The Allies Liberate Europe

Even as the Allies were battling for Italy in 1943, they had begun work on a dramatic plan to invade France and free Western Europe from the Nazis. The task of commanding Operation Overlord, as it was called, fell to American General Dwight D. ("Ike") Eisenhower.

D-DAY Under Eisenhower's direction in England, the Allies gathered a force of nearly 3 million British, American, and Canadian troops, together with mountains of military equipment and supplies. Eisenhower planned to attack Normandy in northern France. To keep their plans secret, the Allies set up a huge phantom army with its own headquarters and equipment. In radio messages they knew the Germans could read, Allied commanders sent orders to this make-believe army to attack the French port of Calais—150 miles away—where the English Channel is narrowest. As a result, Hitler ordered his generals to keep a large army at Calais.

The Allied invasion, code-named Operation Overlord, was originally set for June 5, but bad weather forced a delay. Banking on a forecast for clearing skies, Eisenhower gave the go-ahead for **D-Day**—June 6, 1944, the first day of the invasion. Shortly after midnight, three divisions parachuted down behind German lines. They were followed in the early morning hours by thousands upon thousands of seaborne soldiers—the largest land-sea-air operation in army history.

Background
American paratroopers on D-Day carried a simple signaling device to help them find one another in the dark. Each had a metal toy cricket to click. No German radio operators could intercept these messages.

Despite the massive air and sea bombardment by the Allies, German retaliation was brutal, particularly at Omaha Beach. "People were yelling, screaming, dying, running on the beach, equipment was flying everywhere, men were bleeding to death, crawling, lying everywhere, firing coming from all directions," soldier Felix Branham wrote of the scene there. "We dropped down behind anything that was the size of a golf ball."

THE ALLIES GAIN GROUND Despite heavy casualties, the Allies held the beachheads. After seven days of fighting, the Allies held an 80-mile strip of France. Within a month, they had landed a million troops, 567,000 tons of supplies, and 170,000 vehicles in France. On July 25, General **Omar Bradley** unleashed massive air and land bombardment against the enemy at St. Lô, providing a gap in the German line of defense through which General **George Patton** and his Third Army could advance. On August 23, Patton and the Third Army reached the Seine River south of Paris. Two days later, French resistance forces and American troops liberated the French capital from four years of German occupation. Parisians were delirious with joy. Patton announced this joyous event to his commander in a message that read, "Dear Ike: Today I spat in the Seine."

By September 1944, the Allies had freed France, Belgium, and Luxembourg. This good news—and the American people's desire not to "change horses in midstream"—helped elect Franklin Roosevelt to an unprecedented fourth term in November, along with his running mate, Senator Harry S. Truman. (E)

MAIN IDEA
Evaluating
(E) Was the Allied invasion of Europe successful? Explain your answer.

KEY PLAYER

DWIGHT D. "IKE" EISENHOWER 1890–1969

When Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall chose modest Lieutenant General Dwight David Eisenhower to become the Supreme Commander of U.S. forces in Europe, he knew what he was doing. Ike was a superb planner and possessed a keen mind for military tactics.

More important, Eisenhower had an uncommon ability to work with all kinds of people, even competitive and temperamental allies. After V-E Day, a grateful Marshall wrote to Ike, saying, "You have been selfless in your actions, always sound and tolerant in your judgments and altogether admirable in the courage and wisdom of your military decisions. You have made history, great history for the good of mankind." In 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower became president of the United States.

Voices of D-Day: Thomas Valence

Allied landing craft we proceeded toward the beach, and many of the fellows got sick. The water was quite rough. It was a choppy ride in, and we received a lot of spray.

Our boat was one of six of A Company in the first wave, and when we got to the beach, or close to it, the obstacles erected by the Germans to prevent the landing were fully in view, as we were told they would be, which meant the tide was low.

I was the rifle sergeant and followed Lieutenant Anderson off the boat, and we did what we could rather than what we had practiced doing for so many months in England. There was a rather wide expanse of beach, and the Germans were not to be seen at all, but they were firing at us, rapidly, with a great deal of small-arm fire.

As we came down the ramp, we were in water about knee high, and we started to do what we were trained to do -- move forward, and then crouch and fire. One of the problems was we didn't quite know what to fire at. I saw some tracers coming from a concrete emplacement which to me looked mammoth. I never anticipated any gun emplacements being that big. I attempted to fire back at that, but I had no concept of what was going on behind me. There was not much to see in front of me except a few houses, and the water kept coming in so rapidly, and the fellows I was with were being hit and put out of action so quickly that it become a struggle to stay on one's feet. I abandoned my equipment, which was very heavy.

I floundered in the water and had my hand up in the air, trying to get my balance, when I was first shot. I was shot through the left hand, which broke a knuckle, and then through the palm of the hand. I felt nothing but a little sting at the time, but I was aware that I was shot. Next to me in the water, Private Henry G. Witt was rolling over towards me. "Sergeant, they're leaving us here to die like rats. Just to die like rats." I certainly wasn't thinking the same thing, nor did I share that opinion. I didn't know whether we were being left or not.

I made my way forward as best I could. My rifle jammed, so I picked up a carbine and got off a couple of rounds. We were shooting at something that seemed inconsequential. There was no way I was going to knock out a German concrete emplacement with a .30-caliber rifle. I was hit again, once in the left thigh, which broke my hip bone, and a couple of times in my pack, and then my chin strap on my helmet was severed by a bullet. I worked my way up onto the beach, and staggered up against a wall, and collapsed there. The bodies of the other guys washed ashore, and I was one live body amongst many of my friends who were dead and, in many cases, blown to pieces.