

D-Day and the Liberation of Europe (US 1st and 3rd Armies)

By the spring of 1944 planning for the long-awaited invasion of Western Europe by the Allies was complete. Under the overall control of the Supreme Commander General Eisenhower and his ground force Commander General Montgomery the date of the invasion was set for June 5th. This was the first date on which the conditions for a successful landing - a rising tide at dawn and no moon - would occur. However, by June 4th the weather was so bad that Operation Overlord, the codename for the invasion, had to be delayed for one day. The conditions on June 6th were only a little improved but Eisenhower decided that the risk must be taken as the next favourable date was more than a month later.

American forces were assigned two of the five landing zones, codenamed Utah and Omaha. These were to the west of the British and Canadian zones in the in the Bay of the Seine. Airdrops inland behind Utah Beach, by the US 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, took place in the early hours of June 6th aimed at creating a diversion and preventing German reinforcements from intervening in the beachhead assault. Both Divisions lost great quantities of equipment and many were scattered over a large area, but they were able to spread confusion among the defenders and prevent reinforcements from reaching the landing zones.

On Utah Beach the troops went ashore at 06.30 hours with negligible losses and were off the beach and moving inland by 12.00 hours. On Omaha beach the specialised D-Day tanks, intended to provide support, were launched 6,000 yards offshore in heavy seas. 27 were swamped within minutes thus depriving the attackers of much needed armour. Many of the landing craft also foundered in heavy seas and hundreds of men were drowned long before they reached the beaches. Within half an hour of the scheduled landings only 1,000 men were actually ashore and none were fighting the enemy; they were largely leaderless and fighting for survival. Eventually some order came from the chaos; the attackers were reinforced by follow-up battalions coming ashore, and the defenders began to give way. By nightfall, although the Americans did not realise it, the battle for Omaha had been won, albeit at a terrible cost.

At the end of the day both the American beachheads were secure, although the penetration on Omaha was not much more than a mile; men and materials

were beginning to flow inland. Under General Bradley the Americans now began to build up their strength, before attempting to break out south to the Brittany ports. Following the link-up with the British and Canadian beaches on D-Day plus 3, the next objective for General Bradley was to cut off the Cotentin peninsula and capture Cherbourg. However on June 19/20th a great storm swept the channel and all but wiped out the flow of supplies through the two pre-fabricated Mulberry Harbours which had been put in place on D-Day. Eventually the US 7th Corps captured the port on June 29th and found the city largely in ruins, which further delayed the build-up of much needed supplies. All through late June and July the Americans fought a painfully slow battle southwards, through the Bocage Normand (wooded country) towards St Lo at the base of the Cotentin peninsula, as they sought to break out to the west.

In late July, and after the British and Canadians had drawn off the bulk of the German forces from the American front, General Bradley's 1st Army launched their attack west and within five days had ripped the whole front open. At the end of July they began to turn eastwards and begin their drive towards the river Seine. Realising that the western flank was virtually unopposed Bradley now devoted the greater bulk of his forces to the complete destruction of the German Army. The Germans now found their Armies squeezed between the British and Canadians to the north and the Americans advancing from the south. They were under almost constant air attack as they tried to escape through the closing pincers of what became known as the Falaise Gap.

Completely out of touch, Hitler was still insisting on counter-attacks to no avail. The Falaise Gap was finally closed on August 20th, by which time about 50,000 German prisoners had been taken. Inside the pocket was a picture of indescribable destruction with over 10,000 Germans dead and wrecked vehicles of all descriptions as far as the eye could see. In just over a month the Allies had destroyed two German Armies and were now about to cross the river Seine on their way to liberating Paris. For political reasons the first troops to enter Paris were those of the French 2nd Armoured Division fighting with Bradley's 1st American Army, although on August 29th units of the 28th US Infantry Division did parade down the Champs Elysees in order to impress the population.

Meanwhile, far to the west, Bradley's troops fanned out to lay siege to the Brittany ports; however these proved to be very well-defended and some held out until the end of the war.

Immediately following the triumphant drive to the Seine there was to be no let-up in the race towards the German border. However by this time the forward troops were far from the available ports of Normandy and supplies of fuel and ammunition had to be hauled over long distances. Logistics now became the main issue facing the Allies and, despite the establishment of a one-way route called the Red Ball Express, the American front line troops began a hand to mouth existence.

