Operation Overlord and Me

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Holland Professional Club

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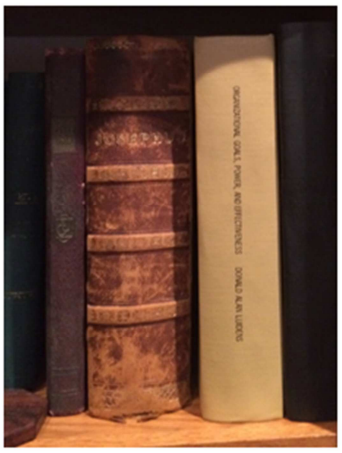
"So tell me, Luidens," my friend began. We were on our way to a lecture to be given by Pulitzer Prize winning historian, Rick Atkinson. Atkinson had just finished his epic trilogy on World War II with a volume entitled *The Guns at Last Light*, and he was to be a guest speaker at the Gerald R. Ford Museum. We were excited to hear from this authority who writes so eloquently about the ways and wiles of the grunt on the ground and the sea salt on the briny deep.

"So tell me, Luidens," my friend repeated. "How come you're so fascinated with World War II? We've known each other since Vietnam War days, and I've always heard how anti-war you are. I even thought you were a pacifist. What gives with this preoccupation you have with the Second World War?"

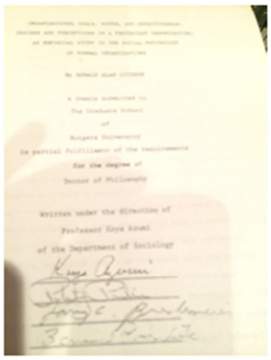
Good question. I've wondered about that seeming contradiction myself, from time to time. Usually I've breezed around the question, focusing on learning the lore of the war, absorbing the arcana of battles and personalities. My friend and I had exchanged books and videos on the war, and we regularly shared anecdotes and tall tales about its campaigns. In that light he asked a reasonable question, and he pressed me to articulate a reasonable answer. I fear that my faltering riposte was totally inadequate that night, but his query started me thinking.

After spending the better part of a week wandering the coastline of Normandy this past summer, I felt I could finally put my thoughts to paper. I'm going to use the unique events surrounding June 6, 1944 as the launching pad for my reflections on why I am so fascinated with World War II in general, and D-Day in particular. In the process, I'll share four aspects which underlie my enthrallment.

First, I am professionally and personally fascinated by the organizational and structural dynamics of modern, mass society. My doctoral dissertation was ponderously sub-sub-titled, *An Empirical Study in the Social Psychology of Formal Organizations*. I've long been interested in the machinations of organizational structures, especially the role that power plays in swaying opinion and policy. My dissertation research investigated how power was perceived and idealized within religious and non-religious institutions. But that is a story of another era; suffice it to say that I've had a long standing fascination with how structures – especially **big** structures – work. And D-Day was nothing if not a massive enterprise, and that is the first component which draws me in.



Dissertation next to Josephus!

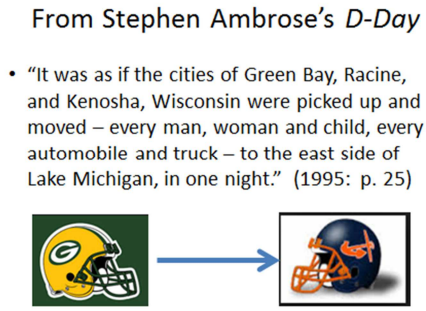


I: Scale of Operation Overlord

- My fascination with the **sheer scale** of *Operation Overlord* (which subsumed *Operation Neptune*, the naval support; *Operation Transportation*, the air cover; and *Operation Fortitude*, the covert manipulation of misinformation which centered on Calais and Norway)

One can't help but be impressed when visiting the record of *Operation Overlord* with the scale of the undertaking. "Big" is its middle name. Renowned author Stephen Ambrose has used a regional simile that presents a hint at the magnitude we're talking about. In his 1995 definitive history, ***D-Day: June 6, 1944, The Climactic Battle of World War II***, Ambrose wrote the following:

> Operation Overlord, the invasion of German-occupied France in June 1944, was staggering in its scope. In one night and day, 175,000 fighting men and their equipment, including 50,000 vehicles of all types, ranging from motorcycles to tanks and armored bulldozers, were transported across sixty to a hundred miles of open water and landed on a hostile shore against intense opposition. They were either carried by or supported by 5,333 ships and crafts of all types and almost 11,000 airplanes. They came from southwestern England, southern England, the east coast of England. It was as if the cities of Green Bay, Racine, and Kenosha, Wisconsin were picked up and moved – every man, woman and child, every automobile and truck – to the east side of Lake Michigan, in one night. (pp. 24-25)



