

Q & A from the 2019 75th Anniversary of the Landings on D-Day Event:

1. Was there ever consideration of pushing up through Northern Italy and into Austria meeting with the Russians for attack to Berlin?

To my knowledge this was never discussed as a valid strategic option. As I commented at the presentation (which was a testament to Rod McDonald's attention to detail), although 'On to Berlin' was a catchword during the European campaign, and though Field Marshal Montgomery and General Patton both advocated for their own 'single-axis of advance' strategies (each of which would have required withholding logistics from the other), Eisenhower's objective was defeat of the Wehrmacht in detail, not capture of the enemy capital.

Eisenhower was an advocate of General Ulysses Grant's strategy of focusing on the defeat of Lee's army, in the Civil War. Grant did not believe Richmond had any strategic value; it fell as an afterthought in April 1865, a few days before the South capitulated.

Another demonstration that a captured enemy capital is nothing more than a collection of buildings was what followed Napoleon's armies' capture of Moscow in the 19th Century: the Russians abandoned the city, setting fire to it, and let time and the weather work their effect on the French. In 1945 the Soviets lost 300,000 killed and a million men in two army groups involved in taking Berlin in 1945, and the Germans fought fanatically with old men and boys until the very last moments of the battle.

I doubt the American public would have accepted a butcher's bill like that.

2. How was D-Day kept a secret from the Germans? (This was pretty well address in the Q&A...could one of you give me the name of the Gent who played both sides of the spying game?)

The double agent working for the Allies was a Spaniard, Juan Pujol Garcia, code name 'GARBO'. He created a wholly fictitious cast of agents who were ostensibly working for him across Britain: dockworkers, secretaries in various government bureaus, train drivers, factory workers, etc. and fed the Germans a continuing list of 'reports' from each. He completely foxed the German *Abwehr* and was the only spy to be decorated by both sides; the Germans gave him the Iron Cross.

Along with the fabulous deception campaign we discussed in the presentation, in which the Allies created the wholly fictitious First Army Group commanded by General George Patton, and the British Fourth Army Group, both fully equipped with dummy tanks, trucks, aircraft, camps, airfields, and landing barges, keeping the Germans' attention on it as the possible main landing force yet to be committed to the Pas de Calais, GARBO's one-man efforts were heroic and incredibly effective. A Wikipedia description of GARBO can be found here:

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_Pujol_Garc%C3%ADa

Q & A from the 2019 75th Anniversary of the Landings on D-Day Event:

3. Did the Allies know the Germans did NOT suspect Normandy as an invasion location?

The Allies were intercepting and decoding a large part of the encrypted signal traffic between OKW, the supreme German military headquarters, and its subordinate commands and units. The Germans were using a commercially-produced and militarized typewriter-like encryption machine known as ENIGMA. The permutations and combinations ENIGMA enabled in coding any transmission were literally in the millions. The Germans considered the machine to impermeable to decryption. But the Allies did it.

The effort to replicate the ENIGMA by the Allies and crack its code was nothing short of magic, and the intercepts from these Allied decryptations were in fact dubbed MAGIC. They were shared out between a very few Allied leaders on a need-to-know basis. This Allied success at codebreaking was of course highly classified.

The Allies had sympathizers, agents, and spies in Occupied Europe, and were constantly monitoring German unit dispositions. Nothing they were seeing or hearing indicated foreknowledge of the date and place of the invasion.

The Allies knew the Germans fully expected the landing but were not aware of where or when it would take place. A few ranking German officers believed it would come in Normandy (German General Eric Marcks among them) but their voices were not loud enough to be heard in the background noise of the German consensus that it would come at Pas de Calais.

A great dramatization of General Marcks's strategic forward thinking on the invasion location can be found in this YouTube outtake from the film 'The Longest Day':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=W6YnMaNTx30>

It should be noted the Germans had never executed a significant amphibious operation. They were of a mind that the invasion would come at the shortest distance the Allies would have to travel from England; at the Pas de Calais in northern France, directly across the English Channel from Dover. They also believed the Allies would only attack when the light, tide, and weather were all in their favor. The Allies' attack at Normandy was a complete surprise to the Germans as to the weather; the German meteorologists did not foresee any letup in the storm that was pounding northwestern France, while the Allies' weather people foresaw a very brief break, after which the risk of heavy storms would return.