Once across the Seine, the Allies' plan was to advance on a broad front up to and beyond the German border. However, starved of vital fuel the American 1st and 3rd Armies were often halted for two or three days at a time, and did not reach the river Meuse until early September. Meanwhile, refusing to move from the broad front approach, Eisenhower was persuaded to listen sympathetically to pleas for an airborne attack, to try and outflank the German defences in Belgium and Holland. Code-named Operation Market Garden this plan called for three airborne divisions to seize bridges on the road to Arnhem and thereby outflank the German border at the Siegfried Line. Two American divisions, the 101st and the 82nd were assigned the bridges at Eindhoven, Grave and Nijmegen, with the British 1st Airborne Division tackling the northernmost bridge at Arnhem.

In the event lack of transport aircraft saw the British troops dropped piecemeal into far stronger German opposition than had been anticipated. Although the American Divisions were able to reach and capture their objectives, those from the British Division, that did reach the bridge at Arnhem, were wiped out and their sacrifice ended any hope of finishing the war by Christmas.

Despite the destruction of his armies in Normandy and the later Allied landings on the Mediterranean coast, as early as August Hitler issued orders to prepare to take the offensive on the western front in November. In fact he achieved the near impossible and, out of the armies that had fought and lost in France and Belgium, he built up a new army group on the western front by December 1944. What was more, this new force was intended not merely to hold the front, but to hurl itself against the weakest American sector, sweep westward towards the Meuse as in 1940 and ultimately reach the Channel, in what was to be one of the most daring counter-offensives in history. When it came it was the heaviest Panzer attack ever seen on the western front, but it depended on the strictest of timetables to achieve its objectives.

What became known as the Battle of the Bulge began at dawn on December 16th when some 200,000 keyed-up German troops were launched against 80,000 unprepared Americans along the Ardennes front. Initially German confidence ran high as large fuel dumps were captured providing the Germans with much needed petrol and significant progress was made. Bad weather prevented Allied air power from intervening and helping to stem the German advances. By December 25th a large salient had formed around the town of Bastogne and the Germans were demanding its surrender. However, incredibly stubborn American resistance eventually sapped the strength of the attackers and, aided by improving weather conditions, counter-attacks began in January and by the 28th the Bulge as it became known had disappeared.

As the US 1st and 3rd Armies mopped up the last remnants of the Battle of the Bulge, their main effort was now concentrated on the Ruhr Industrial Region. However, worn down by the recent savage fighting in the Ardennes, some of the impetus had been lost and the advance was slow. As they approached the Rhine the Americans had no specific plans for taking a bridge intact. The Germans were so efficient at the process of demolition that no-one ever entertained the expectation of finding a bridge intact. It was therefore all the more surprising when, on the afternoon of March 7th, an infantry platoon emerged from the woods overlooking Remagen to see German troops streaming across a railway bridge on the outskirts of the town. They immediately called up reinforcements to seize the bridge, but as they approached the Germans detonated a charge. When the smoke cleared the east bank the bridge still stood. Within minutes the Americans had gained the far end of the bridge and fanned out to capture the German defenders. Realising the importance of the bridgehead Eisenhower immediately told his commanders to rush five divisions across as quickly as possible. Despite continuous air and artillery attacks by the Germans the bridge remained intact until March 17th, when it finally succumbed to the constant pounding and collapsed into the river.

While a small scale crossing had been achieved at Remagen, the end of March saw large scale crossings of the Rhine by Allied forces, which now began to pour into the German heartlands. On April 1st units of the American 1st and 3rd Armies completed the encirclement of the Ruhr Industrial complex, and by April 11th units of the 3rd Army reached the river Elbe at Magdeburg. Finally on April 18th all resistance in the Ruhr pocket ceased and over 370,000 men were taken prisoner.

On April 25th, as the Red Army surrounded Berlin, the first contact was made between American troops advancing from the west and Russian patrols on the river Elbe near Torgau. On April 30th Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker and on May 4th all the German forces in North West Europe surrendered to the Allies and the war in the west came to an end.