The D-Day Companion

Edited by Jane Penrose

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Extract

Foreword

In his book *Band of Brothers*, Stephen Ambrose tells the story of a group of citizen soldiers who became an elite company of paratroopers in the American 101st Airborne Division. They shared good and bad World War II experiences – from training in Toccoa, Georgia, to Albourne, England; the battles of Normandy, Market Garden, and Bastogne; and finally reaching Hitler's Eagle's Nest in Berchtesgaden, in May 1945.

This D-Day Companion has been composed by an elite group of historians who have worked to become a literary "band of brothers," sharing with the reader the input of all those involved in the most important event of our generation – D-Day, June 6, 1944, which launched the attack on Hitler's Fortress Europe.

In combat, a soldier such as I was can only tell his memories of his "field of fire." In this compelling account of D-Day you will have the opportunity to view the war through the eyes of all branches of service. This will include President Franklin D Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the commanding generals – Eisenhower, Montgomery and Rommel – the planners, the tacticians, and the men on the line, Allied and German.

As I write this foreword, almost 60 years later, I find it strange the things that stick in my mind, never to be forgotten.

In the few days before D-Day I remember the sadness of my British family, with whom I was fortunate enough to have lived. They said goodbye, knowing without being told that this was the real thing. As we went down the road in trucks, I see in memory my British "sister," Elaine, walking ahead of us and turning to wave goodbye.

At the airfield where we loaded up, I remember the feeling of relief. "At last! At last! We're going!" After all the months of training, day and night, in heat and cold, wet and tired, waiting, waiting, waiting, we could finally put it all to use.

How surprised we were to see the British men on the airfield with tears in their eyes as they watched us file to the planes. I recall their shouts

of good luck – they, who had been at war much longer than we, found it hard to stand by.

In the plane with my head out the door, I could see the planes in front and behind us in V-of-V formations, nine abreast. They seemed to fill the sky. We had seen them on the airfield, but now their power filled the air.

Then, the thrill to look down at the English Channel and see the vast magnitude of ships of all sizes streaming in the same direction – ships filled with men counting on us to pave the way for them.

My mind filled with the excitement of being a vital part of the biggest invasion in history, and the tremendous responsibility I now faced of leading men in actual battle, all of us for the first time. I prayed that I was up to the challenge.

Memories of the Normandy jump, the landing, joining others to walk to our destination, Causeway #2, even the battle at Brécourt, remain clear and filled with vivid snapshots of memory.

I recall the despair of the loss of all my equipment, and the relief of replacing it with like equipment taken from the bodies of dead Germans and GIs. How good was the momentary satisfaction when I first shot one of the enemy. I sent a prayer of thanks to that soldier who had done his job of zeroing his rifle in properly.

I remember the humility I felt when "Popeye" Wynn kept saying,

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I'm sorry!" when he was wounded.

I felt such excitement when I found those maps the Germans had left at the gun position – maps that detailed their fortifications for the whole UTAH Beach peninsula.

How shocking to learn that our whole headquarters' plane was the one we had seen go down in flames. I was now the company commander simply by having survived the jump.

After the battle, how proud I was of all our men. They had obeyed orders instantly, had moved forward deliberately, and worked together to eliminate the battery of four 105mm cannon at Causeway #2. I wished none had been wounded or lost, but I knew there would be many battles to face and we would lose more.

Perhaps one of the most poignant things I remember was days later when I finally got to the beach. In surprise, my emotions welled up at the sight of the American flag planted there. I have never looked at our flag since without that memory in my mind.

D-Day was the beginning of the end of Hitler's dream of conquering all Europe and eventually the world. At last the tide was turned and he was on the defensive. We had our feet on the Continent and refused to leave until we had liberated France, Holland, and Belgium.

After seeing D-Day through the eyes of this group of distinguished historians, you will understand and appreciate the tremendous job that was done on June 6, 1944, to give everybody the Freedom of Speech, the Freedom of Worship, the Freedom from Fear and the Freedom from Want which we now enjoy. These Four Freedoms were given as goals in the State of the Union Speech on January 6, 1941, by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Although we have not achieved perfection in these goals, we continue to set an example for the whole world.