Eisenhower's decision to postpone the landings for a day was prescient; the landings occurred in that window. A heavy storm in the days that followed did severe damage to the MULBERRY artificial breakwaters and harbors.

Q & A from the 2019 75th Anniversary of the Landings on D-Day Event:

4. D-Day and Switzerland. A little-known fact of 6 June. The Germans were planning an invasion of Switzerland during Summer 1944 (Plan Bohme). Didn't know this. With the purpose of seizing the nations rail network. The landings at Normandy that June put an end to these plans. The Normandy landings, in effect, broke the siege of over 5 years that the Nazis had placed around this neutral country, with Allied Forces reaching the Swiss border in August 1944 (Source – "Target Switzerland" by Richard Falbrook). How much pre-invasion intelligence was provided to the Allies by the Swiss?

Very interesting; I was unaware of BOHME. The Swiss were heavily armed and organized and prepared to fight fiercely; I don't doubt it would have cost the Germans a lot of men to subdue the country, since the Swiss were (and still are) fully prepared to fight in defense of every peak and valley.

My appreciation is the Swiss were allowing the Germans free passage for their troop and logistics trains through the country anyway, so don't understand the desire by the Germans to attack Switzerland, which was also serving a secondary role as a center for espionage by both sides. The American OSS maintained an office in Bern during the war, headed by Alan Dulles, later to become Director of the CIA; he ran a network of agents into Italy, Austria, and Germany. Much of the intelligence which helped toward war's end came through the OSS Bern office.

The Swiss interned any fliers and aircraft that landed in Switzerland during the war. A surprising number from both sides did land in Switzerland, due to mechanical failure, battle damage, navigational errors, and in one of the little known but humanly understandable aspects of that war, because their crews or individual pilots had had enough of it, and simply landed to intern themselves. The Swiss treated them all with punctilious impartiality.

Neutral Sweden was another country which was a landing place and internment site for aircraft and aircrew from all combatants.

5. Would Rommel's presence changed the outcome? How?

Difficult to say, but Rommel certainly had what the Germans call tactical finger-knowledge, or '*Fingerspitzengefühl*' and the ability to inspire in his subordinate commanders with the drive to inflict severe counterattacks. Given the disruption in the battle area and immediately forward of it due to Allied air superiority and the French Resistance's efforts, whether it would have mattered is open to question.

Rommel was an advocate of locating the German armored units much closer to the beaches, but had been overridden by decisions at the Hitler headquarters level. If his recommendations had been followed, and German SS panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions had been a lot closer to the beachhead area, yes; it could have made a big difference. But such was not the case.

Q & A from the 2019 75th Anniversary of the Landings on D-Day Event:

(cont. of # 5. Would Rommel's presence changed the outcome? How?)

Rommel was wounded when his staff car was strafed by British aircraft as he was rushing back to his Normandy headquarters from Germany, where he had taken a weekend off during a period of projected bad weather in France, to visit his family. He was out of the picture from that point anyway.

The tardiness of major German armored formations in arriving late on the *Normandiefront* is attributed to Allied air superiority, with fighter bombers able to hammer German armor and truck convoys whenever they showed themselves and utterly decimate rail transport, and the French resistance, which came out of hiding with a vengeance in the weeks after D-Day.

The *Das Reich* SS panzer division was famously delayed in its movement from southwestern France to Normandy by the Resistance so effectively it took almost ten days for division to arrive, instead of the two to three days that had been planned for the move. The *Das Reich* was so furious at this resistance effort they committed heinous reprisals against French civilians in towns and villages along the way, and completely destroyed the town of Ouradour sur Glan, killing almost every man, woman, and child.

6. What was the mistake (if any) made by the allies that most affected the course of battle in the *negative*?

The 6th of June was a demonstration of the maxim that the best detailed operational plans rarely survive first contact with the enemy. Although in the main the amphibious landing, code named NEPTUNE, was a success, there were several places where the results were not at all as predicted. The air and naval bombardments of the beach areas were, largely ineffective. Low cloud and winds were a couple of the factors, and the heavy bombers passed over their coastal defensive belt objectives in perpendicular fashion, in order to not subject themselves to heavy German flak if they made their bombing runs linearly. That approach made the triggering of bombs to hit targets a literally split-second affair, and most bombs went long or short of their targets.

