

D-Day Historian Craig Symonds Talks About History's Most Amazing Invasion

Pre-eminent naval historian Craig L. Symonds talks about how the Allies devised, executed, and then survived the D-Day invasion.

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June 6, 1944—70 years ago—the Allied forces pulled off what many doubted could be done: the greatest armada in history transported the largest invasion force ever assembled into the most heavily defended coastline in the world and got ashore. The cost in lives, ships, and weapons of that D-Day assault was awful. But the liberation of Europe had begun.

The D-Day landings marked the final and long anticipated leap from England across the Channel to the Continent. After almost five years of war in Europe, two and a half years since the United States joined the fight, the ground war against Hitler and Nazi Germany from the west had begun. A year of fighting would remain, but that day's singular achievement presaged the final downfall of the murderous Third Reich.

The story of “the longest day” has been told many times from many angles, from the horrors and heroism on Omaha Beach to the cutting up of the paratroopers dropped behind the lines to the close quarters combat through Normandy's charming hedgerows and ancient villages. But D-Day was not a one-day affair. The landings culminated years of debate, planning, construction, bickering, invention, training, deception of the enemy and more. The operation on D-Day was known as “Overlord.” But D-Day was just the beginning of an invasion codenamed Neptune, starting with D-Day and culminating with nearly a million men from the U.S., the U.K., and Canada and everything they needed to live on and wage war streaming into France by the end of June. That was an undertaking on a scale like no other.

Lincoln Prize-winning naval historian Craig L. Symonds makes clear all that it took to pull off the complementary Overlord and Neptune operations in *NEPTUNE: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-Day Landings*. Starting out from the earliest days of planning for war in Europe that began years before the U.S. joined the fight, he shows how the Allies learned from their mistakes and successes in the invasions of North Africa and Italy to tackle the far greater challenge of landing in France. Along the way, he paints concise portraits of many of the key leaders involved, and also shows how many others less well known in the command structure planned and organized and then executed the invasion that started seventy years ago.

NEPTUNE is not *Band of Brothers*, but readers will understand just how the Allies accomplished the impossible on D-Day and set the stage for liberation.

Author of numerous books of American naval history, Symonds spent almost 30 years as a professor of history at the Naval Academy. A side note to Symonds's teaching career at the Naval Academy: before he played Jack Ryan in the 1992 hit action-suspense movie *Patriot Games*, Harrison Ford shadowed Symonds to sample the life of a civilian history professor at the military college. Symonds denies, however, that Ford modeled Jack Ryan on him.

Marc Wortman: Give us a sense of the scale of what took place during the D-Day landings on the morning of June 6, 1944.

Craig L. Symonds: Well, it was absolutely unprecedented. Of all the searing memories that participants recalled afterward, the one nearly everyone recalled was the carpet of shipping that crowded the mid-Channel rendezvous. Numbers are sterile, but depending on how you count, between five and six thousand Allied ships, embarking from 171 ports, took part in the invasion. By nightfall on June 6, the Allies had landed 132,450 American, British, and Canadian soldiers on French soil, along with thousands of tanks, jeeps, trucks and other vehicles.

That was just the tip of the spear. What followed over the next days and weeks?

There is a tendency to conceive of the Allied landings on D-Day as a single event, but in fact it was just the first step. After seizing the beaches, the Allies then had to land hundreds of thousands of more men, vehicles, and equipment in a never ending stream that lasted for months, and they had to do it faster than the Germans could direct reinforcements to the threatened area. Then, the Allies had to supply all those men with hundreds of tons of food, fuel, and ammunition, all of which came by sea.

Many amphibious invasions have failed. How likely was it that the German defenders would throw the Allied invaders back into the sea?

On Omaha Beach they very nearly did. There is a tendency in looking back on historical events to see them as inevitable, to assume that the huge Allied armada, and the meticulous planning all but ensured success. But little in history is inevitable. While complete failure was not likely, Omaha Beach was such a mess two hours after the first landing that Omar Bradley seriously considered halting the invasion of Omaha and sending the follow up waves to the other beaches. At 8:30 a.m. the outcome still hung in the balance.

Nothing on this scale ever goes smoothly. We know Omaha Beach was especially terrible. What went wrong there and elsewhere during the invasion?

There is an old saw among military practitioners that no plan survives first contact with the enemy, and so it was with Overlord-Neptune. Lots of things went wrong: the preliminary naval gunfire was too brief and failed to knock out most of the German strong points; the aerial bombing, massive as it was, missed most of the targets; the gliders and paratroopers mostly landed in the wrong place; the current off Utah Beach put the soldiers ashore a half mile from their intended target.

