



CANADA REMEMBERS

D-DAY AND THE BATTLE OF NORMANDY

Introduction

By the spring of 1944, Germany had occupied France and much of the European continent for almost four years. A narrow stretch of water, the English Channel, was all that separated the German forces from Great Britain.

An Allied raid on the French coast at Dieppe in August 1942 had resulted in heavy losses, particularly for Canada, but by 1944 the Allies had made strong gains against German troops in both Italy and the Soviet Union.

The Allies knew they would have to defeat Germany in western Europe to win the war and decided to mount a major campaign for 1944. Planning lasted more than a year, taking great effort and involving many elements. Ground, sea and air forces rehearsed endlessly to make sure their timing and coordination was perfect. Great numbers of troops, boats, tanks, supplies and equipment were gathered in total secrecy in southern England. Portable docking facilities were built for the supply ships to off-load their cargoes in France once the Allies had landed. A long flexible pipe, called “Pluto,” (‘pipe lines under the ocean’) was even built to carry fuel under the sea from England to Normandy.

Fortress Europe

Even with all these preparations, the Normandy campaign would be very difficult. The Normandy beach was littered with German land mines, barbed wire, heavy artillery batteries and machine-gun nests. There were also anti-tank walls, shelters constructed

of thick concrete, anti-aircraft guns and many other types of defensive positions. For these reasons, the coastline from Denmark to the south of France was known as “Fortress Europe.”

For the Allied offensive to be successful, harbours along the continent’s coastline would have to be secured for the many transport ships that would be needed to ferry food, medical supplies, weapons and fresh troops after the initial landings. As well, Allied armies would continue to need “Pluto” to transport the fuel needed to liberate occupied Europe.

An Allied defeat on the beaches of Normandy would have meant certain disaster as there would be no way to remove troops to safety. But if the landings succeeded, the Allied forces would finally gain that all-important foothold in western Europe and a chance to liberate France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark from German occupation.

On Land, By Sea, In the Air

Allied aircraft paved the way for the landings, bombing coastal defences in the months leading up to the attack. On June 6, 1944, D-Day, a massive Canadian, British and American force crossed the English Channel to engage in Operation Overlord. Their destination: an 80-kilometre stretch of the heavily-defended coast of Normandy in France. There were five landing zones, given special codenames: Juno Beach (Canada); Gold Beach (United Kingdom); Sword Beach (United Kingdom and France), and; Utah Beach and Omaha Beach (United States).

7,000 vessels of all types, including 284 major combat vessels, took part in Operation Neptune, the assault phase of the D-Day offensive. Destroyers and supporting craft of the Royal Canadian Navy did their part and shelled German targets while many Royal Canadian Air Force planes were among the 4,000 Allied bombers (plus some 3,700 fighters and fighter bombers) which attacked German beach defences and inland targets.

More than 450 Canadians parachuted inland before dawn on June 6 and engaged the enemy. A few hours later, 15,000 Canadian troops began coming ashore at Juno Beach in the face of enemy fire. Their mission: to establish a beachhead along an eight-kilometre stretch fronting the villages of Courseulles-sur-Mer, Bernières-sur-Mer, and St. Aubin-sur-Mer. Once secure, the troops would push inland to capture the city of Caen, a German communications centre.

A Hard-Won Victory

Many Canadian soldiers in the Normandy campaign were young and new to battle, but their courage and skill meant they often helped lead the Allied advance against a determined enemy. Canadians soon captured three shoreline positions on D-Day and established themselves near the village of Creully, but this was to be only the beginning of the struggle to liberate France. Savage fighting in Normandy continued and grew even more intense as Canadian forces faced powerful German Panzer tank divisions in the struggle for Caen.

Through the summer of 1944, the fighting continued through choking dust and intense heat. The living conditions were terrible and the enemy was ruthless, but the troops moved forward. On August 25, 1944, Paris was liberated by the Allies, bringing the Normandy campaign to a close. It would be another nine months of hard fighting, however, before the Allies achieved a final victory in Europe.

Sacrifice

Against difficult odds, the Canadians advanced against the best troops the enemy had. Victory in the Normandy campaign, however, would come at a terrible cost. The Canadians suffered the most casualties of any division in the British Army Group. Many made the ultimate sacrifice, losing their lives, and lie buried in a place far from their homes and loved ones. Others returned home with injuries to body and mind that they carry to this day.

The Legacy

The collective experiences and stories of Canada's Veterans who landed in Normandy that summer of 1944 and fought through to the Falaise Gap and beyond provide Canadians with a proud and lasting legacy that will continue into our country's future. We remember those who served and Canadians continue to cherish the values for which they fought and died - truth, justice, peace, freedom and knowledge. These values guide much of what we do today and reflect our free and peaceful country.

Canada Remembers Program

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by all who have served during times of war, military conflict and peace, and to become involved in remembrance activities that will help to preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about Canada's role in the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at www.vac-acc.gc.ca or call **1-877-604-8469** toll-free.

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