The Germans were also in very heavy bunkers and other fortifications, so many of them rode out the attack by simply staying sheltered below ground. Those bunkers were huge constructions; many of them remain today.

The naval bombardment was also somewhat ineffective; there were no aerial spotters aloft to adjust naval gunfire, so the ships were shooting from their positions on the sea at enemy positions on a map. Their fire saturated the area on and behind the beaches but there was little effective fire on individual targets.

Q & A from the 2019 75th Anniversary of the Landings on D-Day Event:

(cont. of # 6. What was the mistake (if any) made by the allies that most affected the course of battle in the negative?)

Although air reconnaissance of the landing area and related German defenses was thorough, it failed to reveal (or Allied intelligence failed to detect) the big German coastal guns situated on top of Point du Hoc between the American OMAHA and UTAH beaches had been removed, from the bunkers atop the cliffs and were sitting in a field some miles away, almost unprotected.

The Rangers scaled the cliffs to get at the Pointe du Hoc battery, taking severe casualties, only to find their objective inhabited by dummy German guns.

Recently, historians have discovered directives to LTC Rudder, the Ranger commander, NOT to attack Point du Hoc, but instead to move to and attack a gigantic German artillery battery at Maizy. For whatever reason Rudder did not obey this directive, and once atop Pointe du Hoc did not proceed to attack the Maizy battery, which was still shelling the beachhead area on D+3.

The US Airborne night drops of the 82d and 101st divisions went almost completely awry, with paratroops scattered all over the beach area behind UTAH, and many landing miles from their objectives. This was due to cloud cover over the approach route and very heavy German flak, which forced the aircraft of Troop Carrier Command to break formation, winding up scattering their troop loads all over the area.

OMAHA beach was very heavily defended; the Navy landing craft dropped many men in deep water too far offshore, after which, weighted down with very heavy gear, they drowned.

Almost all of the 'Duplex Drive' tanks which were intended to be launched from LCT's offshore, then 'swim' under their own power onto the beach to destroy the reinforced German gun positions which were sited to fire in enfilade up and down the beach, went straight to the bottom, taking their crews with them. As a result, the Infantry assault on OMAHA was severely delayed, with men dead from interlocking fans of German automatic weapons fire in huge swaths, from the water line all the way up the beach, and terrified survivors attempting to hide behind the steel landing craft obstacles the Germans had erected by the hundreds.

It wasn't until several of the Navy's destroyers offshore realized the impasse on the beach and came close inshore to engage and destroy the German bunkers with direct 5-inch gunfire that the situation on OMAHA changed from potential disaster to one in which the troops rallied, went up the bluffs and out through the road in the draw at the FOX GREEN sector of the beach that provided the 'exit' to the higher ground behind the beach.

Q & A from the 2019 75th Anniversary of the Landings on D-Day Event:

(cont. of # 6. What was the mistake (if any) made by the allies that most affected the course of battle in the negative?)

These are only a few observations of Allied error; there are probably a lot more. Very likely the biggest error in Allied planning was not what they didn't detect or allow for on D-Day; it was the Allies' almost complete surprise, once getting off the beaches and into the French farm country beyond, to find themselves having to fight through a heavily compartmented checkerboard series of fields bordered by hedgerows, often eight to ten feet high and thickly plated with trees and other vegetation. This hedgerow terrain was a defender's dream and an attacker's nightmare. Yet Allied intelligence had completely missed it as a potential problem, to the cost of untold hundreds, perhaps thousands, of dead and wounded soldiers as a price for fighting into and through the hedgerow area.

7. How accurate are the fictionalized Hollywood depictions of the Battle, i.e. "The Longest Day", "Saving Private Ryan", etc.

While entertaining, both had some severely limiting factors. 'The Longest Day' was so overloaded with every imaginable Hollywood star in its cast it was hard to see past the inflated egos. It also played, as do most Hollywood films, fast and loose with reality. The depiction of German General von Choltitz, the commander of the Paris garrison, as a humane man unwilling to destroy Paris on Hitler's orders isn't precisely what happened. By the time Hitler's orders came through to level the city, the German Army was in retreat and the Allies were planning to bypass the city in any event. Von Choltitz didn't have the men to have accomplished the task had he wanted to, and the citizenry of Paris had risen and taken to the streets and the barricades (which the French are wont to do whenever their *amour propre* is piqued), snarling the Germans' ability to move troops around within the city.

