

Churchill's D-day: The Tyranny of Overlord

D-Day. The 6th June 1944. Operation Overlord. The long awaited liberation of France and the opening of the second front in north-western Europe.

Here is a defining moment in the Second World War. One that is now associated in the popular consciousness with images of American troops storming ashore – as depicted in the dramatic opening sequence of the Hollywood blockbuster *Saving Private Ryan*.

It is not a moment normally associated with Winston Churchill. The British Prime Minister made two short statements to the House of Commons on 6 June, but neither rose to the levels of his famous oratory from the summer of 1940. There was no equivalent of 'blood, toil, tears and sweat', no 'fight on the beaches'. There was no broadcast to the people.

Indeed, when Churchill has featured as part of the D-day story, he has often been portrayed negatively. It is a process that began as early as 1948 with the revelations by General Eisenhower – the Supreme Commander for Overlord – that Churchill feared the seas would run red with blood.

Those comments became the starting point for the 2017 movie, *Churchill*, starring Brian Cox. The film opens with Winston nervously pacing a British beach and looking out across the Channel, as, in his mind's eye, the waves turn red with blood. He is presented as a man who is haunted by the ghosts of his past and who fears a massacre. He has seen it all before – at Gallipoli in the First World War – and the script has him doing all he can to prevent it happening again, showing him working to obstruct the D-Day operation with only hours to go.

But there is another interrelated criticism of Churchill. Namely that he did not want to fight in France in 1944 because he was prioritising the defence of the British Empire. Much has been written about his imperialism. He was certainly a lifelong supporter of the British Empire and, in November 1942, would famously assert that he had not become the King's first minister to preside over its liquidation.

The allegation against Churchill is that he used his influence to lead his American Allies away from northern Europe into the Mediterranean Theatre and Italy, and that he did so in an attempt to preserve the British Empire, allowing the Soviets to bear the brunt of the fighting against the German army in the east, and that -by doing so – that he prolonged the conflict and with it the suffering of countless millions in Europe.

What I want to do today is to show why I think this picture is too simplistic and to explain why OVERLORD was such a hugely complex proposition. We must remember that we see things in the rear view mirror. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that D-Day was successful, we know that it led inexorably to the end of the war in Europe, but hindsight was not a luxury that was afforded to Churchill, Roosevelt and the other Allied leaders. To them, it was a huge risk.

Churchill was fond of saying that the only thing worse than fighting with allies was fighting without them. By early 1942, he had not one but two powerful new allies, each coming to the top table with their own agendas and strategies for running and winning the war: the

Russians desperate for help in eastern Europe ; the Americans keen to defeat Germany in western Europe as quickly as possible so that they could turn against Japan in the Pacific.

It was at this moment – in April 1942 -that this important letter from Franklin Roosevelt was handed to Churchill.

Dear Winston

What Harry and Geo. Marshall will tell you about has my heart & mind in it. Your people & mine demand the establishment of a front to draw off pressure on the Russians, & these peoples are wise enough to see that the Russians are today killing more Germans & destroying more equipment than you and I put together. Even if full success is not attained, the big objective will be.

The President's letter was designed to open discussions that would lead to the establishment of a new front in Western Europe. With it came a second document, a secret memorandum. Entitled *Operations in Western Europe*, an American military plan –promoted by General Marshall and his protégé General Eisenhower. Its language could not have been clearer. The United States wanted a cross-Channel operation as quickly as possible.

*Western Europe is favoured as the theatre in which to stage the first major offensive by the United States and Great Britain. ... **Through France passes our shortest route to Germany.***

The objective was to seize the French beaches between Le Harve and Boulogne. **But** the plan recognised that it would take time to build up American forces in Britain and it estimated the earliest date for D-Day as 1 April 1943.

