Remembering D-Day Essay, Research Paper

REMEBERING THE WAR

D-DAY JUNE 6, 1944

The year was 1944, and the United States had now been

an active participant in the war against Nazi Germany

for almost three and a half years. During this time, numerous

battles had occurred which were fought with determination

and intensity on both sides. Amongst the many invasions

of World War II, there is one day which stands out more in

the minds of many American soldiers than the others.

That day was June 6, 1944, more commonly known as D Day, part of the invasion of Normandy, known as “Operation Overlord.” This operation was the largest amphibious assault in history. It was a day in which thousands of young Americans, who poured onto the beaches of France, matured faster than they would have ever imagined. Little did they know of the chaos and torment that awaited them on their arrival. The attacks on Utah and Omaha were strategically made, and carried out in careful preciseness. The Allied invasion of Nazi-occupied France began on June 6, 1944, and the American assault on the Utah and Omaha beaches on this day played a critical role in the overall success of the Normandy operation.

An extensive plan was established for the American attack on Utah and Omaha Beaches. The plan was so in-depth and complex, its descriptions detailed the exact arrivals of troops, armour, and other equipment needed for the invasion, and where exactly on the beach they were to land.

Before the landings were to begin, the coastal German defences had to be broken down by a combination of a massive battering by United States Naval ships, and by bombing from the United States Air Force. Between the hours of 3 a.m. and 5 a.m. on the morning of June 6, over 1,000 aircraft dropped more than 5,000 tons of bombs on the German coastal defences. As soon as the preliminary bombing was over, the American and British naval guns opened fire on the Normandy coastline. A British naval officer described the incredible spectacle he witnessed that day: “Never has any coast suffered what a tortured strip of French coast suffered that morning.” Along the fifty-mile front the land was shaken by successive explosions as the shells from the ships’ guns tore holes in fortifications and tons of bombs poured down on them from the skies. Through smoke and falling debris German defenders crouching in their trenches would soon faintly see the hundreds of ships and assault craft closing in on the shore.

There were initial problems with the invasion. Numerous American bombers missed their targets up to as much as five miles inland due to the thick cloud cover. Rockets which were fired from offshore destroyers landed short killing thousands of fish, but not any Germans. Artillery from American battleships crashed against the tops of the bluffs of Omaha, and sailed into the adjacent towns, but not did not successfully accomplish their goals of destroying targets on the beachhead such as enemy artillery and machine gun positions.

Contrary to Omaha, Utah Beach was less strengthened against an attack. Erwin Rommel was the commander of the German forces in northern France and he predicted an Allied invasion in another part of the region. Subsequently, the Utah beach was not as well equipped as that of Omaha. The Germans had not been able to fully construct defensive barriers by the time of the invasion and also had not completely laid the number of land mines Rommel had in mind. Aiding to the Allied success at Utah were the underwater demolition teams who were able to knock off many of the coastal defences awaiting the Americans. As American soldiers moved toward Utah Beach in their conveyances, the pounding the beachhead fortifications had taken from US naval artillery and rockets was clearly evident. Large gun stations, machine gun posts, and infantry positions were among many of the targets weakened or destroyed.

The American assault on Utah was very carefully planned and designed in the idea that the Allies would send wave after wave of troops onto the shores to defeat the opposition. Troops, armour, and equipment arrivals were timed to the minute. Naval barrage landed first on the beach at 6:30 a.m., immediately followed by thirty-two light assault tanks known as DD tanks to further subdue fortified positions and provide cover for the oncoming troops (These were held on large freight boats known as LCTs). In the wake of this attack came the American 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry in twenty Higgens boats, another type of transport designed to hold a thirty-man team. They were followed by the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, bringing engineers and naval demolition teams in thirty-two more Higgens boats. Wave after wave of troops and equipment, containing bulldozers, and the light and mobile Sherman Tank continued to arrive.

Before the assaults began, the planners, including Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, hoped everything would stick to the precise schedule. This hope was not a reality, as some craft landed too late, others too early, and some off course as far as a kilometre south of the target. There were many factors which resulted in the wronging of the time table. Tides, wind, waves, and a thick cover of smoke were all partially responsible for the trouble, while the largest factor were the mines placed just off of the coast. These obstacles resulted in the tanks landing a kilometre south. The American forces were in for a strike of luck however, as the German defensive fortifications at their new and accidental landing site, had been badly damaged from the naval artillery and air battering. The fortifications where the landing was supposed to take place were still strong, unscathed from the preceding bombardment.

