

Remembering D-Day

Compiled by the NCO Journal

June 6, 2018



U.S. Soldiers disembark a landing craft on Utah Beach during the D-Day landings on June 6, 1944. (National Archives photo)

Today, we commemorate the anniversary of D-Day and remember the brave Soldiers who gave their lives 74 years ago striving to end Nazi Germany's fight to dominate Europe.

D-Day, or Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Western Europe, brought together the Allies' land, air and sea forces in the largest invasion force in human history.



Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division march to board the plane that will take them to Normandy, France, on June 5, 1944. (National Archives photo)

The airborne assault into Normandy, as part of the D-Day invasion, was the largest use of airborne troops up to that time. Paratroopers of the U.S. 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, the British 6th Airborne Division, the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, and other attached Allied units took part in the assault. Numbering more than 13,000 men, the paratroopers were flown from bases in southern England to the Cotentin Peninsula in approximately 925 C-47 airplanes. An additional 4,000 men, consisting of glider infantry with supporting weapons, medical, and signal units were to arrive in 500 gliders later on D-Day to reinforce the paratroopers. The parachute troops were assigned what was probably the most difficult task of the initial operation - a night jump behind enemy lines five hours before the coastal landings.¹



U.S. Soldiers of the 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, move out over the seawall on Utah Beach after coming ashore. Other troops rest behind the concrete wall. (U.S. Navy photo)

At 4:30 a.m., elements of Troop A, 4th Squadron and Troop B, 24th Squadron, 4th Cavalry Group, Mechanized, landed on the St. Marcoufs. Cpl. Harvey S. Olsen and Pvt. Thomas C. Killeran of Troop A, with Sgt. John S. Zanders and Cpl. Melvin F. Kinzie of Troop B, each armed only with a knife, swam ashore to mark the beaches for the landing craft. They became the first seaborne American Soldiers to land on French soil on D-Day. As the troops dashed from their landing craft they were met with silence. The Germans had evacuated the islands but left them

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heavily mined.⁴



American Soldiers huddle behind the protective front of a landing craft as it nears Omaha beach on the northern coast of France June 6, 1944. Background smoke is from supporting naval gunfire. (National Archives photo)

The amphibious assault delivered five naval assault divisions to the beaches of Normandy, France, codenamed Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword. The invasion force included 7,000 ships and landing craft manned by more than 195,000 naval personnel from eight allied countries. Approximately 133,000 troops from the U.S., England, and Canada landed on D-Day.³

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe, was confident that operation Overlord would bring a quick end to the war and sent this message to the troops on the morning of the invasion:

Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force

Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

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But this is the year 1944. Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

Dwight D. Eisenhower⁴



The beachhead was secure, but the price was high. A Coast Guard combat photographer came upon this monument to a dead American soldier somewhere on Normandy's shell-blasted shore. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)

Although caught by surprise, the Germans had built formidable defenses and fought fiercely, particularly on Omaha beach against units of the U.S. Army's 29th and 1st Infantry Divisions. After suffering about 10,300 casualties, Allied troops successfully landed and began to advance inland.⁵ By June 30, more than 850,000 men, 148,000 vehicles, and 570,000 tons of supplies had landed on the Normandy shores.⁶

There were 11 months of hard fighting in Europe before the Nazis were defeated, but the D-Day invasion gave the Allies the success they needed to start that fight.⁷ On May 7, 1945, German General Alfred Jodl signed an unconditional surrender at Reims, France.⁸

Notes

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1 "D-Day" army.mil, accessed June 5, 2018, <https://www.army.mil/d-day/history.html> (<https://www.army.mil/d>

1. "D-Day," army.mil, accessed June 5, 2018, <https://www.army.mil/d-day/military.html> (<https://www.army.mil/d-day/history.html>).
2. Keliher, John G. "The History of the 4th U.S. Cavalry Regiment," 25th Infantry Division Association website, accessed June 5, 2018, <https://www.25thida.org/units/cavalry/4th-cavalry-regiment/#WWII> (<https://www.25thida.org/units/cavalry/4th-cavalry-regiment/#WWII>).
3. "World War II: D-Day, The Invasion of Normandy," Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum & Boyhood Home, accessed June 5, 2018, https://eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/d_day.html (https://eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/d_day.html).
4. "World War II: D-Day, The Invasion of Normandy."
5. "D-Day: The Allied Invasion of Normandy," The National WWII Museum, New Orleans, accessed June 5, 2018, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-d-day> (<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-d-day>).
6. "World War II: D-Day, The Invasion of Normandy."
7. "D-Day: The Allied Invasion of Normandy."
8. "World War II: D-Day, The Invasion of Normandy."