The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 433
"The Longest Day II"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and 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.

Order of the day for the Allied Expeditionary Force, June 6, 1944.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 433. The Longest Day, part two.

The Allied amphibious landings at Normandy consisted of two parts. First were the western beaches, where units of the US First Army were to land. The First Army was commanded by Lieutenant General Omar Bradley, and consisted of about 73,000 soldiers. The eastern beaches were the objectives of the British Second Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Sir Miles Dempsey. It consisted of around 83,000 soldiers. In both cases, I'm including the airborne units that landed overnight, and which I told you about last time.

Today, I want to talk about these landings, the main amphibious landings of the Normandy invasion. We'll look at the American assault on Utah Beach today, and next week the British invasions and the American assault on Omaha Beach, the bloodiest of the landings, but before we do any of those things, a word about nomenclature, because you know I love to talk about nomenclature.

You've heard me speak repeatedly of Operation Overlord. That term is sometimes used as a synonym for the Normandy invasion, although it was in fact an umbrella term for the first 90 days of the campaign, from the initial landings through to the end of August, by which time it was projected that Allied forces would have reached the River Seine and Paris. The specific

name for the initial invasion plan was Operation Neptune. No one ever uses that name in our time.

The most common everyday name for the Normandy invasion is simply "D-Day." D-Day is a military planning term referring to the first day of an operation. The specific plan might call for certain actions to be taken on D-1 or D-2, which would refer to the day before the operation begins or the second day before the operation begins, respectively. Similarly, D+1 would refer to the day after the operation began, D+2 to the day after that, and so on.

Military plans were written up this way so they could be distributed to the units concerned without also disseminating the exact date of the operation, which could remain a closely held secret, or indeed, as in the case of the Normandy invasion, the exact date might not yet have been set, possibly because it depended on conditions outside the military's control, like the tides or the weather.

The first appearance of the term "D-Day" was in the First World War and it was introduced by the US Army. I took note of its use at the time, in episode 168. But because Overlord was such a huge operation, and pivotal to the outcome of the war, the term "D-Day" came to be a synonym specifically for the Normandy landings of June 6, 1944, at least in colloquial speech.

All right, now that I got that out of my system, let's talk about the landings. The Americans landing zones were two beaches designated Utah and Omaha.

So what happened to the Americans on June 6? The short version is this: everything went pretty smoothly at Utah Beach, while at Omaha Beach, everything went wrong.

The invasion force began its journey to Normandy on the evening of June 5. Four thousand landing craft set off from ports across southern England, while over a thousand warships already under way from ports around the British Isles would rendezvous with them at a designated stretch of sea southeast of the Isle of Wight that many were calling "Piccadilly Circus." The Royal Navy contributed the largest share of warships and the US and Royal Canadian Navies the next two largest, but many other Allied nations were also represented in the fleet. The armada included the battleships HMS *Ramillies*, *Rodney*, and *Warspite* and USS *Arkansas, Texas*, and *Nevada*. There were also about 20 cruisers, including HMS *Enterprise*, there's that name again, and more than a hundred destroyers and escorts, including the most aptly named ship in the fleet, the Free French frigate *La Surprise*.

Allied forces made a great effort to ensure a *surprise*; I already described to you how Allied aircraft dropped chaff to confuse German radar. Other aircraft flew over the Channel broadcasting radio signals meant to jam enemy radar. RAF Mosquito squadrons patrolled the coast all night, ready to attack any German aircraft that might otherwise venture over the Channel and spot the approaching fleet.

One of the greatest fears of the naval commanders involved was the possibility of an attack by German U-boasts stationed in Brittany and on the east coast of France. The RAF Coastal Command's Number 19 Group flew anti-submarine patrols back and forth between the southern coast of Cornwall and the northern coast of Brittany, watching for any sign of submarines entering the Channel from the west, where the Kriegsmarine had built their U-boat pens. Not a single German U-boat succeeded in entering the English Channel. The only German naval vessels that were able to reach the invasion fleet and do any damage were small, fast German torpedo boats that were already stationed along the French Channel coast.

Number 19 Group included pilots and crew members from the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, along with two Americans and one each from Switzerland, Chile, Brazil, and South Africa. On June 7, D+1, one Canadian officer in the group named Ken Moore sank two U-boats in 22 minutes, which has to be some kind of record.

