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Offensive Operations: The Historic Success of D-Day

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Abstract

The allied force invasion on to the beaches of Normandy was the most successful joint offensive operation in the history of warfare. German leader Adolph Hitler led the axis forces on a march across Europe and felt he had the world at his fingertips because of their efforts. The allied invasion of the beaches Normandy, France, provided the necessary momentum required for the elimination of the Nazi German aggression in WWII and ultimately led to the end of the war. Pundits disagree that the mission was successful because of the large numbers of casualties and equipment losses, but these losses were necessary for world security and the preservation of country state boundaries in Europe.

Offensive Operations: The Historic Success of D-Day

The D-Day invasion during World War II is the most successful joint offensive operation the world has ever witnessed. This operation was largely successful because of the allied forces ability to mass huge numbers of Soldiers, equipment, and supplies, while maintaining the ability to fight the war and conduct superior re-supply efforts. This joint offensive operation changed the way that we conduct joint operations and ultimately led to the end of World War II.

The allied military forces' planning and buildup for the D-Day invasion required the most in-depth and lengthy political, operational, and strategic coordination and planning processes in the European theater during World War II. The planning process followed the British retreat from France after their defeat at the hands of the German forces and their forced withdrawal from the European continent.

The lengthy planning process resulted in the largest allied invasion force ever assembled. The allied force consisted of nearly 5,000 ships: 104 destroyers, 23 cruisers, 9 battleships, 71 landing crafts, and various minesweepers and troop transports that supported and delivered over 100,000 fighting men to the five points of attack on the Normandy beaches (Hammond, 2003). The allied forces also amassed various air forces consisting of more than 3,100 war and transport aircraft (Hallion, 2002).

Some historians have an opposing viewpoint that indicate that the massive number of casualties combined with huge equipment losses indicate an obvious failure by the allied forces. These pundits maintain that for a mission to be successful all aspects, the forces must accomplish the mission in the most efficient manner possible. In their point of view, the allied invasion into Normandy lacked efficiency and demonstrated the allied forces inability to effectively plan, resource or execute the joint mission.

The Situation

The British began planning to return to France in 1940 but were unsure of the method to use for the attack. The British began making plans for an amphibious cross-channel attack plan in September, 1941 and the U.S. became involved in December, 1941 after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Subsequently, Germany declared war on the U.S. on December 11, 1941, ensuring the U.S. would enter the war. Over the course of the next 24 months the American and British planners worked together to form a viable plan to turn the tide and beat back the Axis powers. Throughout the planning process the Americans pushed for a plan that would attack sooner than later. The British, however, wanted to wear down the Axis forces by other means prior to conducting the cross-channel attack. The American and British planners initially disagreed about where to project the main effort, but they maintained their focus on defeating the enemy at all cost. The Axis forces had overrun the European theater and the allies were fighting fronts in Italy, North Africa, and the Soviet Union.

Large contingents of Hitler's forces were heavily engaged in the Soviet Union during 1941-1942. Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin was pressuring the allies to create a western front that would hopefully cause the German forces to divide. In 1941 the allies began to attack Italy forcing Hitler to send reinforcements to drive the Allies back to Africa. This did little to relieve the fighting on the Russian front. It appeared that an all out allied assault in the west was the only way to force the German forces to divide their strength. This division came to fruition because the allies assembled the greatest military minds and planners from the United States and Great Britain under the Chief of Staff of the Supreme Allied Commander (COSSAC).

U.S. planners were very aggressive and supported a direct strategy to retake Western Europe. The Supreme Allied Commander, General (GEN) Dwight D. Eisenhower, and his Chief of Staff,

Lieutenant General (LTG) Walter B. Smith, headed this planning conglomerate for the U.S. The British planners were more cautious in their approach due to previous British failures at Dunkirk and Dieppe. In September, 1941, the British selected Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to investigate the feasibility of a major cross-channel amphibious operation. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill advised him that "you are to prepare for the invasion of Europe...you must devise and design the appliances, the landing craft, and the technique...the whole of the South Coast of England is a bastion of defense against the invasion of Hitler; you've got to turn it into the springboard for our attack" (Hammond, 2003).

