

Planning for Overlord – The Invasion of Normandy – June 6, 1944

Over the next two months, the number of sorties steadily increased and the group flew its first combat missions on 20 April 1944—an uneventful fighter sweep of the occupied French coast. The group and squadrons underwent another name change on 30 May 1944, dropping the designation "bomber." Thus, the names that would remain with the units until their inactivation were the 48th Fighter Group and the 492d, 493d, and 494th Fighter Squadrons.

Unknown at the time to 2nd Lt. James W. Harrison and the pilots of the 48th, all of their training was specifically designed for a campaign against the German positions in Normandy.

By D-Day, June 6, 1944, the Allies had been planning for the invasion of Europe for more than two years. In August 1943, the Combined Chiefs of Staff had approved the general tactical plan for the invasion, dubbed Overlord. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander of the European theater since February 1944, would be responsible for carrying off this bold gambit. The Allies' main strategy, in Eisenhower's words, was to

. . . land amphibious and airborne forces on the Normandy coast between Le Havre and the Cotentin Peninsula and, with the successful establishment of a beachhead with adequate Ports, to drive along the lines of the Loire and the Seine rivers into the heart of France. Destroying the German strength and freeing France.



The Allies believed that the enemy would resist strongly on the line of the Seine and later on the Somme, but surprisingly, once ground forces had broken through the relatively static lines of the bridgehead at Saint-Lo and inflicted heavy casualties on enemy troops in the Falaise Pocket, Nazi resistance in France disappeared. British and American armies swept east and north in an unimpeded advance which brought them to the German frontier and the defenses of the Siegfried Line.

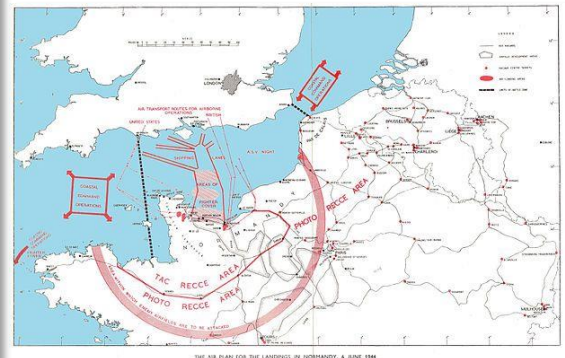
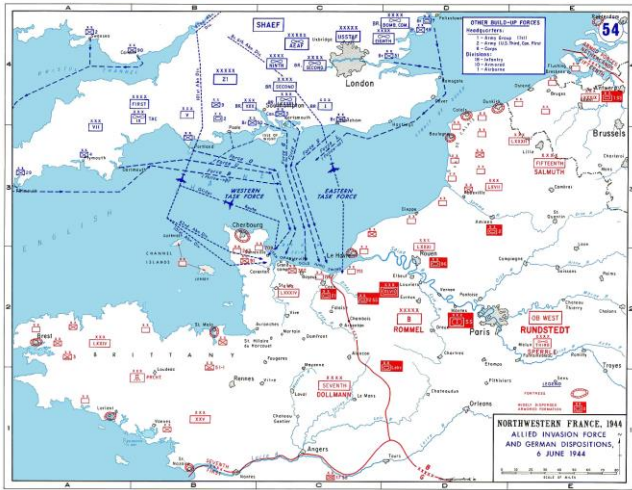
Air Power: Critical to Success on D-Day - From the beginning Eisenhower and the rest of the combined forces planners recognized that air power would be critical to success of Overlord. Experience had taught planners to avoid facing hostile air power over the battlefield. This meant that the Luftwaffe would have to be destroyed, but not at the price of sacrificing vitally needed air support missions for air superiority ones.

Fortunately, in early 1944 the Luftwaffe was on the skids. By the fall of 1943, Republic P-41 Thunderbolts equipped with long-range "drop" tanks were inflicting heavy losses on German fighters over Occupied Europe and in the German periphery. Then in December 1943, the North American P-51B Mustang entered service. Featuring superlative handling qualities and aerodynamic design, and powered by a Packard-built Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, the P-51B (and its successors, the P-51C and P-51D) could escort



bomber strikes to Berlin and back, thanks in part to a symmetrical wing section that was thick enough to house a large quantity of fuel and streamlined enough to minimize drag. These two fine aircraft were worthy supplements to the overall Allied strategic bombing effort.

