

Pegasus Bridge, an uninspiring structure spanning the Caen Canal in Normandy on the northern coast of France, was a strategically important crossing. On June 5, 1944, almost two hundred Allied glider commandos took off in bombers from a Dorset airfield in the south of England, tasked with the mission of capturing and securing the bridge. High above the English Channel the commandos were released, and, manning their six fragile Horsa gliders, began their precarious descent over the French coastline into Normandy.

The gliders landed within striking distance of the bridge. Deserting their craft, the commandos were greeted by a wave of gunfire from some obviously surprised guards. This resistance had been expected, and in the space of a few minutes two-inch mortar bombs had silenced the opposition. The commandos stormed the bridge to find that their adversaries had fled. Within ten minutes of landing, Pegasus Bridge had been taken.

However, shortly before one o'clock the next morning, an instantly recognizable rumbling sound interrupted the night's peace, and two Mark IV tanks materialized from the darkness. Armed with a Piat anti-tank missile, Sergeant Charles Thornton crept past the now infamous Gondree Cafe adjacent to the bridge, and crawled to within thirty yards of the tanks. He focused upon the leading tank, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

It was a direct hit which penetrated the tank's body armor and created a fireworks display that acted as a welcome beacon for the 7th Parachute Regiment—then arriving two miles away. Further along the bank, the platoon discovered the sleeping German guards who seemed more aggrieved at having been woken than at their imminent capture and surrender.

The capture and the securing of Pegasus Bridge was celebrated in time-honored style with the recovery of 98 bottles of champagne that the cafe's owner had buried shortly before the German invasion. As the commando leader Major John Howard concluded, "I owe the lads an awful lot...June 6, 1944 was a first class success".

"...it will be the longest day"

Remembering D-Day

Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy by Allied troops on D-Day, began the liberation of France and turned the tide of the war in Europe. Fifty years later, as British and French governments host large-scale commemorations of this event, we look back from a world which has yet to learn the lessons of the war it vowed never to forget.



D-Day landings on the beaches of Normandy. Troops of the North Nova Scotian Highlanders going ashore at Bernieres-sur-mer. [National Archives of Canada]

by Jonathan Morton

The storming and subsequent capture of Pegasus Bridge was just one ingredient in a series of events that constitute history's understanding of June 6, 1944, the day that turned the tide of the war in Europe...D-Day. Undeniably an extremely successful military initiative, as well as a gargantuan organizational feat, it was a day of tremendous loss of lives, as well as one of triumph in the last stages of the second great war.

The two World Wars are still a vital part of the educator's curriculum, but for today's youth, a generation far removed

from these events, how are they to be remembered? With such devastation in the former Yugoslavia and in conflicts all across the globe, surely not much imagination is needed to emphasize the importance of understanding the implications of our history. A scant 50 years ago, as the atrocities of the Second World War were fully realized, we vowed never to forget...have we forgotten?

Towards a Liberated Europe

As early as the summer of 1940 Winston Churchill was planning the Allied return to the continent. In that year, the Third

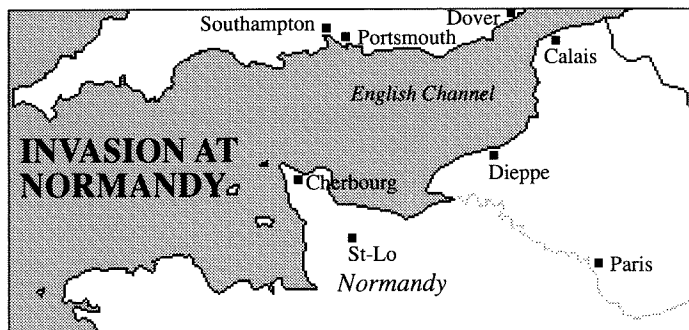
MILESTONES

Reich had begun its successful barrage against the Low Countries (the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg). This forced the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk where almost 130,000 British and French troops were evacuated, leading to the eventual collapse of France before the Germans in June.

Britain was being tested to the limit both militarily and economically. The still-neutral United States could only give limited assistance, but following the unexpected attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, the war changed for good. The American entrance into the war metamorphosed the largely European struggle into a full-fledged world war.

In the spring of 1942, an experimental operation was launched to regain control of the vital French port at Dieppe. The initiative, inaptly labelled Operation Jubilee, was a dismal failure and is remembered as one of the darkest hours of the war. Some 6,000 British and Canadian men landed at Dieppe with inadequate air cover and little naval support. Of the 5,000 Canadians who landed on the beaches, 3,000 did not return. The crushing losses suffered by both nations were, in retrospect, said to be vital to the success of the D-Day campaign.

It was not until 1943 that the invasion which would successfully cross the channel and liberate France, Operation Overlord, began to take shape. A small Anglo-American team began to address the most fundamental of questions: How many men would be needed? What number of ships and aircraft would be required? Towards the end of 1943, General Dwight Eisenhower was chosen as the Supreme Allied Commander. His instructions were straightforward: *You will enter the continent of Europe and, in conjunction with the other Allied nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces...*



[Electromap, Inc.]

Operation Overlord

The task seemed insurmountable, considering the sheer strength of Hitler's Atlantic Wall: the German line of defense stretched from the North Cape as far as the Bay of Biscay. Eisenhower appointed General Bernard Montgomery, the British commander who had excelled at the Battle of El Alamein, and the American General Omar Bradley to plan, direct and carry out Operation Overlord.