Major Richard Winters, June 2003

1

"The great crusade" Introduction

Professor Samuel J Newland

"Soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force, you are about to embark upon the great crusade towards which we have striven these many months."

General Dwight D Eisenhower in his address to Allied forces, June 6, 1944

Embedded in the memories of people of every generation are key events, defining moments which will be remembered for the rest of their lives. For millions of contemporary citizens from the Western nations, the events of September 11, 2001, in New York City will be one such key memory. A previous generation however, the generation that lived through and fought World War II, witnessed many defining moments. Some of their memories tend to focus on events that have special meaning to a particular nation. For example, few Frenchmen of that generation will ever forget the 1940 Fall of France and the vivid image of German soldiers marching, daily, down the Champs Elysées to the Place de la Concorde. Citizens of the United Kingdom have an enduring memory of the Blitz of 1940, when London endured the merciless pounding by the Luftwaffe. They will not forget the "Miracle of Dunkirk," the rescue of the British Empire's soldiers from France. US citizens of the wartime generation clearly remember December 7, 1941, when, without warning, the Japanese Navy staged its surprise attack on the US fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawai'i.

Yet, from the World War II era there is one event, one memory, that transcends national experiences and unites the Western Allies. That event is D-Day, June 6, 1944.

The invasion of German-occupied France by an Allied joint force remains an accomplishment that is undiminished by the passage of over half

a century. As readers look back at that event, through this commemorative volume, it is appropriate to ponder and evaluate the significance of D-Day. In short, as we proceed into the 21st century, what should be remembered and what can be learned from this legendary operation?

The importance of superiority

Generations which were not a part of this epic undertaking should consider that an invasion of the Continent was a decided but necessary risk. If it succeeded, it would serve as the precursor to victory over Nazi Germany. If it failed, it would have been a bitter defeat that would likely prolong the war. Defeating Hitler's regime, and the military forces that had allowed it to extend its sway over most of Europe was, to say the least, a daunting task. In early 1944, the main areas where Allied troops could clearly take comfort in their success was in the air and on the seas. By 1944, the Kriegsmarine that had menaced the sea lanes with ships like the *Graf Spee* and the *Bismarck* could not afford to put its remaining capital ships to sea. Instead, it was forced to relegate what remained of its small fleet to relatively safe harbors, in the hope that they would not be sunk. The powerful U-boat fleet, which had terrorized the North Atlantic and threatened the sea lanes that supported Britain, was systematically being hunted down by Allied air and sea assets. U-boats were no longer the hunters, but rather the hunted. If an invasion were to occur, the German Navy could only hope to contest an Allied invasion fleet in the English Channel through raids by their fast and maneuverable E-boats, or possibly through limited operations by their rapidly diminishing U-boat fleet. By 1944, serious resistance by the German Navy was, at best, a dubious prospect.[1]

The possibility of effective resistance by the German Luftwaffe was only a little better. That proud air arm, which had ruled the skies over eastern and western Europe from 1939–42, had begun a gradual decline in 1943. By early 1944, due to the steady attrition of its pool of skilled pilots, over-dependence on outdated airframes, and an inadequate training base, the Luftwaffe had clearly lost the air war. When, rather than if, an Allied invasion force appeared off the coast of France, the Luftwaffe could hope to stage some limited sorties against the Allies, but their assistance to the German defenders overlooking the French beaches would be limited. For certain, the German combined air/land operations of the early war years were a thing of the past.

Despite this Allied superiority in the air and on the seas, a major obstacle still remained for the Western Allies and their planned invasion of Fortress Europe – the German Army. This force had risen from the ashes like the proverbial phoenix following Hitler's assumption of power in 1933, and had established itself as a leading military power in a relatively brief period of time. The German Army, which prior to 1933 was restricted by the Versailles Treaty from possessing tanks or military aircraft, had by 1940 become the foremost proponent in the use of combined arms operations, allowing it to repeatedly dominate the battlefield. Thus, in the time that elapsed between September 1, 1939, and December 5, 1941, when the Russian counterattack rolled the Germans back from the gates of Moscow, the German Army was able to amass an almost unblemished string of victories in campaigns against Poland, France, the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and Yugoslavia. By the end of 1941, victory had only eluded the Germans in their wars against Britain and the Soviet Union. At the end of 1941, the ultimate fate of the Soviet Union was still in doubt.