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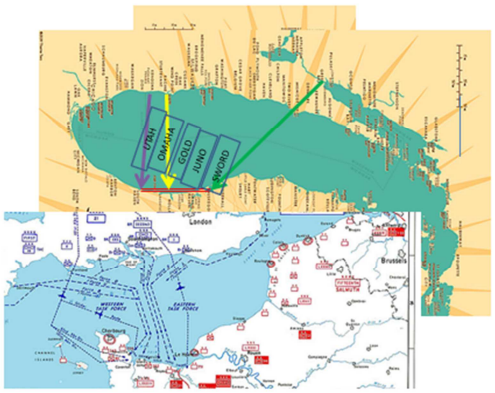


An undertaking of these dimensions was more than a year in the planning. In early 1943, while the war was still raging in North Africa, the Allies brought together a group of military planners under British Lt. Gen. Frederick Morgan and “charged [them] with ‘co-ordinating and driving forward the plans for Cross Channel operations this year and next year.’” (*Ibid*., p. 71) It was quickly realized that no invasion would take place during 1943, so the focus shifted to 1944. The ill-fated assault on Dieppe in August 1942 had given the Allies some sense of the extent of German defensive preparations. The planners were eventually placed under the command of Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe.

Among the logistic issues to settle were ***where*** the invasion should be targeted and ***when*** it should take place.

The most logical route for the assault on Hitler's redoubtable Atlantic Wall would be across the English Channel from Dover to Pas de Calais, a mere 20 miles distance. On a clear day, the white cliffs are visible from each shore. This would necessitate the Allies building up their forces in East Anglia and in the plains and estuaries to the east of London. The logic of this route was so compelling that it became the preoccupation of Hitler and most of his generals. Through Allied intelligence gathering capacities – especially their ability through Enigma to decipher coded German messages – the Allies learned of this German obsession with the likely landing point, and the Brits decided to feed the German misimpression with all kinds of misinformation in a program dubbed *Operation Fortitude*.

Having earned the disfavor of Eisenhower for slapping two shell-shocked soldiers in Sicily, George Patton was called back to London in disgrace from the assault on Italy in early 1944. He fulminated and festered, but he also hoped he'd be the field general to lead the assault on Europe. After all, in his own estimation, he was the best field general that the Allies had. The Germans – especially Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox" – agreed with this estimation, and German high regard for Patton provided the Allies with a fortuitous opportunity. They placed the myth-loving Patton in command of a mythical army. Allied artisans and theater designers built an entirely fictitious "First United States Army Group" (FUSAG) complete with inflatable tanks and stage-crafted airplanes and landing craft which were light enough for a handful of servicemen to move around "runways" and local "assembly points." Patton made highly visible lectures to local gatherings in East Anglia, and the media pumped up the extent and readiness of this ghostly division.

"First US Army Group" (FUSAG)

The build-up was accompanied by some unusual encounters. Here's one account:

> From a distance, an English farmer could see that sometime overnight a column of Sherman tanks had parked on his field. One of his bulls also noticed the American tanks and was eyeing one of them warily. Suddenly, the bull lunged. The farmer braced himself for the sight of one of his prized bovines cracking its skull against armor plating.
>
> The bull struck the tank at top speed, and with a lazy hiss of air, the Sherman deflated into a pile of olive-drab rubber sheeting. The bull and the farmer had stumbled onto one of the most elaborate deceptions in the history of warfare: the creation of a phantom army to divert attention from the *real* Allied army poised to invade France in the spring of 1944. (Murphy, p. 1)

To parallel the Dover-Calais deception, the Allies also dispatched a couple of hundred retired cable operators to the far reaches of Scotland.