British and American fighter squadrons had been assigned air superiority missions over Brittany, where the Luftwaffe was known to have stationed aircraft. Their job was to make certain those German planes did not intercept the anti-submarine squadrons. They found nothing. The Germans had destroyed those airfields to prevent their falling into Allied hands. The fighter pilots were angry at getting such a fruitless assignment. They wanted to be over the invasion beaches, where the real action was, or so they imagined. In fact, exactly two German planes made it to the invasion beaches that day. Allied fighter pilots were in greater danger from friendly fire on the ground, where nervous, trigger-happy soldiers sometimes misidentified them as Luftwaffe.

The other fear was mines. The invasion armada included 227 minesweepers that proceeded ahead of the main fleet to clear a path south from Piccadilly Circus to the invasion beaches. Happily, every one of the minesweepers completed its sweep and made it safely back to England.

The mood within the armada was a mixture of excitement and trepidation. They were about to attempt what many of the greatest military leaders in European history had dreamed of, but only a handful ever dared even to try: a cross-Channel invasion.

No one was more excited than the Free French, for whom this was a sort of homecoming after four years in exile. A few of the French ships expressed their feelings by playing "La Marseillaise" at full blast over their PA systems as they plowed the waters. The music echoed across the sea and a couple of British ships replied with "A-Hunting We Will Go," but no one outdid the bagpiper who stood at the bow of one of the landing craft and provided live music, specifically "The Road to the Isles."

The gathered ships began their overnight journey south. Just before midnight, the US Navy ships went to "general quarters." The Royal Navy ships went to "action stations."

About an hour later, the soldiers who would be making the landings were served breakfast. US Navy ships fed their troops whatever they could eat: hot dogs, steak, ice cream, coffee and donuts. The Royal Navy was less generous. Soldiers on its ships got sandwiches, albeit washed down with shots of rum, something no one would ever get on an American ship. In many cases, British sailors offered soldiers some of their own rations.

At 2:15 AM, headquarters of the German 352nd Infantry Division, stationed at what Allied forces were calling Omaha Beach, received a phone call from the local naval command, based in Cherbourg, reporting approaching ships. But soon afterward, the phone started ringing off the hook with multiple reports of paratrooper landings, and that early ship sighting was forgotten in the confusion that followed.

Utah Beach lay on the west coast of the Cotentin Peninsula. That's the small peninsula that sticks up northward from the Normandy coast like a thumb, with the major port city of Cherbourg at its tip. Utah Beach was at the southern end of the peninsula, just at the point where the coastline bends to the east. The goal of the Utah Beach landing was for the invasion force to move rapidly inland and westward, first to Sainte-Mère-Église, and thus cut off the main road to Cherbourg from points farther inland, including Paris. You'll recall from the last episode that the US 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were dropped along the path of the intended westward advance from Utah Beach in order to seize key bridges and roads, so that advance could be as rapid as possible. Ultimately, the goal would be to cross all the way to the west coast of the peninsula and cut off and isolate the German garrison in Cherbourg.

At 4:30 AM, American soldiers began awkwardly climbing into their landing craft. They were heavily encumbered with the huge loads of equipment every one of them was made to carry. Some broke ankles or legs when they tried to jump into the craft. The sea off Normandy was choppy that morning, with a stiff breeze. The small landing craft rose and fell with the waves, as the soldiers inside them began to regret those hearty breakfasts. Soldiers across the landing force began to vomit. They soon learned to vomit into their helmets, then rinse the helmet in seawater. That was better than vomiting onto the floor of the landing craft and making it slippery.

The big warships soon began their coastal bombardments. Royal Navy ships customarily fired their turrets in sequence, but American battleships fired every gun at once. So loud was the roar, so bright the flames, that a few soldiers thought the ships were exploding. Their 14-inch shells were so big and moved so fast they produced a vacuum in their wake, which caused the sea itself to rise and then fall as the shell passed.

As the assault forces drew nearer to the beaches, landing craft armed with rockets opened fire. Each of these landing craft carried 1000 rockets, each one on its own rack so they could be fired all at once. They made an impressive sight.

