

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 434

“The Longest Day III”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“No plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the main enemy forces.”

Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, writing in 1871.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 434. The Longest Day, part three.

Today I want to begin with the British and Canadian landings at Normandy. These took place on three beach sites east of the two American beaches. Their code names, reading from west to east, were Gold, Juno, and Sword. I'm going to cover them in the opposite order, beginning with Sword, the easternmost landing site, and then moving west.

The landing force at Sword was made up of the British 3rd Infantry Division, augmented with some additional units. Facing them, and indeed facing all the invasion beaches except for Utah, which we already talked about, was the German 352nd Infantry Division. Positioned behind them and farther inland was the unit the British were most concerned about, the 21st Panzer Division. This was one of the armored divisions Hitler assigned to Rommel. You'll recall that Rommel believed the battle would be won or lost on the first day and wanted armor stationed close to the most likely invasion sites, where it could be ordered into battle as soon as the Allied landings came.

The landing at Sword, as well as Gold and Juno, began one hour later than the American landings. This is due to the vagaries of the tides, which do not rise and fall everywhere at the same times. The planners of this invasion were keen on the landings taking place at dawn and just after low tide. Low tide so the approaching landing craft could see any obstacles the

Germans might have placed in the beach zone between the low and high water lines, and then, as the invasion progressed, the rising tide would make it progressively easier for soldiers making the follow-up landings to arrive close to the top of the beach.

Sword Beach received a heavy bombardment from the Royal Navy battleships HMS *Ramillies* and *Warspite*, along with four cruisers, including the Polish cruiser ORP *Dragon*, and thirteen destroyers, including the Norwegian destroyer HNoMS *Svenner*, which, as you know from last week's episode, was sunk that day by torpedoes fired from two German torpedo boats.

The DD tanks went in first. Because of the choppy water, they were launched closer to the beach than planned, 5,000 yards instead of 8,000 yards, but that's still a long distance to travel in heaving seas. Four of the tanks sank, two others were sunk after collisions with landing craft, but the remaining 34 made it to the beach, a surprisingly high number, all things considered.

As the landing craft approached, one British commander tried to rally his soldiers by reading the famous speech from Shakespeare's *Henry V*:

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day 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 accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.*

Too bad most of his soldiers were too seasick to take in the words.

The tanks did their job of suppressing fire from the enemy bunkers. Soldiers landed and immediately charged the fortifications; in many cases, the Germans surrendered when British troops reached their hideouts.

The landings centered on the small French village of Hermanville-sur-Mer. Coincidentally, a young French woman arrived on the beach by bicycle just as the landings were beginning. She had been swimming at this beach the day before, and had forgotten her swimsuit in one of the changing huts. She had come back early this morning to retrieve it before going to work. As it happened, she was a student nurse, and she spent the next two days on Sword Beach, tending to the wounded. There she met the English officer who would become her husband.

German resistance at the beach was initially strong, but with the aid of those tanks, the British were able to secure the beach and the Royal Engineers set to work clearing paths through the minefields. By 9:30, the engineers had opened passages through the beach to the fields beyond.

Some units, including the Special Service Brigade, moved east to link up with the units of the 6th Airborne that had landed the previous night. The Special Service Brigade was commanded by Lord Lovat. I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly, I wouldn't want to disrespect the 24th Chief of the Clan Fraser. He had brought along his personal bagpiper; this was the man who played while the invasion fleet was still at sea, which I described last time. Lovat had him play again as he and his unit landed on the beach, and again as they advanced east, so that the airborne units ahead would hear the sound and know that relief was on the way.

Lord Lovat is one of those Teddy Roosevelt-esque figures who strides through a live fire battlefield as if the bullets were mirages, and somehow is never hit. This drew admiration from many of his soldiers, and disapproval from a dissenting few who thought he was taking needless risks, if not evincing signs of madness.

But the Special Service Brigade linked up with the airborne troops without much difficulty. Among these soldiers was a troop of commandos that included Polish, Dutch, Belgian, and Norwegian soldiers, as well as a troop of fighters who were Jewish Germans, refugees from the Nazis. The British Army had provided them with English names and identification that listed their religion as Church of England, in case they were captured.

