The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 428
"An Idea of Simple Genius"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Everyone knew an Allied invasion of Western Europe was coming. Everyone on the Allied side knew it. Everyone in Germany knew it.

Both sides invested much time and many resources in preparing for the invasion. The tension grew until the arrival of the invasion would come as a relief, even to the Germans.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 428. An Idea of Simple Genius.

In episode 423, I talked about some of the issues facing the Western Allies as they made the final preparations to execute Operation Overlord. Today, I want to discuss more of those issues, and then take a look at the situation as of spring 1944 from the German perspective.

The Allies faced a touchy diplomatic situation in their relations with the Free French, and in particular with Charles de Gaulle and his stubborn brand of egotistic patriotism. De Gaulle was hypersensitive to anything that could be construed as an insult to France; to him, France was an equal partner with Britain and America and deserved to be treated accordingly. On the other hand, de Gaulle seemed to take a perverse pleasure in making life difficult for his own allies.

The problem of managing de Gaulle was seriously complicated by Franklin Roosevelt, who saw de Gaulle as a sort of French Mussolini. The American President insisted that the Allies were not invading France to install de Gaulle as its leader, nor any French government until the French people chose one through free and fair elections.

Since it would take many months, at least, for an election to be arranged and a French government to be chosen and put into place, liberated France would in the interim be governed by the Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories, known by the acronym AMGOT, as would Germany and the other Allied-occupied nations of Europe.

De Gaulle and the Free French leadership regarded such talk as an insult to the honor of France. To be fair, it wasn't about de Gaulle's ego—okay, it wasn't *only* about de Gaulle's ego. De Gaulle had a very reasonable fear that once the Germans were gone, France would descend into civil war along the same old fault lines: between the conservative Catholic Right, which had regarded the German Nazis as a lesser evil than the French Left, and the anticlerical French Left, which had been persecuted during the occupation, as much by the French Right as by the Nazis, and was out for revenge.

Years of negotiation had led to an agreement among the various resistance groups to unite behind de Gaulle and his French Committee of National Liberation, and de Gaulle's value to the various resistance groups came from his claim that at least a government led by de Gaulle would not be a government led by an ideological enemy. The Committee represented a delicate balance. As de Gaulle himself would remark some years later, "It is impossible to govern a country that produces 256 kinds of cheese."

To underscore their claim, the Committee declared itself the Provisional Government of the French Republic just days before the Normandy invasion. This announcement infuriated Roosevelt, who saw it as a French act of defiance against the countries that were coming to liberate them.

Roosevelt had forbidden General Eisenhower even from consulting with de Gaulle. The one Free French leader he was permitted to work with was General Pierre Koenig. Koenig had been a captain in the French Army at the time of the armistice of 1940. He became one of the first Army officers to evacuate to Britain and join with de Gaulle, who promoted him four times between then and now. It had been Koenig in command of the first Free French Army unit to engage the Germans. That was at Tobruk in June 1942, episode 368. Now he was the commander of the Free French forces that would participate in Overlord, as well as being a military advisor to de Gaulle and liaison between the Free French and Eisenhower.

Even so, Eisenhower was also under orders not to share too many operational details with Koenig, since it was his duty to report to de Gaulle. It irritated Koenig that the Allies were asking much of his Free French forces and of the resistance groups in occupied France, and yet the French received only the most general information about Overlord.

Days before the invasion was to begin, Churchill invited de Gaulle to come to Britain for a briefing. The British PM sent a message to Roosevelt that was practically apologetic, but pointed out the obvious: that "it is very difficult to cut the French out of the invasion of France." Roosevelt replied with a demand that once de Gaulle was briefed, he must not be permitted to leave the United Kingdom until Overlord had begun.

It wasn't that Roosevelt didn't trust de Gaulle, or it wasn't entirely that; the main concern was security, or the lack of it, in the Free French command. The Abwehr was getting excellent intelligence information from the Free French. This wasn't due to double agents or traitors, or

anything as exciting as that. Rather, and as usual, the problem was French pride. The Free French refused to use British or American ciphers; they sent their own internal communications using French codes that dated from before the war and were hopelessly obsolete by 1944.

Leo Marks, the head cryptographer of the British SOE and the man who first deduced that the Dutch resistance had been compromised by the Germans, went so far as to drop in on the Free French headquarters in London and challenged them to encrypt any message they might choose and give it to him. Marks then sat down and, with only pencil and paper, decrypted the message as the astonished French watched.

Marks may have been well-intentioned, but the French did not take his demonstration to heart and change their codes. It only served to further alienate the French from their allies.

