**U.S. History**

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**Preparation for Operation Overlord**

**Code Name: D-Day**

(The D doesn’t mean anything. It was just a code to refer to the specified D-day and H-hour for the invasion)

Most of this information comes from *D-Day: June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of WWII* by Stephen Ambrose

The Allied powers knew that ultimate victory over the Nazis would require them to land on France in order to achieve their final goal of invading Germany to force a Nazi surrender. Their campaigns in Northern Africa and Italy were important, but the base of Allied operations was Great Britain, so it was necessary to gain a foothold in Northern Europe in order to advance ground troops on Germany. This, however, was easier said than done. Hitler and his generals also knew that the Allied strategy would almost certainly include a campaign in Northern Europe, and so they had been preparing accordingly. They had been building and strengthening defenses since 1940 along the northern coast of Europe.

The Allies knew that launching an amphibious assault was extremely dangerous, and so they meticulously planned their attack. This would not be the first amphibious assault of WWII. In fact, this would be the fourth time the Allies coordinated an amphibious assault (the others being North Africa, Sicily, and Salerno). The difference with Operation Overlord was that NONE of the other beaches had been fortified by Axis troops.

**Why Normandy?**

The location of the Allied assault was a closely guarded secret, because the Allies did not want to tip the Germans off with their plans, which would cause them to beef up defenses even more, making it more difficult to succeed. But the Allies couldn’t just land *anywhere* in Northern Europe. The location needed to meet some very specific requirements. For example, it needed to be within range of the Allied Bomber planes that were based in Great Britain. This eliminated the idea of launching their offensive close to the German coast.

The invasion site also needed to be close to a major port. The leaders had to remember that in order to succeed; they needed to get supplies onto land, in addition to personnel. This would require a huge port so ships could cross the channel and deposit their supplies close to the invasion point. The beaches were also problematic. Sand beaches would not be conducive to handle the weight of prolonged unloading operations, so it was necessary to check the content of the sand, to make sure it would be firm enough to accommodate the heavy trucks and tanks without causing them to sink into the sand. Special Forces conducted secret missions to get soil samples to make sure the location was suitable.

The landing site also needed to be close to “civilization.” An abandoned beach would be easier to land on, but would make it harder afterward because it wouldn’t have the proximity of usable roads to advance the invasion. They also wanted to cross at a choke point in the English Channel, thus minimizing the distance between England and France.

At the end of all these requirements, there were about three locations that would work. There were sites in Belgium and the Netherlands, but the coastal areas were known for frequent flooding because many parts were below sea level, and it was quite close to the bases of the Luftwaffe[[1]](#footnote-1). The obvious and ideal choice was Calais, which has always been the easiest connection between England and France. The channel is at its narrowest here, and it could accommodate the needs of a port. The only drawback to Calais was its obviousness. Hitler’s defenses at Calais were extremely secure and strong, and it would be the obvious choice for an invasion. Because of this, the Allies eventually settled on Normandy, France, but tried to make Hitler believe that they would eventually launch their major assault on Calais.

**When to Go?**

Operation Overlord was extremely complex, and required extensive coordination. The date had to be after June 1, 1944, in order to guarantee that enough U.S. troops could be trained and shipped across the Atlantic. This would also give the factories in the United States enough time to manufacture enough supplies to support the invasion. The time of day was also critical. The best time to land would be during the day, in order to be safe in the crossing, but that made the invasion vulnerable to German defenses and increased the chance that they could be spotted by Nazi lookouts. (Keep in mind, this is not just a few boats and planes. We are talking thousands[[2]](#footnote-2) of ships and thousands[[3]](#footnote-3) of planes, and thousands of soldiers, all going to the same place, all trying to maintain secrecy.) The Allies decided that they would plan to hit the beach at 0630, which required them to cross the channel during the night. The attack would also take place on a rising tide so the landing boats could drive right onto the beach, then could float back off as the tide rose. The time of month was also critical, because they needed at least a partial moon to help them navigate during the night, but not a full moon, which would make them visible from land. The first available date that fit those requirements was June 5, 1944.

**Deception and Espionage**

The Allies knew that a large part of their success would depend on their ability to surprise the Germans. In order to accomplish this, there was an elaborate system of deception designed to make the Nazis believe that the attacks on Normandy were a feint, and the real attack would be coming somewhere else. They also wanted the Nazis to believe that the armies of the Allies were far larger than reality. They successfully deceived the Germans concerning this, and Germany estimated that the Allies had command of 87 divisions (each division had 8,000 soldiers). In reality, the Allies only commanded 47 divisions. Hitler estimated that the attack could land 20 divisions on the first day, when the reality was the Allies would be lucky to land 6.

