

# D-Day or Operation Overlord, June 6, 1944

by Antony Beevor



*Omaha Beach, France, by Joseph Gary Sheahan, 1944.  
(US Army)*

As dawn broke on June 6, 1944, the Allied invasion fleet became visible crossing the choppy waters of the English Channel to France. None of those who took part in D-Day, whether soldier, sailor, or airman, would ever forget the sight. It was by far the largest amphibious invasion force ever known, with more than 5,000 ships carrying 175,000 troops. The view from the air was breathtaking. Many pilots said later that the sea was packed so full of ships that it almost looked as if you could walk to France.

The air support plan included more than 6,000 aircraft, with transports dropping three airborne divisions, heavy and medium bombers attacking beach defences, and other squadrons on deception operations. Typhoon and P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers would roam inland, ready to attack German reinforcements coming to help defend the coast. Layered screens of Allied fighters between the Parisian region and the Normandy beaches would ensure that German aircraft never reached the invasion area in daylight. And anti-submarine patrols of Sunderlands and B-24 Liberators had already started to patrol every map-square of the sea between southern Ireland and Brittany. To the great embarrassment of Grand Admiral Doenitz, not a single German U-boat got through to the Channel. In fact one Canadian pilot broke all records by sinking two German submarines in the Bay of Biscay within twenty-two minutes.

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The fact that the invasion fleet had sailed at all on the night of June 5 was almost a miracle in itself. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Allied supreme commander, had faced a terrible dilemma. On June 2 his meteorologists had warned of a bad storm. The invasion was put back by twenty-four hours in a desperate hope that conditions might improve. Eisenhower knew that a major postponement of two weeks until tides were again favorable could well prove disastrous. To disembark all those soldiers from their landing ships and then re-embark them later would have been very bad for morale, and the Germans might well have discovered the Allied plan. Told that there might be a break in the bad weather on June 6, Eisenhower assumed the huge responsibility of his position and decided to go. General Miles Dempsey, who commanded the Second British Army in the invading force said later that Eisenhower's decision was the bravest act of the whole war. It is easy for us to look back and think that D-Day was

bound to succeed, but it could have been a disaster.

Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy, was an intensely emotional event for all the Allies—Americans, British, Canadians, and men from thirty different countries, many of which had, like France, been occupied for the previous four years by the German Wehrmacht after its devastating victories in 1940. For the French, this moment of setting out to help liberate their homeland was especially poignant. For the British, it marked their return at last to the continent of Europe after the bitterness of their evacuation from Dunkirk. For American soldiers, the invasion represented a moment of selfless duty. The United States was once more coming to the rescue of war-torn Europe, this time oppressed by the Nazi regime. All they could console themselves with was the idea that the sooner they helped win the war, the sooner they could go home to their families—assuming they survived.

The pre-battle tension for everyone was considerable. Keith Douglas, one of the great soldier poets of the Second World War, who was killed in Normandy a few days later, wrote the following lines shortly before D-Day:

Actors waiting in the wings of Europe  
we already watch the lights on the stage  
and listen to the colossal overture begin.  
For us entering at the height of the din  
it will be hard to hear our thoughts, hard to gauge  
how much our conduct owes to fear or fury.

The overture was indeed colossal, whether from US Navy and Royal Navy battleships firing huge shells that screamed “like freight cars” over the heads of the soldiers packed into landing craft, or bombers coming in from the sea to smash the German defensive positions and barbed wire. Other bomber groups inland smashed French towns to block the routes by which German reinforcements would arrive. French civilians in Normandy suffered terribly. Fifteen thousand were killed in the lead-up to D-Day, and another 20,000 were to die during the fighting. Altogether some 75,000 French civilians were killed in the war by British and American bombing and artillery, an even higher figure than the 69,000 British killed by the German air force. It is a terrible irony that the armed forces from democracies ended up killing so many civilians because their commanders felt forced by the pressure of public opinion at home to reduce their own casualties as much as possible.

Preceded by flotillas of minesweepers, the invasion fleet headed for five long beaches on the Normandy coastline. They were codenamed Sword, Juno, and Gold (where two British and one Canadian division were landing), and Omaha and Utah (where the leading battalions of three American divisions were headed).

The task of the US 4th Infantry Division landing at Utah at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula, was to head inland to meet up with the paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions who had been dropped during the night. Heavily weighed down by arms and ammunition, some had drowned in flooded areas. Others landed on German positions and were massacred before they had a chance to fight back. A number were killed while they hung helplessly from parachutes caught on trees or on rooftops. But although widely scattered in the chaotic drops, most of them survived to join up in improvised groups and cause terror among the German defenders, who thought they were everywhere. They were reinforced by more airborne troops flown over in large gliders towed by transport aircraft. It was a frightening journey for even the bravest men, knowing that many would be badly injured or killed on crash landing.

The objective for the American 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions was Omaha Beach, a long, gently curving

stretch of coastline. Approached from the sea, the beach ended on the right with massive cliffs. Four miles farther around to the west was the Pointe du Hoc promontory. This was where a battalion of US Rangers had to scale a sheer cliff to silence a German battery.