As for Churchill's invitation, on June 2, the British sent planes to Algiers to transport de Gaulle and his staff to London, but de Gaulle refused to come. He was angry over Roosevelt's refusal to acknowledge him and the Committee of National Liberation as the legitimate government of France. British representatives argued with him, telling de Gaulle that to refuse to cooperate with Operation Overlord would only validate Roosevelt's doubts about him and likely also alienate Churchill, currently de Gaulle's best friend among the Allied leadership. It took until the following day to convince de Gaulle to accept Churchill's invitation.

De Gaulle arrived in Britain on June 4. Churchill welcomed him warmly, but their meeting turned chilly soon afterward, when Churchill revealed that his main interest in talking to de Gaulle was to ask him to deliver a radio speech to be broadcast into France during the invasion.

Then Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden suggested they discuss "politics," by which he meant the impasse between de Gaulle and Roosevelt. De Gaulle denounced the Americans; he was especially infuriated by the occupation currency the Americans were already printing up for use in Allied-occupied France. He told the British the French Republic would not honor this "false money," as he called it, and chastised them for cooperating with the Americans in such a demeaning scheme.

This in turn roused Churchill's ire. He asked whether de Gaulle thought the British could possibly conduct the war independently of the Americans. He pointed out that the coming liberation of France was only possible with American cooperation and concluded with a blunt declaration. If the French forced Britain to choose between France and the United States, Britain would choose the United States.

That afternoon, Churchill escorted de Gaulle to Eisenhower's headquarters to be briefed on Overlord. Eisenhower had a gift for the kind of people skills needed to cajole a group of disparate leaders into working together, even if they were accustomed to doing things their own way. That gift was what made him the right person for this command, and it did not fail him during his meeting with de Gaulle, at least not until Eisenhower showed de Gaulle the

announcement they wanted him to make over the radio. The text said nothing about any provisional French government; instead, it called on the French to follow the instructions of the Allied military command.

At least de Gaulle kept his cool this time. He politely asked Eisenhower if it would be possible to suggest some changes to the message. Eisenhower agreed, but later that day, after de Gaulle returned to London, he received notice that his proposed changes had to be reviewed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, and there was insufficient time to do so before the invasion.

That was it. De Gaulle announced he would not give the radio address they had asked from him, and ordered the French liaison officers meant to accompany Allied units landing in France not to participate in the invasion.

Churchill received this news during a meeting of the War Cabinet and exploded into a rage, calling de Gaulle a traitor and threatening to send him back to Algiers in chains.

[music: Holst, "Song of the Blacksmith," from *Second Suite in F for Military Band*.]

Back in episode 369, I told you about the Allied raid on the French port town of Dieppe in August 1942. It did not end well, with nearly half of the force of about 10,000 soldiers killed, wounded, or captured during the one-day raid.

One of the purposes of that raid was to test whether a lightning attack could seize control of a French port before the Germans had the opportunity to destroy it. The Allied experience at Dieppe indicated the answer to that question was a firm "no."

This was a matter of grave concern. A large-scale amphibious invasion opposed by a substantial enemy force is not a simple project. The disastrous result at Gallipoli during the last war was proof enough of that. The Allies' plan for Overlord involved a huge landing on the first day, totaling eight divisions, but that was just the first day. The Germans had a much larger garrison force in France than that, and if those eight divisions were the entire operation, there was no hope. It would be only a matter of time before the Germans moved a force into Normandy large enough to push the invaders back into the sea.

The liberation of France required that the D-day invasion be just the first step. Behind those eight divisions were some forty more divisions in England that would have to be transported to the secured invasion site in Normandy as quickly as possible to beef up the Allied line faster than the Germans could reinforce theirs.

To move such large numbers of troops requires a sizeable port facility where the soldiers can debark and their equipment can be unloaded. And that's before we get to the question of supply. Those eight divisions landing on D-Day would require something like 5,000 tons of food, munitions, and other supplies every day. Once the full Allied expeditionary force crossed into

France, they would need 25,000 tons of supplies every single day, Saturdays and Sundays included.

To sum it up, getting as many soldiers and supplies across the English Channel and into France as quickly as possible would be crucial. The success of Operation Overlord might very well depend on it.

So what's so special about a port? Couldn't additional troops use landing craft to get to the beaches, and couldn't supplies be delivered the same way?

Well, it's possible, but it's not easy, and it certainly isn't fast. Soldiers would have to ride on transports till they reached the French coast, then transfer onto landing craft to get ashore. Supplies would have to be delivered the same way.