Operation Fortitude: Phase II

Norway as co-target

These telegraphers sent messages "on the open" to each other giving the impression that a vast military force was preparing for the invasion of Norway. Fictitious orders for gloves and skis, masks and long-johns, together with regular broadcast of such pertinent information as the weather and tidal movements on the

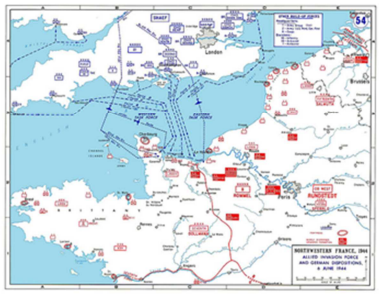
coast of Norway bolstered this deception. In the end, *Operation Fortitude* in all of its dimensions helped to obscure the fact that the invasion would be in Normandy. Normandy had been chosen for its broad beaches, relatively light defensive bulwark, and proximity to Cherbourg as a future port of entry.

The other logistical decision – when to make the attack – was an occasion for inter-service negotiation and endless bickering. The Army wanted the invasion to take place in the early morning so that it could have the full day to achieve a beachhead. The Army Air Corps wanted to have as much daylight to drop bombs as possible in order to soften up the landing sites before the actual invasion. The Navy wanted to bring the troops in at low tide so that their crafts could avoid under-water, mined obstacles which littered the coastline. They, too, wanted to have enough daylight in advance of the army assault to pound the shoreline, thereby minimizing German artillery and mortar resistance to the landing forces. Paratroopers, who were intended to land at night and secure approach bridges and roads on the east and west of the invasion targets, wanted to have a full moon and clear skies so that their gliders

and escort pilots would have the maximum visibility to see their landing and drop targets. In the event, the initial D-Day – June 5 – failed to meet any of the needed weather conditions for the invasion, and it was with only a half-hour to spare before the initial paratroops' departure that June 6 was selected as the alternate D-Day.

From its very inception, D-Day was bigger than anything of its kind. Two years after a handful of ships and planes were annually rolling off American assembly lines, tens of thousands were now ready for combat. Untold tons of munitions of all sizes, and the artillery, mortar, and hand-held weapon systems to deliver them, were stockpiled throughout southern England. Indeed, for extended periods the lower third of England was totally cut off for security reasons from the rest of the country, a monumental organizational task in itself. In addition to all of these accomplishments – including the manipulation of misinformation through covert activities, the transportation of 175,000 troops across

175,000 men on D-Day;
2 million more through Normandy



a roiling Channel to 50 miles of beaches, the porting of 50,000 tanks, artillery, support vehicles (from bicycles to jeeps), the cooperative engagement of military services under one command (on June 6, 1944, Eisenhower had personal command of *all* the military branches of *all* the Allied services in Europe – a totally unprecedented feat of inter-agency cooperation), this enterprise was a monumental organizational "one-off." The Allies estimated that it would take two years to mount another similar campaign if *Overlord* failed. Seeing the vast extent of the invasion coast this past summer, brought home to me the overwhelming scope of *Operation Overlord*.

Secondly, World War II – and therefore D-Day as the spearhead of the Allied effort to liberate subjugated peoples – has about it a strongly moral character. While I have no real affinity for the nuances of the "Just War" thesis, the Allied effort in World War II comes as close in my mind to what such a just war would look like as any I can recall. For this reason – unlike my attitudes about Vietnam or the subsequent military entanglements we've orchestrated, from Granada and Panama to

Iraq I and Iraq II – I have found something profoundly moral, even Providential, in our role in the Second World War. I'm not one to decry "evil" very often (I'm more likely to use the more civic term "unjust"), but in all respects, I am convinced that Hitler and his Nazi thugs were the personification of "evil" in their day. Accordingly, the struggle with Nazism has about it the ring of a moral Crusade to me.[1]

II: Crusade against Fascism

This imagery was very much on the minds and hearts of many D-Day participants, first and foremost those of Eisenhower. On the eve of the invasion he issued the following clarion call to the military forces about to set off for France:

Eisenhower Addresses Troops

- http://www.history.com/speeches/eisenhower-broadcasts-d-day-invasion-order#eisenhower-broadcasts-d-day-invasion-order

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

[1] Much the same could be said about the Allied campaign in Asia, given the Japanese treatment of Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos and others.

