

By Jared Newman
University at Albany student
May 2010

D-Day as depicted in *Life Magazine*, 1944

“D-Day” is a widely accepted military term referring to a combat action in its planning stages. However, in modern times, “D-Day” has come to refer to the military action that took place on June 6, 1944, by the Allied Powers in Normandy, France. Noted for its great success and as a major turning point in World War II, and, more specifically, the European Theatre of Operations, D-Day was the final step the Allies took to secure their foothold on the German-dominated continent. The largest force ever assembled for an amphibious military invasion operation up to that time, Operation Overlord consisted of more than 3,000 landing craft and more than 175,000 troops landing on the beaches of Normandy during the 24-hour period of June 6, along with millions more in the month that followed [Britannica 4]. Although the American public was aware of the invasion the day after it happened via newspapers, they didn’t truly understand its magnitude until it was presented in images. Always there in a time of war, *LIFE Magazine* provided numerous reporters and photojournalists, effectively documenting D-Day visually just two weeks after its occurrence.

Operation Overlord, as D-Day was code-named, had been planned for more than two years. Originally titled “Operation Roundup,” Overlord was initially set to go off in 1943, paired with another action titled “Operation Sledgehammer,” which would have been a smaller, more rapid cross-channel invasion of mainland Europe in the event of a Russian failure to hold its lines or a very unlikely German collapse. Sledgehammer was denied approval by the British and instead remodeled into “Operation Torch,” which was the Allied invasion of North Africa in 1942. British General Montgomery, known affectionately as “Monty,” was the commander of Allied forces in North Africa, and saw the desert triumph as the first of many doors that would open. A string of victories were about to engulf Allied forces in their European Theatre [Britannica 7]. The American public knew that there would be an invasion of Europe sometime in 1944, but they did not know where or when, and certainly were not aware of how awesome the Allied power would be. *LIFE’s* job was to bring it back to the American public for a showcase unlike any other.

After successes in Northern Africa and Italy, the Allies were able to redirect attention and energy to an invasion of Western Europe. Monty assigned each of five infantry divisions a stretch of coast east of the Cotentin Peninsula, on the northern shores of the Normandy region of France. Two American divisions took Utah and Omaha Beaches on the western approach; two British divisions took Gold and Juno Beaches in the middle; and one Canadian infantry division took the easternmost approach at Sword beach. On top of this, two American paratrooper divisions, the 101st and 82nd, were to be dropped south of the beaches five to six hours ahead of the invading force at midnight on June 6th. The paratroopers’ responsibility was to take control of key towns and strongpoints behind enemy lines, and most importantly, to disarm any cannon aimed at the beaches when the invasion started [CMH 12].

Although the Allied forces on D-Day seemed to catch the occupying Germans off-guard,

the invasion did not come as a complete surprise. Adolf Hitler had known for weeks and had been suspecting for months that the Allies would try to make a landing in Western Europe. However, what puzzled him was exactly where the landings were going to be. To make this more effective, the Allies deliberately gave away information via radio, radar, and visual reconnaissance to the Germans. This counter intelligence operation was called “Operation Fortitude.” For example, American General George S. Patton, although he did land and lead his 12th Army Group to victory at Brittany on D-Day *after* the main invasion force, was supposed to lead another force at the Pas-de-Calais, a point northeast of the invasion area. This deception was achieved through the Allied strategic planning of feeding known double agents the wrong information, as well as “failing” to effectively code radio messages, making it easier for the Germans to intercept them [OpFor].

Operation Fortitude was a major success, as nineteen divisions of German infantry and tank troops were left standing dumbfounded on D-Day at Calais, waiting for an attack that never came. Fortitude fooled not only the Germans, but the American public as well, as the bombings of Calais in the week leading up to D-Day misled anybody who was not in the Allied Supreme Command into thinking the landings were to be at Calais [CMH 15]. Although President Dwight Eisenhower had ordered the intentional passing of false information to the Germans and their double agents, the date and time of the actual event was kept secret, even from its own invading force. Some of this reason was because not even Eisenhower, Montgomery, or anyone on the staff of the Expeditionary Force really knew when the invasion was going to happen.