Here's something you have to consider: the English Channel is notorious for its storms: storms that seemingly appear out of nowhere, rapidly turn nasty, and can persist for days. Big ships like cargo ships and troop transports can manage all but the very worst weather, but those little landing craft? Forget it. And how are you going to move your soldiers and supplies from the big ships to the little boats in gale-force winds?

What's so special about a port? I'll tell you. There are two features of a port that make it valuable. The first is that ports are built on harbors sheltered from the full force of the ocean. Docked ships can't load or unload cargo if they're heaving up and down and crashing into the pier in a storm. This shelter can be natural, such as London or New York City, where the port is upriver from the ocean on a river big enough to accommodate seagoing vessels but narrow enough to dampen the waves and choppy seas bad weather brings.

Other harbors are protected by an artificial wall, called a "breakwater," which shields the harbor from waves and storm surges. A typical breakwater might wall off most of the harbor, leaving a relatively narrow opening to allow passage of ships.

The second feature is deep water. The water in the harbor of an ideal port is deep enough for large ships to approach very close to shore—close enough that it can dock at a pier that provides passage to solid ground. Cranes and other machinery unload cargo quickly, maybe even move it directly from the ship to the back of a truck.

All the ports on the coast of France were occupied by German garrisons with orders to hold the port for as long as possible, and then destroy it. Experience in Italy had shown that a wrecked port took months to restore, and Dieppe had shown that seizing a port before the Germans could wreck it was not feasible.

So what was to be done? The Western Allies came up with an ingenious solution. The components needed to build an artificial harbor could be prefabricated in England and then towed across the Channel and assembled at Normandy. This idea began with a suggestion from

Winston Churchill, when he saw obsolete American destroyers docked in New York. Churchill suggested crews could sail these ships into position and scuttle them, thus building a breakwater out of old ships. This idea wasn't workable on its own, but it was the beginning of a plan. It was this suggestion that moved Franklin Roosevelt to make his famous quip that Churchill had a hundred new ideas every day, and four of them were good.

The project to design, build, and place these artificial harbor components was codenamed Operation Mulberry, and there were five parts. On the outer edge of the harbor, large floating steel structures, essentially ship hulls with nothing inside them, would be chained together to form a floating barrier that would dampen the approaching waves. These would form the first breakwater. Inside this barrier would be a second breakwater, this one an actual wall, composed of huge floating hollow blocks of concrete, which could be pulled across the Channel by tugboat, then filled with water and allowed to sink into position. The British built over 200 of these. They were supplemented with 61 obsolete ships that could be moved into position and scuttled.

The British also built two floating pierheads that would be positioned inside the breakwater. Here is where cargo ships could dock. These pierheads could float, but they also had legs on each corner that could be individually extended or retracted to reach the sea bottom and help steady the structure.

The last two components were bridge sections and pontoons, which could be assembled to form a floating pier stretching from the pierheads to the shore. These bridges were over a mile long, and strong enough to support a Sherman tank, which could drive from the pierhead right up onto the beach.

The first components for what came to be called "Mulberry harbors" were already getting towed across the Channel on D-day. German reconnaissance pilots spotted British tugs pulling these huge concrete structures across the water, but had no clue what they were for.

Two Mulberry harbors were built: Mulberry A to supply the American beaches, and Mulberry B to supply the British beaches. After the war, German armaments minister Albert Speer said of Operation Mulberry: "To construct our defenses, in two years we used 13 million tons of concrete and one and a half million tons of steel. A fortnight after the landings by the enemy, this costly effort was brought to naught by an idea of simple genius."

[music: Holst, "Song of the Blacksmith," from *Second Suite in F for Military Band*.]

Everyone in the German military, from Hitler down to the most humble private, knew that there would be an Anglo-American amphibious invasion somewhere in Western Europe, probably in France, and most probably along France's Channel coast, and that this invasion was likely by spring of 1944.

Adolf Hitler was sure of it. He was also certain that the outcome of that invasion would decide the war. He told his senior military officers as much in a staff meeting on December 20, 1943. He also told them that when the invaders landed, it would come as a relief to him.

In Hitler's view, the looming invasion was forcing him to station a large military force in France that was badly needed on the Eastern Front. This was unfortunate, but he also believed that when the invasion came, if the Wehrmacht could defeat the invaders and force them off the Continent and back to England, it would be at least another year, perhaps two, before the Western Allies would try anything like that again. They might even give up on a landing in Western Europe and turn their attention elsewhere. Toward Japan, for instance. This would free the force in France to move to the Eastern Front.