Operation Fortitude and Operation Fortitude North were designed to trick the Nazis. Fortitude North was designed to convince Germany that the Allied attack would be on Norway, where Hitler’s navy was based. The Allies created a fictional army that was supposedly massing in Scotland, and they carefully allowed radio chatter to be intercepted by double agents that could pass the misinformation on to the German high command. 24 British officers moved up to Scotland and sat around all day, filling the radio waves with all the communications that would mimic an actual preparation for invasion.

The larger deception was Operation Fortitude. This deception was designed to convince Hitler that Calais would be the location for the major Allied offensive. It would not be enough to simply have radio traffic for this fake operation, so it was far more elaborate than Operation Fortitude North. The U.S. Third Army was supposed to be launching this assault, and while the army was real, they were mostly still in the United States going through basic training, and would not reach Europe until late summer 1944. Germany spies were still able to fly over England, so the Allies created hundreds of dummy tanks, planes, and jeeps, mostly made of rubber or papier-mâché to fool their spies. To lend legitimacy to this deception, Eisenhower placed General Patton in charge. The Reich was familiar with Patton from Operation Torch, and he had proven to be a brilliant general. In many ways, his leadership is what convinced the Reich that Operation Fortitude was real, and they kept some of their best troops at Calais to defend it against Patton. For his part, when Patton heard that he would not be taking part in the Normandy invasions, he was livid. (Of course, he would eventually command troops as the Allies moved forward to Germany, and he had plenty of opportunities to prove his brilliance after D-day.)

**The Element of Surprise**

The Allied leaders had to make a difficult decision between the element of surprise, and preparing the coast for a land invasion. Obviously, catching the Nazis by surprise would be wonderful, but the German fortifications were so extensive that surprising them would be nice in the short run, but would eventually cause enormous casualties. Attempting to land troops on the beach without taking out some of the German fortifications would mean sacrificing thousands of lives. The best way to minimize infantry casualties would be to launch a prolonged aerial and naval assault to destroy the German defenses before the ground troops landed. The drawback with this, however, was that it would alert the Nazis to the location of the ground assault. If the Germans had even 24 hours notice, they could move troops to the area and crush the Allied offensive. Eisenhower and his chiefs of staff decided to strike a balance between these two problems by launching a short aerial bombardment (less than half an hour), immediately followed by the landing ground troops. They realized that this short bombing would increase casualties among the infantry, but they decided it would be worth it to firmly establish an allied presence in France, rather than risk the possibility that they could be pushed off the French coast (as had happened at Dunkirk[[4]](#footnote-4) in 1940 and Dieppe[[5]](#footnote-5) in 1942).

**The Plan:**

Eisenhower and his staff needed to stick to a very strict timetable in order to coordinate the massive attack on 5 different beaches along the Normandy coast. Their code names were: Juno, Sword, Gold, Utah, and Omaha. American troops would be responsible for Utah and Omaha, and the other Allies[[6]](#footnote-6) would take the other beaches. The Airborne divisions would fly in C-47s across the channel and parachute behind enemy lines in France during the night before the invasion to cut communication lines and disable German defenses. Then, the invasion force would leave shortly after midnight to cross the channel in their ships. They would transfer to their landing craft and be hitting the beach at 0630 on D-day. The Naval and Aerial bombardment would commence at sunrise (0558) and continue until 0625, stopping right before Allied soldiers hit the beach. The infantry was assured that by the time they hit the beaches at 0630, there would be numerous craters from the air bombardment to provide cover as they worked their way up the beach (150 meters of open area at low tide). The first waves of soldiers hitting the beaches would be covered with swimming tanks on the landing craft still offshore, which were equipped to fire 150 rounds from their cannons, in an attempt to divert German fire from the first waves of soldiers. These tanks would stay offshore until 0615, at which time they would be released from their landing craft and would swim ashore and take positions on the beach at the water’s edge to shell the German fortifications on the bluff.

These precise plans would continue throughout the day, with more waves of infantry coming ashore at specific intervals, giving each wave time to get ashore, cross the tidal flat under heavy fire from three directions, and get up the bluff in order to make room for new waves of soldiers. Any delay would cause a chain reaction of delay for all the following waves.

