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Allied troops waiting to depart from southern England for the D-Day invasion of the Normandy coast of France, June 6, 1944.

ROBERT CAPA/MAGNUM PHOTOS

OVERLORD

D-Day and the Battle for Normandy.

By Max Hastings.

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By John Keegan

WAS it the last great adventure story, the "Shape of Things to Come Never Again?" Was the script written by Jules Verne? Did Cecil B. De Mille command aboard the U.S.S. Augusta, screaming "retake" as the assault waves crumbled in the surf of Omaha Beach? Did Charles Lindbergh fly with the 82d? Was Frederic Remington the official war artist? Did Ernest Hemingway file the first dispatch?

Actually, to the last question, yes — more or less. Hemingway did travel with the invaders, "packed shoulder to shoulder," as he put it, "in the stiff awkward, uncomfortable, lonely companionship of men going to battle." Hemingway was not only a great writer. He was a great reporter, with an unerring nose for a story. D-Day, June 6, was clearly the great story of 1944 and he succeeded not only in being present to cover it, but in selecting the most dramatic episode of the day — the debacle at Omaha Beach — as his point of focus. So did Drew Middleton of The New York Times, who reflected recently, "If I'd known Omaha was going to be so dangerous, I'd have tried another beach."

Max Hastings was too young to have been present — though his father was — but he has made an outstanding reputation by his reports from 22 "postwar" wars, notably the recent one in the Falklands. He is also a military historian with an excellent academic grasp of military realities. The combination of talents lends a particular interest to everything he writes. Three years ago he decided that the 40th anniversary of D-Day would be one of the big stories of 1984 and set himself to recreate the atmosphere and events of the great Allied invasion of France — Operation Overlord. The result is "Overlord," which very accurately catches the heroism and desperation of the Allied invasion of France.

Mr. Hastings rightly decided to waste little time on the antecedents. As we now know, a cross-Channel invasion, agreed on in principle by the British and Americans as the right means of defeating Hitler as early as December 1941, aroused the enthusiasm of the Americans a great deal more than it did that of the British. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, almost until the eve of the invasion, tormented by visions of the Channel "awash with corpses," was fluent in his advocacy of

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other strategies to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In that way the decision to go ahead was delayed until November 1943, when Stalin shamed the British into a public commitment by tactics whose familiar brutality in retrospect seems, for once, justified. In the presence of the other Allied leaders, he taunted Churchill with the demand that he state unequivocally and publicly that he would undertake a cross-Channel invasion as soon as possible.

It is to the events of the landing itself and the battle which followed that Mr. Hastings devotes the bulk of his narrative. And it is splendidly done. He has assembled material from all the well-known works of reminiscence and to them added a great deal that he has garnered himself. Much of this new testimony is German, since he rightly holds that we know much less about the German than we do about the Allied conduct of the fighting.

He also holds that the skill and tenacity of the Germans in the fight have too often been underrated, not by the Allied soldiers who faced them but by commentators too easily impressed by the weight and comprehensiveness of Allied preparations. That is undoubtedly the case. The Allies had left as little to chance as practically could be. The appearance of their invincibility was overwhelming. Five thousand ships, probably the largest fleet ever assembled, crossed the Channel. Fourteen thousand aircraft — outnumbering the Luftwaffe 30 to 1 — flew to protect and support them. Shore and air bombardments equivalent in weight to the total delivered at Verdun, the longest battle of World War I, prepared the way for the ground troops. Tanks swam ashore with the infantry. Parachutists descended in swarms to blanket enemy reinforcement routes. Yet, despite the technical inferiority thus imposed upon them across almost the whole tactical and strategic spectrum, the Germans succeeded in causing one near-disaster to the Allies on D-Day, and thereafter they inflicted almost unbearable casualties on many combat units. By July, for example, the Americans had suffered 100,000 casualties, 85 percent of them among the infantry.

Historians have long known that the Germans fought well and effectively. Mr. Hastings has been to interview several dozen survivors to ask how and why. Why is the more difficult question. How is more readily answered. The Germans dug like badgers, criss-crossing the already densely landscaped countryside of Normandy with a labyrinth of trenches and foxholes. From those improvised positions they served their weapons with a soldierly efficiency few Allied units could match. They seemed to take pride in the reputation of Germans as soldiers, and to feel a sense of moral superiority in their ability to meet the Allies on unequal terms. And then, too, there was a sense of desperation. Germany was already suffering the terrible punishment of Allied air attack. What would happen to the nation if the Allied armies entered the homeland?

But the chief explanation of how the Germans found the strength to sustain their resistance lies in the will of their leader. Adolf Hitler had discounted the risk of a cross-Channel attack until as late as November 1943. He

then issued a Führer Order, the highest strategic directive known to the Wehrmacht, to emphasize the danger; and he appointed a strong man, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, to oversee anti-invasion measures.

Rommel, furiously riding his subordinates for six months, saw to the laying of twice the number of mines as had been laid in the previous two years. He brought reinforcements to the coast — and would have brought more had his superior, Field Marshal Gert von Rundstedt, not insisted on holding reserves back for a classic counterattack strategy. He motored relentlessly from unit to unit in an effort to infuse his men with something of his own indomitable spirit.

With some of the troops, notably those of the 352d Division who defended Omaha Beach, Rommel undoubtedly succeeded. Hitler should have been pleased with him. On the contrary, he chose to judge that Rommel was party to the conspiracy that nearly killed him on July 20, 1944. Although Rommel had by then been invalidated from the battle as the result of an attack by a British fighter on his car, he was forced to commit suicide as soon as he was well enough to perform the act.

Hitler's terrorizing of his commanders led to at least two more suicides — those of Rommel's successor, Field Marshal Günther Hans von Kluge, and Rommel's subordinate, Gen. Friedrich Dollman. The force of example thus given made its way down through the ranks. German officers exerted a strict but fruitful discipline over their troops.

ON numerous occasions — Operation Goodwood would be the best example — German troops fought with a dedication and success rarely found on the Allied side. In Goodwood, the great British tank attack of July 18, 1944, German anti-aircraft gunners shot up tanks and a German divisional engineer battalion, acting as infantry, mounted a successful defense. Hitler had no room for defeatists at the top of his army and his Draconian methods helped to insure there were few at the bottom.

So it was that the battle of Normandy, which the Allies had expected would last only a few weeks before the enemy withdrew to the French interior, dragged out into that beautiful summer like a replayed episode of World War I. German tenacity worked against Allied firepower to produce attrition, and both armies were ground to pulp. But while the Germans had no means to replace the pulp, the Allies had. Their unrelenting reinforcements eventually broke the German line and Allied forces encircled the remnants of the defense in a pocket near the village of Falaise. But the Germans broke out of the pocket and escaped to fight again later.

And so, in retrospect, one of the world's great ordeals came to appear one of the great epics. Max Hastings' reportage of the battle is not unworthy to stand with that of the best journalists and writers who witnessed it. It is a tribute to his skills as a historian and writer that, across the space of 40 years, he has managed to recreate what it was like for almost everyone who was there. □