Basically, the Allied air campaign for the invasion of Europe consisted of three phases. First, Allied fighters would attempt to destroy the Luftwaffe. The second phase called for isolating the battlefield by interdicting road and rail networks. And once the invasion began, Allied air forces would concentrate on battlefield interdiction and close air support.



The requirements to keep the landing sites secret - particularly the deception to encourage the Germans to devote their greatest attention in the region of the Pas de Calais - complicated the air campaign. Strike planners had to schedule vastly more operations across the sweep of likely landing sites rather than just at the true site of Overlord. For example, rocket-armed Royal Air Force Hawker Typhoon fighter-bombers of the Second Tactical Air Force (2 TAF) attacked two radar installations outside the planned assault area for every one they attacked within it.

A P-47 would carry an external belly fuel tank and one 500-lb bomb under each wing many were also configured so that the plane could carry air-to-ground rockets, typically ten 5-in HVARs (high-velocity aircraft rockets). P-47s on an armed reconnaissance mission would usually operate three flights, two armed with a mix of bombs and rockets, and the cover flight carrying only rockets. Over 80 percent of the bombs dropped by P-47s during the European campaign were 500-lb weapons; less than 10 percent were 1,000-lb bombs, and the difference was made up by smaller 260-lb fragmentation bombs and napalm. While acknowledging the spectacular effects and destructiveness of rockets, the AAF considered bombs more effective for "road work" due to accuracy problems in firing the solid-fuel weapons.



A Republic P-47D Thunderbolt shown with two 500-lb bombs and an external fuel tank, a typical offensive load carried in the 1944 campaign across France.

The P-47 carried eight .50 cal. Machine guns with 400 rounds per gun and it proved "particularly successful" against transports. The machine guns occasionally even caused casualties to tanks and tank crews. The .50 cal. armor-piercing bullets often penetrated the underside of vehicles after ricocheting off the road, or penetrated the exhaust system of the tanks, ricocheting around the interior of the armored hull, killing or wounding the crew and sometimes igniting the fuel supply or detonating ammunition storage. This seemed surprising at first, given the typically heavy armor of German tanks.



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 An example of a typical fragmentation bomb mounted on a P-47 Thunderbolt; these devices were used in dive-bombing missions against airfields in Spring 1944, with varying results.



On 6 June 1944, the 48th participated in a massive invasion of France, which included more than 14,000 sorties flown by the allied air forces. The 492nd, 493rd, and 494th squadrons assisted the Normandy invasion by dropping bombs on bridges and gun positions, attacking rail lines and trains, and providing visual reconnaissance reports. Over the course of the Normandy campaign, the 48th flew nearly 2,000 sorties, dropping nearly 500 tons of bombs and fired more than 160,000 rounds of ammunition.



Between January and June 1944--the five months before D-Day the Luftwaffe was effectively destroyed: 2,262 German fighter pilots died during that time. In May alone, no less than 25 percent of Germany's total fighter pilot force (which averaged 2,283 at any one time during this period) perished.



During "Big Week" American air forces targeted the German aircraft industry for special treatment; while production continued, the fighter force took staggering losses. In March 1944, fully 56 percent of the available German fighters were lost, dipping to 43 percent in April (as the bomber effort switched to Germany's petroleum production), and rising again to just over 50 percent in May, on the eve of Normandy. No wonder, then that the Luftwaffe could contribute less than a hundred sorties to the defense of Normandy. Months of concentrated air warfare had given the Allies not only air superiority, but air supremacy as well.



Whatever the bombing campaign may or may not have accomplished in destroying enemy resources, it did contribute directly to the D-Day success. Large bomber formations were aerial magnets that drew up the Luftwaffe to be destroyed by the American fighter force. The omnipresent Thunderbolts and Mustangs (and less frequently P-38 Lightnings) gave the Luftwaffe no respite over Germany, complementing the shorter legged Spitfires and Hawker Typhoons of the Royal Air Force.