Bernard Montgomery, the commander of land forces involved in the invasion, had assigned the 3rd Division the goal of taking the French city of Caen on the first day. Caen, with a population of about 60,000, lay only 15 kilometers, less than ten miles, inland. This is not such a great distance if you're out for a Saturday hike, but it was a challenging goal for a unit of invading soldiers. To have any chance of achieving this goal, they would have had to move rapidly, in the face of the danger posed by the German 21st Panzer Division, which was known to be somewhere to the south, behind Caen.

In fact, the British advance inland was anything but rapid. Once the beach was secure, about 9:30 AM, the next action for many of the soldiers was to stop for a tea break, boiling up some water right there on the beach. It sounds like a stereotype, but that's what they did. Canadian and American soldiers were often surprised by their British allies' propensity to drop everything for a tea break.

While it's fun to rag on the British and their tea breaks, the reality was that reaching Caen was always an ambitious goal, and once the Allies learned of the presence of the 21st Panzer Division, Montgomery might have been wiser to have crossed off that part of the plan.

The plan called for an infantry brigade to rendezvous with a tank battalion at 11:00 AM, then ride the tanks south into Caen. The brigade reached the rendezvous on time; the tanks didn't. The rising tide had created unforeseen difficulties that delayed the unloading of the tanks, and when they began heading south on the road to Caen, the Germans subjected them to an artillery bombardment that set some of the tanks on fire, which blocked the other tanks from proceeding

forward and led to long backups and traffic jams. Taking the tanks off-road was deemed too risky, due to the danger of land mines.

In Caen, as soon as word came of the landings, Gestapo officers entered the city prison and executed the 87 members of the French resistance being held there.

Just before 2:00 that afternoon, the RAF began bombing Caen. Again, this was the tactic of “putting the city in the street” to block the movement of German units northward through Caen to the beach. As at Saint Lô, the British dropped leaflets that morning warning the citizens of Caen to flee the city; as at Saint Lô, the French either did not see the leaflets or did not take them seriously. Hundreds were killed, thousands injured, tens of thousands immiserated. The city was heavily damaged, including buildings that dated back to William the Conqueror.

It is puzzling that if the plan was for the British Army to take Caen that day, why the RAF would be ordered to bomb it. If the goal was to capture the city, reducing it to rubble would only make it easier for the Germans to defend and harder for the British to capture.

But that problem never came up, since the infantry only made it about two-thirds of the way along the road to Caen before nightfall. Caen would not be taken on the first day. Nor the second, nor the fiftieth. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

And what about the 21st Panzer Division, you may ask. This was one of the four armored divisions Hitler had assigned to Rommel to deploy as he chose, and Rommel believed in keeping the armor close to the shore so when a landing came, it could mount a quick and powerful counterattack.

And the status of the 21st? Rommel was at home, after celebrating his wife’s birthday, and the commander of the 21st, like Rommel and many other senior officers, was away from his headquarters, as they’d all been advised that bad weather would forestall any invasion for at least a week.

The commander of the infantry on the scene near Caen had been frantically calling the headquarters of the 21st since 2:00 AM, when the first paratroopers had landed. He attempted to order the panzers to move north and attack the paratroopers, but in the absence of both the 21st’s commander and its chief of staff, the unit’s headquarters dithered on what to do.

In the case of the commander of the 21st, he had taken advantage of the opportunity to spend a romantic night in Paris with his mistress the night of June 5th, which turned out to be a spectacular example of bad timing. There seemed to be no one available who had the authority to order the 21st to advance.

It took until afternoon to get all that sorted out, and at about 5:00 PM, the panzers finally began their advance. The division split into two parts, one of which headed north and east with the goal

of overwhelming the British 6th Airborne Division. The other part headed west, intending to push its way to the sea and isolate Sword Coast from Juno Coast to its west.

Allied air and naval attacks disrupted the eastern force and it never reached its target. The units on the west side also suffered under a heavy bombardment, but they made it all the way to the water's edge. But at dusk, a brigade of British glider infantry appeared and began landing to their rear. The nervous Germans felt in danger of being surrounded and cut off themselves, so they withdrew to the south.