The delivery of this letter and memorandum marked the arrival of the Americans in the European theatre. This was something that Churchill had been hoping for, and working towards, since May 1940. It might be assumed, therefore, that the President's words would be music to his ears; after all, he had pledged himself very publicly to the restoration of France and the destruction of Nazism in Europe. But British weakness meant that he and the British Chiefs of Staff now favoured a very different policy.

For Churchill, this was no moment to risk a return across the Channel. The loss of the American Fleet had left the British Empire in the East horribly exposed. Hong Kong had fallen, the British army had surrendered at Singapore and the Japanese seemed poised to overrun the Indian Ocean and attack Australia. Worse still, the British were on the retreat again in North Africa where they were engaged in a see-saw war of attrition with General Rommel. 1942 was a bleak time for Churchill. On 2 July, he had to face down a confidence vote in his administration in the House of Commons. The Labour MP Aneurin Bevan made the stinging comment that 'the Prime Minister wins Debate after Debate and loses battle after battle'.

So, behind the scenes Churchill and the British set about convincing their American counterparts that any return to France could only happen after the completion of their preferred operations in North Africa. The obvious weakness in the US plan was that it would take time to build up the required American forces in Britain. In the meantime, the Americans were expecting the British to provide the majority of the troops, the naval

support and aerial protection for any operation. And, with all their other existing commitments, the British simply did not have the numbers even for a limited operation in France.

So, an attack on French North Africa was dangled as the best alternative; an invasion of Vichy-held (and nominally neutral) Morocco and Algeria. If successful, it would relieve pressure on the British fighting in Egypt and Libya, open up a new front against Rommel, facilitate a decisive end to the North African campaign and free up British forces for campaigning in France. It would enable the Allies to practise amphibious operations and landings on a less well-defended shoreline, where untried US troops would not face veteran German units. The operation could also take place relatively quickly with overwhelming Allied naval and air superiority.

It was these practical considerations that gradually tilted Roosevelt towards Churchill's preferred strategy. The process was helped by continued British weakness in North Africa. There was a dawning realisation by the Americans that they could not allow the British to lose in the Mediterranean.

At the same time, the difficulties of a cross Channel operation were horribly illustrated by the disastrous failure of Operation Jubilee, an attempt in August 1942 to attack the town of Dieppe on the French coast. The largely Canadian troops were pinned down and badly mauled on the beaches. The tanks could not climb the shingle beaches. Losses were high. The town was not taken. The failed operation was a stark reminder of the difficulties of conducting such an amphibious assault. The British General Alan Brooke saw it as a lesson 'to the people who are clamouring for an invasion of France'. More recently, Professor Paul Kennedy has written that the psychological lesson of Dieppe was that when the Allies did come ashore in France, 'they were going to have to be very, very good'.

So, it is easy to see why D-Day gets knocked back to 1943. Neither the British nor the Americans believed a large-scale assault on France was feasible. But it is less obvious why the Allied invasion of France does not happen until 1944. The answer lies partly in the law of unintended consequences. The decision to proceed with operation TORCH – the landings in North Africa, and the operations that then flowed from them - further delayed the build-up of forces in the United Kingdom.

It was in January 1943, at the Casablanca conference, that the main steps on the long road to victory were agreed. The Mediterranean would be the immediate priority, with Sicily the next target after the clearing of North Africa, but preparations would be stepped up for a larger entry into France in early 1944. It was a compromise, but the fact that Roosevelt, Marshall and Eisenhower all ultimately agreed to it was a recognition that this provided the surest and safest way to victory at what they believed would be the lowest cost. With hindsight and our knowledge of the success of OVERLORD, it is a decision that can be challenged, but from the military perspective there were clearly a number of preconditions

It is worth looking at each one of these in turn. Could any of them have been met before the spring of 1944? And what role did Churchill play in meeting these preconditions and making D-day possible?