> 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.
>
> 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 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 marching together to Victory!
>
> I have full confidence in your devotion to duty and skill in battle.
> We will accept nothing less than full Victory!
>
> Good Luck! And let us all beseech blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking. ("Messages," p. 1)

Indeed, prayers were the order of the day throughout the Expeditionary Forces. Cornelius Ryan, in his iconic tome, *The Longest Day*, recounts the "'land-office business'" done by chaplains. "One minister," he records,

> . . . on a jam-packed landing craft, Captain Lewis Fulmer Koon, chaplain for the 4th Division's 12th Infantry Regiment, found himself serving as pastor for all denominations. A Jewish officer, Captain Irving Gray, asked Chaplain Koon if he would lead his company in prayer "to the God in whom we all believe, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Jew, that our mission may be accomplished and that, if possible, we may be brought safely home again." (p. 92)

It is significant that the good captain asked the chaplain to pray first that the mission would be brought to fruition and then, "if possible," that the men's lives would be spared. There was a wide-spread understanding that the war was being fought for a righteous cause and would exact a high price in lives and materials. In addition to pay back for the egregious alliance Germany had made with treacherous Japan, the objective of defeating Fascism in all its autocratic guises, was worthy of sacrifice. While the full extent of the persecution of the Jews was not widely known on D-Day, their systematic marginalization was broadly understood, and it served as a particularly compelling motivation for many Allied servicemen.

This is not to say that everyone was eager to die for the cause; many saw themselves as invulnerable in the face of death. The Allies

very deliberately chose inexperienced divisions to lead the assault on Normandy. Ambrose remarks on the particular role that youthful optimism played in their thinking:

> For a direct frontal assault on a prepared enemy position, men who have not seen what a bullet or a land mine or an exploding mortar round can do to a human body are preferable to men who have seen the carnage. Men in their late teens or early twenties have a feeling of invulnerability, as seen in the remark of Charles East of the 29th Division. Told by his commanding officer on the eve of D-Day that nine out of ten would become casualties in the ensuing campaign, East looked at the man to his left, then at the man to his right, and though to himself, You poor bastards. (*D-Day*, p. 49)

Which leads to my third theme. I have been struck – over and over – at the amazing instances of individual heroism that took place throughout D-Day. I find the readiness to put oneself in the proverbial line of fire for a noble cause – whether actual, as in the midst of warfare, or figurative, as in the midst of ideological debate – to be a particularly awe-inspiring impulse. It is replete with elements of courage, self-sacrifice, and hope. And I find that courage especially transcending when it is combined with a just and noble cause. In my mind, the

readiness of so many to sacrifice themselves on D-Day rises to the level of the heroic.

In fact, D-Day is rife with cases of incredible heroism. They begin with the brazen courage, bordering on foolhardiness, of the British and American paratroopers who were the first to reclaim occupied territory. The most dramatic of these British exercises has come to be known as the assault on Pegasus Bridge. Between the coast and the pivotal city of Caen there were two bridges spanning the Orne River and its adjacent canal. This roadway was critical for two reasons: straddling the eastern most estuary on D-Day, it would be the most likely route for a German counter-attack led by Panzer tank divisions stationed near Calais, over 100 miles to the east. At the same time, these bridges would be critical for any Allied "breakout" from the beaches as they made their way into the heart of France. Accordingly, they were essential to secure and hold.

III: Heroes Abound

12:01 AM
June 6, 1944
British
Paratroopers Hit
Pegasus Bridge

At a few minutes after midnight (French time) on June 6, three gliders from "the 2nd Oxfordshire and

Buckinghameshire Light Infantry, a part of the Air Landing Brigade of the 6th Airborne Division of the British Army," landed on a narrow strip of raised farmland barely one hundred feet from the bridge over the canal. (Ambrose, *Pegasus*, p. 19) Heavily guarded by an entrenched German squad, the bridge was a formidable target. The light-weight, Horsa gliders had been pulled across the Chanel by escort bombers which cut them loose about six miles before the coast, just as the anti-aircraft batteries began to send tracers and floodlights crisscrossing the sky. For the paratroopers, unused to being delivered by glider (they had only had three practices landings prior to this one), the ferocity of the *ack-ack* was tremendously disconcerting. Helmets were used as seat-cushions, because bullets tore through the bottom of the gliders sheering off slabs of canvas and aluminum. The gliders soundlessly overflew the bridge, made a broad 360 degree turn, and swooped down to their landing sites – crashing into barbed wire fences and coming to a stop barely feet from each other.