The British landed over 28,000 soldiers on Sword Beach that day and took about 700 casualties.

Juno Beach was the landing site for the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, augmented by a Canadian armored brigade. The Canadians were keen to take revenge on the Germans for their losses at Dieppe.

Allied naval forces executed their bombardments and rocket attacks here as elsewhere. As the Canadians approached the shore in their landing craft, only sand and silence greeted them. Some dared to hope the naval bombardment had driven the Germans away.

No such luck. The Germans were holding their fire until the landing craft hit the beach and dropped their ramps. Then the artillery and the machine guns opened up on them.

One of the initial objectives was the seaside town of Courseulles-sur-Mer, known to have been garrisoned and fortified by the Germans. The Canadians had excellent maps of the town, thanks to careful Allied reconnaissance, with the community already divided into several zones and one infantry company assigned to each.

It took until the afternoon to clear the town; the Germans had reinforced certain houses and were using them as defensive positions. These had to be cleared out, and the Canadians discovered the hard way that the Germans had also dug tunnels under the town connecting their fortified positions. The Canadians would clear one out and move on, then the Germans would return to the house via the tunnels and begin shooting at them from behind.

The nearby seaside town of Bernières-sur-Mer fell more easily, as the German garrison took one look at approaching Canadian armor and fled. By 9:00 AM the town was secure, and the townsfolk emerged from their cellars to celebrate. They even opened the bar. Allied soldiers had been warned not to accept gifts of food or drink from French civilians, out of fear that German sympathizers might try to poison them. At Bernières-sur-Mer, the Canadians ignored the warning and celebrated with the French. I'm happy to report there were no attempted murders; it seems there were very few German sympathizers in Normandy on June 6, 1944.

French civilians were even more delighted to meet soldiers from the Francophone Canadian Régiment de la Chaudière. This was the next best thing to being liberated by French soldiers. Farm families pulled out their stocks of homemade cider and passed them around.

Stiff German resistance at the beach and traffic jams as the follow-up units came ashore slowed the Canadian advance. The Canadians did not reach their main objective for the day, Carpiquet Airfield, a Luftwaffe base. Late in the afternoon, advance units came within sight of the airfield, but the division commander, worried about that 21st Panzer Division, which he knew was out there somewhere, ordered them to stop and dig into defensive positions for the night.

It was an understandable decision, but he did not know the 21st was operating farther to the east, and at the Luftwaffe airbase, its commander spied the approaching Canadians and immediately ordered an evacuation.

Despite these problems, the Canadians at Juno Beach advanced farther inland on the first day than soldiers at any of the other invasion beaches, and in the face of greater resistance anywhere other than Omaha Beach. The panzers from the 21st had prevented the Canadians from linking up with British forces to their east, but they did make contact with Gold Beach, to their west.

At Gold Beach, the British landing force suffered the same choppy seas as at the other beaches but here their commanders wisely decided to disregard the order to deploy the DD tanks 5,000 yards from shore and brought them in as close as 1000 yards, so most of the tanks made it safely to the beach. Unfortunately for them, the beach was muddy and many tanks and other vehicles got bogged down.

Even so, and despite stiff German resistance, the British secured their beachhead and advanced inland, though, as at the other beaches, they were unable to reach their most important objectives, which here were to move inland and west, link up with the Americans, and capture the town of Bayeux. Even so, they ended the day in a good position. About 350 British soldiers were killed.

[music: Lithgow, "Invercargill March."]

Omaha Beach was always going to be the most difficult landing site. The first problems Omaha posed were geographical: shallow waters, then a sea wall, then a pebbled beach a few hundred meters, or yards, wide, which reaches to the foot of a steep slope, almost a cliff, that rises to a height of 100 feet, or 30 meters. No one would choose to make a landing here if there were any alternative, but in the view of Allied commanders, there were no alternatives. It was important to establish a beachhead between the British and Canadian forces to the east and the American force landing at Utah Beach to the west.

The second problem was that this beach would be defended by the German 352nd Infantry Division. Unlike most of the garrison units on the Atlantic Wall, the 352nd included a cadre of battle-hardened veterans of the Eastern Front, along with the usual German conscripts and some Soviet POW volunteers.