The weather in late May and early June of 1944 had been very temperamental, making for rough seas, which would have made the already multifaceted operation even more complex. The original date of the invasion was supposed to be June 5, 1944, but was postponed due to rough seas, which might have altered the trajectory of thousands of landing craft. Headlines in *LIFE* the next week as well as in tabloids the next day might have read “Extreme Massacre at Normandy” instead of “Break-Through In France” [“Break-Through” 19]. When the invasion finally did commence, it was met with great success. The Allies had broken through Hitler’s Atlantic Wall, and now had a foothold in Western Europe. America’s part in the largest invasion force ever assembled was substantial, and anything less than substantial coverage of it in the domestic media would not have done it justice.

While the Expeditionary Staff kept the timing of D-Day clandestine, its publication didn’t take very long. Newspapers sprang up with coverage and images back in the States by the very next day, June 7. Although Allied forces had captured North Africa and Italy, American morale at home and abroad depended on the success of this invasion; it would be the catalyzing event America needed to rally itself for the later part of the war. For example, a picture of General Eisenhower nonchalantly talking with some of the enlisted men prior to the invasion was being circulated in the States, making its way into big-name papers like *The New York Times* [Middleton 1]. Domestic papers, probably in accordance with military staff, were displaying possibly more beneficial information than they had to. For example, in his article “All Landings Win; Sea Wall Broken,” Drew Middleton, aside from building up the Allied army, jeers at the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe: “So feeble was the German Air Force opposition that one [American] fighter force swept seventy five miles inland without meeting opposition” [Middleton 2]. It was almost as if the writers had as much of a vendetta against the Germans as American troops did themselves.

Although the events of D-Day in widespread tabloid coverage surprised people, the text surely could not have matched the weight carried by the images *LIFE* released in its June and

August editions of 1944. Although the weeklong turnaround for the visuals of D-Day and its subsequent actions to appear seems slow by today's standards, the images were worth the wait. This one-week turnaround is especially impressive for the magazine as an institution in a time when computers and the Internet did not exist, meaning that the editorial staff had to rely solely on the safe transport of its field reporters back home. One of *LIFE*'s most detailed pictorials and stories of D-Day came in its June 19th edition. *LIFE* contributing reporter Charles Christian Wertenbaker provided a more than adequate seven-page spread, including his accounts from D-Day minus two through D-Day plus one [Wertenbaker 32-37].

The overall scale of D-Day could not be fully conveyed any better than when *LIFE* editors decided to include aerial reconnaissance photographs overlaid with different strategic Allied movements and battles drawn onto the map. The movements depicted indicate various advances toward Paris, whose capture was key to maintaining an Allied presence in Western Europe. The magazine served the purpose best of informing those at home of what battle in Normandy looked like, sometimes with six to ten pages full of pictures, some of them full-page. At a time when television did not exist in the American household, *LIFE* did a very accurate job of conveying the events of D-Day en masse to the American public, and in a timely manner as well, as the publications sources were only one to two weeks after the actual action at Normandy ["Battle of France" 34-35].

As important as it was that the American public get the full truth as to what was going on and what had already transpired in Normandy, the wartime climate ensured that whatever information conveyed was positive, emphasizing the gains made by the Allies and understating their losses. It is probable that articles written by *LIFE* staffers were first read by military eyes, and then processed with less personal or less harmful information - harmful in this context meaning that the articles might have contained information or views that would have damaged the perception of American military forces. In another article by Wertenbaker, measures were carefully taken to protect the identities of some dead soldiers on the beaches after the initial invasion by way of covering their faces before photographing the bodies - an attempt to respect the dead, to protect the public from the macabre details of death at war, and/or to ensure continued public support of the war by depersonalizing the fatalities [Wertenbaker 33]. However, overall there are very few negative images of any American forces included in the articles studied in this sample [all 1944 content]. Most, if not all, of the images depicted the battle and American and Allied forces in a positive, optimistic light. Aside from showing the true scale of Operation Overlord, *LIFE* did an excellent job of engaging the reader's interest with myriad action shots, most of them taken while reporters were in the heat of live battle. One such example is the assault by American tanks on a French house held out by German troops, as the photographer lay within firing range in the foreground of the shot. Another such example is that of a mortar round exploding in a field in the background as the cameraman approaches it via transport truck. The best of these pictures, however, is an aerial view of a field full of German tanks, disemboweled and stopped dead in their muddy tracks ["Break-Through" 19]. This powerful image makes it clear that even the mighty German tank divisions could not withstand the American onslaught that followed D-Day.