Dazed, the paratroopers flooded out of the gliders and stealthily made their way to the foot of the bridge. Amazingly, the German defenders had ignored the *ack-ack* racket (something with which they had grown accustomed) and failed to hear the splintering of the gliders as they nosed into the barriers in the field. A short fire-fight ensued during which the Brits overwhelmed the defensive garrison with the loss of only a handful of their own fighters. Probably the first Allied serviceman to die on June 6 was Lt. Den Brotheridge, the platoon leader who pointed the charge across the bridge in the face of withering machine-gun fire. (Ambrose, *D-Day*, p. 21) So complete was this heroic assault that within fifteen minutes the bridge was secured and the Brits were digging in for a long stay. They were soon reinforced by other heroic glider passengers and then relieved toward the end of D-Day by British and Canadian Tommies who had made their way from the Normandy beachhead. I have tried to imagine the resolve and sheer audacity which drove those Brits on that day. It is truly awesome. Heroic.

While the Brits were securing the eastern flank of the D-Day beachhead, the 82nd and 101st US Airborne Divisions were bracketing the western reaches. Aboard 822 C-47s, 12,000 officers and enlisted men flew a long route around the Cotentin peninsula coming up on the Normandy landing area from the southwest. They were to be dropped to the west of the little towns of St. Mere Eglise (the 82nd) and St. Marie du Mont (the 101st). As the assault unfolded, a combination of a heavy cloud covering, strong winds, and a deadly and persistent barrage of anti-aircraft fire resulted in the paratroops being scattered far afield. Indeed, so thoroughly were they blown off course that many found themselves totally isolated. In the face of this confusion, these remarkable heroes gathered their bearings and headed toward the north and the beaches as individuals and in groups of five or ten and then, as they met their fellow countrymen, larger units. Significantly, these impromptu units were often made up of a hodge-podge of individuals with unrelated skills and from both the 82nd and 101st; most were poorly armed. Virtually all their heavy

82nd and 101st Hit St. Mere Eglise and St. Marie Du Mont

equipment – including most of their communications gear – was destroyed during the drop or fell into German hands. Nonetheless, as individuals and as small contingents, they pulled themselves together and headed for the war.

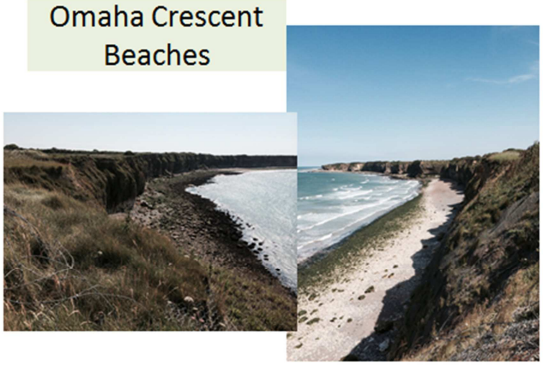
One of the tragedies of this engagement occurred in the town of St. Mere Eglise; it has been recounted by all the D-Day chroniclers, and was fictionalized in the movie "D-Day" with episodes starring John Wayne and Mickey Rooney. Although estimates differ, it would appear that a dozen paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne were blown right into the middle of St. Mere Eglise. Earlier in the evening, Allied bombers had ignited a large fire which still blazed in the early hours of June 6. A bucket-brigade of local citizens watched in horror as the vulnerable parachutists were gunned down when they drifted into the public square. Remarkably, Pvt. John Steele's chute became entangled with a spire of the church, and he hung there helplessly until he was taken as a POW by the Germans several hours

St. Mere Eglise today with memorial

later. Subsequently he escaped in the confusion of the German retreat. (*Ibid*., pp. 210-11)

As mind-boggling as these acts of airborne heroism were, it is still hard for me to imagine the fear and fortitude which drove the soldiers piled up on Omaha Beach. While the other four landing sites each experienced high drama and heart-pounding heroics, the landing at Omaha was a shambles from the outset. A large, crescent-shaped beach with towering cliffs and ideal defense perimeters throughout, Omaha was a veritable shooting-gallery. In addition to heavy batteries situated several miles inland, Rommel had placed machinegun and mortar redoubts pointed on to the beach from the enveloping arms of the crescent. Moreover, as he had done the entire length of the Atlantic Wall, Rommel scattered mined obstacles along the waterfront, most of which

Omaha Crescent Beaches



Look-out and 88-Mortar Bunkers overlooking Omaha Beach

were completely covered during high tide and therefore invisible to the pilots in the approaching landing craft.