Allied planners believed an assault on Omaha Beach could be made feasible if Allied forces subjected the German defenders to a sufficiently heavy bombardment just before the landing. General Omar Bradley, the overall commander of American forces assaulting Normandy, reassured jittery soldiers before the landing by emphasizing how thoroughly the Allied air and naval bombardment would pummel the enemy as they approached. He said, "You men should consider yourself lucky. You are going to have ringside seats for the greatest show on earth."

Not every commander felt the same way, not even the commander of the naval force assigned to the bombardment of Omaha Beach, who believed the force inadequate to the job.

Two US Army infantry divisions would execute the landing at Omaha Beach: the 1st Infantry Division, known as the Big Red One, the most experienced and skilled division in the United States Army, and the 29th Infantry Division, a unit of inexperienced soldiers who had not yet seen combat.

At about 5:00 AM, the first German soldiers spotted Allied ships. At 5:30, German artillery began firing. A few minutes before 6:00, the naval bombardment began. At the same time, American B-24 Liberator heavy bombers swooped over the beach from the north, by which time the landing craft were already approaching the shore. The bomber crews were understandably reluctant to release their bomb loads too soon, for fear of accidentally hitting the landing craft, so they held off an extra few seconds.

Because of this, most of the bombs landed too far inland. Those tall cliffs afforded an excellent view of the beach and the sea beyond, and the Germans took full advantage of it by positioning their bunkers right on the edge. One British officer on the scene lamented that all the bomber attack had accomplished was to wake the Germans up.

In fact, they were already awake. The local German commander had previously ordered gunnery practice for June 6, so the gunners were prepared. Local French civilians had already been warned to keep their fishing boats and other craft away from the area today.

Allied intelligence believed that most of the German 352nd Division was deployed farther inland, away from the beach. They were wrong. A good portion of that division was right there at the top of the cliffs, which will prove an unexpected and nasty surprise for the Americans. It could have been worse. A few hours earlier, the commander of the 352nd had sent some of his units to the west and south to investigate those reports of exploding paratroopers. If those soldiers had also been here at the beach, things would have been even worse.

Things were bad enough as it stood. As those of you who have seen the film *Saving Private Ryan* know, or have probably guessed, it is the landing here, at Omaha Beach, that is depicted in the first portion of the film.

As the landing craft approached the shore, things were pretty quiet on land; many soldiers dared to hope that the naval and air strikes had neutralized the German defenses. Most infantry rode stood in a group of 30 or so in each landing craft; most of those soldiers couldn't see anything except the helmet of the soldier in front of them.

As at the other invasion beaches, the DDs, the amphibious tanks, were supposed to land a few minutes before the infantry to provide covering fire, but the choppy sea swamped most of them.

Because of the clouds of smoke and dust the naval bombardment had created along the shore, it was difficult to see and the landing craft had trouble identifying the position where they were supposed to land. Others were pushed away from their intended landing sites by the strong current, as had happened at Utah Beach.

As the landing craft approached the shore, the soldiers inside began to hear pinging sounds. Those were German bullets bouncing off the steel hull. That was the first sign that the bombardment had not been as effective as hoped.

Most of the landing craft hit sandbars and got stuck before they reached the shore. When the craft dropped the ramp at the front of the boat to allow the soldiers inside to debark, German machine guns opened up, firing directly through the opening and into the craft. Soldiers ran or jumped over the sides to escape the bullets.

They waded ashore, struggling under their heavy packs. But the seabed between the sandbar and the shore was uneven. Soldiers might be wading through knee-high water, then step into a trough where the water was suddenly over their head. Many couldn't swim, so when this happened, they'd drop their rifles and struggle out of their packs, if they were lucky, while bullets splashed into the water around them and the dead bodies of their comrades floated by.

When they reached the shore, many of the survivors huddled behind the sea wall. When they peered over it, the 200 yards to the base of the cliff looked more like 200 miles. In their fear and desperation, it was as if most had forgotten they were armed. Those who remembered often discovered their rifles were clogged with sand and water. Most of their radios were also water-damaged.

The second wave came up behind them. Soldiers in those boats heard the shooting and felt encouraged. They assumed it was Americans firing at the German defenders. Soldiers at the seawall knew better. They watched in horror as the landing ships' ramps dropped and the next wave of soldiers began to die.

