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D-Day at Normandy

By LTC (Ret) Thomas Morgan



Omaha Beach, watercolor by Joseph Sheahan

"The question of landing in face of an enemy is the most complicated and difficult in war." Sir Ian Hamilton: Gallipoli Diary 1920.

Echoes of Normandy

During these years devoted to commemorating some of the major events of World War II for the United States, the Allied Landings at Normandy in June 1944 take on renewed meaning. Veterans who visit peaceful Normandy beaches still hear echoes of history's "longest day." Next year 2024 will mark the 80th anniversary of D-DAY, 6 June 1944. D-DAY was the culmination of Operation OVERLORD, the largest amphibious landing in history.

However, it was in 1943 at the Quebec Conference that the Allied leaders made the final decision to make a large-scale invasion against the continent of Europe in the spring of 1944.

June 1944 was the climactic month of World War II that set the stage for the final victory in Europe. Ever since Hitler had invaded Russia in 1941, Stalin had relentlessly pressed Roosevelt and Churchill for a second front in Europe. On 6 June 1944, a day author Cornelius Ryan called "The Longest Day," about 7,000 naval and amphibious ships and 3,500 airplanes and gliders brought the equivalent of over nine divisions of troops to the sandy beaches of Normandy in the largest armada in history.

Crusade in Europe

There was great anticipation and excitement in the Allied camp because just four years before the British had been forced to withdraw their forces from the continent of Europe at Dunkirk in the aftermath of Hitler's two-week Blitzkrieg offensive in the West.

The successful D-Day landings fulfilled the promise to Stalin for a Second Front in Europe and launched the Allied Crusade in Europe. With the Anglo-American forces pressing in from the west and the Russians from the east, Hitler's forces were trapped between two fronts and Nazi Germany's final defeat was assured.

Although the peaceful landscape was devastated seventy-nine years ago, the countryside of Normandy has recovered from the fierce battles that raged there in June and July of 1944. Normandy is once again renowned for its green pastures and superb cathedrals. Instead of washed up ships, dead bodies, destroyed tanks, and the other wreckage of war, the Normandy beaches are now filled with local fishermen, tourists, returning veterans, and laughing children whose parents let them run on the now safe, beautiful beaches.

Anglo-American Beaches

The invasion beaches were given code names UTAH and OMAHA for the U.S. troops and GOLD, JUNO, and SWORD for British-Canadian forces. Those beaches have seen many famous visitors.

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel personally supervised the construction of beach defenses during visits in early 1944. In fact, he inspected the UTAH Beach sector less than a month before D-DAY. While inspecting the Atlantic Wall, Rommel said: " ... the first twenty-four hours of the invasion will be decisive ... for the Allies ... as well as for Germany, it will be the longest day." Winston Churchill, King George VI, and Charles de Gaulle all made their first re-entry into Liberated France across JUNO Beach.

The Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, launched his famous Crusade in Europe over the Normandy beaches. President Ronald Reagan would later make several emotional speeches to returning veterans on the 40th anniversary of D-DAY in 1984. The media coverage of those commemorative events would play a significant role in Reagan's re-election as President later that year. President Clinton made a similar speech on 6 June 1994. There was potential political benefit from that speech as well. Politicians can sound victorious at Normandy when they are in the company of heroic veterans.

But perhaps the most truly famous visitors are the veterans from all the Allied and Axis forces that participated on D-DAY. They are American, British, Canadian, French, Belgian, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, German, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, and Russians who return to visit fallen comrades' graves, visit the museums, and look at the remaining bunkers of Hitler's fabled Atlantic Wall.

Overlord

The code name for the D-DAY invasion was OVERLORD (NEPTUNE was the name of the naval assault phase that supported OVERLORD). The Germans knew that the Allies were coming, but they did not know exactly where or when. Most of the better German units reinforced that part of the coast of France known as the Pas de Calais, only 20 miles across the Channel from England. To reinforce the Normandy sector, the Germans had brought in two new divisions (the 352d and 91st) and a parachute regiment of non-veteran teenagers. The presence of the 91st Air Landing Division behind UTAH Beach caused General Ridgeway to alter the DZ (Drop Zone) locations of his 82d Airborne Division. However, there was no avoiding elements of the 352d Infantry Division that had recently moved into the OMAHA Beach sector.



American G.I.s from the First Division prior to landing on Omaha Beach.

Assault elements of the U.S. 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions had no choice but to storm Bloody OMAHA, as it came to be called, in the face of these fresh German reinforcements. The resulting U.S. casualties were so heavy that the Germans thought they had won that day.