Engineers and naval demolition teams came ashore after the first wave. They consisted of five Navy “Seabees,” also known as combat demolition units, and two or three American engineers. The engineers, who were highly trained in explosives, made quick work of the outermost set of obstacles before the tide had a chance to cover them up. The engineers worked at a very fast pace clearing the way for more landing craft to arrive. Engineering teams continued to work hard as more and more forces began piling up on the now secured beach awaiting the chance to punch through the land mine filled interior defences. The assault on Utah Beach proved to be fairly simple as compared to what was going on at Omaha. An anonymous Infantryman from the 4th division was quoted as saying, “You know, it sounds kind of dumb but it was just like a [training] exercise. Easier. We waded ashore like kids…. and up the beach. A couple of shells came over but nowhere near us. I think I even felt somehow disappointed, a little let down.” Altogether, 200 American soldiers died, but the Allies were victorious.

Omaha Beach in itself was a formidable challenge for the Allies. If the Germans were going to try and stop an Allied Invasion, Omaha Beach was the place to do it. Omaha Beach stretched for approximately 10 kilometres, its sand was golden brown in colour, it was firm and fine, and during low tide there was a stretch of 300 to 400 meters of firm beach sand.

The physical makeup of Omaha Beach made it easy for the Germans to defend. The beach was adjacent to hills perpendicular to the beach spanning the entire 10 kilometres. On this basis, the German stations had an extreme advantage holding the safety of the hills, sometimes a 200 foot height advantage at some points. Omaha was the perfect place to hold a defensive stance against an invasion. Its hilly landscape provided the perfect place for fortifications and machine guns, the sloping ground leading up to the bluffs allowed for a useful trench system, and the overall height advantage provided for a clear view of the entire killing field. It was like having an army of snipers on towers looking down on the incoming troops. Eisenhower did not like the idea of having to attack Omaha, but he knew it had to be done.

Rommel took full advantage of what he learned from defending frontal infantry assaults during the First World War. He heavily mined the coastline, and the shore. He placed extensive amounts of barbed wire leading up to the hills. He placed machine guns at angles to have better shots at all points of the beach. He also added all types of weapons to cover all possible weaknesses in the German posts. He added mortars and artillery pieces on top of the hills to bring more firepower from above. Rommel’s setup allowed for enemy fire coming from three different directions.

There were four main factors which led the Americans to believe that an attack on such a difficult position would succeed. Intelligence reports gave the Americans the impression that the command posts and trenches were being manned by the 716th Infantry Division, a supposed low quality force composed of Poles and Russians. This was, however, untrue, as the positions were being held by the German 352nd Division, a section of well-trained troops. Second, intelligence reports gave the Americans the impression that only 800 troops were manning the defences, when in actuality, a number three to four times that was more realistic. Third, B-17 bombers were to thoroughly prep the site by dropping thousands of tonnes of bombs. However, due to the intense cloud cover, bombers missed their targets by as much as 5 kilometres. Finally, the invasion was to consist of 40,000 men and 3,500 motorized vehicles. This idea later failed as troops and vehicles became backed up on the beach. Allied Captain Walker on a landing craft headed toward the beach commented on the sight, “I took a look toward the shore and my heart took a dive. I couldn’t believe how peaceful it was, how untouched, and how tranquil the scene was. The terrain was green. All the buildings were intact. The church and steeple were still standing in place. Where are the damn Air Corps!”

The plan for Omaha was to have assault teams cover every inch of beach. Weapons used to cover the successive landing crafts were to include .30 caliber machine guns, bazookas, 60mm mortars, and flame throwers. Just like the assault on Utah, DD tanks were to lead the invasion ashore while Naval demolition teams worked to clear the area. Following the initial craft were to be reinforcements to bring up stronger firepower ranging from greater numbers of M-1’s to 105mm howitzers, in addition to more tanks, jeeps, medical units, head quarters and communication units. Two hours after this first wave, it was planned that vehicles would have already scaled the hills and begin to push farther inland.

