

37 Going for D-Day



June 6, 1944, England: Eisenhower gives paratroopers leaving for Normandy the orders for D-Day—to go all-out for a full victory.

General Erwin Rommel, Germany's brilliant desert warrior, looked at the skies and decided to take a two-day trip home to Germany. It was his wife Lucie's 50th birthday (he had bought her a gift—shoes from Paris); he also wanted to see the Führer and ask for more troops.

The weather was too rough for an invasion, he said.

General Eisenhower looked at the same skies and decided to go for it. The English Channel was in turmoil, but the moon was full and the tides were low.

The invasion began at night, when paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines. They captured bridges and lit flares to guide the gliders that followed. With all the sophisticated equipment available, it was a tiny child's toy—a snapper that made a sound like a cricket—that the paratroopers used as a signal during the night so they could find each other.

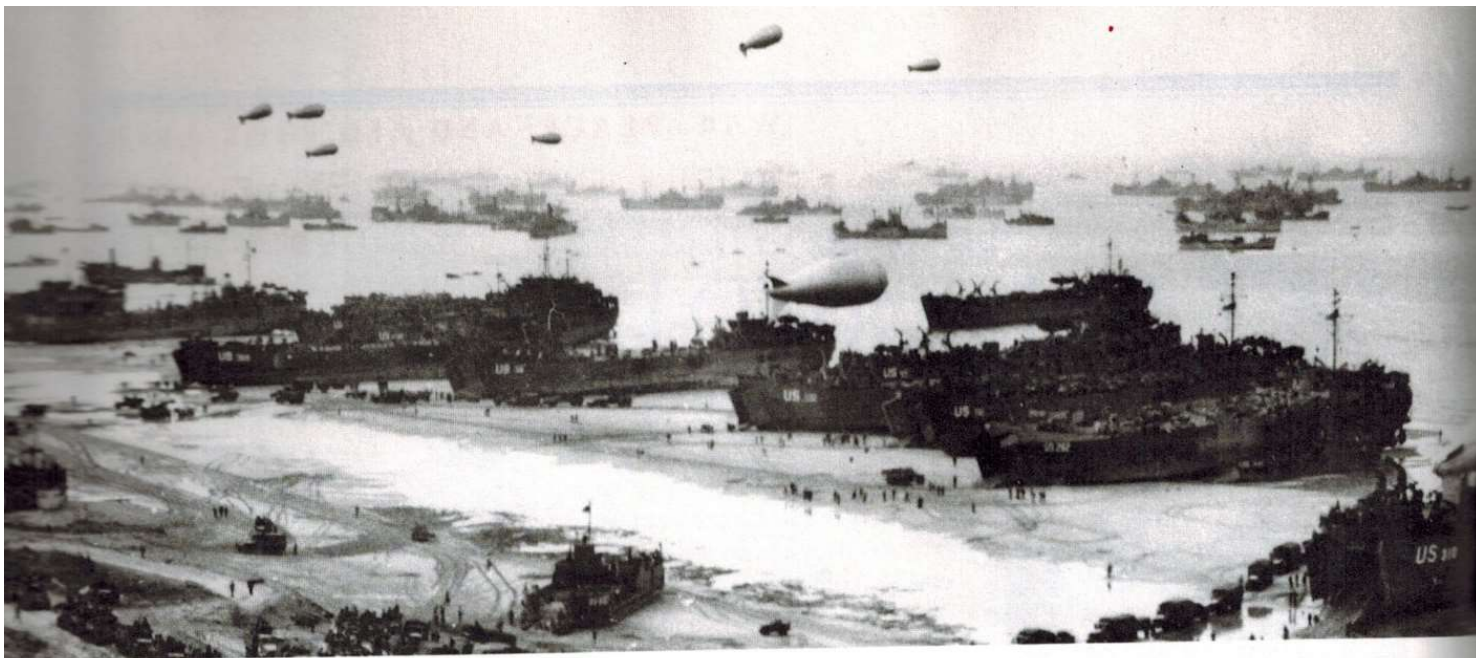
Then, at daybreak, the sky filled with airplanes—wingtip to wingtip—9,000 of them. Two submarines raised flags to mark a landing area. The largest armada ever assembled appeared off the French coast: landing vehicles, minesweepers, attack transports, tankers, cruisers, battleships, ocean liners, yachts, hospital ships and puffing tugs—all the

Hitler was known in Germany as *Der Führer* (FEW-rur), which means "the leader" in German.



