

This Day in History... June 6, 1944

Allies Storm Normandy On D-Day

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Following the invasion of Poland in 1939 that sparked the start of World War II, German troops moved swiftly through Belgium and the Netherlands to France. There, they trapped British, French, and Belgian troops, who were eventually saved in the Dunkirk evacuation. However, France was soon occupied by German troops and would remain so for five years.

Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was an early driving force behind re-taking France. Despite Stalin's non-aggression pact with Hitler, German forces invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. The Soviets then joined the Allies, and Stalin made calls for establishing a second front in Europe. Once the US joined the war, President Roosevelt agreed to the importance of such a front but was convinced by Winston Churchill to wait, as the Allies did not have a large enough force. Instead, the Allies launched campaigns in the Mediterranean and North Africa. With those won and a successful invasion of Sicily, planning for the invasion of France began.

In May 1943, Allied leaders met at the Trident Conference and decided that the cross-channel invasion would take place within the next year. At the Tehran Conference that November, they agreed the invasion would take place the following May. They considered four different sites for the landings: Brittany, the Cotentin Peninsula, Normandy, and the Pas-de-Calais. The Germans could have easily cut off an Allied advance at Brittany and Cotentin, so those were rejected. As Pas-de-Calais is the closest to Britain, the Germans would have considered that the most likely landing spot, so it was also not a good choice. Normandy seemed to be the ideal location. It offered a long front the Allies could use to launch multiple attacks on Cherbourg, Brittany, and eventually move toward Paris and Germany.

To launch such a massive attack, the Allies had to develop new equipment. Among these were artificial Mulberry harbors and tanks that could climb sea walls while offering close supporting fire on the beach. The number of troops, as well as landing craft needed, was increased from the initial plans. More time was needed to build the extra landing craft, so the invasion was moved to June.



Patton and his 3rd Army arrived in Normandy in July and began combat operations on August 1.



Stamp issued on the 50th anniversary of D-Day.

Part of the Allied plan was to lead the Germans to believe the attack would happen elsewhere. Operation Bodyguard was the name for a series of smaller operations of deception. In Operation Fortitude North, the Allies transmitted fake radio communications suggesting the attack would be on Norway. Fortitude South revolved around a fake army under George Patton that would attack Calais. Even after D-Day, Patton was stationed in England until July 6 to convince the Germans that a second attack was coming.

The Allies destroyed German radar stations along the French coast to prevent detection of the invasion fleet until it was too late. The day before the invasion, they also dropped dummy paratroopers over Le Havre and Isigny to lead the Germans to believe that the landings were already in progress. Small ships with barrage balloons were also used near Le Havre and Pas-de-Calais to cause confusion.

Eisenhower had selected June 5 for the invasion date, but high winds and rough waters made it impossible. The next date with good tides, but no full moon, was not for another two weeks. His meteorological team believed June 6 would have good weather, so Eisenhower set that as the new

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invasion date. In the meantime, the Germans did not have such reliable weather forecasts and were predicting two weeks of storms. Because of this, many of their commanders left to attend war games while soldiers were given leave.

The Germans were not entirely unprepared. Previous raids in 1942 led Hitler to order fortifications along the Atlantic coast, from Spain to Norway. Pas-de-Calais had the greatest defenses, while Normandy's defenses were concentrated around Cherbourg and Saint-Malo. Normandy's beaches were also fitted with gun emplacements, wooden stakes, mines, and anti-tank obstacles.

In the weeks leading up to the invasion, the Allies also coordinated with the French Resistance to sabotage the Germans. Their duties included damaging the rail systems, ruining electrical facilities, and cutting underground communication cables.

Around midnight on June 6, 1944, more than 2,200 British and American bombers struck targets up the Normandy coast and inland. Many of these bombers were afraid to hit their own troops, so they waited too long and did not hit the beach defenses they were supposed to.

Shortly after midnight, minesweepers started clearing the channel, finishing their work around dawn. Paratroopers and gliders began their jumps around 12:15 a.m. Their goal was to delay a German approach by seizing bridges and road crossings. However, thick clouds made it difficult for pilots to find the drop zones and many of the men landed far from their targets.

At 5:45 a.m., the Allies launched a naval bombardment on areas behind the beach while it was still dark. As the sun rose, they then focused on targets they could see on the beach. Some landing craft were fitted with guns so they could also lay cover fire for the troops coming ashore.

The first troops to storm the Normandy beaches were the Americans at the beach code-named Utah. They arrived around 6:30, but were about 2,000 yards south of their intended position, as strong currents had pushed their boats off course. The landing craft at all of the beaches would suffer this same problem. It worked in their favor at Utah, and the Americans were across the beach by 9 a.m. and wading their way through flooded fields to spend the rest of the day fighting. Americans were also tasked with landing at Omaha Beach and scaling the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc. They encountered trouble at both locations and were

unable to accomplish all their objectives for a couple of days. British and Canadian troops stormed Gold, Juno, and Sword Beaches and encountered similar problems as the Americans.

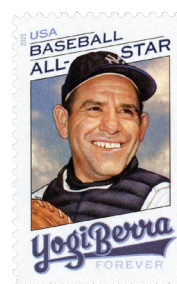
Due to the choppy seas, weather, and German resistance, the Allies did not complete any of the objectives they had planned for the first day. But in the coming days and weeks, more troops arrived and they managed to meet their goals. Major victories came with the captures of the Cherbourg port on June 26, and the city of Caen on July 21. In response, the Germans launched a failed counterattack on August 8 that led to 40,000 of their men being captured. On August 19, the French Resistance in Paris rose against the Germans, and days later, the Allies arrived to liberate the city. By the end of the month, the Germans were pushed out of France. Though they would launch one more offensive, the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans were on a downward spiral to losing the Second World War.



Eisenhower served as supreme commander of Allied forces during D-Day.



Bradley commanded the 1st US army during the landings and later the 12th US Army Group during the breakout from Normandy. It was the largest group of soldiers under a single field commander – 1.3 men in 43 divisions.



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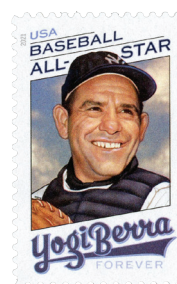
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