Even after the German debacle at Stalingrad in early 1943, the German Army was still a formidable force, as the Russians would soon learn. While still suffering from the Russian offensive that bagged the 6th Army at Stalingrad, its capabilities allowed it to conduct von Manstein's famous "backhand" response. This counterstroke sent the Russian Army reeling back in retreat, allowing the Germans to recapture the important city of Kharkov, and stabilize the front. According to some German writers, this resilience of the German Army caused Stalin to consider negotiating an end to the war. Even the German Army's much-analyzed failure in the battle at Kursk, initiated on July 5, 1943, was more of an example of Hitler's bungling and interference in military matters than of the declining capabilities of the German Wehrmacht.

Granted, starting with mid-1943, the military fortunes of the German Army began a steady decline. But, even as Germany lost terrain, troops and equipment, the amount of territory it had to defend also diminished. Less terrain to defend and occupy, increased recruiting of Germans and kindred peoples from other European nations, and the reorganization of the German wartime industry by Albert Speer meant that, as 1944 dawned, the German Army was still a formidable adversary. It may have been a wounded giant, but the giant was not yet approaching death. The army was still a military force which, even that late in the war, could and did punish its adversaries, as would later be demonstrated in the Huertgen and the Ardennes.[2]

The strength of alliance

What today's readers should consider is the quandary facing the two Western Allies. That is, what was the best method to bring about the final defeat of the German Army? The Allies had the best overall foundation for vanquishing Nazi Germany – a strong alliance and a goal from which the Alliance never wavered. In fact, the most significant lesson of the World War II campaign in Europe is likely to be the power that can be and was generated by a strong alliance which holds firmly to a mutually accepted goal.

This concept was understood early in the war by the leaders of the two major democracies, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston S. Churchill. Early in his first year as Prime Minister, Churchill came to believe that the defeat of Nazi Germany would take the combined might of the English-speaking nations, specifically the British Empire and the "Great Republic across the seas," the United States. President Roosevelt, an anglophile, watched with great concern as the war clouds gathered over Europe in 1939. Roosevelt understood the importance of a strong bond between the two English-speaking nations, and as early as 1940 began to prepare his nation to support the British Empire, even before any type of official alliance was forged. The relationship between the two democracies became more formalized with the ABC Talks (or American–British Conversations) held in Washington between January and March, 1941. Through these talks the two nations agreed on a common goal, a goal that carried them through some of the darkest days of the war – the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Although the British–American alliance held firm throughout the war, the problem facing the two democracies was determining the best strategy to bring about the final defeat of Germany. The Allies could continue to nibble around the periphery, to weaken and attrit Germany's strength. After all, in 1942–43 battles were being won on the land-masses bordering the Mediterranean and on the Atlantic Ocean. However, the Allied goal was not merely winning battles or concluding victorious campaigns, it was the defeat and destruction of Nazi Germany. How to expeditiously accomplish this goal was important because, as a general rule, democracies do not normally exhibit the patience to pursue strategies that take a long time to bring success. Instead, they seek closure, an end to hostilities and a return to peacetime pursuits.

Thus, to accomplish this goal in a timely fashion, the American Army and forces drawn from the British Empire would have to conduct amphibious

landings, an invasion of the continent of Europe. Once a successful landing was made, it would have to be followed by a determined drive into the heartland of Germany, which would bring about a speedy conclusion to the war and return Europe and the world to a peacetime existence. June 6, 1944, was more than just another amphibious landing, like TORCH in North Africa or HUSKY in Sicily. It was the direct path to the German heartland and the destruction of Hitler's regime.

Decisions and resources

The basic question facing planners was when and where such an invasion should occur. At conferences held by the Western Allies at Casablanca, and the "Big Three" meeting at Tehran, the Allies quibbled and at times squabbled over when and where the main thrust would be aimed. Though the prospect was daunting, the leadership recognized that the final defeat of the German war machine would have to come through a forcible entry into the continent of Europe.

This was the only logical way to destroy Germany's army and its war-making capabilities. Regardless of whether it was in the vicinity of Calais, Normandy, or in southern France, an invasion of "Fortress Europe" would certainly have to happen.