Probably the best firsthand accounts of life overseas were provided a few months after D-Day, in a few issues of *LIFE*, dating from August to October of 1944. In one issue, a feature called "*LIFE*'s Reports: War Photographers' Stories" included first-person accounts of invading and/or occupying photographers stationed with active military units on D-Day. However, these

accounts did not sensationalize war as one would have expected them to. Take photographer Frank Scherschel, for example:

The first mission on D-Day over northern France by the group of Marauders with which I flew was the easiest operational trip I ever made. We thought it was going to be murder but it wasn't. To show you how easy it was, I ate my bar of chocolate. In every other operational trip I sweated so much the chocolate they gave us melted in my breast pocket. [Scherschel 13].

This account, like many others in the paper, seemed to *follow* the initial invasion force, not be a part of it. Either way, Scherschel's calm description of his operation conveys to the American public that the situation was completely under control. No matter what, the press always wanted to give a positive depiction of any American military situation, as Phillip Knightley has demonstrated in *The First Casualty*.

Noteworthy aspects of the *LIFE* coverage included the sketches of an artist who had drawn on memories from his month spent in Normandy. *LIFE* artist Aaron Bohrod spent four months overseas, one of them all throughout Normandy. One of the cartoons, entitled "Anybody here from Chicago?" illustrates war correspondents inching through trenches and supply lines on the front, putting themselves at great risk while trying to interview the average American G.I. [Bohrod 8-12]. Bohrod sketched countless cartoons of his experiences, most of them individuals, but he did include a few sketches of the invasion force as a whole. One such depiction is of men unloading supplies over a broken barbed wire fence, while in the background numerous weather balloons as well as observer zeppelins wait over the heads of the thousands on the beaches. Bohrod's personable demeanor and aptitude for drawing make for a splendid combination that allowed him to access the soldier in a way the American public could relate to. Although cartoons are less visually striking than photographs, Bohrod did a good job of personalizing the invasion, giving the American public a glimpse into the life of a soldier without frightening them with depictions of bloody casualties.

This examination of *LIFE*'s 1944 issues archived at the New York State Military Museum underscores just how large the invasion was, as well as its importance in the larger scope of the war. In sum, the magazine content displayed the high sense of morale and pride America held about its military, from generals visiting enlisted men down to the grassroots papers covering the war. Without the media firsthand to witness and capture the Battle of Normandy, nobody back in the States might have understood the significance or effort of what the Allies had done.

American coverage of the invasion was overwhelmingly positive, and served to rally morale at home. When one looks at D-Day in retrospect as one of the most important events of the war, *LIFE* certainly did the assault justice in bringing it to prominence in the American psyche. Contemporary media coverage is instantaneous to the average American, with information about wars available almost as it happens, packaged in tiny sound bytes or tweet-bursts. Back in the 1940s, when there were no televisions, cell phones, or computers, the United States depended on magazines such as *LIFE* to provide an accurate depiction of combat as soon as it was available - which *LIFE* did, with a stunning array of articles and photographs to give the American public hope that their loved ones were achieving something great in the foreign theatres of war.

Sources consulted

Bohrod, Aaron. "Speaking of Pictures: Aaron Bohrod Sketches the War in France." *LIFE Magazine*, 28 Aug. 1944: 8-10. Print.

"The Battle of France." *LIFE Magazine*, 21 Aug. 1944: 34-35. Print.

"Break-Through in France." *LIFE Magazine*, 14 Aug. 1944: 19-24. Print.

CMH - Center for Military History. "Normandy: The US Army Campaigns of World War II." 15 April 2010. HYPERLINK "<http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/normandy/nor-pam.htm>" <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/normandy/nor-pam.htm>

"Normandy Invasion [European-United States History]." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 18 April 2010. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/418382/Normandy-Invasion>

"Operation Fortitude [OpFor]". *Normandie Memoire*. 18 April 2010.

HYPERLINK

"http://www.normandiememoire.com/NM60Anglais/2_histo2/histo2_p5_gb.htm"

http://www.normandiememoire.com/NM60Anglais/2_histo2/histo2_p5_gb.htm

Middleton, Drew. "All Landings Win." *New York Times*, 7 June 1944. Print.

Scherschel, Frank. "War Photographers' Stories." *LIFE Magazine*, 26 June 1944: 13. Print.

Wertenbaker, Charles. "The Big Days." *LIFE Magazine*, 19 June 1944: 32-37. Print.