Heroes

Time heals the scars of combat for the adversaries of the battle for the Normandy beaches. There were many heroes on both sides. Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., a World War I veteran pushing 60, won the Medal of Honor for his actions on UTAH Beach. A German defender on UTAH Beach, 24-year old Lieutenant Arthur Jahnke, fought valiantly until knocked unconscious and half-buried in sand by a 14" shell from the battleship Nevada (refloated after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor). For both of these brave men the war was nearly over. Roosevelt died of a heart attack a few weeks later and Jahnke, badly wounded, was captured and evacuated to England on one of the ships that had brought his captors to Normandy.

Commandant Phillipe Kieffer returned to his native land leading two French commando troops. Although wounded almost immediately upon landing at Riva Bella, "Green Beret" Kieffer led his men in hand-to-hand fighting that liberated Riva Bella and Ouistreham.

Three companies of Lieutenant Colonel James E. Rudder's 2d Ranger Battalion assaulted the sheer cliffs of Pointe du Hoc and held onto a small perimeter for nearly three days without relief. Of the original 225 Rangers who landed on Pointe du Hoc, less than 90 were able to bear arms at the end of D + 2. Rudder, twice wounded and refusing to be evacuated, was still with his men when help arrived.

German General Erich Marcks, a one-legged veteran of the Russian Front whose 84th Corps defended the Normandy sector, was also with his men in the front lines a few days later when he was killed by Allied bombers. Another German general, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox" of North Africa fame, tried to lead from the front. A master of mobile warfare, Rommel failed to convince Hitler to release the Panzer divisions in the west to his control in time to stop the invasion. Locked in a battle of stationary warfare and siege, Rommel conducted a spirited defense. On 17 July, the day before the great Allied offensive at Caen that started the breakout from the landing zones, Rommel was severely injured when British Spitfires strafed his staff car. It was a day of misfortune for the German Army in Normandy. Rommel was medically evacuated and never returned to active command.

Normandy Remembers D-Day

The Normans have the reputation of being some of the friendliest of Frenchmen. Accustomed to frequent visitors, they offer tourists a warm hospitality. Normandy does not forget those who fought on her soil. All the major landing beaches are protected and have museums, monuments, and markers to record the events of the most famous military operation in history. Visitors can see the beaches relatively untouched since 1944, except where the debris of war intentionally has not been cleaned up, such as the remains of the artificial Mulberry harbor at Arromanches. The German guns are silent along the fabled Atlantic Wall, which was more propaganda myth than reality. Tourists, veterans, and their families can see the gigantic invasion site that was the key to the liberation of Europe. It is well worth seeing because there will never be another operation like OVERLORD again.

With other anniversaries approaching, the entire region of Normandy is ready for a tourist invasion and a media blitz. Normandy's cities and towns were fixed up for the 50th anniversary and are still in good shape. Streetlights were added, roads widened, signs repainted, museums enlarged, and in some places new museums have been built.

One of the newest museums is Le Memorial in Caen. Well-marked and easily found on the north traffic ring of Caen, it is a multi-media museum, dedicated in 1986, that uses high-tech audio-visuals to convey lessons in war and peace. Partially funded by the Battle of Normandy Foundation, this museum will be of interest to anyone starting a tour of the Normandy Landing Beaches.



Canadian Troops land on Juno Beach.

Commemorating World War II is almost a way of life in many Norman towns. Sainte-Mere Eglise, which claims the honor of being the first town liberated by the Allies (a distinction shared or challenged by several other towns depending upon which Allied force--either British or U.S.-liberated them) has welcomed veterans from the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions for many years. It was the setting for several memorable scenes from the film, "The Longest Day."

Benouville, just north of Caen, is to the "Paras" of the British 6th Parachute Division what Sainte-Mere Eglise is to the American Airborne. It was here that the Gondree Cafe was used as an aid station and made popular when Monsieur Gondree dug up a large supply of champagne from his garden to celebrate the arrival of his airborne liberators. The capture of the bridge over the Caen Canal next to the cafe by Major John Howard's glider-borne force was also a high point in "The Longest Day."

Sadly, the bridge, known for 49 years as the Pegasus Bridge, has been dismantled and replaced by a more modern structure. However, a way has been found to display the old bridge near the historic site.

Wherever you go in Normandy, the war is never very far away. Plaques, cemeteries, memorials, and old fortifications dot the countryside and dominate the villages. The D-DAY Landings were not accomplished without terrible sacrifice on the part of the Norman inhabitants. Caen was 80 percent destroyed by Allied bombers as Field Marshal Montgomery dueled with Rommel's Panzers for control of the city and a breakout from the D-Day beachhead.

