

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 435

### “D Plus One”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The risky part was over. The Normandy landings were generally successful, but the long, hard slog had just begun.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 435. D Plus One.

On the evening of June 5, 1944, Adolf Hitler had watched a movie at the Berghof, along with a circle of intimates, including of course Eva Braun. After the film ended, Hitler and his guests talked about the war and the state of the world until the early morning hours. Hitler did not go to sleep until 3:00 AM, by which time Allied paratroopers were already seizing bridges and other key positions in Normandy in preparation for the invasion fleet that was drawing near.

Hitler’s staff well knew that he did not like to be awakened before he was ready, so when the first reports from Normandy started coming in, they took no action. Besides, it seemed likely this was just another quick raid or some form of misdirection, at least at first.

At 10:00 AM, Albert Speer came to the Berghof for a meeting and asked that Hitler be awakened. It wasn’t until the daily noon briefing with Wehrmacht chief of staff Alfred Jodl that Hitler got the full picture of the situation at Normandy. “So it has started,” he said, as he pored over the maps. His attitude struck everyone else at the meeting as cheerful.

It was a sign of how unconcerned Hitler was about the Allied landings that in the afternoon he left for Klessheim Castle for a previously scheduled meeting with the new Hungarian prime minister, Sztójay Döme, the premier Horthy had appointed to appease Hitler in the aftermath of the German occupation of Hungary. The main topic of the discussion was the unfolding genocide of Jewish Hungarians, which I described in episode 419. Hitler assured Sztójay that after the “cleansing,” Hungary would be all the better for it.

Hitler did not get around to releasing some reserve panzer divisions in France to oppose the invaders until the end of the day, assuring it would not be until June 8, at the earliest, before they could join the battle. Clearly, the battle would not be settled on the first day, as Rommel had hoped, but Hitler appeared confident that it would be settled soon. He also spoke of the new V weapons and how hundreds of rockets would be falling on London within a few days.

In Normandy, the Allied position at dawn on June 7 might be described as good, but not great. Casualties were lighter than expected, about 10,000 on the Allied side and maybe 7,000 Germans. These numbers are estimates, as the records are not complete, especially on the German side.

Remember too, that “casualties” in military terms means the total number of soldiers killed, wounded, captured, or missing. Speaking strictly of deaths, the figures are around 4,500 Allied deaths, most of them paratroopers, and 2-3,000 Germans. About 3,000 French civilians also died in the first day of the invasion. Most of them were killed by Allied bombings or naval bombardment.

Even one death is one too many, but in fact casualties on the beaches where Allied forces landed were lower than expected. The worst was Omaha Beach, but when the dust had settled and the Americans took stock, they found casualties were not as bad as they had feared. In the chaos of that landing, with bodies lying on the beach and washing in from the ocean, it was easy to assume that any soldier missing from your unit was dead. But this was often not the case. Currents pushed some landing craft to the wrong position and soldiers scattered when fired at on the beach. A number of American soldiers therefore got separated from their units. Their comrades assumed they’d been killed until they found their way back and proved not to be dead at all. In fact, around 1000 Americans died on Omaha Beach that day; exact numbers are uncertain.

But over 40,000 were alive at Omaha Beach, and overall the Allies had landed more than 150,000 soldiers that first day, which is a stupendous achievement. In a single stroke, the Allies went from having zero presence in France to a force more than half the total of all German soldiers stationed in that country. And this was just the beginning. Behind them were hundreds of thousands of more soldiers the Allies planned to ship across the Channel to the Normandy beachheads in the coming days and weeks.

Many of those German units stationed in France were of poor quality. These were garrison forces usually comprised of older conscripts or POWs with little enthusiasm. Regulars were also stationed in France; the German Army typically rotated units from the Eastern Front to garrison duty in France, where they could rest and reorganize.

So the situation from the German point of view was quite grim, but at this early moment it seems few German commanders understood that. Marshal Rundstedt, commander-in-chief of German forces in the West, clung to the view that Normandy was just a diversion and the real invasion

was yet to come and would strike at Calais. For this reason, he kept German Army units stationed in the Calais region where they were and would not send them to reinforce the line at Normandy.