Von Choltitz was also fully aware of last minute rail 'transports' of Jews from the city to almost certain death in concentration camps to the East, but did little to stop them.

'Saving Private Ryan' was a nice morality play and Spielberg did a good job of drawing us in close to a single unit's actions holding out in a French town on a mission (directly authorized by General George Marshall) to find a trooper in a US Airborne unit and get him out of the combat zone because his brother had been killed in action elsewhere.

The beach landing scenes in this film are probably the closest anyone could come to what the soldiers may have actually experienced. But from there the film becomes a wander through a bucolic Norman countryside in which Tom Hanks plays Everyman, moralizing whenever he gets the chance. The fact his little unit is so bunched up they would have lasted about a three second burst from an MG 42 is not apparent to anyone but a combat veteran, but it should be recognized that if they were appropriately tactically dispersed, the camera frame would have maybe gotten Hanks and at most one other man in any one shot.

So, nice try, and let's remember Hollywood is about entertainment.

Q & A from the 2019 75th Anniversary of the Landings on D-Day Event:

8. Were there any other viable options? (I presume question relates to location, timing, etc.)

It's hard to pick another landing location that would have afforded the allies more advantages (surprise, deception, mass, etc.) than Normandy. It needs to be highlighted that OVERLORD was bookended by DRAGOON, the amphibious invasion of southern France, which occurred on 15 August. DRAGOON was late due to a shortage of landing craft and slow progress of Fifth Army in Italy, but it put intense pressure on the Germans, by driving north from the landing beaches as the OVERLORD forces were effecting their breakout and race across France toward Paris as a result of operation COBRA.

9. Re Russian Commissars at Normandy? Please verify. Any Allied records on this?

I've never heard of it. Very likely any Russians found serving in the German Army were going to be shot anyway, once they were turned over to Russian control. But as for actual Russians at Normandy, other than possible liaison to the SHAEF staff, I'm not aware of it.

10. 2,000+ African-American troops at Normandy left out of most histories. Please comment.

The US Army was segregated in World War II, and while there were all-black combat units serving in Italy and there were all-black Army Air Force fighter squadrons and medium bomber units (none of which were in the Normandy area on D-Day), the African-American soldiers at Normandy were performing anti-aircraft, or service and logistics functions: driving trucks, loading and unloading ships and landing craft, road clearing and engineering tasks, etc.

All of the US logistics operations came under the Services of Supply, or SOS, commanded by General J.C.H. Lee, an overbearing officer often referred to as "Jesus Christ Himself" Lee.

11. U. S. Marines in Iceland and on ships-any ashore?

It's a little known fact that the Marines trained some of the Army units in the techniques and tactics of amphibious assault, prior to the North Africa and Sicily landings. They also trained some Army units before the Normandy landings. But with the possible exception of Marine observers attached to the command staffs at the high levels, at the specific instruction of General Marshall and General Eisenhower, no Marines participated in the Normandy landings.

The most practical reason is the Marine Corps was relatively small; at its biggest during the war it was 6 infantry divisions, while the Army had over 90. By 1944 the Marines were involved in the Pacific campaigns, where they acquitted themselves fabulously, enduring high casualties, against a determined Japanese foe.

The other side of the reason no Marines were at Normandy, or elsewhere in the campaigns in Italy and Europe, reached back to the experience of the Army in the First World War, when Marine units were integrated into the AEF, the American Expeditionary Force. In battles on the Marne and at Chateau-Thierry and Belleau Wood, the Marines fought gallantly. Afterward, US newspapers attributed almost the entire success of the campaign to the Marines alone. That experience stuck in the craw of Army officers like Marshall, Bradley, and Eisenhower. So Marines were *verboten* in the ETO in World War II.

Q & A from the 2019 75th Anniversary of the Landings on D-Day Event:

12. What are some of the myths about D-Day?

One of the biggest, doubtless due to our American-centric way of looking at our history and our long animosity toward Russia during the years of the Cold War, is that D-Day was the decisive moment in the Second World War. It was anything but. By the time the Allies landed at Normandy, the Soviets had devoured most of the best armored, mechanized infantry, and infantry divisions the Germans possessed, on the Eastern Front.

