struck at targets inland from the landing area, and 36 provided direct air support to invading forces.

Despite the intensive air and naval bombardment of coastal defences, most of these were intact when the invasion force hit the beach. This was particularly true at OMAHA beach, where American forces suffered serious casualties and critical delays. Despite a massive series of attacks by the 8 AAF's B-17s, B-24 Liberators and medium bombers in the early hours of 6 June, the invading troops were hung up on the beach. The air commanders had predicted that the air and naval bombardments would not achieve the desired degree of destruction of German defensive positions and the Army's general optimism that these would clear the beaches before its approach was shattered.

On D-Day over 11,590 Allied aircraft of all types were involved, 5,656 of these were RAF. What is often forgotten is that over 1,800 RAF personnel and 456 vehicles landed on the beaches and by 9 June, this had increased to over 3,500 RAF personnel and 815 vehicles in Normandy, providing anti-aircraft protection, forward controlling, airfield construction, and aircraft servicing.

In the following days, as the German Air Force attempted to transfer aircraft to the invasion area, the Allied fighter pilots patrolled the perimeters establishing an aerial 'umbrella' and the bombers cratered the local enemy airfields, in addition to the continued bombardment of rail and road centres. While maintaining the air superiority the fighter pilots were able to exploit their situation, flying armed reconnaissance in the battle area, firing rockets, dropping bombs, and unleashing their machine guns.

At times the land battle ground to a halt and the Allied bombers were called in to break the stalemate. The Allies exploited their local air superiority to the full. Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel reported on 12 June 1944:

*"The enemy has complete command of the air over the battle zone and up to about 100 kilometres behind the front and cuts off by day almost all traffic on roads or by-ways or in open country.*

*Manoeuvre by our troops on the field of battle in daylight is thus almost entirely prevented, while the enemy can operate freely... Troops and staff have to hide by day in areas which afford some cover...*

*Neither flak nor the Luftwaffe seems capable of putting a stop to this crippling and destructive operation of the enemy's aircraft.”*

The role of the Allied Air forces during the preparation, invasion and post-invasion operations must not be forgotten as without the air superiority they provided; the result could have been very different.

## Look Forward

In Part Seven of D-Day, 6 June 1944 – The Greatest Seaborne Invasion The World Has Ever Known, I look at the part played by the French Resistance.

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