Early in 1943 the British leadership assigned LTG Frederick E. Morgan the responsibility for planning the cross-channel mission. In April, 1943, LTG Morgan completed forming the planning team that would plan the attack. This team was known as COSSAC, the acronym of his newly assigned position as the Chief of Staff of the Supreme Allied Commander. In late 1943 the allied leaders selected GEN Eisenhower to lead as the Supreme Allied Commander. GEN Eisenhower named LTG Smith as the COSSAC and named LTG Morgan as his deputy commander (Hammond, 2003). GEN Eisenhower reached out to the British to select his principal commanders in order to maintain political peace among the forces. He selected Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder to serve as the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander and lead coordinator of the theater's air forces, and Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay to serve as the naval commander for the invasion (Hammond, 2003).

GEN Eisenhower composed his ground forces with some of the most respected and experienced military leaders of the day. He selected GEN Sir Bernard L. Montgomery to command the 21st Army Group, and as the provisional commander of the ground invasion forces landing on the Normandy beaches. GEN Montgomery successfully commanded the Eighth

Army in campaigns in Italy, Sicily, and North Africa. Two highly experienced commanders served under GEN Montgomery: LTG Omar Bradley, who commanded the First U.S. Army, and GEN Sir Miles Dempsey, who commanded the Second British Army. Additionally, after the Allies secured the beaches, the Third U.S. Army, commanded by LTG George S. Patton, Jr., linked up with First U.S. Army to form the 12th U.S. Army Group (Hammond, 2003). No greater group of military minds had ever met in prior operations, and arguably have not done so since.

Prior to the selection of military commanders for Operation Overlord, the allied leaders and planners met at strategic conferences where the cross-channel invasion plan was born and refined. The allies met several times to war plan at: Casablanca, Morocco; Quebec, Canada; Cairo, Egypt; and Tehran, Iran for strategic planning from 1942 through 1943. The British and the Americans met to share their plans and proposals while hoping to come to a consensus on a plan of action. At Tehran, the Soviets were very adamant that a western front develop according to the American plan. This would provide some relief to the Soviets since they were losing thousands of troops bearing the majority of Hitler's military machine. It was at Tehran that the British accepted the American plan for a cross-Channel attack. The British had accepted to American Operation Overlord plan at Quebec, Canada, but only as a secondary priority to the Mediterranean (Leighton).

Logistical Support

The allies decided to move forward with Operation Overlord with May, 1944 as the projected date of execution. The allies wanted to attack earlier but the required landing craft were in use in Italy or in the Pacific and were not available. The Navy quickly built more landing craft in United States, but they were unable to meet the demand in time for a May invasion. Operation Overlord was postponed until June, 1944 when the landing craft became available for use in the

operation.

The Allies placed their fate, and the fate of the world, in the success of the Operation Overlord. This plan was very complex; it consisted of forty-six named secondary operation plans that supplemented Operation Overlord, much more than any other operation plan during WWII (Wikipedia, 2006). The build up to the execution of Overlord was a major undertaking in itself.

When Operation Overlord was executed, the allies had assembled thirty-nine divisions for the cross-Channel attack: 20 American, 14 British, three Canadian, one French, and one Polish. They also amassed support troops numbering in the hundreds of thousands. At the beginning of 1944, there were approximately 774,000 U.S. Soldiers based in England preparing for the operation and by the week preceding the D-Day invasion, the number of troops more than doubled. Local warehouses and other buildings were quickly transformed from their original purpose into barracks to support the great influx of troops. The successful logistical support was a true testament to the superb planning and execution by the allied commanders leading up to Operation Overlord. The required logistical support was extensive: 16 million tons of supplies and food, approximately 137,000 jeeps and trucks, over 4,200 tanks and tracks, about 3,500 artillery guns, over 11,900 aircraft, and countless tons of other supplies required to maintain this massive gathering of armies (Olive Drab, 2000).