The first units to reach land were the amphibious tanks, known as DD tanks, for "duplex drive," as the engine could drive either the tracks or two propellers at the rear of the vehicle. A

waterproof canvas screen around the tank could be raised to give the vehicle buoyancy; it could then be retracted when the tank reached the beach. American soldiers dubbed them "Donald Ducks." Or I should say, they were supposed to be the first units to land. The unsteady seas were more than the Donald Ducks were meant to sail in, and many sank, drowning their crews.

In England, General Eisenhower prepared a communiqué to announce to the world that the long-awaited invasion of Europe had begun, but he was beaten to the punch by the Wehrmacht, which made its own announcement first. To the delight of the Allied commanders, the Germans reported that the Allies were landing at Calais.

On the Cotentin Peninsula, French civilians emerged from their homes at 6:00 AM, as soon as the German curfew ended, to see what was going on. In the village of Montebourg, scarcely ten kilometers up the road from Sainte-Mère-Église, residents discovered German soldiers in their village square, guarding a group of captured American paratroopers, their faces still blackened. Some of the French took them for African Americans. When the prisoners saw the French civilians, they grinned and made the "V for Victory" gesture.

The German garrison had been requisitioning local men to help them build their Atlantic Wall defenses; this morning, the mayor of Montebourg couldn't resist needling the garrison commander by asking him how many laborers he would require today. The commander, visibly nervous, told him no workers would be needed.

The American airborne troops were relieved to hear the unmistakable sound of the naval guns opening up on Utah Beach. The invasion was proceeding as planned; they would not be abandoned. They did the best they could to hold the positions they had managed to seize by surprise and prayed the US 4th Infantry Division would arrive soon.

[music: Haydn, Symphony No. 94 in G, "Surprise."]

It was the German 709th Static Division that garrisoned the Cotentin Peninsula, but its commanding officer, Generalleutnant Karl-Wilhelm Graf von Schlieben, was not present at division headquarters that morning. He was sleeping in a hotel in Rennes, 150 kilometers to the south, because he was supposed to be leading a training exercise today. He was awakened by the telephone at 6:30 and told the Allies were landing and the exercise had been cancelled. He hurriedly dressed and climbed into his car; the driver floored the gas pedal to get him back to headquarters as fast as possible. They stopped only once, to pick up a wounded German soldier. To their right, in the distance, they could hear the reports of the Allied naval guns.

The first soldiers of the 4th Infantry to land at Normandy arrived a mile away from where they were supposed to, after their landing craft were swept south by the current. They found themselves at the mouth of the River Vire, but this proved to be a stroke of luck. The German defenses were far thinner here than at their designated landing site, and the calmer waters of the

river's estuary made it easier for the Donald Ducks to reach dry land here than on the other beaches, although once they did land they had difficulty finding any targets to shoot at.

The first general officer to set foot on Utah Beach—or rather a mile south of it—had a name familiar to long-time listeners of this podcast. He was Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., son of the late President and distant cousin of the current one. Young Theodore was very much his father's son. He called his jeep the "Rough Rider" and was known for walking in the open while under enemy fire, a real chip off the old block, there. His soldiers admired his courage, though some speculated he was hoping to die in combat.

Once his unit realized they had landed in the wrong place, General Roosevelt wisely rejected suggestions that they advance north along the beach to the place where they were supposed to be. He ordered his soldiers to move inland instead, or, as he put it, "We'll start the war from here!"

The beaches were cleared and secured within an hour and they began their advance inland. An American tank battalion came upon a crucial bridge guarded by a German bunker. It only took one or two shots to convince the Germans inside to surrender. When the American commander strode forward to accept their surrender, the Germans began calling out excitedly, *"Achtung! Minen!"* It took him a moment to figure out the Germans were warning him away from a minefield that lay between them.

In another incident, one German soldier taken prisoner discovered his American guard had been born in Germany and spoke German fluently. The German asked the American how much was left of New York City. The question left the American puzzled. The German asked, didn't you know that the Luftwaffe bombed it?

I used to marvel at stories like this and wonder how people could believe such silly lies. I don't wonder about that anymore.

A short distance west of Sainte-Mère-Église a bridge crosses the River Merderet, more of a stream, really, which flows south down the middle of the Cotentin Peninsula. This bridge was one of those the 82nd Airborne Division had been assigned to capture and hold until the 4th Division arrived.

