

Ike's Decision

Eisenhower's call to proceed with D-Day was anything but inevitable

By Michael Korda

IT HAS BEEN 65 YEARS since D-Day—the early June day when the United States and its allies launched a massive attack on the shores of Normandy in a bid to liberate western Europe from the Nazis. It's been long enough for most people who still remember the date to have come to think of its success as natural and foreordained.

But of course it was neither of these things. Supreme Allied Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force Dwight D. "Ike" Eisenhower himself gave it no better than a 50-50 chance of success, even if the weather was good and everything went right. As it turned out, the weather was so bad that he had to postpone the invasion by 24 hours once the troops were

already aboard the ships and boats. Battalion after battalion was forced to land miles from where they were supposed to be, facing terrain totally unlike what they had trained for. High seas and nervous coxswains under fire for the first time

faced the question of whether to postpone the invasion once more, they seem—in these days when placing 40,000 combat troops somewhere is a huge political and military decision—overwhelming: he had over a million men, 5,000 vessels of all



SUPREME HEADQUARTERS
ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE



Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

General Eisenhower, above, understood that the D-Day invasion, the large Allied plan to attack the Nazis at Normandy, stood no better than a 50-50 chance of success even with good weather. Despite the inclement conditions, Eisenhower gave the go ahead and issued the Order of the Day, left, which was handed out to the invasion force.

"landed" many troops into water that came over their heads. Men laden with more than 100 pounds of equipment and ammunition sometimes sank to the bottom and drowned, their bodies eventually washing ashore to join those who had been killed the moment their feet touched the beach.

When we think of the forces under Ike's command on the night of June 4, as he

sizes, including battleships, and 10,000 aircraft. On the morning of June 6, if he decided to go on that date, he would land 73,000 Americans, 66,000 Britons, and 20,000 Canadians on the shores of Normandy.

These were big numbers, but facing them was a German army still better trained, more experienced, better armed, and motivated by a high degree of fanatical zeal; an overwhelmingly strong armored force that could reach the invasion beaches in 24 to 48 hours; formidably



Three days after Normandy, American troops of the 8th Infantry Regiment rally behind a concrete wall on Utah Beach, ready to begin the drive that would eventually lead to Nazi surrender.

well-planned fortifications; and, in the person of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, one of the war's most daring and brilliant battlefield commanders. Victory was no sure thing.

On the morning of June 6 it was still just possible for Hitler to win the war, however slim the margin. Failure on D-Day and the withdrawal of the surviving troops might have encouraged Stalin and Hitler to embrace, might have cost FDR the election in November, and might have led to making the defeat of Japan America's first priority. Certainly D-Day could not have been easily or quickly repeated. British manpower was strained to the utmost, and a whole new army could hardly have been formed.

Ike could not know that Hitler had kept the four strongest German armored divisions under his control, to be released only on his explicit command. Nor could Eisenhower know that he had succeeded in fooling the Germans into believing that the invasion would come in the Pas de

Calais, and that any landing in Normandy would be a feint, intended to draw German forces away from the real invasion beaches. He could not know that Rommel had gone home on leave to celebrate his wife's birthday. Had Rommel been at his headquarters in Normandy on the morning

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on June 6 he would have realized that this was the real invasion, and his prestige might have been sufficient to persuade the Führer to release the four Panzer divisions from the Pas de Calais in time to bring them to the beaches of Normandy on the morning of June 7, while the Allies still had no meaningful amount of armor or artillery on shore. But it was not to be. Rommel raced back to Normandy too late: by the evening of June 6 the Allied beachhead was far enough in shore to survive, and Hitler had lost his last chance.

Ike's decision to proceed on June 6 was perhaps the single most crucial decision of the war, and it was up to him to

make it. He did not call Washington or London for advice, although he had a scrambled line to 10 Downing Street and another to Washington in his trailer. He chain-smoked, drank coffee, in between rainstorms walked restlessly around the trailer, and at 9:30 p.m. British Summer Time, after listening to Group Capt. James Martin Stagg give him the latest, slightly more optimistic weather report, sat silently for five minutes in front of his ground commander Gen. Bernard Montgomery, his air commander Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory and his naval commander Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, and then said: "I am quite positive I must give the order . . . I don't like it, but there it is. . . I don't see how we can do anything else."

Then he stood up and walked back to his trailer in the rain. The order had been given. The invasion would take place on June 6. Nothing could stop it now. ☉



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