Great Britain

Great Britain played a key-role as a logistical support center prior to the invasions during Operation Overlord. Great Britain was used as a gathering area for allied forces and the accumulation of supplies due to its geographical position being strategically close to Normandy, France. Their position allowed the allied supply operations to operate smoothly and to provide

the necessary logistical assistance to the war fighters. Great Britain supported approximately one and one-half million American troops, one million British troops and five-hundred thousand Canadian troops leading up to the invasion. Eventually smaller European nations helped to increase troop numbers and provided security support in the southern portion of Great Britain. Great Britain was a logistical center that was built to the enormous magnitude required to support the allied advance across France. To support the movement of the supplies and equipment, the British built a 280 km railroad that allowed the move of heavy equipment inland while building airstrips close to the coast to support aerial supply operations. Over two million tons of equipment and weapon systems were staged in Great Britain in preparation for the attacks. More than 50 thousand vehicles were staged for use during the operation. Just prior to execution on D-Day, there were over 2,800,000 troops in southern England.

The Plan

Operation Overlord (also known as the Battle of Normandy or D-Day) was the Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944. The Allied forces took about three years to plan and build logistical support for Operation Overlord prior to execution. The operation was originally planned for May, but the right combination of moonlight and low tide did not take place until 5-7 June 1944. The day prior to the operation, British broadcasting stations emitted two verses of the Verlaine poem “Song of Autumn” as a coded signal that Operation Overlord was to commence the next day. German radars noticed suspicious movement of allied troops in areas of Boulogne-sur-mer and Dieppe overnight on June 6, 1944, but these were a bluff by the allies to divert attention away from the well-planned attacks at different locations. Allied planners sectioned the operation into five beach landing (or attack) zones: Gold, Sword, Utah, Omaha, and Juno. Various members of the allied forces were responsible for the beach landing zones: the

Americans attacked Utah and Omaha Beaches; the British attacked Gold and Sword Beaches; and the Canadians attacked Juno Beach.

Offensive Operations during Operation Overlord

The United States, working in conjunction with British and Canadian forces, invaded the German-occupied beaches of Normandy, France on 6 June 1944 in order to secure the beachhead for use in the assault designed to drive the German forces out of France. Despite the will and resolve of the German forces, the allied beach landings during the D-Day Invasion of World War II is the most successful offensive operation to date due to the allied force's ability to mass units, provide superior leadership, maximize transport capabilities and to efficiently supply and re-supply the forces.

The Beach Landings

Utah Beach

The United States' assault onto Utah Beach was a well-planned and successfully executed attack that met little resistance. The American plan called for the assault to occur in four waves; the first wave consisted of 20 transport vessels carrying 30 infantry Soldiers each. The initial 600 infantry Soldiers were to attack, secure a foothold and provide over watch and protective fires for the following three waves. The second wave of 32 transport vessels carried additional infantry along with combat engineers and naval demolition teams. The third wave consisted of eight vessels transporting dozer tanks for use in clearing passage ways for follow-on forces. The last wave was primarily a compilation of combat engineers to be used to clear the beaches as the tide receded. All four waves were launched no later than H+17 minutes (H-Hour is the time that the assault was initiated). Within 30 minutes of H-Hour, the United States had landed approximately 2,000 Soldiers and over 30 dozer tanks onto Utah Beach. By the end of the day,

the U.S. landed approximately 74,000 Soldiers into Normandy; almost 24,000 Soldiers on Utah Beach, almost 35,000 on Omaha Beach and 15,500 airborne Soldiers parachuted on to the mainland (Ferguson, 2001). The mass of forces and speed of execution led to a very deliberate and decisive victory on Utah Beach.

