

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 432

“The Longest Day I”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

[T]he first 24 hours of the invasion will be decisive...the fate of Germany depends on the outcome...for the Allies as well as Germany, it will be the longest day.”

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, April 22, 1944.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 432. The Longest Day, part one.

On June 3, 1944, in England, soldiers were already beginning to board the ships that would take them to Normandy. Meanwhile, 1,100 kilometers away, or 700 miles, Adolf Hitler, SS chief Heinrich Himmler, and Martin Bormann, Hitler’s private secretary, were in Salzburg for a wedding.

The 28-year-old Margarete Braun, known to her friends as Gretl, the younger sister of Eva Braun, Hitler’s paramour, was married that day to the 37-year-old Hermann Fegelein, a high-ranking officer who served on the *Führer’s* staff as representative of the SS. The couple was wed in a civil ceremony, with Hitler, Himmler, and Bormann serving as the witnesses.

Fegelein had a reputation for charm and wit and was popular with the ladies. He was also known as a playboy. He’d befriended Bormann and it is widely believed that his relationships with both Bormann and Gretl were as much about his career ambitions as anything else, but Gretl liked him. Eva liked him, too. Hitler was strict about not showing affection toward Eva in front of others, and Fegelein often took the role of her escort and companion on public occasions.

After the wedding, Hitler escorted the wedding party back to the Berghof, his Alpine vacation home, which served as the venue for the reception, organized by Eva. Hitler hated tuxedos, but wore one anyway for the occasion. They partied late into the night at the Eagle’s Nest, except for Hitler, who excused himself and went to bed early.

Everyone knew an Allied invasion was imminent. Hitler expressed confidence that his Atlantic Wall would repulse the invaders, though Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, commander-in-chief in the West, privately dismissed the project as a “cheap bluff.”

Germany had stationed in the West some 1.5 million uniformed personnel, but that statistic sounds more impressive than it is. It included Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine personnel, who were not under Rundstedt’s command, but answered directly to Hitler. Rundstedt had asked they be placed under his command, but Hitler had refused. This arrangement was his way of making sure none of his subordinates got too powerful.

Rundstedt in fact commanded around 850,000 soldiers, barely half of that total. Of these, 120,000 were under orders to fortify and hold ports on the coast, part of Hitler’s “fortress city” strategy. They would not be available to meet Allied forces on the beaches. Neither would the 24,000 who were part of the 319th Infantry Division. That unit held the Channel Islands, the only British territory under German occupation. Characteristically, Hitler had heavily fortified the Channel Islands, calculating that their occupation had huge symbolic value. He was determined never to let go of them. Technically, the Channel Islands fortifications were part of the Atlantic Wall. Some estimate that 10% of the total amount of steel and concrete used to build Atlantic Wall fortifications went to fortify the Channel Islands. German soldiers in France jokingly referred to their comrades stationed there as “the Canadians,” that is, their likely future was confinement in a Canadian POW camp.

Subtract the soldiers that were committed to holding those fortifications, and the total under Rundstedt’s command dwindles to around 700,000 available to oppose an enemy landing. The German Army had an additional 400,000 soldiers garrisoning Norway, which it would very much have liked to redeploy to France, but Hitler refused to allow it.

The German soldiers stationed in the West were not, for the most part, the cream of the Army. Those soldiers went to the Eastern front. Most of the formations in France consisted of “ear and stomach battalions,” as they were known, meaning soldiers who had already been wounded, mostly in the stomach, or else had lost some of their hearing. Others were teenagers, or reluctant conscripts from Luxembourg or Alsace-Lorraine who didn’t really want to fight for Germany. Almost one soldier in five in France was Polish or Ukrainian or Russian, most of them POWs from the East.

Some of the Polish soldiers had received instructions from the resistance that when the Allied invasion came, they should switch sides as soon as possible. Polish soldiers stationed in France told the French about the extermination camps the Germans had built in their country, stories many French civilians found difficult to believe. They also told the French that when the Allies came, France would be liberated, while Poland would merely exchange one occupier for another.

