

1995

D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II

Robert Goldberg

Stephen E. Ambrose

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Goldberg, Robert and Ambrose, Stephen E. (1995) "D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 48 : No. 2 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol48/iss2/29>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

There were bullet holes through his shirt. The hill became known as "Edson's Ridge."

Edson was helping forge the controversial Marine faith that bulling ahead for quick victory minimizes casualties. He repeatedly told Marines hesitant to move forward, "You've got to take a chance on getting hurt." One of the most daring combat leaders of World War II, he never received a Purple Heart.

At Tarawa, Edson, now the 2nd Marine Division's chief of staff, took command of the growing forces ashore for twenty hours, after Colonel David M. Shoup had endured the first thirty-six hours at his command post on Red Beach. Before the landing, Edson had urged seizing other islands of the atoll as artillery bases. He was turned down, and the Marines took unprecedented casualties in the surf and on the beaches. The 2nd Marine Division next assaulted Saipan and Tinian to create airfields from which the Army Air Forces could bombard Japan directly. Now a brigadier general, Edson was named chief of staff, Fleet Marine Force Pacific, the Corps' theater headquarters for the final campaigns of the war. There he took a jealous interest in protecting the Corps from encroachments by the Navy, especially after Admiral Chester W. Nimitz supported the refusal by the Army-led force on Okinawa to land Marines behind the Japanese lines. But Edson would be denied his two greatest ambitions: to command a Marine division in combat and to wear the two stars of a major general.

At the beginning of 1946 he was back in Washington, fighting the Navy

and Marine Corps battle against the unification of the military services. He was the senior Marine on the staff of the Chief of Naval Operations and "the primary point of contact between the Marine Corps and the Navy." Edson and the antiunification "termites" won their share of battles, in good part because of Red Mike's personal courage. He went far beyond what Nimitz (now the CNO) or General Alexander A. Vandegrift, the Commandant, were willing to risk to make the case to Congress, the press, and the public. His most persistent argument was that a centralized military command—German style—would end up with an undemocratic nation—German style.

Hoffman writes clearly about that complex and bitter political battle over roles and missions. When President Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947, General Edson felt his official part was finished. Six days later, he retired. But to this day, the battle of roles and missions continues.

Edson missed the Korean War and became the first director of the Vermont state police and then the executive director of the National Rifle Association. In August 1955, when he was 58, he turned on the ignition of his car in his garage—and killed himself. But as Jon Hoffman makes clear, he was one of the bravest and the best of the few good men.

J. ROBERT MOSKIN
Author of
The U.S. Marine Corps Story

Ambrose, Stephen E. *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World*

War II. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994. 665pp. \$30

The allied invasion of Normandy was the largest amphibious operation in modern history. On D-Day more than five thousand ships and eleven thousand planes carried and supported 175,000 (mostly inexperienced) troops and tons of equipment across five heavily defended beaches extending almost fifty miles. The invasion was the linchpin of the strategy to defeat Nazi Germany. If the Allies had failed to secure a beachhead, the course of the war would have been vastly different.

Ambrose is the author of numerous books on presidents Eisenhower and Nixon and is currently the director of the University of New Orleans Eisenhower Center, which has compiled nearly 1,400 oral histories from allied and German participants in D-Day. Ambrose describes the D-Day landings from the perspective of those involved. From these and other sources, the author paints a vivid picture of D-Day's progress and how the Allies succeeded despite the breakdown of almost every aspect of their plan. For most of the book, Ambrose simply narrates the story as told by participants, including airborne troops, glider pilots, seamen, infantrymen, medics, engineers, artillerymen, and tank drivers. It is on these accounts that the strength of the book rests. *D-Day* offers a more comprehensive account of the invasion than its precursor, Cornelius Ryan's *The Longest Day*, which Ambrose credits with sparking his interest in the subject.

In the first part, the author sets the political and strategic contexts and discusses allied planning and preparation for the invasion; the second part covers the actual battle. Ambrose describes the initial aerial bombardments of the battle area, the airborne infantry assaults in the early hours of 6 June, the transport of men and equipment by air and sea, the naval barrage conducted prior to the first attack wave, and, finally, the infantry assaults on all five beaches. Much of this section is devoted to the American attack on Omaha Beach, where units of the 116th and 16th Regiments suffered 2,400 casualties, constituting 50 percent of the total allied casualties suffered on D-Day.

D-Day was a gamble. There were inherent risks in secretly sending a large force across the English Channel to a frontal assault upon heavily defended beaches. Eisenhower did not prepare alternative plans; if the assault had failed, Ambrose surmises, the Allies would have been forced to drop the atomic bomb on Germany. Reasons for the success on D-Day include unity of allied command, superior and innovative equipment to carry and land troops and equipment, air power to prepare and isolate the battlefield before the landings, a clever and successful deception plan that ensured surprise, French resistance fighters' cutting the German lines of communication in the hours before the attack, and poor German planning and organization. The Germans were plagued by a split command—it was Hitler, not Rommel, who controlled the panzer divisions and kept them out of the initial battles. Rommel sought to

defend the entire French coastline rather than concentrate defenses inland. However, once the Allies breached the Atlantic Wall, German defenses were thin.