Into the face of this lethal fusillade, heroic Navy and Coast Guard pilots aimed their landing crafts beginning at 6:30 AM. Filled with assault soldiers and vehicles from jeeps to tanks, these flat-bottomed marvels delivered their loads to shallow water, often foundering on the reefs which coursed irregularly throughout the beachheads. As the ramps were lowered, German batteries let loose to devastating effect. Many landing crafts were blown out of the water and others had all their passengers decimated as they rolled into the sea. So-called "swimming tanks" – equipped with "skirts" which were to keep them buoyant until they arrived on shore – slid off the ramps into the swirling foam which swamped the inflatable skirts and pitched the hapless tanks into the abyss. Tank after tank followed into the heaving swells. These incongruous, reptilian vehicles

were vital on other beaches because they fired back at the German emplacements from the water's surface while giving the soggy invaders temporary protection from the German barrage. However, on Omaha Beach the tanks were virtually non-existent. Several dozen plunged to the ocean floor, often taking their trapped crews with them.

Allied planners had known that Omaha was going to be the most deadly beach, in large part because of the terrain and the placement of German defense positions. However, several unexpected things occurred which compounded the problem. First, here (as elsewhere) the pre-invasion naval and air force bombardments had had negligible effect. Fearing that they would inadvertently hit their own forces, both the high-flying bombers and the lumbering battleships had overshot their shoreline targets – sometimes by several miles. Instead of neutralizing the beachfront batteries and creating a patchwork of craters in the sand (to be used for shelter by the advancing Allied forces), the pre-invasion bombardment had merely stirred up a hornets' nest. Secondly, Allied intelligence – which had depended on courageous Resistance workers monitoring the coastline – came to believe that all the beaches were

defended by second-rate units. Resistance communiques indicated that the troops were either conscripted Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, and other *Osttruppen* or were old and young German recruits. Instead, Omaha Beach was defended by the battle-hardened veterans of the 352nd Infantry Division who had been brought up just days before D-Day.

Omaha Beach on D-Day Plus One

For those water-soaked troops who made it to the shore on Omaha Beach, the terror had just begun. Despite the rain of bullets, they had to sprint from the shore-line, where there was at least minimal shelter behind the grotesque obstacles, to the base of the cliffs. Slicing through these cliffs were several depressions which provided exits from the beach and were the principal targets of the invaders. It was planned that these breaks in the cliff fronts and their gradual slopes would be secured in short order so that subsequent waves could rush up to the heights unimpeded. Needless to say, the Germans had anticipated this strategy and concentrated their firepower on these exit routes.

It quickly became apparent to the early landers that they were hemmed in by the cliffs in front of them and the open firestorm on the beaches behind them. Moreover, they were facing an impossible task in taking the exit routes to the top. Many troops were so stymied that they cowered in the lee of the cliffs for several hours. So chaotic was the situation that Gen. Omar Bradley, commanding the US forces from the *USS Augusta*, suspended the invasion waves at about 9:30 AM. Initial reports from the beach were so grim that he began to consider an evacuation of the survivors. Indeed, the situation was as dire as it appeared. However, the sheltered troops were trying to gather their strength after a nightlong sea-tossed voyage; a frigid drop into the water with backpacks of ninety or more pounds; a lengthy slog through a hail of bullets, mine-encrusted obstacles, and the floating bodies of their compatriots; and the hellacious charge from water's edge to the cliff haven.

The heroics were just beginning. Slowly, in twos and threes, individuals began to renew the assault. Significantly, they threw out all the plans which had been dunned into them during the prior year of

practice sessions. Instead, they improvised. Eschewing the "exits," they created their own ways upward, wending to the top of the cliffs in the shelter of brambles and bushes, around trees and mine-strewn openings.

Bruce Bliven, Jr. recounts that remarkable surge:

> In the crisis a handful of heroes came forward. They were men who decided that, however hopeless the battle seemed, they themselves would do something. Any action, they thought, was better than none. Each man, at the moment of his heroic decision, acted alone. It might have been easier for him if he had known there were others like him at other places along the beach, but none of them did. They only knew that, where they were, the attack was stalled. Each man decided, independently, to do his best whether or not, in the long run, his best could make much difference. (pp. 102-3)

One such hero was Pvt. Ingram Lambert, an infantryman in Company C of the 116th Regiment. Along with others on his LCVP he made it to shore and then was pinned down by the withering gunfire coming from the bluff above. Bliven writes:

Flooded Fields, Hedgerows, Artillery Await

> At 7:50 Lambert decided that someone had to get something going, and that he would be the man to try it. Behind the sea wall there was the narrow beach road. In happier times summer vacationists had used it as a promenade. Now the Germans had

