



D-Day, June 6, 1944:

The beginning of the end of the war in Europe

The Landings in Normandy

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Historical context

On September 1st, 1939, German armies sweep through Poland, setting fire to the powder keg which signals the beginning of the Second World War. Two days later, France and Great Britain follow through with their commitment to Poland and declare war on Germany after Adolf Hitler refuses to pull back his invading troops. Canada joins the anti-Nazi coalition on September 10th. The first Canadian soldiers arrive in England at the end of December 1939.

Germany crushes Poland in five weeks. On the Western front, the French army entrenches itself behind the fortifications of the Maginot Line while Germany fortifies its Siegfried Line, on the other side of the Rhine River. Britain sends troops to the continent to help the French, but no assault is mounted against the enemy. The Winter of 1939 and the Spring of 1940 become known as the “funny war”, “*la drôle de guerre*”, the “*Sitzkrieg*”, because opposing armies are content to wage a propaganda battle.

On April 9th, 1940, Germany renews its aggression. Denmark and Norway are invaded. But it is only on May 10th that German armies launch their assault westwards. The Netherlands capitulate on May 15th and Belgium surrenders 10 days later.

During this time, the Germans penetrated France and reached the English Channel thus isolating French and British armies in northern France and southern Belgium. The Allies fall back on the port of Dunkirk from where a fleet of all types of ships evacuates 338,000 combatants between May 27th and June 4th.

The Allied threat having been eliminated in the North; the *Wehrmacht* pushes south into France. The Germans enter Paris on June 14th. France surrenders on the 22nd.

From the Summer of 1940 to D-Day

After the fall of France, Britain, and the Commonwealth, including Canada, are alone in their fight against Germany which occupies nearly all of Western Europe. Between the summer of 1940 and that of 1941, Allied military successes are few and far between. The Royal Air Force has managed to put an end to Hitler's plans to invade England.

Hitler turns his attention East and on June 22nd, 1941, his armies attack the Soviet Union which joins the coalition against Germany. The Germans forge ahead and close in on Moscow during the winter.

On December 7th, Japan attacks the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. The military and economic might of the United States will eventually tilt the balance of power in favor of the new coalition fighting against Germany, Japan and Italy.

The first decisive Allied victories are recorded in the Soviet Union in 1942. Stalin, the uncontested leader of the USSR, threatens to sign a separate armistice with Germany if his allies do not attack in the West. This will precipitate the disastrous Canadian raid on Dieppe on August 19th, 1942.

In 1942, the Allies take a roundabout detour to begin the liberation of Western Europe. On November 8, they land in Algeria and Morocco. The campaign lasts five months. Then, on July 10th, 1943, Sicily is invaded. It is the first stage of the Italian campaign. On September 8th, Italy surrenders but German troops occupy the country.

In spite of Allied victories, all understand that the enemy cannot be defeated without landing in Northwest Europe. Even the Germans have understood this... they have built an extensive network of strong points stretching from the north of the Netherlands to southwest France. These fortifications, known at the "Atlantic Wall" and that the Germans call *Festung Europa*, include gun emplacements, hundreds of bunkers, machine gun nests, thousands of kilometers of barbed wire and millions of mines on the beaches and near the coast. Infantry divisions and armoured formations are posted along the coast and inland, notably in France.

Planning the invasion

The planning for the return to the continent begins shortly after the debacle in 1940 but it is only in August 1943 at the Quebec Conference that the initial plan for Operation OVERLORD is adopted. It is believed that the invasion can begin after May 1st, 1944.

On Christmas Eve 1943, American general Dwight Eisenhower is named Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe. British general Bernard Montgomery takes command of the British army group and becomes Eisenhower's right-hand man. It is Montgomery who will lead the first phase of the invasion.

The two men are not satisfied with the existing plans. They demand that more troops be assigned and that the landing zone be enlarged. The definite invasion plan is finally ready in February 1944. It will be the most important military operation of the Second World War. It has to succeed because, if it fails, it will take months, even years, before a new invasion can be mounted.

Operation OVERLORD

The Allies are finally ready to assault *Festung Europa*. Their air forces control the skies over Northwest Europe. Their bombers drop thousands of tons of bombs on German war factories and on rail and road networks in Germany and France. After the Dieppe raid of August 1942, new weapons are developed, including floating tanks. They have also built two artificial harbors which will be towed to the invasion beaches.

The landings in Normandy are the most complex military operation ever undertaken. More than 5,000 ships of all sorts, 200,000 men, thousands of bombers, and fighter aircraft, some 900 gliders and 1,200 transport planes will take part in Operation **OVERLORD**.

The Germans know that the Allies are preparing the invasion, but they believe that the assault will take place in the Pas de Calais which is just 35 kilometers south of England on the other side of the English Channel.

The seaborne invading forces will land on five beaches code named **SWORD** and **GOLD** (British), **JUNO** (Canadian), **OMAHA** and **UTAH** (American) some 150 kilometers from the coast of England. The zone stretches from the mouth of the River Orne in the East to the dunes of Varville in the West. Paratroopers will be dropped inland to protect the flanks of the landing beaches.