Throughout most of 1943 the Germans gave little consideration to the possibility of an immediate invasion, although construction of the Atlantic Wall continued during the same year. Rather, they were occupied with the fall of Stalingrad and subsequent operations, and the collapse of Axis units in Tunisia. These military disasters were followed by the Allied invasion of Sicily and Italy and the subsequent overthrow of Mussolini. Still, in the collective opinion of *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) and Adolf Hitler, invasion of the European continent was not likely, something confirmed by the fact that German units were almost totally unprepared to repulse such an event. However, as Allied power grew throughout that year and into 1944, the Germans started to recognize that an invasion of the Continent would soon be attempted.

In late 1943, the German forces began to prepare in earnest to defeat a cross-Channel invasion. Narrowing their focus to the area from Calais through to Normandy, and under the command of the charismatic Erwin Rommel, feverish preparations were initiated to make the Atlantic coast a formidable defensive system. The pace of bunker and pillbox construction

accelerated, millions of mines were laid, and anti-landing-vessel devices were planted on the most likely beaches. France, which in 1942–43 had been lightly defended and had served as a reconstitution area for German troops mauled on the Eastern Front, became a hive of activity. Troop strengths were boosted and mobile reserve forces were designated and put into position to launch a counterattack in the event that an invasion occurred. Despite the military reverses of 1943 and early 1944, the German preparations to counter an Allied attack were ominous.

German preparations plus the defensive capabilities of the Wehrmacht meant that the Western Allies were not at all certain of a successful landing, even in 1944. The balance sheet shows that the military fortunes of the Western Allies to this point in the war were mixed. Since the beginning of the European conflict, Britain had fought long and hard against Nazi aggression, but with mixed results. It had, together with its French allies, lost its foothold on the Continent, but had bloodied the German nose in the Battle of Britain. British forces had lost the island of Crete but, after a long retreat, they had stopped the famed Afrika Korps at El Alamein. British forces, together with American units, had been successful at Sicily but, like their American allies, they had become bogged down in Italy due to a well-planned and executed German defense. Britain did not lack good soldiers or great commanders, but what it did lack was resources – men, the weapons of war, and secure sources of raw materials to fight the war.

In comparison, the United States, a relative newcomer to the war, had an abundance of resources, both raw materials and industries. It also had a rapidly expanding military force that drew from an ample population base. Conversely, US participation in the European war had to that point in time produced mixed results. Operation TORCH, the landings in North Africa, had been a significant accomplishment, but Kasserine Pass had been a decided embarrassment. Sicily and Salerno had again shown significant American capabilities, but Anzio had demonstrated problems with both American planning and leadership.

The task facing these Western Allies was exceptionally difficult. The insertion of a military force into hostile territory is one of the most hazardous operations that a commander and his headquarters can attempt, as noted by Russell Weigley in his outstanding book *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*:

"An amphibious assault is a frontal attack, with all the perils thereby implied. The assaulting troops have no room for maneuver. They cannot fall

back. They have only limited ability to outflank strong points. They cannot do anything subtle."[3]

Landings of this sort require troops well trained for such an operation, the necessary transport – in this case by land and sea – and a strong base of fire support to provide cover to the invasion force. Without these factors and sound leadership, the landings could result in a Gallipoli or Dieppe, both painful and costly defeats, a fact all too obvious to the British military establishment.

Despite all of these potential problems and perils, the invasion, codenamed OVERLORD, would have to be staged and would have to be staged at a time when the Germans were feverishly preparing their coastal defenses. In short, this was the quickest, the most decisive route to victory. Even though victories in the North Atlantic and in North Africa were not without merit, the road to victory both psychologically and militarily lay in an Allied force entering the heartland of Europe, fighting its way into Germany, and destroying the German Army and the war-making capabilities of the German nation. A quick and decisive victory was important because much of Europe had suffered under German occupation for some four years. Whilst not all Germans were barbarians, the barbarity of the National Socialist regime was truly a stain on Western society that had to be removed.