Omaha Beach was a special problem for several reasons: geography was one—the high ground behind the beach was crescent shaped and allowed the Germans to maintain a crossfire over the beach from their 81 machine gun positions. Another was the unexpected presence of the 352nd German division, sent to Omaha Beach just the day before for training. A third was the too-short naval bombardment, and the disappointments of the aerial bombing. Then, too, the crowding on the beach meant there was not enough time for the Navy Combat Demolition Teams to remove the beach obstacles. All that contributed to the chaos and bloodshed on Omaha Beach.

Simply put, how did the Allies pull off something so monumental? Who were the unsung heroes behind the scenes?

The Allies were successful for a lot of reasons but among the most important was American industrial productivity. Shipping was the principal strategic bottleneck, and U.S. shipyards were able to produce an unprecedented number of warships, especially destroyers to guard the trans-Atlantic convoys, plus more than 2,700 Liberty Ships—the essential transport and cargo vessels of the war, as well as thousands of specialized landing ships, essential to amphibious operations. In 1943 alone, American shipyards turned out more than 800 of the large LSTs and LCIs, plus more than 8,000 of the smaller landing craft known as Higgins boats after their designer Andrew Jackson Higgins. Even then, there were barely enough ships to meet the need. Given that, some of the unsung heroes were the shipyard workers back in the States who worked 60-hour weeks at 50 cents an hour to produce the ships.

Did Churchill and Roosevelt agree about the when, where, and how of D-Day and the invasion of France?

No. Indeed, the British and Americans had very different views. The simplified version is that Roosevelt and the Americans, led by U.S. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, wanted to invade France as soon as possible, preferably in the spring of 1943. Churchill and the British wanted to wait until Germany had been so weakened by aerial bombing and peripheral raids that an Allied landing would simply topple a collapsing regime. The wild card was the Russians, who were doing most of the fighting against the Nazi Wehrmacht, and who were desperate for a second front to take off some of the pressure. The Anglo-American “conversations” about the timing of the second front often grew heated and testy.

What was Supreme Allied Commander Eisenhower’s role in pulling off the successful invasion?

Eisenhower’s greatest contribution was his political sensitivity in commanding an Allied (British-American-Canadian) force. Aware that nationalist squabbles could wreak havoc with any plan, he made sure that soldiers and sailors of all nationalities were constantly reminded that they were Allied soldiers and part of an Allied command. Ike had to put up with (British Prime Minister Winston) Churchill’s constant meddling, (British Field Marshal Bernard Law) Montgomery’s officious posturing, (U.S. Army General George S.) Patton’s bloodthirsty eagerness, and the lobbying of the air commanders that they could defeat Germany just by bombing it. His patience as well as his determination was key.

Who chose the landing site and why?

From the beginning, it was evident that the landings had to be in northern France, since that was the only place where Allied aircraft, operating from Britain, could provide air support over the beaches. And in northern France there were only two possible sites: the Pas de Calais where the English Channel is narrowest, and the Bay of the Seine off Normandy. The latter site was chosen by a team led by Major General Frederick Morgan, whose curious title was COSSAC: Chief of Staff, Supreme Allied Commander. When Eisenhower replaced Morgan in 1944, he accepted Morgan’s decision.

How did Churchill and Roosevelt spend the day?

Roosevelt had hoped to fly to Britain and spend the day with Churchill, but his health made that impossible. Churchill then decided to embark on a British cruiser, the *Belfast*, and watch the landings from offshore. King George VI begged him to consider what a blow it would be to England should

the *Belfast* be hit by a chance bomb. So in the end, Churchill remained behind on the south coast of England. (The *Belfast*, incidentally, was not hit.)

You've been to the landing site. Tell us something about the emotions you felt walking the beaches.

Many of the German concrete defenses remain in place on Omaha and the other Allied beaches, and it is an odd feeling to look or crawl inside them. You can also see the remains of the "gooseberry"—the artificial breakwater the Allies created off the beach. My first visit was the 50th anniversary of VE day, May 10, 1995, and I was moved by the hand-lettered signs the French had put in their windows saying, "Thank you, Americans, for liberating us."

Most moving of all, of course, is the American cemetery where 9,387 men are entombed on French soil.

You've had a career teaching at the Naval Academy, and studied the cost of war. What have you tried to teach the young men and women about the past to prepare them for the challenges of modern warfare?

The first thing was to make sure they knew what happened there. D-Day was 70 years ago, and to midshipmen of today, it is all but ancient history. Second, it is important to show how the decisions and actions of ensigns and second lieutenants became absolutely crucial once the detailed plan began to fall apart. In the end, it was the ability of the senior non-coms and junior officers to adapt and adjust that made the landings successful.