A sophisticated level of British and American inter-service cooperation

From the top down, from the Prime Minister and President, it took time to build the close political and military ties and develop the trust and teamwork that underpinned the alliance and made OVERLORD possible. The Anglo-American and inter-service cooperation, planning and staff work needed to make an assault against Hitler's fortress Europe was never going to be produced by desk clerks working in offices; it had to be forged and tested in war. A clear partnership framework had been established with the creation of the Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee which brought together the military leaders of both countries. The big strategic decisions concerning OVERLORD and D-Day were taken at a series of major conferences throughout 1943, culminating in the Tehran Conference in November attended by Marshal Stalin for the Soviet Union. These meetings were often difficult, but they allowed a common strategy to be hammered out.

It was in North Africa in 1942-43 that the commanders for D-Day gained their first experience of working together against the common enemy: the same enemy commander in General Erwin Rommel that they would face one and a half years later in Normandy. But the bond was not formed instantaneously.

Control of the seas

In his own words, the only thing that ever really frightened Churchill during the war was the U-boat peril. He said: 'I was even more anxious about this battle than I had been about the glorious air fight called the Battle of Britain.'

One way in which Churchill digested the huge amount of information arriving on his desk was to have the complex figures and statistics converted into graphs and charts. Hand-drawn specially for him, these colourful documents presented the realities behind the figures in a highly visual and easily comprehensible manner. They painted a worrying picture.

It was a battle that was expressed in figures – Allied merchant shipping losses in one column, numbers of German U-boats (submarines) sunk in another; production numbers versus losses on both sides, and it was a battle that the Allies were initially losing. In 1942, seen the loss of 1,664 Allied merchant ships, nearly 8 million tons. Ships were being sunk faster than they could be replaced.

Britain was an island, cut off from most of neighbouring mainland Europe by Hitler's occupation, and dependent – in an age before commercial air freight – on imports by sea for her survival. With traffic through the Mediterranean almost impossible, her main supply routes were now coming across the Atlantic Ocean. If these could not be maintained, the country might be brought to its knees and forced to negotiate. In any event, a heavily besieged country would not be in a position to act as a forward base for an Allied liberation of France.

It took the first half of 1943 to win the Battle of the Atlantic and establish command of the seas. That is a story for another time, but Churchill used the convening power of his office to bring together the key authorities through his anti U-boat committee.

By May 1943, the situation in the Atlantic was in the process of being transformed but again – it all took time.

Mastery of the air

Mastery of the air was just as important to the success of OVERLORD as command of the seas. In any air battle over France, the Germans would enjoy the home advantage of being closer to their bases and being able to refuel more quickly. Air supremacy was therefore felt to be a vital requirement for a successful invasion of Europe, particularly one that was intended to push on into Germany itself. Churchill made clear 'That there must be a substantial reduction in the strength of the German fighter aircraft in North-West Europe before the assault took place.'

This involved increasing allied production while reducing German capacity. A key factor was the relentless bombing of Germany by the Allies. It was a strategy that Churchill had endorsed from the moment he became Prime Minister, one of the few ways in which he had been able to take the fight to the enemy. But again, it took time. 1942 saw both the arrival of the American 8th Air Force in Britain and the appointment of the single-minded Air Marshal Arthur Harris as head of British Bomber Command. The Casablanca Conference further increased the tempo, unleashing operation POINTBLANK against German military and industrial targets. With the Americans bombing Germany by day and the RAF at night, the Luftwaffe were forced to divert more and more resources to the defence of the German homeland.

A huge build-up of men and materials

The build-up of American and other national forces in Britain had started in the immediate aftermath of Pearl Harbor, but it had initially been small. In early 1943, there was still only one US division in the UK. Nor was it possible simply to transfer large numbers across the Atlantic without putting in place the substantial infrastructure that would be needed to sustain them. Preparations had to be put in place to accommodate a million and a half US servicemen.

