

Information sheet no 098

Operation Neptune (Normandy landings 1944)

Plans to invade occupied Europe through northern France had been discussed between the British and Americans since 1942. It was not until December 1943 that General Eisenhower was appointed Supreme Allied Commander of Operation Overlord - the codename for the general assault. The naval contribution to the plan was codenamed Operation Neptune. This part of the main operation was planned and commanded by Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, while the land force invasion plans were prepared and commanded by Field-Marshal Montgomery. Planning took place at Southwick House near Fareham, Hampshire.

The decision to invade Normandy was made in March 1943. It lay within fighter cover from British airfields and it would appear an unlikely location from the obvious Pas de Calais area. Germany's forces were engaged on the Eastern Front and Hitler had delayed preparing plans for the defence of Western Europe until November 1943, when in Fuhrer Directive 51 he made it a priority policy. In December 1943, he appointed Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel and Field Marshal Karl von Rundstadt to take charge of defensive preparations. They assured Hitler that the Allied main assault would take place at the Pas de Calais, where the sea crossing was shortest, and that any landings in Normandy would be for diversionary purposes. The basis for this lay in intelligence gathered indicating the build-up of Allied landing craft, tanks and signal traffic in Kent. Of course, this was really a largescale cover-up laid by the Allies involving dummy landing craft and wooden tanks to throw the enemy off the scent.

A series of amphibious assaults had taken place in the Mediterranean at Sicily and Salerno in summer and autumn 1943 and lessons learnt from these were acted upon in the planning for the main European invasion. The arrival of the naval force and supporting vessels in Normandy was preceded by RAF bombardment of the German defences in the area.

On the night of the 5/6 June 1944 the convoy began its journey across the Channel. Widespread Allied air raids blinded or distracted the German warning and command systems. Heavy naval and air bombardments covered the disembarkation on the beaches.

Each landing area was code-named.

British 2nd Army (under the command of General Miles Dempsey):

Gold Beach - Landed on by Force G, consisting of the British 8th and 50th Infantry Divisions.

Juno Beach - Landed on by Force J, consisting of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division and 2nd Armoured Brigade

Sword Beach - Landed on by Force S, consisting of the British 3rd Infantry Division and 22nd Armoured Brigade.

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US 1st Army (under the command of General Omar Bradley):

Utah Beach - Landed on by Force U, consisting of the US 4th Infantry Division

Omaha Beach - Landed on by Force O, consisting of the US 1st Infantry Division.

In addition, airborne forces had been dropped into northern France behind the German lines to support the beachheads.

The cross-Channel passage of over 6000 naval and transport craft included 6 battleships, 23 cruisers, 104 destroyers and over 4000 landing craft formed in 75 convoys. These were protected and supported by approximately 12000 aircraft (the Germans were only able to deploy 425 fighter planes). Two artificial harbours (known as Mulberries) were towed across the Channel and a pipeline (known as PLUTO) was laid under the ocean on the seabed to supply fuel from England to Normandy.

The seaborne divisions were accompanied by amphibious craft and landed ashore without serious loss or delay, except at Omaha beach, where the amphibious craft were launched too far from the shore and were swamped, causing the loss of 3000 men. This was the heaviest loss during D-Day assault. By nightfall, all beachheads had been secured and due to the slowness of the High Command to react, the German counter attack had failed. By 10 June, the Americans were making ground inland and towards Cherbourg, whilst the British were preparing to take Caen.

Despite the heavy bombardment of Caen and surrounding German positions to the south, an attempt to surround the city via Villers-Bocage failed. A second attempt was made by the 15th Scottish Division (Operation Epsom) from 24 June to 1 July but also resulted in failure. Meanwhile the Americans were occupying the Cotentin peninsula and forced the surrender of Cherbourg on 27 June. The Germans had begun to send infantry divisions from the 1st and 19th Armies to reinforce Normandy but Hitler still feared a follow-up invasion on the Pas de Calais and refused to allow reinforcements from the 15th Army until 30 July. The third British attempt to capture and isolate Caen from the east (Operation Goodwood) and secure an opening towards Paris was once again prevented by the Germans. However, Operation Goodwood did succeed in diverting German forces and this freed up the US forces to the west ready for the forthcoming land campaign.

Overlord was the biggest and most complicated operation in naval history and executed by the largest fleet that had ever been put to sea. Planning was complete down to the provision of sick bags for seasick soldiers!