> strung barbed wire along the inland edge, making a barrier in the way of C Company's advance. Behind the wire was a swampy, flat stretch of about 150 yards to the base of the grassy bluffs. The problem was to blow a hole in the barbed wire. It was not an easy task. The Germans on the bluffs were keeping the promenade well sprinkled with rifle fire and occasional light artillery and mortar fire.
>
> Lambert picked up a bangalore torpedo, a high-explosive charge in a long pipelike casing especially designed for blasting a path through mine fields or barbed wire. He crawled over the sea wall, carrying the bangalore. He ran the few steps to the far side of the road, shoved the long demolition charge under the wire, and pulled the device that was supposed to set it off, a friction lighter.
>
> Then he threw himself onto the ground, with his arms over his head, waiting for the blast of the explosion. But the bangalore did not go off. Before Lambert could do anything about the failure, a burst of shots from a machine gun hit him, killing him instantly.
>
> Lambert died without knowing how important his effort, which took only a few seconds, was going to prove. The moment Lambert was hit, his platoon leader, 2nd Lieutenant Stanley M. Schwartz, jumped in to take his place. Schwartz darted across the road. Kneeling close to Lambert's dead body, he set about to make the igniter work. On the second pull, it set off the bangalore. In a matter of minutes C Company was on the move. (pp. 118-119)

In sum, the day was filled with heroes. While estimates vary, it is likely that upwards of 10,000 Allied servicemen were killed, wounded or "missing" at the end of D-Day. Of these, 6,600 were from the United States. The Airborne Divisions suffered almost half of these casualties. Nearly 1,400 were killed on Omaha Beach alone. (Ryan, p. 303) While

devastating, these were a far cry from the pre-invasion estimates of upwards of twenty percent casualties. By the evening of D-Day, roughly 175,000 men had been brought across the Channel and had begun the process of chipping away at Hitler's stranglehold. Eventually, more than two million servicemen would join the fray through the Normandy entryway, a formidable accomplishment on the backs of a handful of heroes.

Which brings me to the fourth of my reasons for being absorbed by WWII and its turning point on that wind-swept shoreline in Normandy. I am profoundly aware of the lasting historical legacy of that turning point. Some of the legacy was intended and some was totally unanticipated; and much of it has been resoundingly positive.

In many ways World War II was a modern morality play, with D-Day as the pivotal act which shifted the flow of the plot from one resonant with despair, tragedy, and suffering to one of optimism and hope. While there were enough perils that lay ahead to trouble any embattled Pauline, the secured foothold on the bluffs of Normandy

meant that a new *leitmotif* was introduced which was marked by a more promising score. In sum, D-Day was the historical lynchpin between the dusk of an old era and the dawn of a new one.

For one thing, the death knell of Imperial Europe was rung on the shores of Normandy. While the far-flung colonial system was already under duress in the decades leading up to WW II, its coffin nails were awaiting the weakened state of Europe in the wake of the war. From the Pacific – where the US had no interest in maintaining its lock on Philippines and the far-flung islands of the incipient Japanese empire – to the Indian Subcontinent and the wide reaches of the Middle East and Africa, the colonial era was doomed. Within five years of the end of the war, Britain had lost control of India, Pakistan, the Arabian Gulf, Palestine, and Egypt. France battled on for another decade in Indochina and Algeria, but by the 1960s

France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Portugal, and even Belgium had either voluntarily or involuntarily ceded their colonial holdings to indigenous peoples. Truly a remarkable turning from almost 450 years of European hegemony on the global stage.

Secondly, the social and cultural fabric of the United States was demonstrably being unraveled and rewoven through the sacrifice and heroism on Normandy's shores – and in the subsequent drive across Europe. Most pronouncedly, for the first time the United States military forces fought as one. Up until this point, inter-service rivalries made joint effort virtually impossible (Pearl Harbor's fiasco highlighted Army-Navy suspicions). In the process, the US cemented itself as a military power of unparalleled superiority.

The American military came of age on D-Day. Moreover, the success of the "Second Front" set the stage for the Cold War and the on-going rivalry between the US and the USSR/Russia – one which simmers today.