Omaha Beach

The assault onto Omaha Beach was a major demonstration of the superior leadership exhibited by the United States officers and noncommissioned officers (NCO). The assault was well-planned, but not as precisely executed as the assault onto Utah Beach. The rough seas during the hours leading up to H-Hour hampered the initial assault onto Omaha Beach. Inclement weather conditions including fog, low cloud cover, high winds and rain led to some assault forces missing their landing objectives by up to 1,000 meters. The rough seas and weather conditions caused the United States to lose over 15 naval transport and warship vessels before the assault (Ragz, 2006). The Soldiers awaiting the assault on transport vessels off the coast fought with sea sickness, while simultaneously observing their fellow Soldiers trying to survive on rafts and life preservers as victims of the sunken ships. The transport vessels were unable to get as close as planned for the drop of Soldiers and tanks onto their objectives. The 400-meter out-to-sea drop of Soldiers and tanks resulted in high casualty rates from enemy gunfire and drowning, and a high rate of tank loss due to the high seas. The tumultuous beginning to the initial assault led to mass confusion and a grim outlook for the forces massed and continuing to mass onto Omaha Beach.

The efforts of the U.S. Army's leaders were instrumental in the success of the operation. Confronted with massive casualties, heavy equipment losses and a formidable German defense, the leadership overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their efforts to secure the beach

head. The assault plan was no longer a viable option less than 30 minutes into the fight. The massive casualty rates destroyed the integrity of most small units and took a heavy toll on leaders across all units involved in the assault. Soldiers began to consolidate into groups, regardless of unit, and take commands from the senior officer on the ground. In one instance, a Captain found himself to be the senior officer from his battalion left in the fight, making him the battalion commander. Officers and NCOs were able to consolidate Soldiers from the various units, reorganize into functioning units and continue the assault to the objective (Ferguson, 2001). Despite the trouble and turmoil faced in all facets of the operation, the superior leadership efforts of those lucky enough to survive the initial assaults ensured the U.S. Army's success.

From the Sea

Leadership decisions made by the captains of the ships at sea off the coast directly affected the outcome of the assault. American ship captains realized that the German artillery was having a devastating effect on the American ground forces positioned on the beach. The captains of several of the ships maneuvered their boats into a position where their main guns could fire on to the German artillery positions rendering them useless against the infantry Soldiers. The captains did this at great risk due to the harsh weather conditions and the shallow water depth; some of the boats were even scraping their bottoms on the ocean floor (Ferguson, 2001). This unplanned and unanticipated naval support likely shaped the events of D-Day and demonstrated the leadership abilities of the leaders involved in the assault.

Gold, Sword and Juno Beaches

The attacks on Gold, Sword, and Juno beaches were well-planned and executed with minimum casualties and loss of equipment. The German forces concentrated their efforts on the defense of Utah and Omaha Beaches, which allowed the British and Canadian forces to gain

their foothold much easier and with fewer casualties. Despite the comparative lack of intensity, the successful assault onto the beaches was paramount to the overall success of the operation.

Allied Airborne Operation

The allied airborne operation during Operation Overlord was costly and chaotic, but it cut the German lines of communication, prevented any major counterattack, and opened up the causeways for inland movement for Soldiers landing on the beaches. Two U.S. airborne divisions (101st Airborne Division and 82nd Airborne Division) along with one British airborne division (6th Airborne Division) were dropped behind enemy lines to deceive the powerful Germany Army and secure routes for seaborne troops when Operation Overlord began on June 6, 1944. Despite the high winds that would directly affect the airborne operations and the rough seas that would hinder the beach landings, GEN Eisenhower made the decision to execute the mission (Stewart, 2005, p. 148). The high winds and German air defense artillery created havoc for the paratroopers. The pathfinders, which jumped in one-hour prior to the main airborne assault to mark the intended drop zone, landed miles away from the designated drop zones. The directional radios used by the pathfinders to signal the transport aircraft did not work so they could not notify the pilots that they were lost and the drop zones were not marked. The confusion, along with German air defense artillery, led to the pilots dropping the paratroopers miles away from the designated drop zones. Over 15,000 American and British paratroopers found themselves scattered across the Cotentin peninsula.