Allied air forces virtually controlled the skies over northern France. The Luftwaffe finally made an appearance after dark on June 6 to make a bombing run over the Allied ships anchored off the coast, but the air raid did nothing to aid the German defenders on the ground. The oft-repeated lament of the German defenders in Normandy over the weeks to come was "*Wo ist die Luftwaffe?*"

The Allies barred French civilians from the beaches; some French felt they were treated like nuisances even in their own homes and villages. American soldiers in particular were suspicious of French civilians. Rumor had it that some French were German sympathizers who would shoot an Allied soldier if they had the opportunity. The Americans were especially leery of young women, some of whom it was said had German sympathies because they had German boyfriends. More than a few French civilians, especially women, were shot dead for the crime of carrying a weapon, especially a German rifle. That some civilians might have been collecting weapons on behalf of the French resistance does not seem to have occurred to any of them.

There's little evidence French civilians were assisting the Germans, although one American soldier reported the discovery of a number of bodies of German soldiers alongside what appeared to be their French girlfriends. These Germans along with their girlfriends had been retreating south from the Allied landing sites when they'd been killed by an Allied bomber.

Soldiers who had nothing else to do got stuck with the job of identifying the dead. Some German prisoners were offered extra rations in exchange for helping to dig graves, an offer most of them accepted. Later, when African-American soldiers began to arrive on Normandy, these unpleasant duties were passed on to them.

The overall position of the Allies on D+1 was a glass half empty/glass half full situation. None of the five invasion forces accomplished all their goals for D-Day. On the other hand, casualties were lower than expected, or maybe I should say lower than feared, and all five beachheads seemed secure for now. The key question for D+1 was how to keep the beachheads secure while also expanding Allied control and perhaps even seizing some of those objectives that had not been taken yesterday.

Let me run off a list of the highest Allied priorities for D+1. The top item on the list surely was the relief of those American Rangers holding Pointe-du-Hoc. The second had to be the relief of the remaining isolated units of American paratroopers on the Cotentin Peninsula. Hardly less important was to close the gap between British-controlled Gold Beach and the Americans on Omaha Beach, who held the smallest of the Allied beachheads.

I already said a few words about Pointe-du-Hoc last time. The Rangers had captured the tip of the point, but were under German counterattack. An American force from Omaha Beach was sent to relieve them, but German resistance on the point was strong enough that it took until June 8, D+2, for the American relief force to reach the beleaguered Rangers.

But even then, their arrival was not unalloyed good news. The Rangers had run out of ammunition and had taken to defending themselves with captured German rifles. Unfortunately for them, German rifles had a distinctive sound that could be identified at a distance. The approaching American relief force heard the sound and began firing on what they believed to be German defenders, killing four Rangers and wounding two more. The Rangers held up a US flag to signal to their attackers that they were fellow Americans.

Many paratrooper units of the US 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division in and west of Sainte-Mère-Église had not yet been relieved as D+1 began, and the German 709<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, based at Cherbourg, was pushing south in an attempt to halt or reverse the American advance. By midday, German tanks had reached the center of Sainte-Mère-Église before American tanks from Utah Beach drove them away.

An American medic was searching the fields north of Sainte-Mère-Église during this fighting when he came across two wounded American paratroopers. As he sat with them, binding their wounds, one of them whispered to him, “There’s an 88 back of you.” The medic chuckled, but when he turned around he discovered a group of German artillery gunners with an 88mm gun pointed directly at him. Happily, the Germans took no action; they merely watched as the medic treated the injured and led them away.

Farther west, a unit of the 82<sup>nd</sup> held out against German attacks despite heavy casualties and no food for four days, relying on amphetamines to keep them going despite hunger and exhaustion.

At Omaha Beach, the veteran US 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division advanced eastward and met up with units of the British 50<sup>th</sup> Division advancing westward, providing the much-needed link between Omaha and the British beaches.

Gold and Juno Beaches had already linked up, which meant that the three beachheads in the middle were now linked together, but getting Juno Beach linked up with Sword Beach, farther east, proved a challenge. Between the two stood a German radar station, defended by a series of tunnels and trenches all around. The station also had an underground telephone line linking it to the city of Caen, held by the advancing 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division. This meant that the station could serve as an artillery observation post, directing German artillery fire against Allied targets.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division was put under the command of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Corps. The commander of the corps was Sepp Dietrich, a German SS officer who held his high rank because he held Hitler’s trust as a long-standing member of the Nazi Party, since 1928 in fact. In the early days he had served as Hitler’s chauffeur and commander of Hitler’s personal SS bodyguard.