Surviving officers strove to organize the confused and frightened soldiers. They were put to work cleaning their weapons or claiming new ones from the dead bodies around them. Then they urged the soldiers forward, toward the cliffs. One colonel famously told a group of soldiers, "The

only people on this beach are the dead and those that are going to die. Now let's get the hell out of here."

Engineers set to work blowing up the obstacles the Germans set on the beach to clear the way for tanks and vehicles. In many cases, they found American soldiers hiding behind them, using the obstacles for cover.

As difficult and dangerous as it was, the Americans gradually advanced. More waves came in behind them. Tanks began to arrive, so many that they clogged the passageways opened by the engineers. German commanders on the scene saw that they couldn't hold the line forever and radioed division headquarters to call for reinforcements. But most of the rest of the division was fighting the British to the east. As the British advanced, the defenders facing the Americans found their right flank becoming exposed. German units in the rear that attempted to advance to the cliffs were stymied by heavy Allied air attacks.

Some distance to the west of Omaha Beach and between Omaha and Utah Beaches, the Normandy coast juts into the Channel, forming a promontory the French call Pointe du Hoc. It did not escape the Germans that the top of the cliff at this point would be a natural position for a gun emplacement. Artillery sited here could look down and to the east for a great view of Omaha Beach and a great opportunity for what is known as enfilading fire. That means the guns' line of fire would be parallel to the shore, a highly advantageous position, particularly in the early part of the assault, when American soldiers would be stuck between the sea and the cliffs.

Allied military planners deemed Pointe du Hoc a threat sufficiently serious to assign to a separate force of 225 US Army Rangers the task of scaling the cliff and capturing the German position at the top. Rangers were and are specialized light infantry raiding forces that were created during the war for missions like this one.

Little about the Ranger assault on Pointe du Hoc went according to plan. One of their landing craft sank and they lost both of the boats carrying their supplies as well as one of the four amphibious trucks accompanying them. The battle against the strong currents also cost them time; they did not reach the base of Pointe du Hoc until 40 minutes after the landings at Omaha Beach had already begun.

The Rangers' landing craft were equipped with rocket-propelled grappling hooks, a British invention. These were fired at the top of the cliff. Most of them didn't make it, likely because their ropes had gotten soggy with sea water, but a few of them did, providing a means for the rangers to scale the cliff. They had also brought with them 100-foot ladders borrowed from the London Fire Brigade.

The German defenders at the top fired their weapons down on the approaching Rangers and also dropped grenades on them, but their combat effectiveness was diminished by a heavy naval bombardment from ships in the Channel, including the American battleship USS *Texas*.

When the Rangers reached the top of the cliffs, they discovered that the artillery battery they had come to destroy had already been dismantled. They found the guns lying on the ground a little farther inland and destroyed them.

The Rangers then attempted to radio the password that meant they had succeeded in their mission, but they had no working radio; seawater had put them all out of commission. They fired flares, the alternative method of signaling success. This was meant to be a signal to a second Ranger force to join them as reinforcements. Unfortunately for the Rangers, the cumulative delays meant they had taken so long they were assumed to have failed and the 500 Rangers who were supposed to be their reinforcements were sent to Omaha Beach instead.

On Omaha Beach at 9:30 AM, all was chaos. The beach was littered with burning vehicles, discarded equipment, and corpses. Bodies of soldiers who died in the water washed up on a shoreline dotted with wrecked landing craft, blocking routes of approach for the waves of reinforcements.

For this reason, the sea near the shore was clogged with landing craft moving aimlessly while commanders tried to figure out who or what to send in next, but over time the arrival of a few tanks greatly improved the situation on the beach. Some tanks moved back and forth between the sea wall and the cliffs, providing cover for groups of soldiers sheltering behind them. Smoke and dust created by the naval bombardment also helped provide cover as increasing numbers of American soldiers on the beach found their way to the relative safety at the foot of the cliff.

Naval bombardment by the smaller destroyers firing up close proved much more effective than big battleships firing their huge shells at targets they could not see. The destroyers fired their guns so rapidly that sailors had to be assigned to spray water on them to cool them down. Many soldiers involved in the Omaha Beach landing credited these destroyers with saving the day.