Troops plunge down their Coast Guard landing barge ramp and wade for the beach. Behind the clouds loom the Normandy cliffs they will climb.

General Rommel had good reasons for taking time off. He intended to see Hitler and ask for more men to beef up the beach defenses. He also wanted to see Manfred, his 14-year-old son, who had been drafted into the army. Some of the other officers who took time off got together to practice war games.



Anti-aircraft barrage balloons over Omaha Beach. Among the arrivals on June 7, D-Day-plus-1, are a group of hulks that will be sunk off the beach as the foundations for temporary artificial harbors. The Allies need a base from which their invading troops can be easily landed and their equipment and supplies handled.

The rains are ferocious, but General Eisenhower's weatherman—tall, serious-faced Captain James Stagg—gets reports from five weather stations in the Atlantic. They indicate that there will be a 16-hour “window” in the bad weather. Ike entered Europe through that window.

boats and ships that could be found. They made an awesome fleet 20 miles wide. Giant military barrage balloons floated above, to interfere with enemy planes.

It was June 6, 1944, and forever it would be known as *D-Day*. The Allies were heading for the treacherous, mine-strewn beaches of Normandy in France, 100 miles from the nearest English port across the turbulent Channel. Enemy soldiers, in bunkers on top of the Normandy cliffs, some of them 150 feet high, waited behind formidable heavy guns. But most were asleep. No one was expecting an attack in this weather. Rommel wasn't the only officer on vacation. Most of the German leaders had taken the weekend off.

Soldiers are supplied with assault equipment suited to their landing area. Those on the cliffs have ropes and ladders; these men have bikes.





General Omar Bradley (right), U.S. 1st Army commander, and British General Bernard Montgomery discussing maneuvers in a field near Omaha Beach.

What happened next? The landing had been planned with the precision of a ballet. Everyone had a place and time in the drama. And, at four of the five landing beaches, things went more or less on schedule. But on Omaha Beach (one of two beaches where Americans landed), everything seemed snafued. The first men ashore couldn't

secure the beach. What was supposed to take minutes took hours. Of 32 tanks, with collars that were supposed to keep them afloat, 27 sank in the choppy water with men inside. Allied planes, sent to bomb the enemy's gun-filled bunkers, went too far, missed the guns, and dropped their bombs on French cows. Immense traffic jams of men and supplies backed up in the water and on the beaches. Mines and shells were exploding everywhere. Gliders dropped men and supplies behind the beaches into swampland, where many sank. "Our men simply could not get past the beach. They were pinned down right on the water's edge by an inhuman wall of fire....Our first waves were on the beach for hours, instead of a few minutes, before they could begin working inland," wrote war correspondent Ernie Pyle, who was there.

General Omar Bradley, on the command ship *Augusta*, thought about calling off the landing. Then a destroyer came up into the shallow water and lobbed a shell right inside a main bunker. When other ships added their firepower, the Nazi gunners in the concrete emplacements were in big trouble. The Navy had opened a crack in the German defenses and the Yanks were on their way.



American troops injured while storming Omaha Beach wait below the chalk cliffs for transport to a field hospital.