Though Hitler trusted him, he was a Party man not a career military officer and his grasp of command and control was shaky.

Dietrich was at the headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Corps in Brussels when the Normandy landings began. Rundstedt brought him to Paris and gave him command of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer, along with the Panzer Lehr Division and the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division, known as the *Hitlerjugend*, or Hitler Youth, and ordered him to send these units north through Caen and throw the British back into the sea.

Dietrich attempted the counterattack on the morning of D+1, despite the fact that Allied air attacks had held up the arrival of two of his four divisions. All he had to work with were the 21<sup>st</sup> and the *Hitlerjugend*, and I should note that the *Hitlerjugend* Division, as the name suggests, was made up of recruits from the Hitler Youth, most of them aged from 15 to 17. It was not the highest quality unit the SS had to offer. Dietrich decided to proceed with the counterattack anyway, despite warnings that two divisions would not be enough to push the British off the beach.

The British on Sword Beach, you'll recall, were supposed to take the French city of Caen, about 25 kilometers inland. Or 15 miles if you prefer. Or five leagues, if you're really hardcore. British forces had advanced on Caen on D-Day, but had been held up by the German 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division. The British might have taken Caen on D-Day anyway, but crucially, one infantry brigade had been diverted to the east to reinforce the British paratroopers against a possible assault by German panzers.

But those panzers did not assault the paratroopers to the east. They advanced on Caen. By dusk on D-Day, the British had not only stood up to the German armor, they had driven the 21<sup>st</sup> back into a confused retreat. An energetic advance here might have taken the city, but British commanders felt that advancing at night was an unwarranted risk. They had already proven themselves against the panzers. Caen could wait until tomorrow.

On the German side, the disorganized retreat of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division triggered a wave of panic. Rumors spread that the British had taken Caen and were still advancing. Rear echelon soldiers reacted to the news by fleeing the area, forcing the corps commanders to send out the *Feldgendarmarie*, the military police, to round them up and escort them back to their units.

By the morning of D+1, when the British resumed their advance on Caen, the 21<sup>st</sup> had pulled together its defensive line and infantry support was on the way. The British had had their opportunity and had missed it. They were not going to get another one, not if German commanders had their way.

Why did it matter? Caen was the largest city in the region and the hub of the road and rail network in the area. Had the British captured it, they would have been in a position to advance in

any of several directions, but as long as the Germans held it, British forces on Sword Beach wouldn't be going anywhere.

Farther west, the advancing *Hitlerjugend* Division intercepted Canadian forces advancing south from Juno Beach. The *Hitlerjugend* Division was under orders to push all the way to the sea and drive a wedge between the Canadians and British forces to the east. An afternoon of fierce combat persuaded German officers on the scene that those orders were unrealistic. The Canadians held the line and inflicted heavy losses on the Germans.

Sadly, that evening, eleven Canadians taken prisoner by the *Hitlerjugend* Division were executed in the garden of the Ardenne Abbey, outside Caen. The soldiers of the *Hitlerjugend* were young men chosen not for their military skill but for their fanatical devotion to Nazism. In the weeks to come, more Canadian prisoners would be killed at the abbey and elsewhere by soldiers of the *Hitlerjugend*, more than 150 in all.

The British had more luck with the smaller town of Bayeux, with a population of about 10,000, just to the west and a few kilometers inland from Gold Beach. Overnight, British reconnaissance patrols investigated the town and found the Germans had withdrawn, and they were able to occupy the town on D+1 against only sporadic resistance, leaving the town's cathedral and other historic buildings intact.

The town's residents greeted the British with flowers and glasses of the traditional Norman apple brandy.

[music: Fauré, *Fantaisie*.]

On June 8, D+2, the Italian government led by prime minister Pietro Badoglio returned to Rome from Brindisi, where it had fled back on September 9 of last year, when the Germans occupied the Italian capital.

On June 9, a battalion commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Panzer Division, known as *Das Reich*, was captured and executed by members of the French resistance. The following day, June 10, units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Panzer Division destroyed the nearby French village of Oradour-sur-Glane in retaliation. 642 civilians—men, women, and children—were killed. Most of them were locked into barns or the village church, and then the buildings set on fire. They then destroyed the village. Oradour-sur-Glane was never rebuilt. After the war, the ruins were preserved as a memorial to the victims.