The timing of the operation was crucial. The Allies needed the maximum length of time to gather and train the appropriate European, American and Canadian forces, and yet needed to use the best of the summer months to follow through the invasion. Specifically, moonlight was needed for the landing craft and the airborne parachute divisions, but a full moon would likely cause more harm. Low tide was the preferred option, as it would allow landing craft to see mines attached to poles in the shallows which would at high tide lurk just below the water's surface. And finally, there was that perennial topic of English conversation: the weather. Somewhat akin to the British economy, the weather over the Channel was—and is—historically unpredictable.

The date had been set for the 5th of June, 1944. Troops were gathered from all Allied countries: the U.S. provided nearly 1.5 million men, and Britain and Canada provided the majority of the remaining forces, though most of the occupied European countries were represented.

Eventually, the force consisted of a huge naval fleet of 359 warships, 1,000 mine sweepers, 4,000 landing vessels, 805 merchant vessels and almost 30,000 miscellaneous small craft. More than 11,000 aircraft had been assem-



The forces of Operation Overlord massed at Southamton Docks, June 4, 1944. [National Archives of Canada]

bled to assist the ground and seaborne forces, ranging from fragile Horsa gliders to the powerful and lumbering Lancaster bombers.

Deception at Dover

As the Allied plans developed, it gradually became clear to the Germans that something big was in the works. This information came to them from a number of sources, but most significantly, from one Danish-born Wulf Schmidt. Schmidt had become Germany's most reliable spy since he first parachuted into Britain with his radio in 1940, and his messages seemed well-informed and were very often accurate. "Something big is building up in the Dover area," he announced to his German paymasters.

Wulf Schmidt, however, was a double agent, and a very good one. He had the Germans convinced that an invasion was pending: that much was true. All in all, the ministry of misinformation saw to it that intelligence reports from Luftwaffe pilots over Kent reported the build-up of tanks, trucks and troops. This led the Germans to believe that the invasion route would be directed at Calais, the shortest crossing between England and France from the Kent region around Dover. Ironically, any information passed on to Hitler suggesting that the invasion was to be in Normandy he ignored, confident Calais was indeed the intended target.

In reality, this suitably convincing force—Operation Fabius—which had

been recruited to keep the Germans unaware of the real Operation Overlord preparations, was composed of 500 rubber tanks, 50 dummy airfields and some 400 cardboard soldiers.

"As the first men jumped..."

With the immortal words "OK, let's go," Eisenhower made the decision to postpone Operation Overlord no longer—already the weather had delayed the launch for a day. British and American troops dropped behind enemy lines in the early hours of June 6th, to accomplish essential ground objectives which would prove vital to the success of the seaborne operation. Operation Overlord was begun in earnest by Operation Neptune, the amphibious invasion which involved 7,000 ships, 6,500 aircraft and the transportation of an army of over one million soldiers.

On June 6th, the initial swarm of troops landed on the stretch of coast between the Orne River and St. Marcouf. The U.S. forces were assigned Utah and Omaha beaches as part of their push towards Cherbourg. The British, Canadian and other European forces focused upon Gold, Juno and Sword. 200,000 troops landed on the coast of Normandy during the first 48 hours, and by the end of the landings on July 3rd a million men had crossed the Channel.

By June 10th General Montgomery had established his headquarters in France, and the makeshift Mulberry harbors had been built to deal with the influx of provisions and equipment for the Allied forces. The next few months documented fierce fighting as the Allied invasion force consolidated and advanced. By the end of the Normandy campaign, the allies had suffered almost 210,000 casualties, including almost 37,000 dead. D-Day was not only the longest day, but one of the most important of the Second World War. This was, indeed, the beginning of the end.

Remembering the Longest Day

In Britain, the Royal Air Force chose to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, the Army elected the Battle of El Alamein and the Royal Navy paid special tribute to the Battle of the Atlantic. The official United Kingdom

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Government commemorations will honor the 50th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy. They are to be held from the 4-6 June, 1994.

The Heads of State and Governments of those countries which provided military units to the Allied operation have been invited to attend the British commemorations. These include U.S. President Clinton, Canadian Prime Minister Chretien, French President Mitterand, Polish President Walesa and King Harald of Norway.

On June 4th, 1,000 veterans of the D-Day landings will be entertained at Southwick House, outside Portsmouth, from where Eisenhower issued the final order to launch the invasion. On the morning of June 5th there will be a commemoration service in Portsmouth, followed that afternoon by a Channel crossing of a flotilla of ships. The crossing is to be led by the Queen in the Royal Yacht Britannia, and will be escorted by an armada of small craft. During the crossing the flotilla will be accompanied by an international fly-past, including aircraft that supported the landings from the air. Approximately 1,000 servicemen will parachute into the Pegasus Bridge area in Normandy.

On June 6th there will be a national service of commemoration in the British Cemeteries in Normandy, followed by a veterans' march in Arramaches. These

events have been coordinated with the French government who is organizing an international ceremony at Omaha Beach.

"In the better days that lie ahead, men will speak with pride of our doings."

—General Montgomery

Aside from the official pomp and ceremony organized by governments, how should we remember the D-Day landings—and, indeed, why should they be commemorated? While England—and the rest of the world—watches the D-Day commemorations, it is possible that these will simply become another meaningless and ephemeral media extravaganza.

Today, fifty years on, the Cold War is over and the frenetic development of information technology has shrunk the globe. Yet the human waste of countless violent conflicts still takes place in a world not unlike the one millions died to change half a century ago.

The events triggered by D-Day constitute an essential part of our history, our culture and our education. For this reason, people ought to be reminded of them time and time again—not only to remember the dead, but to study the mistakes of the past in the hopes that generations to come will have nothing new to commemorate. ●



*Allied troops move through the French village of Falaise on August 17, 1944.
[National Archives of Canada]*