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was responsible for the defense of the Channel coast. He commanded two armies; one garrisoning the region around Calais, the other Normandy. As you

know, he set up his headquarters in a castle along the Seine, north of Paris, that was within easy driving distance of either army. Every morning, Rommel awoke at 5:00 AM and rode out to one of the two potential invasion sites to inspect the defenses and the units occupying them.

Most in the German command thought Calais the most likely invasion site, but in recent weeks Rommel had been tending more toward the view that it would be Normandy. This despite the assurances of the admirals in the Kriegsmarine that the Allies would never choose Normandy. There the water was so shallow that an invasion would only be possible at high tide.

German meteorologists forecast that the weather in the Channel would be unsuitable for an invasion until June 10 at the earliest, so Rommel took the opportunity to return to his home in Germany to celebrate his wife's birthday.

In London, the Special Operations Executive was in radio contact with 137 local resistance groups across France, representing an estimated 350,000 people. Only about 100,000 of them had guns, but the SOE wasn't looking for guerilla fighters; it wanted saboteurs. Two groups of resistance members were particularly useful in this regard: railway workers and telephone workers. The first group could sabotage French rail lines and make it difficult for the Germans to use them to move soldiers. The second group could cut telephone and telegraph lines and force the Germans to use radios to communicate with their soldiers. The resistance didn't know it, but if German commanders were forced to issue orders by radio, they would use Enigma, which meant their coded messages could easily be read in Britain.

On the evening of June 5, the BBC began broadcasting "personal messages" that were actually coded signals to French resistance groups to begin the sabotage campaign. In order to obscure the location of the invasion, the messages were directed to groups across France. German military intelligence picked up on the sudden flurry of messages and at 9:15 that evening Rundstedt's headquarters ordered the units under his command to go on alert. But Rommel was not at his headquarters. In his absence, his staff had invited some friends to have dinner with them in the castle, and why not, and were busy partying when the alert came, so while the Fifteenth Army, the one stationed at the Pas-de-Calais, received the order and went on alert, the other army, the Seventh Army, the one stationed at Normandy, did not.

The party at Rommel's headquarters did not break up until after midnight. His chief of staff, General Hans Speidel, was just getting ready for bed at 1:00 on the morning of June 6, when an officer came to him with a report of Allied paratroopers landing in Normandy.

[music: Beethoven, *Piano Sonata No. 14* in C# minor "Moonlight."]

Just before midnight on the evening of June 5, villagers across southern England were settling into their beds for the night when they heard the roar of an airplane flying overhead. Then another. Then another. It went on and on like this, until people got up and went outside, many still dressed in their nightclothes, to gawk at the endless stream of aircraft heading south. The

significance of this unprecedented sight was obvious. Many of these onlookers began mouthing silent prayers for the soldiers inside those planes.

The first stage of the Normandy campaign, technically Operation Neptune, but in our time, almost always referred to simply as D-Day, involved the airdrop of three divisions into Normandy. Each division rode in some 400 aircraft. At the far eastern end of the invasion beaches the British 6th Airborne Division would land on the invasion force's left flank, with the goal of capturing and holding the bridges over the River Orne and the Caen Canal before the Germans could destroy them, then advancing east to the next river, the Dives, which would serve as their defensive line.

The first British airborne soldiers to land on French soil did not descend by parachute, but by glider. The British had built hundreds of Horsa gliders, each capable of carrying 30 soldiers, or a Jeep, or a light anti-tank gun. The Horsas were towed to Normandy behind British Halifax bombers at an altitude of 5,000 feet, and then cut loose so their pilots could bring them down to a hopefully gentle landing. In the middle of the night, mind you. Horsas were one-use aircraft made of wood; British soldiers frequently referred to them as "Hearses."

None of the landings were as gentle as one might have hoped. In some cases, the gliders broke apart on landing; soldiers climbed out of the craft through the shattered walls. The most dangerous place to be in one of these gliders was in the pilot seats at the front of the plane. Many pilots were killed or wounded in these landings.