By June of 1944 the Russians were driving the German Army back toward the borders of the Reich and captured Warsaw on June 7. The war was recognizably lost to the Germans at that time, but almost a year of savage defensive fighting would remain. More men would die on both sides in that last year of the war than had died in the years preceding.

A couple of other easy myths are the way D-Day is often mistakenly presented by American media as an almost wholly American operation. The British and Canadian played an enormous part, landing five infantry and armored divisions on GOLD, JUNO, and SWORD beaches, their flanks secured by the British 6th Airborne Division.

Free French commando units landed at D-Day as well.

Another myth is that the Allies were landing on beaches defended by 'elite' German divisions, whereas the German units in the German Seventh Army sector in Normandy were generally second- and in some cases third-echelon units made up of previously wounded men, ordinary soldiers, and a surprising number of Russian and Polish soldiers who had been captured by the Germans or had volunteered to fight for them.

One of the first German prisoners taken by the Americans was a Korean who had been forced into the Japanese Army, then captured by the Russians in the battles at Nomonhan on the Manchuria-Mongolia border in 1939. Subsequently captured by the Germans on the Eastern Front, he was forced by the Germans to become a German soldier.

THAT must have had American PW interrogators working overtime.

13. Hitler often made decisions which were in conflict with his military. Comment on the effect of these decisions.

One of the biggest conflicts between Hitler and his field commanders was the decision as to location of the German armored and mechanized (*Panzer* and *Panzergranadier*) units. Rommel and other commanders argued they should be located close to the beaches in order to smash the fragile beachhead as the Allies were coming ashore. Hitler elected to locate them further inland, in order to provide maximum flexibility as to where they could be deployed. Both of these options made their own modicums of sense, but Hitler overlaid his decision with the order that no German armored units could be released without his specific approval.

Q & A from the 2019 75th Anniversary of the Landings on D-Day Event:

(cont. of #13. Hitler often made decisions which were in conflict with his military. Comment on the effect of these decisions.)

One of the biggest conflicts between Hitler and his field commanders was the decision as to location of the German armored and mechanized (*Panzer* and *Panzergranadier*) units. Rommel and other commanders argued they should be located close to the beaches in order to smash the fragile beachhead as the Allies were coming ashore. Hitler elected to locate them further inland, in order to provide maximum flexibility as to where they could be deployed. Both of these options made their own modicums of sense, but Hitler overlaid his decision with the order that no German armored units could be released without his specific approval.

14. The most well-known motion picture made of Operation Overlord was the 1962 production “The Longest Day”. Many of the scenes were shot using actual NATO forces standing in for Allied troops at Normandy. Ironically this occurred during the 1961 Berlin Crisis and involved the personal intervention of President Kennedy for the action scenes to be done. Could you elaborate further on this film, and the general reaction to it from the D-day Veterans? Note the action scenes in the other well-known D-day movie “Saving Private Ryan” were directed by one Dale Dye a former Captain, USMC, and decorated Vietnam Veteran.

Though unable to speak for the D-Day veterans, I’d be surprised if they weren’t pleased ‘The Longest Day’ was being made to commemorate their actions on that day. I’ve commented on the film in 7. above.

Dye was a Marine combat correspondent in Vietnam and traveled widely through I Corps covering Marine units. Accordingly, he likely saw more combat action than many Marines who remained in one unit or in one location. His Wikipedia bio lists a Bronze Star with ‘V’ and Purple Heart, so he was where the action was occurring. His work in training the actors for ‘Platoon’ and ‘Saving Private Ryan’ enabled those firms to at least achieve a certain level of authenticity on the part of those portraying combatants which is so noticeably lacking in ‘The Longest Day’.

15. Did the men practice climbing down the cargo nets into the landing craft prior to the landing.

They did, on frames ashore in their training areas from which nets were suspended.

Getting over the rail of a ship in full battle equipment with a rifle hanging crosswise bore a great risk of slipping and falling. Any man who fell between the ship and the landing craft below could be crushed between them, and would almost certainly drown, weighted down by the equipment.

So, practicing climbing down the nets was crucial. Men were constantly warned to hold the vertical sections of the rope only as they descended; hands holding the horizontal sections would be smashed by the boots of men coming down from above.

Doing all of this in the dark by frightened men in full combat gear posed a significant challenge.