

D-day

The invasion of Normandy was the invasion and establishment of Allied forces in Normandy, France, during Operation Overlord in World War II. The invasion was the largest amphibious operation in history.

Operation OVERLORD

In December 1943 President Roosevelt appointed General Eisenhower, as Supreme Allied Commander, with orders to "Enter the Continent of Europe, and in conjunction with other United Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces". The original codename for this invasion was "Operation Roundup". This was eventually changed to "Operation Overlord".

In the early months of 1944 Britain was a virtual army camp with 3.5 million troops, soldiers, sailors and airmen all training for the mammoth task that lay ahead.

There was an aircraft consisting of 13,000 aircraft and 3,500 gliders. In the ports all over the southern coasts of England, including Cardiff in South Wales were 1,200 fighting ships, 1,600 merchant ships and 4,000 assault craft of various descriptions.

The Pas de Calais was such an obvious landing area, the Allies decided against it, and went for their other location: Normandy.

It was agreed that five landing beaches, covering a distance of 40 miles would be used. Five divisions would attack in the first wave, with four more divisions landing in the following 24 hours.

The Americans would land on the beaches which lay either side of the River Vire estuary, these were codenamed, "OMAHA" and "UTAH".

The British and Canadians would land on the eastern beaches which stretched to the River Orne estuary. These would be codenamed, "SWORD", "JUNO" and "GOLD".

Erwin Rommel was given command of Army Group B in July 1943, taking over the defence of Belgium and northern France in December that year. Rommel was of the opinion that the invasion site would be at the Pas de Calais and he personally supervised the construction of the Atlantic Wall.

He knew that whenever and wherever the invasion force landed, it had to be defeated on the landing beaches. He had obstacles constructed on the beaches the full length of the Normandy coast. These were designed to rip the bottom out of any landing craft, and many did.

The obstacles that were positioned on the landing beaches were designed so that landing craft approaching at high tide would not see them. Some of them had mines attached, the result of hitting these was catastrophic and many men died never reaching the beach.

Rommel knew the first twenty four hours were vital for both sides, as he told his men: "IT WILL BE THE LONGEST DAY".

British Airborne

The British Airborne, which also included a Canadian battalion, was given the objective of securing the eastern flank of the British, French and Canadian landing beaches. This included some very difficult German defensive positions.

The Pathfinders, as the name suggests have to be the first to drop on the landing zones to guide the main drop of men to the correct locations. This was extremely difficult on June 6th

due to the horrific weather conditions, many of the pathfinders were themselves dropped in the wrong positions. Only 50% were landed on the correct landing zones. This wasn't pathfinders' fault because there were extremely bad wind and weather conditions experienced by the pilots of the aircraft.

Paratroopers were dropped from Horsa gliders so that the radar would not detect them.

Omaha beach (Bloody Omaha)

The bombs dropped by the American air force completely missed their intended targets, leaving the German defenders at full strength to oppose the incoming troops. The Germans were well dug in overlooking the landing beach. The American troops were taken by complete surprise, as they expected only minimal opposition. The first wave was completely overwhelmed and took tremendous casualties. More and more troops were landing on the beach and the situation was becoming so serious that General Bradley was making preparations to abandon the assault.

Men from the 2nd and 5th Ranger battalions helped to relieve the situation. The American loss of men could never be counted accurately but it is estimated that their casualties were between 2,000 - 3,000 men, with at least 1,000 of these being fatal.

Utah beach

The losses at Utah beach were the lowest; of the 23,000 men who came ashore, only 197 men died. Bombing by heavy bombers had hit their target and landing troops were accidentally landed in a better place. The intended landing site was 1 km to the north, where defensive bunkers were better and had more layers.

The first wave consists of twenty landing craft of the type's LCVP (Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel), each with thirty troops.

The second wave of attacks consists of 32 LCVP's, including engineer corps.

The third wave of attacks consisted of eight LCT's with armoured vehicles.

The fourth wave of attacks was mainly composed of detachments. They were given the task to clean the beaches.

The Pointe du Hoc

The second goal of the U.S. Ranger battalion was the massive concrete cliff battery at Pointe du Hoc. They had to climb, under enemy fire, the 30 meter high cliffs using sectional ladders and rocket propelled grappling irons with ropes. The Rangers regrouped at the top of the cliffs, and a small patrol went off in search of the guns. This patrol found the guns nearby and destroyed them with thermite grenades.

At the end of the 2-day action, the initial Ranger landing force of 225+ was reduced to about 90 men who could still fight.