

and Omaha Beach

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compassion and heroism. He admires some of the generals and ranking officers on both sides — most notably the Americans Dwight Eisenhower and George Patton and the German Erwin Rommel — but never hesitates to point out instances of "military prima-donnaship," whether practiced by the admired Patton or the British field marshal, Bernard Montgomery, whom an angry Eisenhower dismissed in a postwar interview as "egocentric" and "a psychopath."

The story of D-Day itself has been told so many times and in so many ways that Beevor is right to restrict his account of its central event, the assault on Omaha Beach, to a mere 25 pages, albeit 25 pages filled with blood and chaos. There were many times when the "situation on many parts of Omaha . . . was indeed horrific," and many of the deaths suffered that day were either excruciatingly painful or wholly unnecessary, or both, as when landing craft — part of "by far the largest fleet that had ever put to sea" — dropped their gates well short of the beach and deposited their human cargo in deep water where many men drowned. "The total number of American dead during the first twenty-four hours was 1,465," fewer than some had forecast but still a terrible day's work.

By the end of the day on June 6 and then well into the next day, Allied forces had secured Omaha and the other beaches they had invaded: Utah, Gold, Juno and Sword. Exact statistics for casualties for all the forces involved in the first 24 hours are just about impossible to come by, "since most formations' figures accounted for a longer period, never less than 6 to 10 June." But the figures for the first two weeks in Normandy are nothing if not sobering: American, British and Canadian casualties came to 5,287 killed, 23,079 wounded and 12,183 missing.

I draw two conclusions from those statistics. The first is that although the Canadian role in the invasion of Normandy (or for that matter throughout the war in almost all theaters) is often minimized or even ignored, in Normandy it was large and important. Canadian troops were involved in many hard encounters and often acquitted themselves with great bravery. "The strength of the Canadians lay in the quality of their junior officers," Beevor writes, "many of whom were borrowed eagerly by a British Army short of manpower." The second point is that the remarkably large number of missing soldiers cannot be attributed to those captured by the Germans. Though Patton cruelly dismissed victims of battle shock and those who went AWOL as crybabies, in truth they were as much war victims as those who had been killed or physically wounded. "US Army medical services had to deal with 30,000 cases of combat exhaustion in Normandy," and:

"Nothing . . . seemed to reduce the flow of cases where men under artillery fire would go 'wide-eyed and jittery', or 'start running around in circles and crying', or 'curl up into little balls,

or even wander out in a trance in an open field and start picking flowers as the shells exploded. Others cracked under the strain of patrols, suddenly crying, 'We're going to get killed! We're going to get killed!' Young officers had to try to deal with 'men suddenly whimpering, cringing, refusing to get up or get out of a foxhole and go forward under fire'. While some soldiers resorted to self-inflicted wounds, a smaller, unknown number committed suicide."

As Beevor says, there was a sharp contrast between the Allied foot soldiers and their German counterparts. The most fanatical of the latter (and "fanatical" is indeed the word), especially those in the SS and its Hitler Jugend offshoot, had been brainwashed by the Nazi propaganda machine into believing that the fate of the fatherland was in their hands, and they fought with that uppermost in mind. The British soldiers by contrast had been at war for five years and were exhausted by it. Americans and Canadians were not fighting for land they could call home and thus were motivated primarily by the group loyalty so essential to military morale.

The Allied advance across Normandy was anything but a cakewalk and might well have been turned back had it not been for the air supremacy that the Allies enjoyed, enabling their planes to give ground troops pulverizing air support (men on the ground soon learned to radio enemy positions to fighter and bomber pilots so they could pinpoint their fire), while Rommel was left to ask: "What's happened to our proud Luftwaffe?" German troops "often resorted to black humour. 'If you can see silver aircraft, they are American,' went one joke. 'If you can see khaki planes, they are British, and if you can't see any planes, then they're German.'"

En route to Paris, the Allies had to contend not merely with stout resistance from the Germans but with endless disputes among their top leadership, self-interested political maneuvering by Charles de Gaulle, and suspicion and hostility (as well as cries of welcome) from French civilians. "The greatest weight on Norman hearts was the terrible destruction wreaked upon their towns and countryside," and the human cost was every bit as terrible: "Altogether 19,890 French civilians were killed during the liberation of Normandy and an even larger number seriously injured. This was on top of the 15,000 French killed and 19,000 injured during the preparatory bombing for [the invasion] in the first five months of 1944. It is a sobering thought that 70,000 French civilians were killed by Allied action during the course of the war, a figure which exceeds the total number of British killed by German bombing."

Yes, it was a great victory the Allies won in Normandy, and to this day all of us should be grateful to those who won it. But the cost, as Antony Beevor is at pains to emphasize in this fine book, was awful beyond comprehension.

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