

PATHFINDER

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D-Day



Rome had fallen twenty-four hours before. President Roosevelt, in a voice strangely tense, read a 15 minute speech into the microphones that promised "a long period of greater effort and fiercer fighting" ahead. Scrawny little Victor Emmanuel prepared to abandon the throne of torn Italy to his son, Umberto. Twelve thousand workers walked out of the Lockland, O., plant of the Wright Aeronautical Co., tying up its production of plane engines in a strike CIO leaders hurriedly announced as a "wildcat." In Washington's pentagon a few lights gleamed past the midnight hour of June 5; one cluster blazed over the desk of Gen. George A. Marshall, chief-of-staff for all the armies of United States of America.

Out past the Portsmouth breakwater, out from the fish-shaped harbor of Plymouth, from Exmouth, from Weymouth the black boats slithered through fingers of channel mist. At Christ Church, at Selsey Bill and St. Alban's Head the cottage windows rattled to the throb of motors and the steady chomp, chomp, chomp of marching troops. England had heard the same sounds and seen the same shapes four years before, to the week. Then, they were coming in from Dunkirk. Tonight, they headed out toward France.

That was the way D-Day began . . . the second-front the allies had waited for for two years. It came like a shadow in the English midnight. By sun-up on June 6 Drake's drums were rolling up and down the English Channel, tuned to the roar of an invasion armada of 4,000 ships, the scream of 11,000 allied planes, the softer bark of machine guns and bazookas spitting up the sands of the Norman peninsula between Cherbourg and Havre.

The Nazi news agency, DNB, flashed the first story at 12:40 A. M. on June 6, eastern wartime. German patrol boats had encountered allied landing barges in thin moonlight off the Norman coast. Before dawn, British and American battleships were pouring shells into Havre, Caen and Cherbourg, high-booted skymen of the 28th and 101st U. S. A. paratroop divisions had dropped into the limestone ridges of the Seine valley, and landing barges filled with American, Canadian and British infantrymen nosed up to beaches along the estuaries of the Orne and Seine rivers.

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During the first nine hours of the invasion attempt, allied planes dropped 12,000 tons of bombs on the subterranean forts and concrete pillboxes of Hitler's vaunted "Atlantic wall." The Germans themselves admitted two serious cracks in the wall, in the form of beachheads six to ten miles wide and a mile deep that seemed firmly in allied grasp. Allied losses, London said, were "lighter than expected."

Only Texas' "Ike" Eisenhower and his staff knew whether this thrust against Normandy was to be the main springboard of the invasion or a "display in force" that would be followed up with equally furious assaults against Holland, Denmark, Norway and the south coast of France. Whatever happens, the points to watch will be the ports. Supplies, equipment and men in the quantities the allies need for the bloody push to Berlin will necessitate control of six or seven of the great seaports bordering the English Channel . . . cities like Rotterdam, Havre, Cherbourg, St. Malo, Bordeaux, all will be needed to land the tanks, armored trains, mobile artillery, food supplies, secret weapons, Red Cross equipment and other baggage of mechanized warfare. The offensive against Normandy might well, as viewed at the end of the first day's operations, be an action seeking to swing inland and cut off the big ports of Cherbourg and Havre from Nazi reinforcements. Capture of these ports would give the allies control of the Gulf of St. Malo and the estuaries of the Seine and Arne estuaries, only 140 miles from Paris. Another European capital on the road to Berlin.

From Moscow, where crowds stood cheering in Kremlin Square, the Soviet General Staff promised them an offensive sweeping east into Poland and Rumania would open "within forty-eight hours." Up along the Italian boot, the Germans tumbled toward a new line of defenses building beside the River Po. From Marseille to Narvik, from Cherbourg to Ruthenia the steel fingers of allied might sought the throat of Nazidom. This was D-Day . . . the promised day of Europe's liberation.

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