The factor most important for the allied success, however, was training; it enabled inexperienced soldiers to carry out specific missions, sometimes improvised, in the face of unexpected adversity. Ambrose writes that "it all came down to a bunch of eighteen-to-twenty-eight year-olds." Proper training and preparation was vital, because virtually everything planned went wrong. Eisenhower believed that before battle plans are everything, but once the battle is joined they mean nothing. Unfortunately, this was true on D-Day. Air and naval bombings were supposed to silence German shore batteries and create craters that soldiers could use as makeshift foxholes. Instead, allied aircraft had difficulty navigating at night and hit only targets far inland, while naval guns, in the thirty minutes of bombardment before the landings, fired over the seawall. The Allies prepared landing plans and locations for each unit down to the minute; however, because rough seas forced many landing craft off course, many units landed late and on the wrong beaches. Few American airborne infantry units landed in the proper areas, because few pathfinders were able to find and mark the correct landing zones; many airborne troops were lost and unable to rejoin their units. Additionally, infantrymen, especially at Omaha Beach, fought without the support of artillery and tanks, which had either sunk in deep water, been destroyed by beach

obstacles, or could not land because of massive traffic jams.

The Allies' success that day is even more incredible when one considers each soldier's ordeal. Because Eisenhower had to postpone the landing one day due to bad weather, troops spent more than twenty-four hours aboard ships on the rough English Channel. Some were actually willing to land in the midst of artillery and mortar fire rather than remain seasick aboard the landing craft. These ailing troops, laden with heavy equipment, had to wade through deep water, cross exposed beaches through deadly fire, and climb over seawalls to get to safety. Those who did survive lost equipment or became separated from their units and were forced to improvise the rest of the way. Through it all, by the early hours of 7 June the Allies had breached the Atlantic Wall and obtained a small but secure foothold on the European continent. Their successes were products of America's industrial capacity, training, courage, and dedication to the ultimate cause.

This book does have one minor flaw. Reading of so many particular battles fought by individuals and units of varying sizes, one finds it easy to get caught up in the personal stories and lose track of unit numbers, names, locations, and specific objectives. Maps interspersed throughout the book are helpful, but the author describes more action than the maps can detail. Nonetheless, and while Stephen Ambrose may not offer any new information regarding D-Day, the compilation of experiences from its survivors in combination with his analysis provides an excellent and useful

account of the invasion and the reasons for its success.

ROBERT GOLDBERG
Arlington, Virginia

Perret, Geoffrey. *Winged Victory: The Army Air Forces in World War II*. New York: Random House, 1993. 549pp. \$30

Finally, we have a balanced and frank account of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) during World War II—"the big war"—and big the AAF was—fighting in several theaters, with tens of thousands of planes, striking losses, and immense problems. As a naval historian, this reviewer was totally unprepared for the staggering losses sustained by the Army's air arm. In but one example, Perret's description of General Nathan Twining's year-long bombing campaign against the German oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania, catches the irony of the victory—"A model of its kind: a heavy attack on average once a week until Ploesti was knocked out. The price was nearly three hundred heavy bombers and two hundred fighters shot down or wrecked . . . ; more than a thousand lives lost; and hundreds of young men left limbless, sightless, or crazy." The B-17 and B-24 bombers carried, respectively, crews of ten and twelve.

Based on exhaustive research in both primary and secondary sources, including the ULTRA intelligence, Perret's book gains its greatest insights from oral history transcripts, although he tends to accept most of them too uncritically. Inevitably, he focuses on General

"Hap" Arnold, the utterly humorless and "firm but often erratic" leader of the AAF. Typical of prewar Air Corps leadership, he was a do-it-yourselfer who did not use his staff or even delegate authority. Small wonder Arnold suffered no fewer than four heart attacks during the course of the war! However, thanks to his civilian boss, Robert A. Lovett, the Assistant Secretary of War for Air (and a former naval aviator), the AAF ran efficiently. Perret gives high marks to Carl A. Spaatz, James H. Doolittle, Curtis LeMay, George C. Kenney, and Claire Chennault, but reserves his highest praise for many group and wing commanders who directed the battles, often from the cockpit.

Skeptical of many air power claims (especially those of pilots after battle), the author pulls no punches; he rights the wrongs done by those who insisted that strategic bombing represented the future. The aura of Billy Mitchell had led his heirs to place the strategic bombers above all else, denigrating fighters. Only in 1943 did the horrendous losses of bombers force the use of P-47s and P-51s equipped with auxiliary gas tanks as long-range escorts to and from German air space and, in 1945, over Japan.

Perret gives not only the fighters their due but also troop carriers, gliders, and "attack" aviation: the B-25 and B-26 medium bombers redesignated as "light bombardment" to provide close air support. Given its penchant for bombing, the AAF often defined close air support as interdiction, but when its medium bombers did go in close they sometimes dropped on friendly troops. During 1943-1944, Arnold and his