A greatly weakened and overstretched enemy

Yet perhaps the real turning of the tide was one that Churchill himself chose to largely downplay in his Cold War-era *History of the Second World War*, and that was the smashing of the German Army on the Eastern Front in Russia in 1943. It is noticeable that he devotes only six pages to the siege of Stalingrad [now Volgograd] in Volume IV and just three pages to the Battle of Kursk in Volume V. Yet these huge land battles, fought by enormous armies, far larger than those deployed by the British and Americans in North Africa or the Mediterranean, accounted for the vast majority of German combat losses. By the autumn, the Red Army had pushed the Wehrmacht back hundreds of miles on a huge front and had retaken Kiev in the Ukraine.

By 1944, the sheer scale of Soviet success on the battlefield introduced a new element into Allied planning, namely the fear that Germany might collapse completely leaving the Soviets in possession of large swathes of the continent. That was not the outcome that Britain had gone to war for in 1939.

The existence of enough landing craft to get the army safely ashore and keep them supplied

The ability to deliver the troops and their equipment onto the beaches is an often-overlooked factor in the success of D-Day. Britain and the United States had large navies and could get their armies across the Channel, but without the control of large deep-water ports (which were inevitably going to be heavily defended) they had no way of getting them ashore. Planning for D-Day was dependent upon securing the necessary number and variety of landing ships and craft. These were essential for any amphibious operation, and they simply did not exist in any significant numbers at the beginning of the war.

Churchill, Roosevelt, the Combined Chiefs of Staff and their planning teams spent huge amounts of time wrestling with the logistics of the landing craft.

The final OVERLORD operation would involve a staggering 4,126 landing ships and craft, many of them highly specialist. It inevitably took time to assemble, to recruit and train the crews, and develop the procedures and tactics for such an armada.

The development of officers and troops with real combat experience and high morale

And then there was the issue of morale. The Allied forces might have had an increasing advantage in terms of quantity and quality of arms, but prior to 1943 they had yet to develop the ability and cultivate the self-belief to use them effectively. Up until the Second Battle of El Alamein in November 1942, the British Army had not had a large-scale, decisive victory against the Germans. Small wonder then that Churchill wanted to savour and celebrate the moment, ordering the ringing of British church bells and proudly announcing at the annual Lord Mayor's luncheon in London's Mansion House that 'We have victory – a remarkable and definite victory. The bright gleam has caught the helmets of our soldiers and warmed and cheered all our hearts.' American troops had to suffer their own baptism of fire at the Battle of the Kasserine Pass in Tunisia in February 1943, before they too gained in experience and became more battle-hardened.

There were other factors too – the breaking of the German codes and the gathering of intelligence on enemy dispositions, the development of hugely complex deception plans to fool the enemy as to the location of the landings, the creation of huge Artificial harbours to allow reinforcements and supplies through the beaches and the design of specialist tanks to storm the beaches. Churchill played a key role in supporting them all.

It is my view that all of these factors, taken together, are what contributed to the success of D-day in 1944. We can never know what would have happened if an assault had been made earlier, but it would certainly have been more difficult. Churchill played a key role in ensuring that all the essential preconditions were met.

The pressures were immense and Churchill clearly disliked the period of waiting and preparation immediately before the invasion. After all, he was responsible for putting the UK into a state of virtual lockdown – and we all know what that is like!

On the night before D-Day he dined alone with Clementine and told her that, *“Do you realise that by the time you wake up in the morning twenty thousand men may have been killed?”*

And it would be wrong to think that this streak of pessimism was a lonely manifestation of Churchill's black dog. It was not. Strip away the layers of hindsight and you see that it was shared by almost all the senior Allied commanders. Admiral Ramsay, the often forgotten architect of the naval planning, Operation Neptune, wrote in his diary for 5 June 1944, *“I am under no delusions as to the risks involved in this most difficult of all operations & the critical period around H-Hour when, if initial flights are held up, success will be in the balance.”* Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the British Imperial General Staff went even further in his private journal of the same day, writing: *“I am very uneasy about the whole operation. At best it will fall so very very far short of the expectation of the bulk of the people, namely all those who know nothing of its difficulties. At the worst it may well be the most ghastly disaster of the whole war. I wish to god it were safely over.”*

Even the Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower, after giving the momentous order to go, retired to write and seal a letter to be opened in the event of failure that night accepting personal responsibility upon withdrawing the troops from the beach heads.