Returning veterans will notice changes in Normandy. The population has aged and the hedgerows (bocage in French) are disappearing to make room for larger farms. Modern buildings and towns have grown out of the rubble of war. The Normans, however, have not fully embraced the post-war, industrial revolution. Blessed with fertile soil and proximity to the markets of Paris, the region has been a major supplier of milk, butter, cheese, beef, and seafood. The magnificent chateaux, manor houses, and churches of Normandy are reminders of the region's agricultural wealth from past days of glory.

The upcoming anniversaries will surely give the local economy a boost. The local planners know the value of tourist dollars. However, Normans are not going to fleece the tourists. Value will be given for dollars and Euros expended. Normandy still has much more to give than money can buy.

Liberation

On the eve of D-DAY, 176,000 Allied soldiers and marines waited on ships and at airfields to begin their mission: to assault a 50 mile stretch of the Normandy coast between Caen and Cherbourg. The first 24-hours were critical to the liberation of France. On D-DAY, 156,200 troops landed. The other 20,000 followed on D + 1. The painful daily life of the French civilians in Normandy under the yoke of Nazi occupation was about to end.



Allied casualties await burial at Normandy.

U.S. Army Art Collection

The D-DAY landings are remembered in heroic, chivalric terms. In spite of recriminations by the Canadians against the 12th SS Panzer Division following D-DAY, the Allies conceded that, according to the curious morality of the battlefield, the Germans had fought the good fight in Normandy. There would be many days and weeks of hard fighting in the bocage (hedgerow) country of Normandy to secure the hard-won landing beaches. The capture of Cherbourg, the breakout at St-Lo, the battle of the Falaise Gap, the liberation of Paris, and the advance to the Rhine all lay ahead. But the liberation of Western Europe had begun.

Before V -E Day in May 1945, there would be Allied setbacks. The failed airborne assault at Arnhem ("The Bridge Too Far") and the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes showed that the Germans could still strike back with surprising strength. But the final outcome of the war in Europe would never again be in doubt-the Allies had landed!

D-Day Facts

- Allied Troops - 9 Divisions (176,000 men and 20,000 vehicles).
- Allied Air Forces - 171 fighter squadrons, 2,000 heavy bombers 11,590 total aircraft, 14,674 sorties flown.
- German Troops - 7 Divisions along landing beaches (32 total Divisions in 7th/15th Armies-Normandy Pas de Calais).
- German Air Force - 172 fighters, 88 bombers. 815 total aircraft, 319 sorties flown.
- Allied Navy - 4,000 ships, 3,000 landing craft, 284 warships.
- German Navy - 3 E-Boats (torpedo boats).
- Allied Casualties - 10,000* [OMAHA Beach - 3300] [UTAH - 197] [101st and 82nd ABN- 2500] [Canadians - 1,000] [British - 3,000].
- German Casualties - 4,000-9,000 (estimate). *Notes: Includes one-third killed, the rest wounded and missing in action. (Allied Air Forces lost 12,000 killed and missing and 1,953 aircraft during the three-month air interdiction campaign in northern Europe that preceded D-DAY.)

LTC Thomas D. Morgan, USA, Retired, was commissioned in the Field Artillery after graduating from the U.S. Military Academy. He has served in CONUS, Europe, Vietnam, and Panama. He has visited Normandy several times, including the 40th Anniversary of D-DAY in 1984 and the 50th Anniversary in 1994. He holds a MPA degree from the University of Missouri and an MA degree in History from Pacific Lutheran University.



Lewis Army Museum in the News

Lewis Army Museum was featured in the news recently with the visit of identical twins, Suzie Brown Sichler and Julie Brown Crabill, born on December 14th, 1943 at Station Hospital, Fort Lewis. To celebrate their eightieth birthday early, the twins came to see if they could find information about their father, 1st Lt. Van L. Brown, assigned to the 44th Infantry Division during World War II.



Suzie Brown Sichler, left, and Julie Brown Crabill, right, 2023.