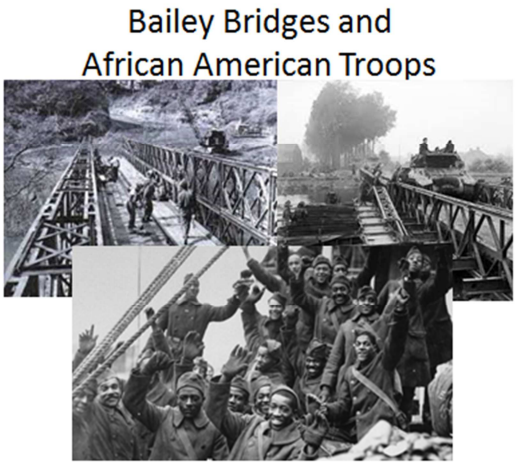
Thirdly, any movie about D-Day has a stock cast of characters right out of a modern *Commedia dell'Arte*. There are obligatory inner city Italians, fair-haired Midwestern farm boys, sharpshooters from the hills of Kentucky, Poles, Irish, Germans, Greeks, Hispanics, and a veritable salad bowl of ethnic varieties. And, at least in support roles, around the edges, are African Americans participating in the war effort, being patriotic and fighting for a country that had long fought against them. The multi-ethnic, multi-racial contours which embody our American self-image were set in heroic stone in Normandy.

This shoulder-to-shoulder self-image in the making was not without its controversies. Bars and USO halls in England were carefully segregated at the behest of the American authorities – and to the wonderment and embarrassment of the British. But there were many instances of grand "successes" across these racial and ethnic divides.

The Tuskegee Airmen come to mind. So, too, the much decorated

Japanese American brigade which fought in Europe. I will go so far as to suggest that the modern Civil Rights movement can be said to have been born in the trenches of Normandy and energized by the subsequent exposure of the bitterly divisive role that Anti-Semitism played in the agenda of the Third Reich. It is not a coincidence that Truman integrated the military ranks years before Brown v. the Board of Education.

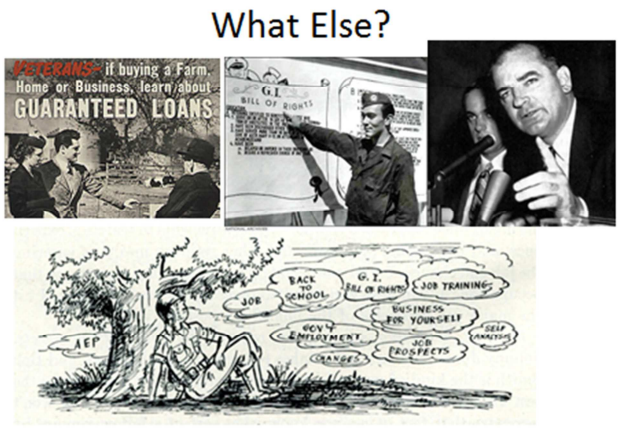
A personal anecdote is called for at this point. My father-in-law, one of the Army's remarkable "90 Day Wonders," had been trained as a civil engineer. During the war, he was put in charge of a unit of



"colored" soldiers who became experts at installing Bailey Bridges in the vanguard of advancing Allied vehicles and personnel. In

their down times, my father-in-law taught his troops how to prepare and paint buildings, providing a marketable skill which many brought back to the States and turned into viable livelihoods. In subsequent years he would have occasional visits to his Jersey City home from grateful veterans who recognized his humane and supportive leadership style as significant in their transition into successful civilian lives. And in the beginning of their full participation in American society.

Many other legacies – from technological advancements to economic boom times to the GI Bill to revolutions in literature, photography, journalism, music, and art – have their roots in the Second World War and their germination on the obstacle-strewn beaches of Normandy. Moreover, the archetypal "Citizen Soldier," motivated by a sense of justice, personal sacrifice, and patriotic fervor was first sketched in the lives of the combatants that day. Tom Brokow's "Greatest Generation," – willy-nilly – was being crafted as larger-than-life heroes on June 6, 1944. Whether falling from the sky,



floating on the rough seas, or charging up bullet-riddled slopes, a new American self-image was being formed.

Why my interest in D-Day and World War II? Never have so many been engaged in such a momentous enterprise. Never has the world convulsed through a more justified Crusade. Never have more heroes stepped forward to leave their mark on history. And rarely have the sands of time shifted more dramatically on the pivot of one day's events.

So, while I wistfully and wholeheartedly join in the words of the old Spiritual, "I ain't gonna study war no more" and "Gonna lay down my sword and shield," I know that, at least on June 6, 1944, these glorious refrains had to be put aside, and the sword and shield girded up.

9,000 Heroes Lie in Coleville Cemetery

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