The first landing craft set off from their mother ships at 0520 hours. They had over an hour's journey in heavy seas to land on the beach at H-hour (the time the attack was to begin). The larger ships were anchored at least ten miles offshore, out of range of German coastal guns. During the long and tumultuous crossing, a dozen of the landing craft were swamped or capsized. The bomber formations appeared at 0605 hours. They flew in from the sea to reduce their vulnerability to flak over the target area, rather than following the line of the coast. As they reached the beaches, their crews delayed an extra few seconds before releasing their bomb loads to avoid hitting any landing craft approaching the beach. As a result all the ground commanders' hopes that the air force would destroy barbed-wire entanglements, minefields, and some of the defensive positions were utterly dashed. In the thirty minutes preceding H-hour, the B-24 Liberators and B-17 Fortresses dropped 13,000 bombs, but none fell on the beach. "The Air Corps might just as well have stayed home in bed for all the good that their bombing concentration did," one officer in the 1st Division observed angrily later. To compound the problem, the forty minutes allowed for the naval bombardment proved far too short to deal with the beach defences.

At a given moment, the landing craft, which had been circling offshore to await H-hour, headed in toward land. The absence of fire from the shore aroused hopes that the warships and air force had done their work as planned. The infantrymen were so tightly wedged that few could see much over the helmets in front of them and the tall landing ramp at the front. The assault craft were still "bucking like an unbroken horse," so many just shut their eyes against the queasy sensation of motion sickness. By then the landing craft "reeked of vomit." Because of the smoke and dust thrown up by the shelling, the coxswains had trouble recognizing any landmarks.

"Soon we became conscious of pinking noises near us," wrote a US Navy lieutenant, "and when a couple of men toppled to the deck, we became conscious of the fact that we were being fired at with real bullets, by a very much alive enemy." When the ramps were dropped, the German machine gunners concentrated their fire on the opening. "Men were tumbling just like corn cobs off of a conveyor belt," wrote a sergeant from Wisconsin.

In all too many cases, the landing craft had come to a halt on a sandbar short of the beach. The water appeared shallow, but ahead there were deep runnels. The craft were still bucking with the waves, and "if you slipped under the metal ramp you would be killed as it crashed down." In some places men leaped off and found the water over their heads. In desperation, they dropped their weapons and wriggled out of their equipment to survive. Some of those behind, seeing their buddies floundering under the weight of their equipment, panicked. "There were dead men floating in the water and there were live men acting dead, letting the tide take them in." The prospect of crossing the stretch of beach in front of them seemed impossible. Any idea of trying to run through the shallows, carrying heavy equipment and in sodden clothes and boots seemed like a bad dream in which limbs felt leaden and numb. Overburdened soldiers stood little chance. There were cries in all directions: "I'm hit! I'm hit!"

With many of their officers and noncoms among the first casualties, soldiers recovering from the shock of their reception realized that they had to get across the beach, if only to survive. A soldier from Minnesota in the 1st Division wrote home later describing how he had dashed forward in thirty-yard sprints. "I've never in all my life prayed so much." He looked back at the remnants of his squad. "It was awful. People dying all over the place—the wounded unable to move and being drowned by the incoming tide and boats burning madly as succeeding waves tried to get in. . . . I've never seen so many brave men who did so

much—many would go way back and try to gather in the wounded and themselves got killed.” Those who had made it were not even able to help with covering fire. “At least 80% of our weapons did not work because of sand and sea water.” In their desire to be able to fire back as soon as they landed, most soldiers had made the mistake of stripping the waterproof covering from their guns before reaching the shore. Almost all the radios failed to work as a result of seawater, and this contributed greatly to the chaos.

An artillery officer described the soldiers he saw. “They were beat up and shocked. Many of them had forgotten that they had firearms to use.” It was hardly surprising that they were dazed. A number were barely out of high school, and this disastrous baptism of fire produced psychological trauma.

Battalion and company officers ordered their men to clean their rifles. Those who had lost their weapons took them off the dead. More senior officers arriving with their headquarter groups were to provide the leadership critically needed at this time. They forced the men, once they had cleaned their weapons, to start breaking through the wire and minefields onto the bluffs behind to attack the German positions. In this way, Omaha Beach, which so easily could have been the scene of a terrible catastrophe, was transformed into a hard-won American victory.

Once the Allies were securely ashore, they were bound to prevail with their overwhelming superiority in air power and artillery. German plans for a massive tank counter-attack against the British Second Army on the eastern side came to nothing when the Germans were hammered by the heavy guns of the US Navy and the Royal Navy off the coast. But the success of D-Day was not enough. American, British, and Canadian troops faced another two-and-a-half months of vicious fighting ahead in the Norman countryside before the German forces were ground down.

Normandy was martyred in its suffering, but this terrible concentration of fighting at least saved Paris and the rest of the country from destruction. Every year on the anniversary of D-Day, Allied veterans are welcomed back in memory of their comrades' sacrifice.

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