These conclusions were based a big assumption. The first was that the Axis forces already engaged on the Eastern Front would be able to hold out until victory came in the West, plus the many weeks it would take to redeploy German Army units in the West eastward. This assumption is debatable, but if you look at it from the German point of view, you reach the paradoxical conclusion that the sooner the invasion comes, the better. The longer the Western Allies wait, the longer those German units defending France have to wait before joining their comrades in the East. You can see why Hitler said he'd feel relieved when the invasion finally came.

Hitler's view was widely shared among the Wehrmacht's senior commanders. They believed it because they had to believe it; it was the most plausible scenario for how the war could still be won. It was believe this, or concede defeat. Even the usually level-headed Wehrmacht chief of staff, Alfred Jodl, in a meeting with Nazi Party officials, after giving them an honest picture of the Wehrmacht's precarious position, went on to make a declaration of Nazi fervor: this was the path to winning the war, and the path along which Hitler would lead Germany, because that was his destiny, and the nation's. Otherwise, Jodl concluded, "world history would lose all its sense."

The *Führer* correctly understood how badly any Anglo-American invasion force would need a port for resupply and reinforcement. He was determined they wouldn't get one. In our recent episodes on events on the Eastern Front, we've seen how Hitler had developed a strategy of fortifying key defensive positions, which he called *Feste Plätze*, literally "fortified places." It sounded good in theory: you could put soldiers in a defensive position, stockpile supplies, and when the enemy conducts an offensive, these fortified places, often at key road or rail junctions, would force the enemy to halt and spend time and resources capturing the fortified place. If it were done right, the cost to the enemy to capture the fortified place would be far greater than the cost of establishing it.

Mindful of what I said about ports a few minutes ago, I could suggest an analogy: these fortified places would be like a breakwater, absorbing the strength and momentum of the onrushing wave of enemy soldiers and bogging down their offensive.

The way Hitler saw it, this is what Stalin and the Red Army had done to the Wehrmacht in 1941 and 1942. German armor had encircled large Soviet forces, but the soldiers fought on, forcing the Germans to spend time and divert soldiers to reducing these enemy pockets and killing or capturing the soldiers in them before they could advance farther. All of this culminated in Stalingrad.

It sounded good in theory, but didn't work so well in practice on the Eastern Front, where the terrain is mostly wide and flat and the Red Army well-equipped with vehicles. Holding a road junction didn't do much good; the Soviets could detour the tanks and supply trucks around it.

In 1941, it had been the German Army that held the advantage in mobility, and the Red Army that was forced into static defenses by necessity. By 1944, it was the Germans relying on static defenses; they lacked the vehicles and especially the fuel to keep up with the newly motorized Red Army.

When it came to Western Europe and the defense against an Allied amphibious landing, Hitler relied on the same strategy, and you have to admit that here it makes more sense. He ordered French port cities, cities like Calais, Le Havre, Cherbourg, Brest, and La Rochelle, garrisoned by German soldiers, fortified, and stockpiled with supplies. I laid out for you just a few minutes ago the reasons why the Allies would need a port. Their expeditionary force in France would have to be big to take on the Germans, and a big force will require lots of supplies to keep fighting; those supplies would have to come from Britain or the USA and unload at a port.

If these German garrisons could hold off the Allies long enough, the Allied expeditionary force would run out of supplies and would not be able to fight effectively. They would either have to withdraw back to England or be crushed by the Wehrmacht.

You already know where this is going, because I just told you about Operation Mulberry. You know and I know, but the Germans didn't.

The overall commander of the German military forces stationed in France and responsible for opposing any Allied landings was Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, the most senior officer in the German Army. Allow me to remind you that Rundstedt was in command of the army group that executed the brilliant advance through the Ardennes in May 1940 that led to the fall of France. He was commanded Army Group South during Operation Barbarossa in 1941, until Hitler relieved him for authorizing his units to withdraw from Rostov-on-Don in December.

In 1942, Hitler appointed Rundstedt commander-in-chief of German Army units in the West. In the spring of 1944, Rundstedt had two army groups under his command. The first was Army Group B, commanded by Erwin Rommel. Army Group B had been deployed to northern Italy when the Germans occupied that country; in late November 1943 Hitler dissolved that formation and created a new Army Group B, which would be responsible for defending the northern coast of France as far west as Brittany. The second was Army Group G, commanded by General

Johannes Blaskowitz. It was responsible for the defense of the French Atlantic coast south of Brittany and the French Mediterranean coast.