One of the gliders landed almost on top of the German pillbox guarding the west end of the bridge across the Caen Canal, their first objective. Soldiers rushed the pillbox and began pushing live grenades through the openings, while others raced across the bridge to secure the other side. They didn't quite make it before the Germans pulled themselves together and began shooting, but after a brief firefight, the Germans withdrew.

That was one bridge down, and one to go. The next bridge to the east, over the Orne, was undefended and soon under British control. Farther east, British paratroopers had blown up five bridges on the River Dives. The officers ordered their soldiers to set up defensive lines. One unit was sent west to reconnoiter the nearby village of Bénouville.

Casualties were light and this brigade of the 6th had captured its principal objectives within ninety minutes of landing. They have to have been the luckiest soldiers on D-day. The unit sent a coded radio message back to Britain that meant both bridges had been taken. The message was "Ham and jam." How very English.

Not every unit of the 6th had it this easy. One battalion was assigned to destroy a German gun emplacement near the shore that was believed to pose a threat to the landing craft. Only 160 of the unit's 600 members found the rendezvous point. They proceeded with their assignment anyway. They suffered 75 casualties but seized the battery, only to discover it was a much

smaller gun than had been thought, too small to pose a threat to the landing. They destroyed it anyway.

The British left flank was secure. Now all they had to worry about was the German 21st Panzer Division, which they knew to be stationed not far to their south. The German commander on the scene called the 21st at 2:00 AM and requested they advance north to the beaches immediately. But the 21st couldn't do that until they got clearance from Rommel's headquarters. By the time they got permission to head north, it was already daylight and the invasion force was landing.

By that time, about 1:30 in the morning, German units across Normandy were trying, with mixed success, to telephone their superiors and report Allied air landings. The messages that got through were confusing, because in addition to the actual airborne landings, the RAF was dropping hundreds of dummy paratroops at other locations farther inland. The dummies were rigged to explode when they hit the ground. Teams from the SAS, the British Army's special forces unit, dropped with them. These teams were meant to cause as much trouble as possible for the Germans.

The purpose of these phony paratroop landings was to confuse the picture and obscure where the actual landings were taking place, but they proved even more successful than that. Once reports came in that the "paratroops" were actually exploding dummies, most German officers in the region concluded that the whole thing was a bluff, or perhaps an attempt to distract the German Army from the real invasion site, such as the Pas-de-Calais.

The Allies had bombed as many German radar stations on the French coast as they could; now the RAF was also dropping "window," that is, chaff to confuse whatever radar stations might still be operating. Chaff and radar-reflective balloons were deployed to confuse the picture further by creating the illusion of large air and naval forces headed for the Pas-de-Calais.

The only senior commander who put two and two together and recognized that these airborne landings in Normandy were the prelude to an impending naval landing was General Max Pemsel, chief of staff of the Seventh Army. He contacted his superior, Rommel's chief of staff, Hans Speidel at the castle on the Seine, Speidel dismissed Pemsel's fears. Rommel himself was, of course, not present.

At the opposite end of the invasion site, at the base of the Cotentin peninsula, lay Utah Beach, one of the two American landing sites. Two American airborne divisions, the 82nd and the 101st, were to be dropped a few miles inland from the beach, where their orders were to capture bridges and clear the way for the landing force at Utah, the US 4th Infantry Division, to advance west across the base of the peninsula as quickly as possible. The Americans hoped to cut off, isolate, and eventually capture the French port of Cherbourg, which sits at the northern tip of the peninsula.

The first American paratroopers were small advance units sent ahead to set up radar beacons to help the main force find its way. The Americans chose not to fly their C-47 transport aircraft directly over the approaching invasion fleet for safety reasons; instead, they turned right, circled around Cherbourg, and approached the Cotentin Peninsula from the west. This route took them directly over the German-occupied Channel Islands of Guernsey and Jersey, where flak batteries began to fire at them. One American soldier expressed surprise at getting shot at from “two islands named after nice moo cows.”

As the planes approached their targets, some soldiers of the 101st had difficulty waking up their commander, General Maxwell Taylor who, unlike most of them, had been able to sleep on the flight over. They had to wake him up because Taylor had ordered that he would be the first to jump out of their plane.