Also on June 11, units of the US 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division liberated the town of Carentan, at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. The following day, June 12, Allied forces in Normandy completed the task of linking up their beachheads. The Allies now held a continuous front line 80 kilometers, or 50 miles, long.

The total number of Allied soldiers in Normandy was by this time over 300,000, and German commanders in the West, including Rundstedt and Rommel, were getting nervous. The Allies controlled only a small strip of coastal land in Normandy, but the hundreds of thousands of soldiers and the tens of thousands of vehicles they had transported across the Channel in a matter of days were troubling. Allied air supremacy made it impossible to move German military formations in daylight, and fuel shortages hindered movement even at night. The Allies had the edge and the German generals foresaw a grave danger: soon the Allies would have enough armor and vehicles on French soil to break through the front line and make the same kinds of rapid encirclements that had once been the German Army's specialty.

Adolf Hitler was unmoved by these warnings. He had vowed that his Atlantic Wall would throw back the invaders before they could establish a foothold. Obviously, that had failed, but Hitler simply fell back to a new promise: those long-delayed vengeance weapons. He told everyone around him these "miracle weapons" would soon be falling on London by the hundreds. "Panic will break out everywhere in England," he predicted.

These "miracle weapons" were the retribution weapons Hitler and the Nazis had been promising for more than a year now, promising them until the whole thing became something like a joke to the German public. But the weapons existed, and although testing took longer than anticipated, the first retribution weapon, or *Vergeltungswaffe*, was launched the night of June 12. It was designated V-1. V for *Vergeltungswaffe*, and "1" to imply that further such weapons were on the way.

The V-1 was essentially a flying bomb. It even looked like a bomb, albeit a long, streamlined bomb with wings and a tail like an airplane. Above the main body of the V-1 was a nacelle about half the length of the main fuselage. This nacelle contained a novel pulse jet engine. Gasoline from the fuselage was pushed up into the nacelle by a tank of pressurized air and atomized into a fine spray. A valve at the front of the fuselage would allow air to enter. This air would mix with the gasoline, which would burn. The valve at the front would then close, so the gas from the ignition would be forced out the rear of the nacelle and propel the V-1 forward.

That would be one pulse. Then the valve up front would open again, and the next pulse would begin. A V-1 engine cycled through 42 pulses per second, propelling it at a speed of 640 kph, or 400 mph. The V-1 guidance system included gyroscopes to keep the weapon flying level and even, a compass to keep it oriented in the right direction, and an altimeter to keep it at optimum altitude.

The V-1 could be launched from a steam-powered catapult on the ground, or from the top of a modified He-111 bomber. An anemometer in its nose ran an odometer. The odometer was set for a predetermined distance and would count backward from that number. When it reached zero, the engine stopped and the V-1 would dive. Three fuses insured that the bomb would explode

when the V-1 hit the ground, or sometime afterward. The Germans didn't want the British to get their hands on an intact one.

The V-1 was, in short, the world's first example of what we today would call a cruise missile. The Germans installed V-1 catapults at Calais, the point in occupied Europe closest to Great Britain, which made it possible for the weapons to reach London.

The first V-1 attack was launched the night of June 12, and was not notably successful. None of the nine missiles launched that night made it across the Channel. The Germans launched a much more ambitious attack of 244 V-1s on the night of June 15, the majority of which struck their targets in London, Portsmouth, and Southampton.

The next morning, the Wehrmacht announced that it had attacked England with a "novel kind of explosive." The story spread quickly across the country, raising hopes among the German public. The long-promised miracle weapons had finally appeared. Maybe they could help Germany regain the offensive. Enthusiasm spread to such a degree that propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels ordered the newspapers to tone down their coverage. It was dangerous to promise too much, and not even as dedicated a Nazi as Goebbels fully believed Hitler's predictions that the weapon would change the course of the war.

The Germans launched thousands of mass-produced V-1 missiles at England during the months that followed. Most of the missiles that reached England were destroyed by British defensive measures before they reached their targets.

Even so, enough of them got through to cause death and damage. The English referred to the V-1s as "buzz bombs," because of the distinctive noise they made in flight. More terrifying than the buzz of a buzz bomb was the moment when the missile suddenly went quiet. Residents of the target cities in England, particularly London, learned that silence meant the bomb was dropping and somebody somewhere was about to be hit.