By 12:30 that afternoon, the Americans had landed nearly 20,000 soldiers on Omaha Beach and the tide of battle was beginning to turn against the Germans. An *ad hoc* collection of soldiers from the 29th Division plus some of those Rangers who had been diverted to Omaha found their way up the cliff and began attacking the German bunkers. Germans in the bunkers called for reinforcement, but there was none to be had. All the available reserves had already been sent to other beaches.

I've been emphasizing the cliffs at Omaha Beach, but the cliffs were broken up by five gullies, also known as draws, carved by water running off the land above and into the sea. These gullies were the natural routes up from the beach and inland, so naturally the Germans concentrated their defenses along them. This so-called "bastard brigade" of infantry and Rangers at the top of the cliff continued to grow as more soldiers found their way up top. A general from the 29th named Norman Cota assumed command of this impromptu unit.

They reached the top of one of these gullies and noted that no American tanks or other vehicles had been able to make their way up. The gully itself was full of smoke because one of the American destroyers was concentrating fire on it. When the bombardment ended, they used it to work their way down the gully and back to the beach, where stood an antitank wall. Cota began signaling for engineers to come and blow it up and calling to other soldiers, groups cowering at the base of the cliff. He told them that the gully was clear and urged them to use it to get to the top.

As the German positions at the top of the cliff were taken one by one, the firing on the beach began to diminish. Armored bulldozers began clearing paths from the shore to open the way for more soldiers and vehicles to land. Engineers set to work destroying minefields.

By dusk, the Americans controlled the beach and a strip of land at the top of the cliff.

As for the Rangers at Pointe du Hoc, the worst fighting for them came after they'd reached the top. They held the position at the tip of the point for two days against German counterattacks before they were relieved by units from Omaha Beach. Of the roughly 225 Rangers involved in this operation, almost all of them were by then killed or wounded, with only 90 still in fighting condition.

The Americans landed some 34,000 soldiers at Omaha Beach that day. Casualty figures are only estimates, but it is thought about 1,200 Americans died at Omaha Beach on the first day, with a similar number of wounded. An estimated 3,000 French civilians also died. German losses were much lighter, as their numbers were much fewer.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Suzanne and Jorge for their kind donations, and thank you to Koen for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Suzanne, Jorge, and Koen 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.

As always, the podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. You know the drill. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look at what happened after D-Day. D Plus One, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned the film *Saving Private Ryan* when I talked about Omaha Beach. The film's depiction of the American landings there is harrowing; it has also received praise from every corner. Many people would name this film not merely the best depiction of the Normandy landings, but the greatest Second World War film ever made.

What about other films? Well, if you're talking about D-Day specifically, you would have to acknowledge the 1962 film *The Longest Day*, which focuses exclusively on the Normandy Landings and tells the story from multiple points of view, Allied and German, with a huge, all-star cast. It has the feel of a documentary and enough detail to rack up a three-hour run time. *The Longest Day* is an epic spectacle of a war film, and it inspired a string of other epic films examining other battles of the Second World War, but no one else ever managed to do it quite like this.

And then there's the 1970 film *Patton*, which sounds like a biography, but it really isn't. It doesn't examine Patton's youth or his early military career. It begins with the Battle of the Kasserine Pass, the first engagement between the American and German militaries and takes the story through to the end of the war. So it's as much a history of American involvement in the European Theater, seen through the eyes of George Patton, as anything else. Patton is depicted warts and all, which was a bold creative choice for the time. Until *Patton*, most war films took a respectful, if not hagiographic, approach to depicting real-life military leaders. On the other hand, George C. Scott plays Patton with so much energy and sincerity it's hard not to sympathize with the character, even when he behaves badly.

And finally, the 1980 film *The Big Red One*, which takes a similar approach, but instead of following a general, it follows a squad of infantry, part of the US First Infantry Division, the Big Red One, examining their experiences from the Operation Torch landings through to the end of the war and the horror of the Nazi death camps. It's also notable for including Mark Hamill's most notable film performance outside of *Star Wars*.

[music: Closing War Theme]