The actual movement of troops and supplies for D-day actually began four days before, on June 1, 1944. Troops were stationed all over England, so they had to be loaded up in ships, taken south to London where they would eventually form convoys to cross the English Channel. One of the reasons this operation was so complicated was that it was coordinating extraordinary numbers of materiel, personnel, and equipment, not to mention that it was a coordinated attack on 5 separate beaches, and involved many different nationalities and generals. Dwight D. Eisenhower was the Supreme Commander of them all, but getting everyone on the same page, briefed about their individual missions, etc. was a herculean task. The plans for D-Day were all done by mid-May, 1944. But changes were made up until the actual day of the operation, in response to intelligence about German troop movements.

**The Weather**

The planning for D-Day took more than a year. All the preparation and planning led up to D-day: June 5, 1944. Unfortunately, a storm system rolled in on June 4, with heavy cloud cover, wind, and rain. The waves in the channel grew to dangerous sizes. Eisenhower held a final weather conference at 0400 on June 4, even as many ships were moving out of the harbors and were beginning to form convoys. The verdict was that the bad weather could continue throughout June 5. The low cloud cover would make it impossible for the paratroopers to see their targets, and without the aerial bombardment, launching the land assault would be disastrous for casualty levels. Eisenhower agonized over a postponement, but eventually decided it was too risky to launch the attack on June 5. He would wait a day, and pray that conditions would improve. At 0600 on June 4, he made the announcement to postpone one day. Unfortunately, for troops already loaded in their convoys, the postponement meant they would spend a miserable day on their ships. They had already been briefed about their missions, and so secrecy demanded that they could not be released, even for a few hours. They spent a miserable day being seasick on rough water.

The next day, Eisenhower met again with his generals, to decide whether the invasion would take place. The high command was split 50/50, with half urging postponement until June 19 (the next time conditions with the moon were favorable) and half urging to go. Eisenhower alone could make the final decision. At 2145 on June 4, Eisenhower gave his decision: “I am quite positive that the order must be given.” By 2300, every vessel had received to order to continue sailing across the channel. D-day would be June 6, 1944.

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**Reading Questions about Operation Overlord**

1. Why did the Allies feel like it was necessary to launch an offensive in Northern Europe?
2. Please identify and explain four requirements for the location for the Allied offensive in Operation Overlord.
3. List and explain three considerations for choosing the date of Operation Overlord.
4. Give three examples of deception the Allies employed as they prepared for Operation Overlord.
5. How did the Allies plan to prepare the coast for the infantrymen coming ashore?
6. What was a drawback to having a long air and naval bombardment before landing troops?
7. Please list the 5 code names for the Allied locations for the D-day assault.
8. Please identify 3 reasons Operation Overlord was so complex.
9. Why was the operation postponed?
10. Why do you think Eisenhower decided to go ahead with the invasion on June 6, despite the fact that many in his high command urged him to postpone until June 19th?

1. German airforce. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There were 5,333 sea vessels that took part in the D-Day invasion. They came from 12 nations (USA, Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, France, Belgium, Norway, Poland, Greece, and the Netherlands). They included 2,727 ships, and 2,606 smaller landing craft and other small vessels that were towed by the big ships, as they were too small to cross the channel on their own. Soldiers rode in the ships, and then transferred to the landing craft when they were a few miles off the Normandy coast. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Allies put 10,521 planes in the air on D-day. This includes 3,467 heavy bombers, 1,645 medium bombers, and 5,409 fighters. Not a SINGLE plane was shot down by the German air force. The ground batteries only managed to shoot down 113. They used every drop of white paint in the United Kingdom to paint the three white stripes on the fuselages and wings, to identify them as friendly. In previous campaigns in North Africa and Italy, many Allied planes were shot down by friendly fire because it was difficult to see from the ground if the plane was Allied or Axis. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As the Nazis were sweeping through France in May 1940, 340,000 soldiers found themselves cut off from safety by the advancing German troops. The British assembled rescue crews in over 850 small boats to ferry soldiers from France to England. This is often referred to as the “miracle of Dunkirk” because all the troops were evacuated before the advancing German troops could take them as prisoners of war. Many of these soldiers would re-cross the English Channel as part of the D-day forces. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Allied forces launched an attack on a well-fortified German position in Northern France in August 1942. This assault was an utter failure and Allied forces were quickly repulsed, and a full-scale retreat was ordered. This failure provided insight into exactly what would be required to make D-day successful. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The bulk of Allied troops taking the three beaches were British, Canadian, and ANZAC troops (from Australia and New Zealand). These forces were joined with many other nationalities, who participated in smaller numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)