

D-Day, June 6, 1944 -- World War II

by Lewis E. Lehrman

Doubts would plague the preparations for Operation OVERLORD in World War II -- the long-awaited cross-channel invasion of German-occupied Europe. “The Prime Minister and some of his chief military advisers,” recalled General Dwight D. Eisenhower, “looked upon the Overlord plan with scarcely concealed misgivings; their attitude seemed to be that we could avoid the additional and grave risks implicit in a new amphibious operation by merely pouring into the Mediterranean all the air, ground, and naval resources available.”¹ Nevertheless, with Churchill’s support, OVERLORD would launch June 6th, 1944 -- the most colossal amphibious invasion of history.

Churchill would write in his memoirs that planning this amphibious invasion involved immense “technical detail. The Channel tides have a play of more than twenty feet, with corresponding scours along the beaches. The weather is always uncertain, and winds and gales may whip up in a few hours irresistible forces against frail human structures. The fools or knaves who had chalked ‘Second Front Now’ on our walls for the past two years had not had their minds burdened by such problems. I had long pondered upon them.”² The prime minister would oppose a premature cross-channel invasion -- without the most careful preparation.

One of the British military planners, General Leslie Hollis, argued that differences about OVERLORD reflected not only timing and adequate preparation, but also different national attitudes. “America, a large country, adopted – like a large man – frontal tactics. They wanted quick and terrible hammer blows that would speedily finish the fight...Britain, a small country, with a long history of frequently successful engagements against opponents that could have overwhelmed her with their numbers, adopted – like a small man faced by a large enemy – more subtle tactics.”³

Despite uncertainties, the Prime Minister stayed firmly behind Allied preparations in the spring of 1944 -- in addition to his commitment to successful Allied operations in Italy. To Churchill, South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts would express his doubts about Operation Overlord. But Churchill would counter: “I hope you will realise that British loyalty to ‘Overlord’ is keystone of [the] arch of Anglo-American co-operation. Personally I think enough forces exist for both hands to be played, and I believe this to be the right strategy.”⁴

As D-Day approached, pressure mounted. General Hastings Ismay, Churchill’s top military aide, recalled: “In the afternoon we went down to the harbour and watched the embarkation. Everything seemed to be going according to plan, and the bearing of the troops was most impressive...There was no joking about the ‘picnic’ on which they were starting, and no signing about hanging up their washing on the Siegfried Line. They seemed to have no illusions about the hazards of the enterprise to which they were committed, but to be relieved that the long suspense had ended and that the time for action had come.”⁵

As they visited the Map Room in the Annexe to 10 Downing Street on the eve of D-Day, Churchill said to his wife: “Do you realise that by the time you wake up in the morning, twenty

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, p. 198

² Winston S. Churchill, *Closing the Ring: The Second World War*, Volume III, p. 67.

³ James Leasor, *War at the Top: The Experiences of General Leslie Hollis*, p. 239.

⁴ Winston S. Churchill, *Closing the Ring: The Second World War*, Volume III, p. 116 (Telegram from Winston S. Churchill to Smuts, September 11, 1943).

⁵ Hastings Lionel Ismay, *Memoirs of General Lord Ismay*, p. 353.

thousand men may have been killed,” Churchill said to Clementine on the eve of D-Day.⁶

Although the weather did not cooperate with the Allied invasion on June 6, General Eisenhower ordered OVERLORD to go forward during the narrow window that weather and tides might allow the vast armada to reach the Normandy beachhead. Superior Allied air power would help American, British, and Canadian soldiers to struggle ashore amidst withering German firepower. Uncertainty would mark the early days of OVERLORD. But the Allied forces did get ashore. However, they did not move aggressively inland because of the resistance of well-led, battle-hardened German soldiers. For much of the next two months, the Normandy campaign was a war of attrition -- wearing down the German war machine. “The battle for Normandy had cost the German army a total of 1,500 tanks, 3,500 guns and 20,000 vehicles,” wrote historian Max Hastings. “They had lost around 450,000 men, 240,000 of these killed or wounded.”⁷

As British military historian Liddell Hart wrote, D-Day was “an operation that eventually went according to plan, but not according to timetable.” The audacity of General Eisenhower’s decision on June 6, the tenacity of Allied leaders and soldiers on the Normandy beachhead would ultimately lead to victory over German arms in France and, finally, in Western Europe. Germany’s unconditional surrender would come in May 1945, only eleven months after D-Day.

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⁶ Mary Soames, *Clementine Churchill: The Biography of a Marriage*, p. 392.

⁷ Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy*, p. 313.