101st Airborne Division

The 101st Airborne Division was to secure exits for Soldiers landing on Utah Beach, destroy bridges, and capture the La Barquette Lock. The Germans, who were confused about the number of paratroopers roaming the peninsula, launched the German 6th Airborne Division to

counterattack the American paratroopers. The Germans quickly became weakened because they had to divert from their mission to defend villages and focus its artillery on troops landing on Utah Beach. Paratroopers from different platoons gathered and began to carry out their mission. The paratroopers took the village of Sainte Marie-du-mont, which opened the door for the 4th Infantry Division to move further inland. The 101st Airborne Division was supposed to take out the bridges over the Douve River and capture the La Barquette Lock, but this secondary mission was not as successful as the first. Receiving heavy fire from the Germans, the paratroopers were unable to destroy the bridges over the Douve River. This was the only victory during counterattack operations by the Germans against the airborne forces. Despite their failure to destroy the bridges, the mission was an overall success; the 4th Infantry Division moved further inland and the 101st Airborne neutralized many cannons along the way (Day, 2004).

82nd Airborne Division

The 82nd Airborne Division was to protect the right flank of invading forces. The paratroopers from the 82nd landed along the Merderet River where many lost their lives when they were weighed down by equipment and drowned in the river. Eventually GEN Gavin was able to assemble 300 paratroopers from multiple units and carry out his mission. The 82nd Airborne Division finally captured Chef du-Pont by killing or forcing all Germans to surrender, aided by a critical re-supply of ammunition, weapons and other critical supplies. In addition to Chef du-Pont, the 82nd Airborne Division captured St. Mere Eglise. These two accomplishments led to the overall success of Operation Overlord (Day, 2004).

British 6th Airborne

The British 6th Airborne, which contained paratroopers from the Canadian Army, was to protect the left flank of the invading forces by securing the bridges that traveled over the Orne

Canal and river. The mission was very important but very dangerous. The Panzer Division or the Nazi German forces stationed nearby could roll through the dismounted forces and attack all beaches and the invading forces. The British airborne operation was flawless. Gliders carrying Soldiers landed on the bridges that traveled over the Orne Canal and river, capturing bridges that were used later by allied forces to advance into France. Throughout D-Day, the 6th Airborne Division fought off the German counterattacks on the bridges. Reinforcements of personnel, equipment, and supplies continually flew into the secure side of the canal by gliders, enabling the British and Canadian Airborne to maintain control of the bridges. The 6th Airborne Division conducted a very successful operation by achieving the majority of its goals (Day, 2004).

Counterpoint

By today's standards, the D-Day invasion would be a complete failure due to the massive amount of dead and wounded; equal to the loss of a modern day combat division. Historically successful, large-scale offensive operations would be widely discredited in both the media and in the general public opinion. Commanders would be relieved and the President impeached based on the sheer number of casualties alone. We currently live in a society that ends its daily grind on a sofa, in front of the evening news, where stories of wounded American Soldiers and displaced Iraqi families bombard us. We are a nation in combat and the media portrays it negatively as an unpopular war.

The Number of Soldiers that Participated in the D-Day Invasion

The Allies landed over 155,000 troops in the Normandy beach assault on D-Day. Over 74,000 American forces participated in the beach assaults: about 24,000 on Utah Beach; 35,000 on Omaha Beach, and 15,500 airborne troops. In the British and Canadian sector, over 83,000 troops landed; more than 61,000 of them were British. Almost 25,000 troops landed on Gold

Beach, over 21,000 landed on Juno Beach, about 29,000 landed on Sword Beach, and 7900 airborne troops jumped in to the mainland (Alper, 2004). The total number of allied aircraft used in support of the invasion exceeded 11,500. The allied pilots flew in over 14,000 sorties in support of Operation Overlord and 127 aircraft and crews were lost. The total number of aircraft lost would equal that of 10 modern-day squadrons.