General von Schlieben had a panzer battalion attached to his division, although that's probably too grand a word to describe a handful of French Renault tanks captured in 1940 and now operating with German tank crews. The general ordered his tanks to patrol the area where the American paratroopers had landed. He was hoping that the sight and sound of enemy tanks would frighten the lightly-armed American soldiers into withdrawing. But when these tanks approached that bridge, the paratroopers raised their bazookas and destroyed two of them in a few minutes. It isn't 1940 anymore.

I should pause here for a moment and explain what a bazooka is. When I was a kid, everyone knew what a bazooka was; we played with plastic toy versions of them. We also chewed Bazooka bubble gum, a product introduced in 1947. The bazooka was an anti-tank weapon devised by the US Army. It consisted of a long metal tube with handles, open on both ends. A soldier raised the bazooka, rested it on his shoulder, and could fire from the tube a rocket containing a shaped charge designed to blow a hole through tank armor. As the tube is open at the back end, the rocket launch produces no recoil.

The bazooka was part of the first generation of portable anti-tank weapons designed to be carried and used by a single soldier. The infantry's revenge against the tank, if you will. Tanks were fearsome weapons and lords of the battlefield in the early part of this war, but the introduction of the bazooka and similar weapons marked the beginning of the decline of the tank as a weapon of war. Bazookas were first used in North Africa, as you already know. The Germans captured some, studied them, and devised their own version, which they nicknamed the *Panzerschreck*, a term which translates roughly as "terror of the tanks."

Also, I suppose I owe you an explanation for the peculiar name of the bazooka. "Bazooka" was originally the name of a comical musical instrument invented by an engineer turned jazz musician and comedian named Bob Burns. Burns made an early bazooka out of stovepipes and a funnel, and played it as part of his comedy act, in which he played a rustic (or *hillbilly*) from Van Buren, Arkansas. He'd play the bazooka between humorous tales about Uncle Fud and Aunt Doody, his fictional relatives back home. Burns honed his act in vaudeville, then performed on radio, then appeared in a number of Paramount films in the Thirties. He had his own radio show during the Second World War.

What I'm saying here is that Burns was a well-known entertainer, and equally famous was his comical musical instrument. When the US Army's weapon was developed, its resemblance to Burns's invention was striking and inevitably soldiers began calling it a bazooka.

But I digress. Despite their success with the bazookas, the American paratroopers, there and elsewhere on the Cotentin Peninsula, were running out of ammunition. Rumors spread that the seaborne invasion had failed and Allied forces were withdrawing and abandoning them. Their anxiety spread to the French civilians, who feared above all else the return of the Germans.

But the invasion had not failed, and by the afternoon, Sherman tanks from Utah Beach met up with soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division, much to the latter's relief. By the end of the day, the 4th Division had secured a line from the coast almost to Sainte-Mère-Église.

This was important because the 82nd Airborne Division was struggling to hold Sainte-Mère-Église against German counterattacks from both the north and the south. North of the village, units of General von Schlieben's division were pushing toward the village. The arrival of the invasion force forced them to halt and dig in.

South of the village, a battalion of German soldiers held a section of the road that ran south to Carentan. I say German soldiers, but they were actually Georgian soldiers, Red Army prisoners who agreed to fight for the Germans, probably because they were starving. But they held this key position on the road that prevented the units advancing from the invasion beach from linking up with the paratroopers in Sainte-Mère-Église.

The situation was saved by the scheduled arrival of a regiment of glider infantry reinforcements that landed in a field south of the German—or Georgian—position at 8:00 PM that evening. The Germans—or Georgians—shot up the gliders as they swooped to a landing, causing many American casualties, but once on the ground, the glider infantry had their equipment, including jeeps and heavy weapons, and best of all, they were fresh, while most of the other soldiers on the battlefield from either side had been fighting since before dawn. That evening, the glider infantry were able to advance west and surround the German force threatening Sainte-Mère-Église from the south.

The paratroopers whom the Germans had taken prisoner the previous night were marched to St. Lô, a city some distance south of the Carentan Peninsula that served as the capital of the department. German soldiers gawked as the prisoners passed; they were taking in their first good looks at their enemy. Many of the paratroopers had shaved their heads, or adopted Mohawks before the jump, prompting some Germans to remark that they looked like convicts.