But when they crossed the coastline, the American planes ran into an unexpected fog bank, a very thick one. The pilots began to worry about collisions. Some on the edges turned their aircraft away from the formation for safety.

The planes flew low, at an altitude of just 1,000 feet, which made them prime targets for German flak guns as soon as they cleared the fog bank. The planes veered to evade the fire, tossing the paratroopers around inside around the plane.

When they reached the drop points and the green lights went on over the doors, the paratroopers began to jump. The planes were supposed to slow down for the jump, but many of the frightened pilots maintained speed, meaning the jumpers suffered a nasty jerk when their chutes opened.

Each paratrooper carried an 80-pound pack attached to their leg with a strap of fabric. Many of these packs broke away when their owners jumped and were never found. Anyone who dropped near a German unit drew heavy fire. They were quickly taken prisoner, if they hadn't been killed first.

Some of the planes flew lower than 500 feet when their paratroopers jumped; many broke ankles, legs, or spines when they landed, and they were the lucky ones. One paratrooper who landed safely reported seeing another plane flying way too low when the 18 soldiers aboard jumped and hearing the awful sounds of successive wet thuds as every one of them hit the ground before their chute had opened. They were all dead.

Some landed in wetlands and drowned, or got stuck and needed help from other soldiers or sometimes French civilians to escape. Others' chutes got tangled in trees and left them dangling. Unlike British parachutes, which had a quick release, Americans had to open multiple buckles to get out of theirs, or else cut their way free with knives. Anyone dangling from a tree made an irresistible target for the enemy; within hours, word had spread among the soldiers on the ground of Germans torturing or mutilating Americans stuck in the trees.

Imagine how terrifying it is to land in the dark of night behind enemy lines and have no idea where you are or where your comrades are or where the enemy is or which way you should go. Paratroopers were issued little metal crickets to identify friendly soldiers. For the benefit of you young people, a cricket is a small metal device you hold between your thumb and forefinger. It has a flexible strip of metal inside a small shell. When you bend the metal strip by pushing it with your thumb and then let go, it makes a loud metallic click as it snaps back into place. These little gadgets were dime store toys—I used to play with them as a child. Soldiers were supposed to announce their presence with one click. If you heard a click, you were to respond with a double click, and in this manner the soldiers were supposed to find each other.

Many of the paratroopers resented having their lives depend on a cheap metal toy. In the 82nd, soldiers worked out their own password system. The password was *flash* and the reply word was *thunder*. These English words were chosen because it was believed that German soldiers would not be able to pronounce them properly.

It must have been a great relief to find one, then two, then a whole group of fellow soldiers. Once they gathered, they began “Kraut hunting,” as they put it. The tracer bullets from the German anti-aircraft guns, which were still firing, gave away their positions.

The soldiers were armed with rifles, and by the way, they put condoms over the barrels of their rifles before jumping to keep them dry. They were also armed with grenades and knives and under orders to use those, not their rifles, until daybreak.

Some of the soldiers were dropped ten or twenty miles from their intended landing zones and were thoroughly lost. One story tells of a group of Americans who happened on a French farmhouse. When the farmer met them, they asked him, “*Ou sont les Allemands?*” The farmer shrugged and pointed in every direction. Another farmer attempted to help the Americans by ripping out a page from his telephone directory; the page displayed a simple map of the Cotentin Peninsula.

The reactions of the local farmers varied wildly. Some of the men offered the Americans food or apple brandy, a Norman specialty, while their wives confiscated as many discarded parachutes as they could find, as these were made of valuable silk. In other cases, French civilians were afraid to have anything to do with Allied soldiers, out of concern that this might be only a raid, like Dieppe. If the Americans should withdraw, the Germans would punish severely anyone who had aided them.

The plan was for the 101st to land in the wetlands inland from Utah beach and secure the roads and bridges so that the invasion force could quickly advance inland. The 82nd was to land farther west. One of its objectives was the village of Sainte-Mère-Église, home to around 3,000 souls at the time. Sainte-Mère-Église translates as Holy Mother Church, I believe. The village name began as the name of its parish church, which was originally called St. Mary’s Church, and it somehow evolved into Sainte-Mère-Église. Go figure.

