

WHY DID THE GERMANS LOSE AT D-DAY?

EVALUATING OPERATION OVERLORD AND THE AXIS RESPONSE

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On June 6, 1944 the largest amphibious invasion in world history took place on the beaches of Normandy, France. By the end of the first day of Operation Overlord, 7,000 ships had delivered almost 170,000 troops to the shores of France and the beachheads were in the hands of the Allied Powers of Britain, Canada, and the USA. The simple conclusion based on these facts is that the Allied invasion of Normandy was completely successful. However, the loss of over 10,000 Allied troops on June 6 requires a more thorough examination of the events of that day. By comparing the effectiveness of the Allied strategies to the effectiveness of the Axis response it becomes apparent that the victory was dependent on many variables. Although the Allied strategy especially in regards to diversion tactics was effective, the Allied victory that day was also a product of German military mistakes.

Cooperation between the Allied Powers was a major requirement for planning a successful invasion. The seeds of the plan for D-Day were first discussed at the Arcadia Conference held between the U.S. and Britain in Washington, DC from December 1941-January 1942. However, it was not until January 1943 that actual planning for the invasion of France, known as Operation Overlord, commenced at the Casablanca Conference. From the beginning, the British and Americans debated over details of the plan particularly in regard to timing and scope. While historians have argued that an invasion of France was strategically possible in 1943 (Grigg, 1984, p.7) the decision was made to invade Italy that year instead. American military leaders, especially U.S. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, opposed this plan, known as Operation Husky, because they rightly feared that

the invasion would siphon off too many resources from the eventual invasion of Normandy (Weinberg, 1994, p. 592). Stalin also opposed the plan because he feared it would not divert the Germans enough from the brutal fighting happening along the Eastern Front in the USSR. The Soviet army had borne the brunt of the war in Europe for two years and mounting casualties lead Stalin to secretly allow intermediaries to contact German representatives to discuss the possibility of a separate peace agreement (Weinberg, p. 610) in 1943. Although the Americans eventually sided with the British and commenced with the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, these events strained the relationship between the Allied Powers and created tension that detracted from the final goal of victory.

At the Tehran Convention (code name Eureka) in late 1943, the “Big Three” of Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt, met in person together for the first time. Although Churchill continued to argue for increased operations in the Mediterranean, Stalin and Roosevelt were able to negotiate a commitment for an invasion of France in May-June of 1944. Some historians speculate that the British, and Churchill in particular, feared the failure of a direct invasion of France because they had “been driven off the continent three times in the war, (and) the fourth time would be fatal” (Weinberg, p. 629). Once the Allies made the decision, however, the British accepted it and moved forward. Within days General Dwight D. Eisenhower was nominated as Supreme Commander of the invasion and final planning began in earnest.

From the very beginning of American involvement in WWII, it was a foregone conclusion that the Allies would need to invade Western Europe and liberate France from German control. The only questions to be answered were when and where. Both the Allies and Axis Powers knew that the easiest point of invasion would be at Pas de Calais because it was only twenty miles from Dover, England. Landing craft would be able to complete a round trip in approximately one hour, which would allow the Allies to put ashore massive

numbers of soldiers in a short period of time. In response to this threat, the Germans placed their finest army division, the Fifteenth Panzer¹, at Calais to protect it. (Ambrose, 1981, p. 265). Instead the Allies chose to invade along a 60-mile stretch of coastline in Normandy, France. To successfully accomplish this task, the British and Americans formed a joint committee of military leaders known as COSSAC² to plan the invasion. In 1943 American General Dwight Eisenhower was appointed as Supreme Allied Commander and put in charge of planning for Operation Overlord. From his experiences in North Africa and Italy, Eisenhower knew that the Allies needed a multi-faceted invasion strategy that would successfully overcome numerous difficulties.

The most uncontrollable obstacle was weather. In choosing the timing for the invasion, D-Day planners had to consider the geography of Normandy including “characteristics of the beaches, moon phase, (and) tidal range” (Berman, 1994, p. 470) in conjunction with weather forecasts. After much deliberation, COSSAC decided that the best chance for success would come if the invasion happened at daybreak, low tide, and just after a full moon. Daybreak and low tide would allow the best visibility for the navy to avoid or destroy the vast network of mines and obstacles the Germans had placed as part of their “Atlantic Wall” fortifications. The full moon would increase the accuracy of Allied bombing and shelling campaigns along the coast and also allow airborne paratroopers to be dropped behind enemy lines the night before the invasion to disrupt communications. These ideal conditions only occurred for a few days each month of the year; in June of 1944 the invasion needed to happen on the 5th, 6th, or 7th.

The portion of Normandy’s coast where the invasion took place was predominantly farmland dotted by small towns. Unlike Pas de Calais, it lacked the ports necessary to bring

¹ German Panzer divisions were made up of highly mobile armored tanks (also referred to as “panzers”), artillery, and infantry troops. They were designed to attack quickly as part of blitzkrieg tactics.

² Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander.

in large amounts of heavy artillery, which was both an advantage to the Allies and a major obstacle to overcome. The advantage lay in the fact that the German military chose to concentrate its largest and best trained divisions in other parts of Europe, wrongly assuming that the Allies could not launch an effectively large enough invasion at Normandy due to a lack of deep ports (Keegan, 1982, p. 60-61). To surmount this problem, the British developed an ingenious system of artificial ports (“mulberries”) and artificial breakwaters (“gooseberries”) to protect them. The mulberries were created from floating piers that were anchored to the seafloor, but could rise and fall with the tides. The breakwaters consisted of old ships, filled with concrete and sunk; their protection from the tides was so effective that portions of the “temporary” harbor at Arromanches-les-Bain are still in existence today. From these artificial ports, the Allies were able to bring in 22,000 tons of equipment per day until they finally liberated the port city of Cherbourg at the end of June (Keegan, 162).

The physical obstacles that soldiers faced during the invasion were formidable. The German military spent four years building a system of defenses collectively known as the Atlantic Wall. The system consisted of concrete reinforced bunkers to protect artillery, machine gun, and radar stations; land and sea mines; beach obstacles such as hedgehogs and Belgian gates; and miles of barbed wire. The defenses were a priority for Hitler and he personally oversaw much of the construction plan, often to the detriment of the German military. In 1942, a contingent of British and Canadian forces had attempted unsuccessfully to take the port city of Dieppe, France. This event caused Hitler to decide to heavily fortify port cities in preparation for an invasion, but conversely convinced the Allies to choose beach assaults at Normandy rather than a port (Weinberg, 1994, p. 681). The failed invasion of Dieppe also revealed to the Allies a fault in the German radar system. The system was designed to alert the Germans of air attacks and was not set up to detect ships. The Allies were able to surprise the Germans at Dieppe, although they were unable to capitalize on this

surprise successfully. The Germans saw the failed invasion as a confirmation of their strategy to build permanent defenses along the Atlantic coast rather than improving their early detection radar system (Saunders, 2001, p.15-16). The Allies, on the other hand, learned from their mistakes at Dieppe and carried that knowledge ashore on the beaches of Normandy.

When the first reports of invading forces at Normandy reached the German command on the morning of June 6, they were initially ignored. Two of the leading German commanders were absent from the battlefields: Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was home in Berlin celebrating his wife's birthday, and his commanding officer, Field Marshal Kurt Von Rundstedt, was on an inspection tour (Korda, 2007, p. 54.)³ Hitler was on vacation with orders to his staff not to awaken him for any reason. The German high command was so convinced that the invasion would come at Pas de Calais they ordered the 15th Army to stay in place and wait for the "real" invasion to come. By the time German reinforcements were sent to Normandy, it was too late. The Allies had established control over the beaches and were able to bring in over a million soldiers in the weeks after D-Day.

The lack of an immediate response by the Germans to the invasion is more understandable in light of the massive Allied diversion tactics employed. In 1939, the British managed to acquire a German code-ciphering machine known as an Enigma. By mid-1940 and throughout the remainder of the war, they were able to decipher most of the communications being sent by the Germans. The intelligence information was coded "Ultra" and remained a secret until well after the end of the war. Despite evidence to the contrary, the Germans refused to believe that the Allies could possibly break their codes. (Weinberg, p. 555-556). This secret information allowed Allied planners to develop a series

³ German high command was convinced that the bad weather on June 5th would continue for several days. Allied control of the skies over the Atlantic prevented the Germans from getting accurate weather reports and they did not realize that there would be a break in the weather on June 6th (Korda, p. 54)

of diversion tactics, collectively known as Operation Fortitude, designed to mislead the Germans into expecting the invasion to come anywhere but Normandy. Entire fake armies were created on paper and fake camps (including inflatable tanks and airplanes) were set up near Dover, England to convince the German's that Calais was the main target. Other diversion plans called for an invasion of Norway and fake radio traffic was set up to mimic communications between imaginary camps in Scotland (Weinberg, p. 680). In reality, the invasion fleet was not concentrated in any single location; it was spread out across southern England to successfully avoid detection. These deceptions effectively caused the Germans to hesitate when the actual invasion started and made the battle easier for the Allied Powers (Barbier, 2007, 195).

The Allied victory at Normandy was a product of complex planning and strategy on the part of the British and Americans as well as a series of tactical mistakes by the Germans. Initial planning for D-Day exposed conflicts between the Allies, but they were able to find consensus and develop a strong strategy for the invasion. The plan took into account the myriad of obstacles the Allies faced and improvised unique solutions. Despite building a strong defensive barrier along the coast of France, the Germans did not react swiftly or forcefully enough to push the Allies off the beaches because they simply did not believe that the invasion was actually happening in Normandy. For them, June 6, 1944 marked the beginning of the end of German domination in Western Europe.