The twins and their mother were featured in a page 1 photo with caption in the Tacoma News Tribune, 11 June 1945: **“Playthings from Germany –** 1st Lt. Van L. Brown’s souvenirs will decorate a den some day, but until he comes home from Germany his twins are having the time of their lives with the silk Nazi flags, SS officers’ caps, sheathed swords, and beautifully carved wooden shoes. These are but a few of the items Lt. Brown, a tourist at heart, collected while with the 7th Army’s 44th Division. After 10 months in some of the war’s bitterest fighting, he is at a rest camp in Lyons, France. He has 88 points. Before going overseas, Lt. Brown was stationed at Fort Lewis. Pictured at their home, 3737 East I Street, are his wife, Mrs. Virginia Brown, and the twin daughters, Julianne and Suzanne, or is it Suzanne and Julianne? They are 17 months old.” (*Banner Editor’s note: Julianne on the left, Suzanne on the right.*)



1st Lt. Van L. Brown, right, with a buddy and an M1918A3 Browning Automatic Rifle, .30 caliber, with bipod .30 caliber.



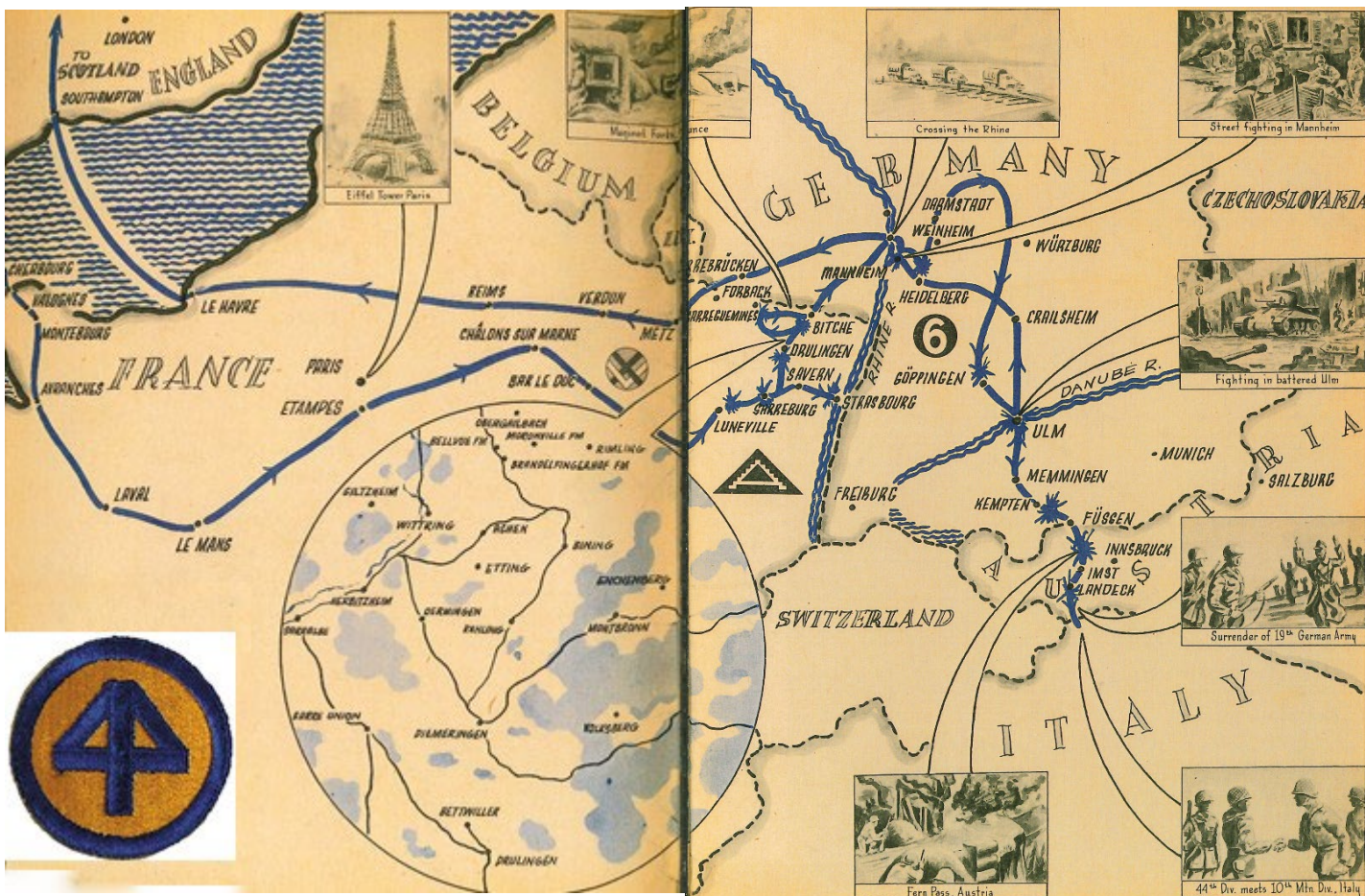
At Fort Lewis from February 1943 to February 1944, the reorganized 44th Infantry Division survived the grueling “D-Series” training which included use of tommy guns, carbines, rifles, light 30 cal. machine guns, 50 cal. machine guns, 37 MM Anti Tank guns, 60 and 81 MM mortars and conditioning to withstand inclement weather.