The failure of OVERLORD would have meant the failure of everything Churchill had worked towards. It was a make or break moment, with all the eggs in one basket, and it is not therefore surprising that he was worried.

But how did he cope with that worry? Well, he decided to accompany the invasion force himself. At his request, plans were made for the British Prime Minister to board HMS *Belfast* on D minus 1, before transferring to a destroyer for a short tour of the beaches on D-Day itself. This was not popular. The military commanders did not want the added burden and responsibility of having Churchill anywhere near the action.

Churchill stuck to his guns. It then took two very personal and hand-written appeals from King George VI, the second sent as late as the 2 June, before Churchill conceded. When he did, it was with reservations and bad grace, grudgingly deferring to His Majesty's 'wishes and indeed commands' while protesting that, 'I ought to be allowed to go where I consider it necessary to the discharge of my duty'. Later, he reflected that: 'A man who has to play an effective part in taking, with the highest responsibility, grave and terrible decisions of war may need the refreshment of adventure. He may need also the comfort that when sending so many others to their death he may share in a small way their risks.'

Churchill needed the release of action. He was finally able to inspect the Normandy beachhead on 12 June.

What General Lord Dannatt and I have aimed to do in our forthcoming book is to put Churchill's decisions and actions in context and to show the many factors and individuals that coloured his approach to this critical operation.

Yes - He was undoubtedly influenced by the First World War and a desire to avoid a repeat of the huge bloodshed of the trench stalemate in France, which would have been catastrophic for the country and almost certainly fatal to his own administration.

Yes - He was determined to preserve the British Empire. Any British Prime Minister in 1940 would have been forced to think about the defence of Egypt, Malta and Palestine, and of

routes to Canada, India, South Australia and New Zealand, but Churchill was particularly driven by a desire not to preside over the Empire's liquidation. He was also becoming increasingly worried about soviet domination of the Balkans. The pending post war settlement was certainly a factor in his desire to keep fighting in Italy, even after the final decision had been taken to attack in north-west France, and explains why at times he resented what he called the 'tyranny of Overlord'.

Yet, for all this, he regarded the relationship with the United States and the commitment to D-Day as the keystone '*arch of Anglo-American co-operation*'. All the major decisions were debated with Roosevelt and the Combined Chiefs of Staff and taken for sound strategic reasons. Operations in North Africa and Sicily took on their own momentum and further delayed D-Day, but they were launched because the preconditions for an assault on Normandy had not yet been met, because the risks of a frontal assault in France were deemed too high, and because to do nothing while preparing to attack France was politically and militarily unacceptable. The Battle of the Atlantic had to be won, mastery of the skies obtained and the enemy isolated and weakened.

On D-Day itself, Churchill – in spite of his best efforts to get himself a front-row seat on board a British ship – had to wait for news of the battle in London. There is no doubt that the build-up to the launch had been a particularly stressful time. He did not have the same reserves of energy as in 1940, but neither was he a nervous wreck as the movie *Churchill* seeks to portray him. The weeks leading up to OVERLORD saw him taking an active interest in all aspects of the operation and using his convening power to ensure that production targets were met and security was maintained. Though often portrayed as a warmonger, one of Winston's consistent concerns in Cabinet meetings prior to the invasion was to minimise allied military and French civilian casualties. Yes, he drove the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff to distraction, complaining about the number of support vehicles versus front-line troops, railing against the machinations of de Gaulle, and opposing plans to bomb French railway marshalling yards, but he did so out of a concern to reduce losses and ensure success. Surely that was his job?