Sainte-Mère-Église was an objective because it lay along the main road leading up the Cotentin Peninsula to the port of Cherbourg. Its capture would prevent the Germans from reinforcing or supplying the Cherbourg garrison.

By the time the 82nd Airborne began its jump, the little village was already in a big commotion. An earlier bombing raid had dropped an incendiary on the roof of a house not far from the village square. The church bell rang to awaken the villagers and alert them to the emergency. Soon the center of the village was lit up as villagers formed a bucket brigade to carry water to quench the fire, as a few dozen German soldiers from the local garrison watched over them.

And then the 82nd Airborne arrived.

The combination of the thick fog bank the division's transports had to fly through, plus heavy anti-aircraft fire on the ground disrupted the carefully planned airdrops, and paratroopers were scattered across the area, including two battalions that were accidentally dropped right on top of Saint-Mère-Église, and in plain sight of the Germans on the ground. Some soldiers from the 101st Airborne were dropped on the town as well, which gives you an idea of how far off course some of these transports got.

The Germans had anti-aircraft guns and they began firing these into the air at the descending parachutes. Casualties were heavy. One unfortunate landed right on top of the burning house.

Then there is the famous case of Sergeant John Steele. Steele was one of those unfortunates who got dropped right over the town. He was wounded by German anti-aircraft fire during his descent, but not seriously. What makes his case famous is that as he descended near the village church, one of the stone spires that line the church roof snagged his parachute and left him dangling.

Sergeant Steele realized that if he called for help, or showed any sign he was alive for that matter, the Germans would be far more likely to shoot him dead than to assist him, so he spent the next two hours hanging limply from his snagged parachute, pretending to be dead. Eventually, the Germans figured out he was alive and took him prisoner.

Around the village, scattered soldiers of the 82nd found each other and began gathering. A few lost souls from the 101st joined them, including two who arrived in style, riding bareback on horses they'd found in a farmer's pasture. A few Americans were sufficiently lost and frightened that they chose simply to take cover and wait for daylight, but most of them were too fired up for that. They had a mission, and they meant to fulfill it.

Around 5:00 AM, the gathered paratroopers attacked the village and forced the Germans to retreat south, and thus Sainte-Mère-Église became the first French town to be liberated from the German occupation.

Later in the day, the Germans began a counterattack to reclaim Sainte-Mère-Église, a counterattack that included a few Panzer III tanks, but the paratroopers had set up a defense

around an anti-tank gun they recovered from a glider. They were able to hold the village until they were relieved the following day.

Speaking of gliders, one of the paratroopers' tasks was to clear a field on the outskirts of Sainte-Mère-Église where gliders could land—gliders carrying heavy equipment. A group of soldiers were assigned this duty and proceeded to the field, which was nothing more than an open clearing surrounded by trees and farmhouses. They found a few German soldiers guarding the spot, but the Germans saw they were outnumbered and quickly withdrew.

The paratroopers set up signal lights, and after a while they heard the sound of airplanes in the distance, but that sound quickly faded away into an eerie silence and the gathering whispers of approaching gliders. But then the sounds turned into bangs and crashes and the occasional scream. The disoriented gliders had come down toward the field from every direction. Many descended too quickly or too slowly and missed the field, smashing into trees and in a couple cases into stone farmhouses.

These gliders were one-use aircraft made of plywood. The equipment they carried—guns and jeeps and such—was tied down to the floor of the glider, but in many cases the force of these abrupt impacts broke the straps and flung the equipment forward, crushing the pilots.

In another sector, a glider containing soldiers was fired at as it landed. Fortunately, the pilot escaped injury and once the glider was down, he indicated to the soldiers where the shots had come from. The soldiers advanced on what proved to be a German bunker, but as they approached, a solitary shot rang out, followed by laughter and cries of joy. Out from the bunker came a squad of Polish soldiers in German uniforms, arms raised. When they realized it was American soldiers approaching, they guessed that the long-awaited invasion had come, so they shot the German sergeant commanding them and surrendered.