The invasion is to take place on June 5th but bad weather forces General Eisenhower to delay it to the next day. June 6th, 1944, will henceforth be known as D-DAY.

At the end of the day on June 5th, the invasion fleet sails and 2,200 bombers take off to drop their bombs on enemy positions in the invasion zone. The bombing will last until 5:15 in the morning.

The first Allied soldiers to set foot in France belong to a British regiment, the Oxford, and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. They arrive by glider at 16 minutes past midnight. Their objective is the bridge at Bénouville (today Pegasus Bridge). In the hours that follow, nearly 6,000 British and Canadian paratroopers jump in the same area and 13,000 Americans descend near Ste-Mère-Église and Carentan on the opposite flank.

At about 5:30 a.m., the large Allied warships which are still tens of kilometers offshore begin to fire on German defensive positions along the coast.

The invasion troops are sent out in waves which depend on the tides. The Americans are the first to give the assault shortly after 6:00 a.m. They quickly take Utah Beach and penetrate inland. But on Omaha Beach, it is a different story. There, they have landed in front of intact German positions. It is a massacre: 1,000 dead and 2,000 wounded. But, by the end of the day, they have managed to advance 3 kilometers.

At about 7:30, the British go in on Gold Beach which stretches some 30 km to the left of the Americans. There, German defenses have been weakened by the shelling and, by the end of the day, the British have advanced nearly 10 kilometers.

At the same time, British forces, and a French Commando unit land on Sword Beach at the opposite end of the invasion zone. Before the day is over, they have joined up with the glider borne forces at the bridge in Bénouville.

Between Gold and Sword lays the landing zone assigned to the Canadians, **JUNO** Beach

JUNO Beach: the Canadians arrive

The sector assigned to the three brigades of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division stretches for 7 kilometers from St-Aubin-sur-Mer, in the East, to Vaux, in the West. It is 7:45 a.m. when the first Canadians reach shore.

Their landing is preceded by shell fire from artillery bearing landing barges. The thick layer of smoke left by the shelling prevents the Germans from discovering the extent of the assaulting force.

The 7th Brigade - A company of the Canadian Scottish is one of the first Canadian units to reach the beach between Vaux and Ste-Croix. On their left flank, two companies of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles and amphibious tanks of the 1st Hussars land in front of Graye-sur-Mer. They suffer heavy losses before reaching the sand dune where they take cover. The two other companies of the Winnipeg Rifles manage to work their way around the enemy and capture two villages behind the beach. It is 8:00 a.m. when the 7th Brigade's other regiment, the Regina Rifles, arrives before Courseulles-sur-Mer, the most heavily fortified locality in the Canadian sector. Accompanied by tanks of the 1st Hussars, they need quite a few hours to clear the village but by the end of the day they have advanced 9 km.

The 8th Brigade - Only 2 kilometers separate Courseulles from Bernières-sur-Mer. The Germans had sown 14,000 mines in this sector. The soldiers of the Queen's Own Rifles reach the beach in Bernières around 8:00 a.m. They spend an hour to capture a German *blockhaus*. It is 8:30 by the time a second Canadian unit, the Chaudière Regiment, lands. After having mopped up what is left of the enemy, the two regiments march inland. The Queen's Own advances about 10 kilometers and the Chaudières capture Bény-sur-Mer.

On the extreme left flank of Juno Beach, at St-Aubin-sur-Mer, it is the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment which gives the assault at around 8:00 a.m. With the support of tanks from the Fort Garry Horse, they capture enemy strong points, and the village is liberated before the clock strikes noon. They then push inland towards Tailleville (3 km away) where they capture 60 prisoners after a violent firefight against the headquarters of a German Grenadier battalion. The North Shore has 33 dead and 89 wounded by the time the day is done.

A British unit, the 48 Royal Marine Commando, lands with the North Shore but is unable to make the junction with British forces which have landed on Sword Beach.

The 9th Brigade, the reserve unit - When the men of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders, the Highland Light Infantry and the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders and the tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers land at Bernières around noon, they face a massive traffic jam. It is 6:00 p.m. before these units reach their positions to assault their objectives. Of all Allied units landed on D-Day, it is the North Novas who advance the furthest, but they are still 8 km from their goal, the airport at Carpiquet, just outside Caen.

Canadian losses on June 6th are only half of what had been feared before the invasion. Official casualty figures are 340 killed, 574 wounded and 47 prisoners of war (Veterans Affairs Canada).

About 155,000 Allied soldiers, including some 15,000 Canadians, land on D-Day.

The Battle for Normandy will last two and a half months, and no quarter is given by either side.

The landings on June 6th are only the first phase of the Battle for Normandy which only ends on August 22nd with the destruction of German forces and the losing of the “Falaise Gap”, 30 kilometers southeast of Caen.

The Allies have kicked in the door of Hitler’s Fortress Europe, but months of heavy fighting still lie ahead. Germany will finally surrender on May 7th, 1945.