Unfortunately for the Allies, nothing for the assault on Omaha went according to plans. Only one group (or company) had landed at their target, Company A. Company E was as much as two kilometres off course due to winds, waves, and strong tides. This resulted in large gaps between the forces coming ashore and allowed the Germans to concentrate their firepower on the smaller group of American forces. The Germans streamed a steady line of artillery, mortar, and machine gun fire down onto Company A. Needless to say, it was an slaughter. Only a few dozen people of the original 200 survived, and practically all of them were wounded. By 6:40 a.m., just ten minutes after the first wave, only one officer from the Company was alive, and he had been shot in the heel and the stomach. On one particular Allied boat, when the ramp was dropped, every single man of the thirty-man assault team was killed before they could get out.

A short way down the beach, Companies F and G were having troubles of their own. Sgt. Harry Bare describes the experience as they disembarked, “I tried to get my men off the boat and make it somehow to the seawall. We waded to the sand and threw ourselves down and the men were frozen, we could not move. My radioman had his head blown off three yards from me. The beach was covered with bodies, men with no legs, no arms – God it was awful.” It was clearly evident as wave upon wave of troops came ashore that everything was in complete and udder chaos. People were being butchered left and right by machine guns, and literally blown to pieces by artillery and mortar fire. Bare continued to say, “Sgt. Clarence Robertson had a gaping wound in the upper right corner of his forehead. He was walking crazily in the water. Then I saw him get down on his knees and start playing the rosary beads. At that moment the Germans cut him in half with the deadly crossfire.” (D-Day, Ambrose 337) “When we were 200 yards from our landing point I could see heavy machine-gun-bullets cutting up the sand and making a noise like a huge swarm of bees. “My God, we are going to be slaughtered.” – Sgt. H.M. Kellar (Lewis 120)

Omaha Beach on that day was in a state of pandemonium. There was no organization which was proven as the troops found themselves pinned with no leadership and no where to go, with additional equipment and troops coming ashore to only back things up worse. The Americans were pinned on the beach. German Commander Rommel had constructed the ultimate killing field, and for a few hours, it seemed like it was going to take a miracle to save the Americans.

It was becoming ever more evident to American commanders that if they remained on the beach, it would be suicide. After several hours of fighting, the Americans had only a few yards of beach, and it was under intense enemy fire. Under these hellish conditions, heroes were produced. Brigadier General Norman D. Cota deliberately exposed himself to enemy fire while walking up and down the beach, rallying his troops to get them moving. Colonel George A. Taylor performed a similar feat in leading an attack against a German machine-gun post while declaring, “Two kinds of people are staying on this beach, the dead and those about to die. Now lets get the hell out of here!” (D’ Este 114)

As the hours wore on, a greater foothold on Omaha was established. The American Forces knew that it was imperative that they get off the beach. As more and more soldiers began to make their way forward, reinforcements continued to arrive bringing tanks, engineers, and more troops. Soldiers, lacking order and organizations began working together to establish routes up the hills. One by one, barbed wire was blown clear, German gun stations were destroyed, and artillery was eliminated. By the end of the day more than 2,500 Americans lay dead on the bloody yet still victorious beaches of Omaha.

D Day, June 6, 1944 was the beginning of the end of the Nazi empire. It was one of the most important days in military history as General Eisenhower’s cross channel attack, the largest in history, proved to be an overall success. The actions of the American soldiers on the Utah and Omaha beaches that day greatly aided in the triumph of the operation as a whole. They had no idea of the death and destruction which awaited their stepping foot onto the beaches. For a few hours on the morning of June 6, 1944, it appeared that Rommel had created the ultimate coastal command post. His strategic placements of machine guns, mortars, and artillery pieces took a tremendous toll on the American invaders.

For a time, it appeared that the Americans were not going to make it off the beach. If not for the courage of a few individuals leading the way, all could have been lost. Their actions played a critical role in the success of D Day, and of the ultimate demise of the Nazi Empire. Even through all of the factors which went wrong that day, and even without the aid of today’s military technology, they made the invasion possible. The status of the free world today can be directly related to the actions of every American soldier who set foot on the beached of Omaha and Utah that day. They will forever be heroes.