

D-Day



I have delayed the posting of my May blog because I wanted to go through the ceremonies for the 75th anniversary of D-Day before writing it. Why do the detailed research when you have the CBC broadcasting it for you.

D-Day. Pretty much everyone knows what it is. On June 6, 1944, over 156,000 men were involved in the landings on the shores of Normandy and launching the beginning of the end of Nazi Germany. Two American beaches, two British beaches and one Canadian beach, all attacked together in what is the largest, ever, amphibious invasion. Of those 156,000 men, a little over 10,000 became casualties, with about 4400 of those being killed.

Considering the magnitude of the operation and the fierce and well entrenched enemy, a 2.8% death rate was way below estimates. One estimate on the paratroopers was as high as 75%. Makes you wonder if the fact that they got spread over 30 miles instead of the targeted 5 may have helped many more of them to survive. The Germans didn't have a concentrated force to attack, so no heavy weapons could be brought to bear. Also, it spread out their forces thinly as well, which meant the outgunned paratroopers were not as outgunned as expected. There are many stories of lone and small groups of Allied paratroopers never meeting any group of Germans bigger than their own group. Another advantage was the Allies had particular targets to converge to. The Germans didn't know what those were. As Allied paratroopers formed into larger groups to concentrate on particular targets, they generally found themselves outnumbering the defenders since German forces were still spread out over those 30 miles of Normandy.

So, you see, even mistakes can have unforeseen advantages in war. Like at Utah Beach, the landings were blown by the wind over a mile south of where they were supposed to land. That put them right in front of the weakest part of the German defenses that day. Worry over landing in the wrong place quickly dissipated.

On the ground, an army needs gritty commanders who can shift attacks to their advantage and lead men into battle. But for an operation the size of Overload (the actual landings code word was Neptune), you need a master planner and administrator to command. Also, he has to have significant political instincts. That was Eisenhower. This was not a job for Patton.

Eisenhower never saw combat in the Great War. His whole career was built around forming and training armies. He was an excellent administrator with the added bonus of knowing a good idea when he saw one. No “stick-in-the-mud” thinking from Eisenhower. He could take a bunch of strong willed generals who despised each other, take all the ideas from them all and form a good plan, and get them to support it by making them think it was their idea in the first place. That skill was what also made him a great US president.

The magnitude of D-Day required a man like Eisenhower. The development and application of new technologies (like swimming tanks), massive use of paratroopers (on the day, still a fairly unknown battle tactic), creating the engineering marvels of mulberry harbours that allowed massive troop and supply entry points into France, and choosing creative generals on the ground all made the great effort work. Even with all the things that went wrong and none of the day-one objectives being achieved, the momentum of the effort must have been in Eisenhower’s mind saying that objectives were nice, but staying permanently in France was his objective. Without him, the naysayers would have reduced the landings to one or two beaches and they would have failed, which was pretty much what happened when egos got in the way of good planning at Dieppe in 1942.

Eisenhower never commanded men in battle, but he is considered one of the great generals of the war. He knew that great plans never survived contact with the enemy, but great preparation would always win in the end. That’s his legacy.

The blurry picture above is from the Canadians landing on Juno beach. The Canadians got farther inland from their beach on day-one than any other beach landing. Their ultimate goal was the City of Caen. They failed, mostly because the 21st Panzer Division was parked there.

Objectives were nice, but Eisenhower’s main goal was just to stay in France. He succeeded in spades.