A Great War Photographer

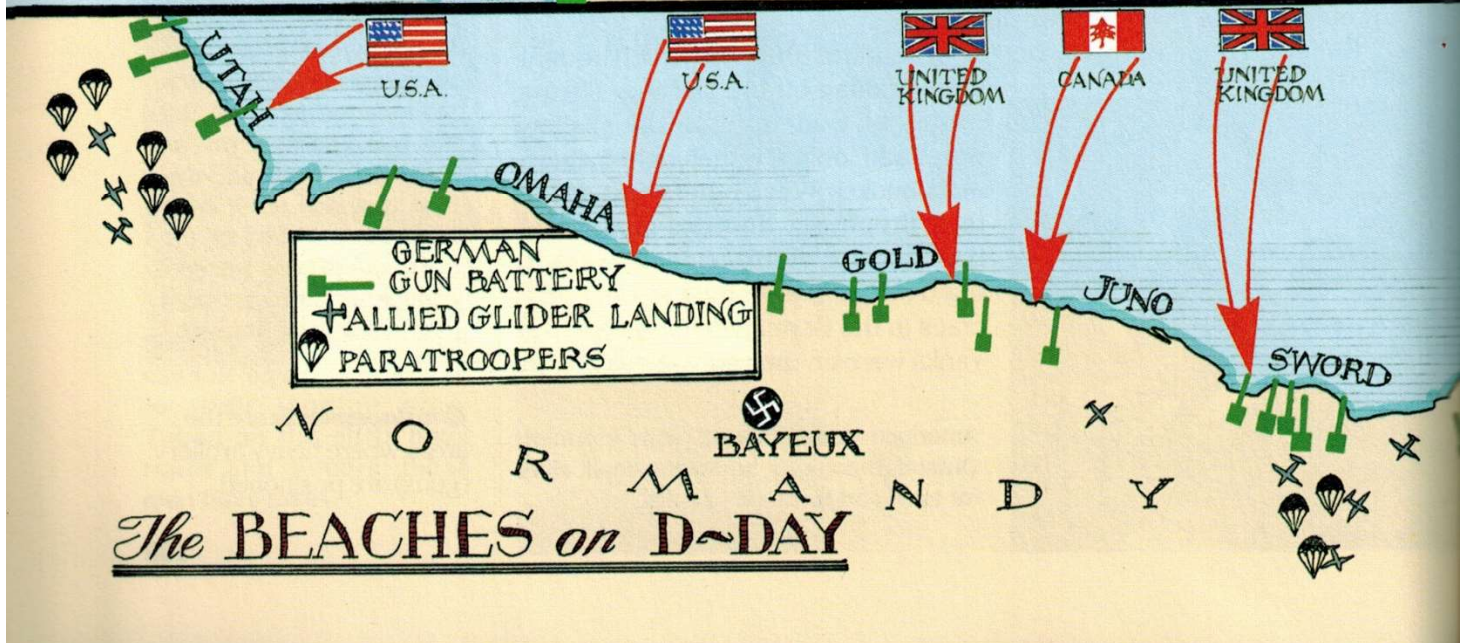
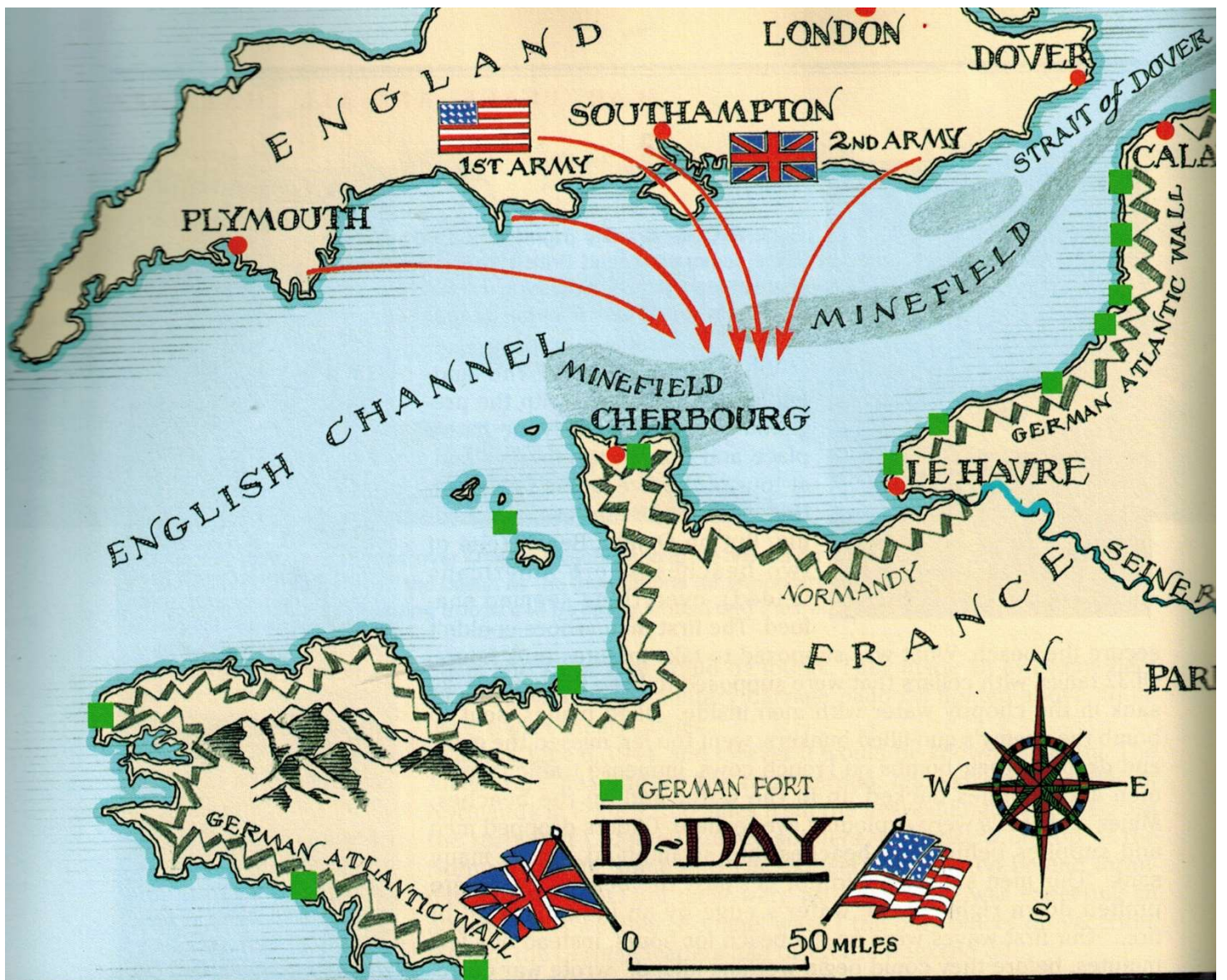