The Number of Allied Killed and Wounded

The number of U.S. casualties in Normandy totaled 3184 wounded, 1465 dead, 1928 missing, and 26 captured. The casualties at Utah Beach were not significant in comparison: 197 casualties, which included 60 missing. However, the U.S. collectively massed around 2000 casualties at Omaha Beach. Casualties on the British occupied beaches (Gold Beach and Sword Beach) estimated around 2,000 combined. The remainders of the British approximate 2,700 losses were amongst the airborne troops with over 600 killed or wounded, 600 more missing in action, and 100 glider pilot casualties. The Canadians at Juno Beach suffered 340 killed, 574 wounded, and 47 Canadians prisoners of war. The total number of allied casualties on D-Day reached 10,000, of which 2500 are dead (Alper, 2004). The total combined losses during the D-Day invasion would exceed that of a modern day combat division.

Operation Desert Storm

On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded its neighbor to the south, Kuwait, with a lightning quick offensive operation. President Saddam Hussein struck swiftly with an invading force of over 100,000 infantry troops, 700 tanks, 75 Iraqi fighter jets, and a battle group from his navy. The opposition was crushed within a day and a small oil rich nation fell quickly to a tyrant. This action of aggression started in motion one of the most coordinated and well-planned offensive operations of all time. The United States and 34 coalition countries planned and conducted

Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The coalition mission was to liberate the Arab State of Kuwait and restore peace to the Persian Gulf region. America deployed more than 500,000 troops in the Persian Gulf War, while the non-U.S. coalition forces equaled roughly 160,000, or 24 percent, of all forces. Iraq had months to avoid the war, but instead chose to prepare and build its might made a grave error in deciding to fight the coalition. The ground war was over in 100 hours leaving over 100,000 Iraqi dead, and 300,000 wounded. The U.S. suffered 148 casualties while non-U.S. coalition forces sustained 65 (Bin, Hill & Jones, 1996, p. 126).

Operation Iraqi Freedom

Approximately 120,000 Soldiers and Marines from the U.S., 45,000 from the United Kingdom, and smaller forces from three other nations (Australia, Denmark and Poland), collectively called the Coalition of the Willing, were deployed prior to the invasion into Iraq. The Coalition of the Willing primarily based these units at several staging areas in Kuwait. With naval, logistic, intelligence and air force personnel numbers included, the invasion force was approximately 248,000 American, 45,000 British, 2,000 Australians, 300 Danish, and 200 Polish personnel. Of those troops, all but the American, British, Australian SAS and the Polish commando squad were kept close to bases and required to avoid hostile engagements. The invasion force was also supported by Iraqi Kurdish militia troops, estimated to number upwards of 50,000. Plans for opening a second front in the north were severely hampered when Turkey refused the use of its territory for such purposes. In response to Turkey's decision, the U.S. dropped several thousand paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade into northern Iraq (Rivera, 2003, p. 9). The original plan included 4th Infantry Division attacking from the north through Turkey, but they were unable to leave the port of Turkey to support combat operations. The U.S. sustained 139 deaths from the onset of the war, March 20, 2003 until President Bush

announced the end of combat operations on May 1, 2003. This number pales in comparison to the one-day operation that occurred in Normany in 1944.

Conclusion

Operation Overlord is the most incredible offensive operation success story in all the war annals of history. It was made possible by the in depth planning and extensive buildup of U.S. and British military forces for the D-Day invasion combined with the superior ability of the allied forces to sustain and support combat operations. Its strategic and operational coordination is unmatched throughout the European Theater during World War II, and no force in the world has matched the superior success of the offensive operation. Despite the opposing view that the numbers of casualties and losses of equipment indicated mission failure, the realities of war maintain that the mission is the number one priority. The mission was ultimately responsible for the end of combat operations and served as the beginning of the end of World War II.

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