Learning from OVERLORD

Looking back after 60 years, the decision to take this risk was important not only because it would lead to the destruction of Hitler's regime, but also because it holds significant lessons, particularly for military planners today. D-Day serves as a prime example of the power and synergy that can be created through a strong alliance. In modern military history there are few better examples of a strong alliance than the one that existed between the United States and Great Britain. The strength of the alliance began at the top with the unique chemistry between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston S. Churchill. While each clearly and consistently represented the national interests of their individual countries, through their warm mutual respect and their common goal, Churchill and Roosevelt set an excellent example for waging warfare within an alliance.

The strength of alliance warfare can be seen at the highest military levels. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, had the support and respect of both Roosevelt and Churchill. Roosevelt sensed early on that Eisenhower held unique abilities to work within an alliance

structure. Eisenhower validated this trust on numerous occasions, not least of which was working with Churchill. Though Churchill was brilliant, working with the Prime Minister could at times be challenging, due to the latter's military background and his own strong opinions on strategy. Still, mutual respect and a common goal allowed these two men to develop a solid working relationship.

As the actual planning for OVERLORD proceeded, the importance of using the talents available through a strong alliance became evident. When Dwight D. Eisenhower was appointed Supreme Allied Commander and Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery was named the Ground Component Commander for the invasion (as well as Commander of the British 21st Army Group), these two senior officers were able to work closely together to develop a successful plan. In 1943, earlier planners had proposed a modest force of three divisions to invade the Continent and begin the process of unraveling Hitler's "Thousand-Year Reich." Eisenhower and Montgomery found the original 1943 plan far too weak and, through their combined efforts, a robust invasion force of five divisions, supported by three airborne divisions, was structured. Though later in the war they would have their differences, in the planning and implementation phases of OVERLORD, the talents of these two senior leaders were decidedly important for the successful invasion.

The solid commitment to use the combined abilities of the two English-speaking nations could be seen throughout Eisenhower's command structure. Thus, as 1944 began, Eisenhower's aide was Lt. Col. James Gault, a member of the Scots Guards. The air commander for the Allied Expeditionary Force was Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, a bona fide British hero from the Battle of Britain. As chief of Allied naval forces for the invasion Eisenhower selected Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay. From the beginning to the end OVERLORD was truly an alliance effort.

The synergy produced by the alliance went beyond that produced by the senior leadership. For example, through its geographical location and a number of excellent ports, Britain offered the prime launching platform for an invasion force. In fact, the British Isles became one immense marshaling yard for British, US, and Canadian troops. The combined power of the Royal Navy and US Navy offered the transportation assets for men and supplies, as well as the combined firepower to make the invasion a success. The combined air assets of Britain and the United States, both tactical aircraft and

strategic bombers, offered the Allies mastery of the skies, day and night. Through the Allied air and sea fleets the firepower needed to support the landings was available. Fortunately, the same strength in the air and on the seas was conspicuously absent for German forces.

In retrospect, consider what this alliance and the millions of soldiers and support personnel were able to accomplish. On June 5, an armada of some 7,000 Allied ships, consisting among others of 138 warships, 221 escort vessels, 287 minesweepers, 805 cargo vessels and 495 light coastal vessels proceeded across the Channel and converged on the Normandy peninsula. Above, 1,400 troop transports, 11,590 military aircraft of various types and 3,700 fighters supported the landings. Even more impressive, on one day, June 6, 1944, Allied naval and air assets put between 150,000 and 175,000 soldiers ashore. The Allied landings were so well planned, so well supported with an admirable deception plan that, together with a little bit of pure luck, they succeeded. Only on OMAHA Beach was there a possibility that the landings might fail, and even that was erased before the day was through.

For certain, the Normandy invasion was a tribute to the bravery of Canadian, British, American, Polish, Czechoslovakian, and Free French soldiers who faced the odds and successfully completed an amphibious landing, one of the toughest types of operation for a soldier. It was a tribute to the pilots who flew the transports through a hail of fire to land three airborne divisions on the European continent, and the navy personnel that guided the landing craft toward a well-defended shore. Above all, D-Day marked the initiation of the final chapter of the great crusade to destroy National Socialist Germany, and was a prime example of the might that can be employed through a strong alliance that has mutually agreed goals and excellent leadership. Despite the passage of 60 years, this is an example that should not be ignored in the 21st century.