That same day, June 16, D+10, Adolf Hitler summoned the Wehrmacht's commander and chief of staff, Wilhelm Keitel and Alfred Jodl, respectively, to the Berghof for a report on the situation in Normandy. By this time, it was clear to both of them that though the Allies had not yet claimed much ground, their forces in Normandy were too strong for any hope of pushing them off the continent. Keitel described the situation as "very serious."

After that meeting, Hitler ordered Rundstedt and Rommel to meet with him the next day at *Wolfsschlucht II*, the "Wolf's Ravine II," a bunker complex the Wehrmacht had built for Hitler about ten kilometers outside the French town of Soissons. The command center had originally been built for Hitler's use during the invasion of Britain. Now Hitler would use it for the first—and last—time to meet with his top commanders on the Western Front.

Predictably, Hitler began the meeting by flying into a rage, berating his commanders and blaming them and their subordinates for the success of the Allied landing. Rommel told Hitler that his soldiers had offered “superhuman performances, but had been helpless against the enemy’s crushing superiority in the air and on the sea.”

Hitler then spoke at length about the V-1 missiles and how they were going to win the war. A skeptical Rommel tried one more time. He warned Hitler that a complete collapse of German forces in the West was possible, and urged him to open peace talks with the Allies. Hitler told him, “Don’t you worry about how the war will continue; take care of your front against the invasion.”

The next day, June 18, the American 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division reached the western shore of the Cotentin Peninsula. Cherbourg was now cut off and three American divisions began an advance on the city.

Hitler, you may recall, had designated Cherbourg one of his fortress cities. The commander of the garrison inside the city, General Karl-Wilhelm von Schlieben, had a force of about 21,000 at his disposal, though they did not represent the Wehrmacht’s best. Hitler contacted Schlieben and ordered him to defend the city to the last man. He cited the example of the 1807 Siege of Kolberg, where an embattled Prussian force commanded by Major August von Gneisenau, the fellow the German battlecruiser was named after, held out against a French force twice its size in a siege that lasted almost three months until Prussia capitulated after the French took Berlin.

It’s easy to understand why the Siege of Kolberg was on Hitler’s mind. A year earlier, following the crushing German defeat at Stalingrad, Goebbels commissioned a film, *Kolberg*, dramatizing the siege. This historical epic, filmed in color with a cast of thousands, carries the story through to 1813, following Napoleon’s failed invasion of Russia, when Prussia resumes the war and rejoins the coalition against France, sending the not-so-subtle message to the German people that they should be prepared to hold out against superior numbers and trust that victory ultimately would be theirs. *Kolberg* was in production at this time; the film would be released in January 1945.

Four days before Hitler issued those orders to Schlieben and on the other side of the world, a different amphibious landing would mark the beginning of the end in the Pacific War.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d like to thank Harry, Daniel, and Yohoshoa for their kind donations, and thank you to Ian for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Harry, Daniel, Yohoshoa, and Ian 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](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I'm still behind on my work for the podcast, so with regret, I'm going to have to change the release schedule to three weeks on and one week off, rather than four and one. I hope I won't have to do this for too long, and I'll get back to the old schedule as soon as I can.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look at the second most important amphibious landing of June 1944. Saipan, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. When I mentioned the liberation of Bayeux on D+1, the question may have entered your mind regarding the town's most important historical artifact, the famous Bayeux Tapestry—though it's actually not so much a tapestry as a gargantuan embroidery. Either way, it is a priceless historical artifact, more than 800 years old at the time, and you might have wondered what happened to it during the invasion.

In fact, the Tapestry was not in Bayeux at the time. It had been removed from the city in 1941 by the Germans and taken to the Chateau de Sourches in the Loire Valley, more than 100 kilometers to the south and stored in the basement for safekeeping, along with art treasures from Versailles and the Louvre, where it was made available for study by German researchers. On June 26, 1944, after the Allied invasion, the chateau was deemed no longer safe enough and the Tapestry was moved to the Louvre in Paris. In March 1945, French authorities returned it to Bayeux, where it has remained ever since, though in our time, preparations are being made to loan it to the British Museum, sometime later this year.

The distinctive look of the Bayeux Tapestry has often been parodied by modern artists. Notably, the cover illustration of the July 15, 1944 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine depicts the story of the Normandy invasion in the visual style of the Bayeux Tapestry.

[music: Closing War Theme]