The 44th arrived on French soil, 15 September 1944, and trained for a month before entering combat, 18 October 1944, when it relieved the 79th Division in the vicinity of Foret de Parroy, east of Lunéville, France, to take part in the Seventh Army drive to secure several passes in the Vosges Mountains. Within 6 days, the division was hit by a heavy German counterattack, 25–26 October. The attack was repulsed and the 44th continued its active defense.

On 13 November 1944, it jumped off in an attack northeast, forcing a passage through the Vosges Mountains east of Leintrey to Dossenheim, took Avricourt, 17 November, and pushed on to liberate Strasbourg, along with the 2d French Armored Division. After regrouping, the division returned to the attack, taking Ratzwiller and entering the Ensemble de Bitche in the Maginot Line. On 14 December, regiments of the 44th Division took part in assaulting major Maginot Line fortifications. The division's 71st and 324th Infantry Regiments assaulted Fort Simserhof and nearby Hottviller. After six days of fighting, the unit captured Simershof on 20 December. Displacing to defensive positions east of Sarreguemines, 21–23 December, the 44th threw back three attempted crossings by the enemy of the Blies River.

An aggressive defense of the Sarreguemines area was continued throughout February 1945 and most of March. Moving across the Rhine at Worms, 26 March, in the wake of the 3d Division, the 44th relieved the 3d, 26–27 March, and crossed the Neckar River to attack and capture Mannheim, 28–29 March. Shifting to the west bank of the Main, the division crossed that river at Gross-Auheim in early April, and engaged in a 3-week training period. Attacking 18 April, after the 10th Armored Division, the 44th took Ehingen, 23 April, crossed the Danube, and attacking southeast, took Füssen, Berg, and Wertach, in a drive on Imst, Austria. On 2 May, a group of V-2 rocket scientists that included Wernher von Braun surrendered to the 44th. Pursuing the disintegrating enemy through Fern Pass and into the Inn River valley, the 44th set up its Command Post at Imst on 4 May. After a short period of occupation duty, the division returned to the United States in July 1945 for retraining prior to redeployment to the Pacific theater but the war ended suddenly when Japan surrendered.

Highlights of the 44th Division's accomplishments include: the capture of Fort Simserhof; defense of the Sarreguemines area against three German divisions; contact with the 5th Army near the Brenner Pass; first American unit to reach the Rhine River; first Americans to fire into Germany; capture of first German division commander on the Western Front; Presidential Citation to 2nd Battalion, 114th Infantry Regiment for repulsing German attack at Schalbach; Presidential Citation to 2nd Battalion, 71st Infantry for repulsing attack in Sarreguemines area; Presidential Citation to Co. I and 1st Platoon, Co. M for repulsing six-day attack of Freudenberg Ferme.



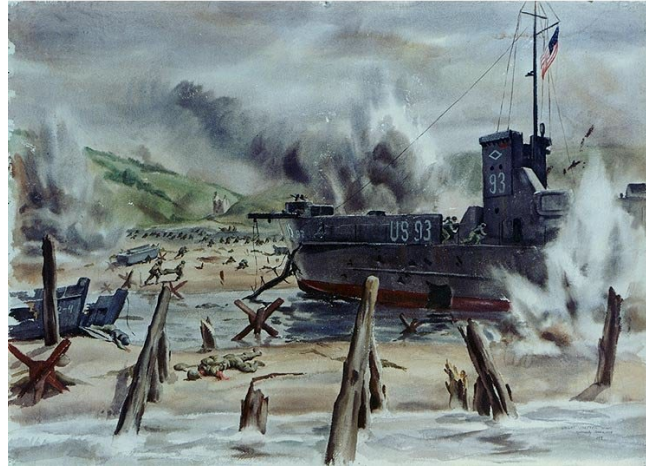
Map from 44th Infantry Division History, "Mission Accomplished", Lewis Army Museum library.

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The Tough Beach, watercolor by Dwight Shepler.

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information.

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*LCIs in formation with transports and LSTs in the distance
as a U.S. Air Corps P-38 fighter plane, flies overhead,
afire and trailing smoke and flame during Operation
Overlord. Watercolor by Mitchell Jamieson, 1944.*

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