Hitler still liked Rommel, even if he sometimes questioned Rommel's loyalty. More to the point, Rommel was still a popular figure among the German public. Rommel set up his headquarters at the Chateau de La Roche-Guyon, a 12th-century castle that stands on a promontory overlooking the River Seine downriver from Paris. Rommel chose this location because it was within driving distance of the coast from Belgium to Brittany. Every morning, Rommel would drive from the castle to inspect some part of these coastal fortifications. Many of these fortifications had been designed by Hitler himself, who sketched out his ideas for different types of bunkers. With his characteristic modesty, Hitler declared himself the "greatest fortification builder of all time."

Yet Hitler's generals were divided on the best defensive strategy. Rommel believed that the success or failure of the Allied invasion would be decided on the first day. He wanted to station panzer units at likely invasion sites all along the French coast, so that wherever the invasion came, it would quickly meet a German armored counterattack. Rundstedt and the other senior commanders in the West took the opposite view. They felt it would be better to concentrate the armored units in the rear, where they could quickly be deployed *en masse* to the invasion site, wherever that might be.

Rommel disagreed. The Western Allies now had air supremacy across France. His experience in North Africa had taught him that Allied air attacks could slow his panzers to a crawl. If German armor was stationed that far from the coast, Rommel reasoned, they might never make it to the invasion beach.

Hitler resolved the dispute in his usual style. There were three panzer corps stationed in France, composed of four divisions each. One of these corps he assigned to Rommel and a second to Blaskowitz to deploy as each commander saw fit. The third corps would be held in reserve under the direct command of OKW, ready to advance to the invasion site on his order.

April 20, 1944 was Adolf Hitler's 55th birthday. He celebrated the occasion privately at the Berghof. In Berlin, Joseph Goebbels arranged for swastika banners to be hung throughout the city, even over the rubble left behind by Allied bombing raids. Posters sprung up proclaiming, "Our walls may break, but our hearts will not." He gave his customary speech in praise of the *Führer* on his birthday, but confessed to his diary that it was "very hard to find the right words in these times." I think that's German for "I can't come up with anything good to say." Being Hitler's propaganda minister was no walk in the park.

Hitler flew to Berlin soon after to attend the funeral of one of his favorite generals, who had died in a plane crash. From the window of his plane, Hitler got his first good look at the damage Allied bombers had inflicted on the city. He vowed to rebuild Berlin after the war and declared the Jews must be punished for their crimes.

Afterward, Hitler traveled to Salzburg for two days of talks with Italy's restored *Duce*, Benito Mussolini, at Klessheim Castle. Mussolini had come to ask for greater autonomy for his government and for more humane treatment of the Italians forced to do slave labor in Germany. Hitler brushed Mussolini's pleas aside and went on another of his long rants. He denounced the treachery of Pietro Badoglio and his government and boasted of the German retribution weapons that would soon destroy London.

Hitler also expressed confidence that the coming Allied invasion would be foiled by Germany's carefully crafted defenses and concluded by once again evoking the example of his hero, Frederick the Great, who had also fought a war against an alliance. In early 1762, when Prussia's position appeared lost, the Russian Empress Elizabeth died unexpectedly at the age of 52. Her German-born nephew, Peter III, succeeded her, withdrew from the anti-Prussian alliance and joined the war as a Prussian ally, which led to the collapse of the enemy coalition. Hitler predicted that if Germany could hold on long enough, the alliance against him would surely also collapse.

Three weeks later, Allied forces in Italy finally broke through the Gustav Line. In the early morning hours of June 4, American soldiers entered Rome.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Simon and John for their kind donations, and thank you to Brad for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Simon and John and Brad help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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The end of the year holidays are upon us again; this is the time of year when I always remind you that donations and patronages to support *The History of the Twentieth Century* make the perfect holiday gift, for me. This year marked the tenth anniversary of the podcast, so if you'd like to help me celebrate, a donation to the podcast is an excellent way.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we pick up the story I alluded to at the end of today's episode: The Fall of Rome. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. At the risk of getting ahead of myself, I want to show you what I meant when I talked about storms in the English Channel. In the first days after the invasion, the Allies brought soldiers, equipment, and supplies to the invasion beachhead by landing craft, as I described earlier. In less than two weeks, both Mulberry harbors were ready to use, but on June 19, a storm with gale-force winds struck Normandy. It was the worst storm there in 40 years, and it was more than the Mulberry harbors were designed to take. The British one was damaged, and the American one destroyed.

Pieces were salvaged from the American harbor and used to repair the British one, which was brought back into service and was used until spring of 1945. Soldiers began calling it Port Winston after the British prime minister. The British shared the use of Port Winston with the Americans; the Americans also continued to deliver supplies via landing craft, which worked out better than anticipated, and that was enough to keep the US Army in supply.

[music: Closing War Theme]