At St. Lô, they were interrogated and then held at a camp the Americans dubbed "Starvation Hill," because they were given so little to eat.

Speaking of St. Lô, the night before, American tactical fighter-bombers had struck the town's railway station, scoring direct hits and doing no damage elsewhere. Many of the 7,000 citizens of St. Lô watched the strike and applauded when the bombs struck. They felt reassurance in how their allies took such care to avoid endangering French civilians. But that night at 8:00, the bombers returned, this time with orders to execute the tactic of "putting the city in the street."

Allied radio had warned the residents of St. Lô to leave, but how many of them had both radios and electricity to power them? The Allies dropped leaflets, but apparently the French hadn't seen them or didn't take the warning seriously. American bombs rained down on the city, turning brick buildings into dust. Hundreds of civilians died; thousands more survived only by fleeing the city. They returned the next morning to piles of rubble, clouds of dust, and the sickening smell of death.

By the time the fighting in Normandy was over, St. Lô had been virtually obliterated. In 1946, Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, reporting from the scene, described the city as "The Capital of Ruins."

Overall, the American units on the Cotentin Peninsula did not achieve all of their first day objectives. This can be attributed to the scattered landings by the airborne units and the 4th Division landing too far south. But they did well enough.

Remarkably, the 4th Division, numbering some 21,000 soldiers, suffered fewer than 200 killed on the first day of the invasion, the lowest casualty figure for any of the Normandy landings. About 700 other American soldiers died when their vessels sank before they reached the shore. Casualties were much higher among the airborne units, about 2,500 killed or missing out of 14,000.

The relatively light losses at Utah Beach were partly due to the pre-invasion aerial and naval bombardment, which hit German defensive positions as intended. That was good for the 4th Division, but unfortunately for the Allies, this success would be the exception rather than the rule, as we'll see when we talk about the other beaches. Additionally, Utah Beach was relatively lightly defended, compared to the other beaches.

The Germans were believed to have stationed some 12,000 soldiers on the peninsula, about a third the number of the invading Americans. As we've seen, many of them were Red Army prisoners, along with conscripts and even a few volunteers drawn from the populations of German-occupied lands in Eastern Europe and commanded by German officers. Most of these soldiers had not previously seen combat; on the other hand, they had been stationed here for some time and were more familiar with the terrain than were the Americans.

The landscape of Normandy proved a challenge, especially to those paratroopers who landed at night. Normandy is farm country and it is bocage country, meaning the land is broken up into innumerable small plots separated by drainage ditches and walls of piled stone and dirt. These walls delineating the fields have stood for centuries, and by 1944, they were overgrown with trees, shrubs, and vines, a jumble of greenery usually taller than a soldier. Not only did the airborne soldiers arrive at night; many found themselves inside one of these enclosures, surrounded by lines of trees and with no landmarks they could use to orient themselves.

Crossing one of these mounds was risky; you couldn't know what was on the other side. A landscape like this is a defender's dream; it's similar to trench warfare, except that the trenches are pre-dug for you, and this terrain would bedevil the Allied landing force for weeks to come.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank John and Brendan and Emma for their kind donations, and thank you to Ari for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like John, Brendan, Emma, and Ari 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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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, we look at what happened at the other Normandy landings. The Longest Day, part three next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

Oh, and one more thing. Just a brief observation here. The total number of American soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division killed by the German defenders on D-Day was about 200. Now recall the story I told you a few episodes ago, when the Americans were practicing an amphibious landing on the coast of Devonshire, and they were attacked by a squadron of fast German patrol boats. That German attack killed about 750 Americans, a much higher figure than the actual Utah Beach landing.

The Germans had these small, fast gunboats and torpedo boats operating in the English Channel and although we usually think of the Royal Navy as dominating the English Channel, the truth is that these German boats were a persistent headache for the Allies. These boats attacked the Normandy landing forces on D-Day and the days that followed. The Allies lost over 30 ships and landing craft over this period, although it can be difficult to sort out which of them were sunk by mines and which by torpedoes from the motor boats.

One significant sinking that can definitely be attributed to these German boats was the loss of the Norwegian destroyer HNoMS *Svenner*, which was hit by two German torpedoes, broke in two, and sank, taking 33 members of its crew. One hundred and eighty-five crew members were rescued.

[music: Closing War Theme]