Speaking of prisoners, ever since the Hague conference of 1899, episode 29, the law of war required that surrendering soldiers be taken prisoner and that prisoners are entitled to food, shelter, medical treatment and protection against abuse. One of the unfortunate truths about war, though, is that enemy prisoners are sometimes a luxury a military force can't afford.

There was little quarter given or mercy available that night, and both sides were guilty of some of the worst crimes ever committed on the Western Front. At least one German commander ordered his soldiers to kill every paratrooper they found, apparently on the basis of Adolf Hitler's notorious Commando Order. In another case, a German unit had an American paratrooper platoon dropped right on top of it. The Germans killed every one of them; one of the soldiers later justified his unit's conduct by saying, "They didn't come down to give us candies, you know. They came down to kill us..."

Some American commanders likewise told their paratrooper units to take no prisoners, a pragmatic order, perhaps, but not a legal one. As I mentioned earlier, rumors quickly swirled

through the American units describing a number of instances of German atrocities allegedly committed against American paratroopers who had gotten stuck in trees. It is difficult to verify these stories, but true or not, the Americans believed them, and that affected the way they treated German soldiers.

There were several cases in which one group of American soldiers took German prisoners, only to see those prisoners killed by other Americans. One story tells of soldiers from the 101st, including a chaplain, who were talking to a French farm family when another group, from the 82nd, appeared with a number of German prisoners, all of whom appeared to be teenage boys. The sergeant from the 82nd ordered the prisoners to lie on the ground and raised his submachine gun while the Germans begged for their lives. The chaplain and the others from the 101st, and the French family, intervened and talked the sergeant out of killing them. In exchange, the French family agreed to lock the prisoners in their cellar until the Americans secured the area.

These American paratroopers went through a lot for the sake of their mission, which was to clear a path for the US 4th Infantry Division, which was supposed to land at Utah beach at dawn, move quickly inland, and secure Sainte-Mère-Église and the surrounding countryside before the Germans could rally and recapture them. Paratroopers by their nature are light infantry; they lacked the tanks and artillery and other heavy weapons that would be necessary to hold off the Germans for any length of time.

As the first glow of dawn appeared in the eastern sky, the question on most American paratroopers' minds was, What if something went wrong with the landings? What if the 4th Infantry's landing was aborted, or the invasion force had to withdraw? What would become of them? Abandoned to their fate, surrounded and trapped by a superior enemy, they would surely end up in a German POW camp. If they were lucky.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Harry and Yohoshoa and Daniel for their kind donations, and thank you to Christina for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Harry, Yohoshoa, Daniel, and Christina 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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I'm seriously behind on my work, I'm sorry to say, so I'm going to have to claim an extra week off to help me catch up. So there will be no new episode next week. But I hope you'll join me in

two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as the naval landings at Normandy begin. We'll go over each landing site, one at a time, beginning with Utah beach, where the US 4th Infantry Division was either going to land and relieve the embattled airborne units, or not. The Longest Day, part two, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. John Steele's story of getting caught dangling from the church at Sainte-Mère-Église became famous. After the war, Steele visited the village several times, and the villagers expressed their gratitude by naming him an honorary citizen.

As happened too often to men of his generation, John Steele succumbed to throat cancer, passing away in May 1969, at the age of 56.

At the site of that house fire that broke out on the morning of June 6 now stands a museum dedicated to the memory of the paratroopers who landed that night. The museum sits along what is now known as the Rue Eisenhower, as does a statue of the general.

The Restaurant John Steele, a restaurant at the Sainte-Mère-Église village square, maintains a collection of photographs, articles, and other memorabilia about its namesake. The church bears a memorial in the form of a dummy hanging from a parachute at the spot where Steele had gotten stuck in 1944. The town also boasts an inn called L'auberge du parachutiste on the nearby Rue Général Koenig, along which also stands a hair salon called Hair'born, because hair salons with bad puns for names are not a uniquely American phenomenon, apparently.

[music: Closing War Theme]