Most of Robert Capa's Normandy photographs were never published; they were accidentally ruined by a Life magazine darkroom technician.

Robert Capa was one of the war's great photographers. He took part in the D-Day invasion:

The sea was rough and we were wet before our barge pushed away from the mother ship. It was already clear that General Eisenhower would not lead his people across the Channel with dry feet or dry anything else. In no time, the men started to puke. But this was a polite as well as a carefully prepared invasion, and little paper bags had been provided for the purpose. [There weren't enough of the bags; most men used their helmets.]

Emplacements are the areas where heavy artillery (guns) are positioned.



WAR, PEACE, AND ALL THAT JAZZ

Slowly at first, but then steadily, soldiers and medical personnel began to land and head inland, into the fierce guns on top of the bluffs. No word is big enough to describe their effort. *Heroic* will have to do.

The operation had been brilliantly planned. Troops and officers had trained for a year; it paid off. Equipment specially designed for this invasion worked superbly. Tanks unrolled reels of steel matting that made roadways across the sand. Other tanks, with flailing chain arms, detonated mines and began to make the beach safe. Some tanks carried small bridges. Naval engineers had built huge floating harbors; they were towed into place.

In the midst of the fighting, over the noise of battle, a British major shouted out words from Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, about another invasion of France.

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England now a-bed,
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here;
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.*

It was D-Day, not St. Crispin's, but poets would write of this day, too: of heroism, of achievement, and of the waste of war. It was there to see on the beaches. They were littered with tanks and bodies and the leftovers of men's lives: socks, Bibles, toothbrushes, diaries, mirrors, letters, first-aid kits, photographs, and food rations. From Ernie Pyle:

There was a dog...on the water's edge, near a boat that lay twisted and half sunk at the waterline. He barked appealingly to every soldier who approached, trotted eagerly along with him for a few feet, and then, sensing himself unwanted in all the haste, he would run back to wait in vain for his own people at his own empty boat.

By nightfall, Allied troops—American, British, Canadian, Free French, Polish—were holding French soil. We had made it. We were on our way to Berlin.

For the Axis, it was the beginning of the end.



The Allies liberate France. *Above:* U.S. infantrymen march through a town in Normandy past a wrecked German truck still in its camouflage. *Below:* An American tank rolls through the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, August 1944. "We couldn't stick around long though," said one soldier. "The Jerries were on the run and we wanted to keep them that way."



Flailing means to move wildly.