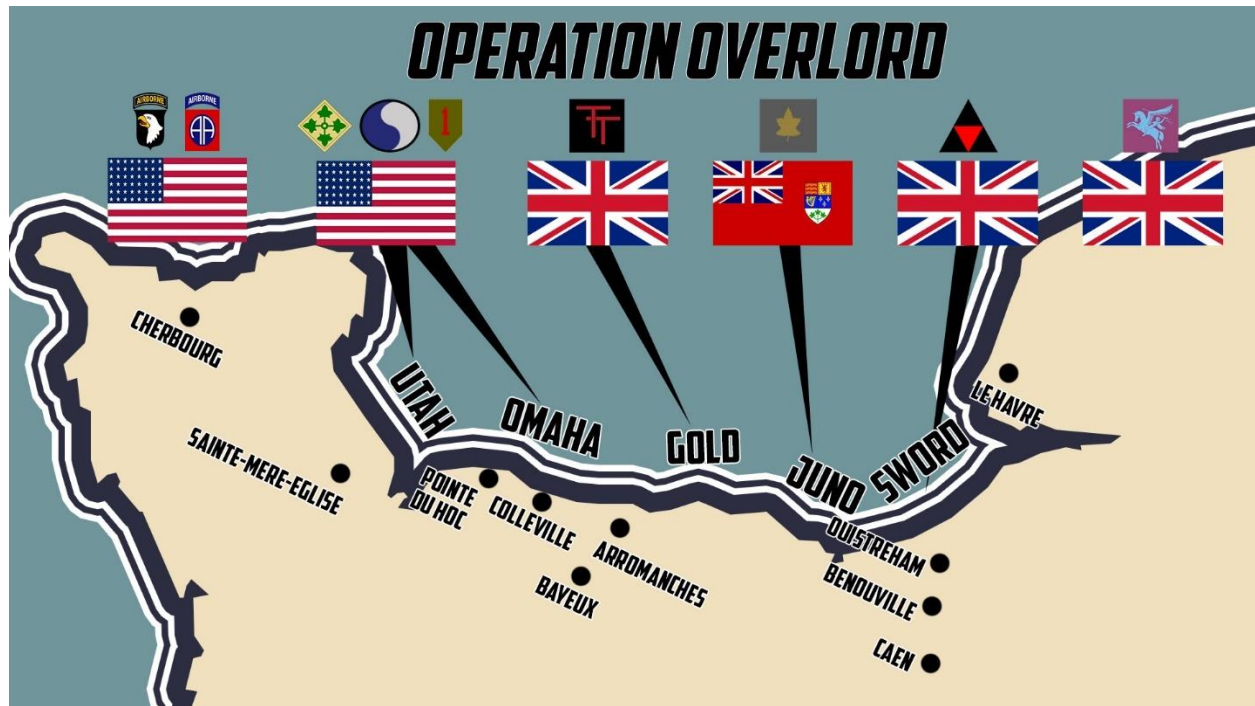


OPERATION OVERLORD



Almost as soon as the United States entered the war, Joseph Stalin began to pressure Roosevelt and Churchill to open a second front in Western Europe. Facing staggering losses, Stalin desperately wanted a western invasion to draw Nazi troops away from the Soviet front. The Normandy invasion of June 6, 1944 was that long-awaited second front.

Roosevelt had agreed with Stalin and was anxious to open the second front as soon as possible, but Churchill vehemently disagreed. British experience with trench warfare during World War I plus a disastrous 1942 attempt at invasion near the French town of Dieppe made Churchill reluctant to commit Allied forces to the European continent before they were ready. Churchill prevailed. Before landing Allied forces in France, the Americans and the British would clear North Atlantic shipping lanes of Nazi subs, bomb industrial targets in Germany, and attack and defeat Axis forces fighting in North Africa. Once Africa had been cleared of Axis forces, the next Allied move would be to invade the soft underbelly of Europe, Italy. While all this was going on, however, planning was underway for an Allied invasion of France and the liberation of Europe.

British, Canadian, and American troops-the Allied Expeditionary Force-would be placed under a single commander, American General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

As Supreme Commander, it was Eisenhower's task to plan-Operation Overlord, the greatest land-sea and air operation in history. This one operation was key to the success of the Allies' most important war goals-the liberation of France and Nazi-occupied Europe and ultimately Hitler's defeat.

Surprise would be an important factor in the success of the planned invasion, but hiding or disguising the presence of 3 million troops in England required elaborate deception. Using Hollywood techniques, Eisenhower set up phantom tanks and encampments that looked real to Nazi spy planes. Old landing vessels, no longer in use, were placed in British ports directly across the English Channel from the French port of Calais. In fake radio messages, designed for German intervention, Allied commanders sent orders to a make-believe army to attack the French port of Calais. The aim of Operation Bodyguard, as it was called, was to mislead the German High Command as to the location of the real invasion at Normandy. At Calais, 150 miles northeast of Normandy, Hitler concentrated his elite troops and best defenses. When Allied ships approached the beaches of Normandy, German leaders were convinced it was not the real invasion and did not commit all their forces to defending against the invasion.

Despite concerns about the weather, Eisenhower gave the order for the invasion to take place on June 6, 1944. Shortly after midnight, British and American paratroopers were dropped on the French countryside behind German lines. They were to hold bridges, roads and airfields that would be critical to the Allied advance inland and prevent the Germans from getting reinforcements to the coast. Silent gliders brought Allied special forces behind enemy lines and 2,000 Allied bombers began an attack of German defenses along the invasion area.

As the first light of dawn began to rise, an armada of 4,400 ships appeared off the beaches of Normandy. Five beaches were targeted for landings. The two western-most beaches, code-named Utah and Omaha, were American landing sites. British and Canadian forces landed on three beaches to the east, Gold, Juno and Sword. More than 200,000 Allied troops under Eisenhower's command stormed onto the beaches of Normandy.

The American landing at Utah beach went well as did the British and Canadian landings farther east, but the American troops landing at Omaha beach faced a brutal and ferocious assault. Roughly 2,500 Americans were either killed or wounded at Omaha Beach alone, but by the end of the longest day, nearly 35,000 American troops had landed at Omaha Beach, 23,000 had landed at Utah and over 75,000 British and Canadian troops had landed at Gold, Juno and Sword. Hitler's Atlantic Wall-the elaborate barrier of coastal fortifications and

underwater obstacles placed along the European coast from Norway to Spain had been pierced. Through this breach poured forth the personnel and weapons of American factories that would defeat Hitler.

Within a week, over 300,000 men and 100,000 tons of supplies were landed at Normandy. (Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, *Pocket History of the United States*, p.458) A beachhead was established in France. By July 25, the battle for Normandy was won and the liberation of France began. By August 23, Paris was liberated, and as the summer of 1944 drew to a close, Axis forces everywhere were in retreat. The war was still far from over, but the success of the Normandy invasion played a key factor in the defeat of Germany in May of 1945.



Allied forces coming ashore on the Normandy beaches in June of 1944.