

**WORLD WAR II  
(1939-1945):  
OPERATION OVERLORD:  
D-DAY 1944**



# **WORLD WAR II (1939-1945): OPERATION OVERLORD: D-DAY 1944**

## **Description**

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the events surrounding Operation Overlord (commonly known as the D-Day Invasion of Normandy), why the Allied Supreme Command chose the Normandy beaches for the invasion, and how mistakes made by the German high command before and after the invasion ultimately doomed the Third Reich.

## **Subjects**

World History, US History, European History

## **Grade Level**

11-12

## **Duration**

180 minutes

## **Tour Links**

- Normandy Beaches
- American Cemetery in Normandy

## **Essential Questions**

- What was Operation Overlord? Why is it commonly known as “D-Day”?
- What was the allied strategy behind the D-Day landings? Why were specific beaches in Normandy chosen for the landings?
- How did the Germans respond to the D-Day landings?
- Why were the D-Day landings considered the turning point on the western front in WWII?

## Academic Summary

### *DOUGHBOYS GET THE GLORY FOR ALLIES' SUCCESS*

*Foot Soldiers' Valor Won Beachheads.*

Newspaper Report By John Thompson.

[Chicago Tribune Press Service.]

WITH U.S. FORCES IN FRANCE, June 7 [Delayed], - There were thousands of gallant men on the beaches of France which this task force seized yesterday. And when you think of the invasion of Europe in big headlines and it all seems so magnificent, remember some of these thousands.

In particular, remember the gallant 800 riflemen and the score of assault engineers who first hit the beaches in our sector and helped make the invasion possible.

We laid on one of history's greatest concentrations of naval gunfire and heavy bombing attacks, but it still remained for the doughboys to charge ashore with rifles against the rows of beach obstacles and machine gun nests atop a steep cliff overlooking the beach area.

#### **The Living Get Priority.**

Many of them of course, will never tell the story. They lie in long lines along the beaches awaiting burial details, for at the moment the living have priority and the masses of guns, mechanized equipment, ammunition, and rations go forward.

After the naval barrage yesterday morning, our first assault boats made their run in from the big transports. In the first boats were special engineers laden with demolition charges to be used in blowing gaps in the rows of beach obstacles.

These were lines of upright wooden logs with slanting timbers lashed to them to trip up our flat bottom barges. There were massive steel contraptions topped with mines.

#### **Off to a Bad Start.**

But before we had embarked our colonel had told us a truism: "If anything can go wrong in battle, it will go more wrong in an amphibious landing, which is the toughest military offensive operation."

He was right. Whether because of the haze, defense machine gun fire, or inexperience, the boats grounded on the wrong sections of the beach. Some lowered their ramps immediately in front of strong points. Even the engineers were helpless.

They started lashing their demolitions to the obstacles, but machine gun fire cut them down before the charges could be exploded. Then came the infantry in waves, many of them also hitting the wrong beach sections. As the soldiers plowed ashore thru neck high water and surf, the hidden Germans enjoyed a machine gunners paradise.

#### **On and On They Drive.**

But this was power, sheer power, with which we were to crack Hitler's fortress, and men kept coming while the naval guns blasted enemy artillery in pillboxes

many feet thick. And from well camouflaged positions which had long been emplaced in the beach approaches German 88's laid their fire directly on the beach. But still our troops kept coming on though the beaches were in shambles and sunken landing barges dotted the sea.

Our colonel had told his men, many of them veterans of North Africa, Tunisia, and Sicily that on them alone rested the final say as to whether this invasion would succeed. The colonel himself was the first man ashore from our small barge, which moved in immediately following the assault waves at 8:20 a.m. We had tried once but had been driven off. Then we came again, dropping into neck high water and struggling in loose sand as more bullets splattered about us. Then we were on the beach, lying flat in the loose shale behind a tiny ridge, our only protection.

The dead and wounded sprawled on every side, while medical aid men, lying beside them tried to save the living.

#### **Rallies Men for New Push.**

We were completely at the mercy of the enemy, saved only by naval gunfire and the courage and ability of the soldiers who pressed inland on the flanks. As it was, the colonel had to scurry about reorganizing the men still pinned there and getting them ready for a new push.

He got his men off the beach and onto high ground where they could silence the machine guns and push inland. But throughout the day the Germans retained an advantage in artillery and made the beach a scene of horror and confusion.

But this was a power play, and although boats were sunk at sea or as they beached, men and equipment somehow forged shoreward to reinforce our slim toehold. They turned it into a much stronger force which, with the aid of naval guns, silenced the more menacing batteries.

At 06:30 local time, the first US assault troops from the 8th Infantry Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division disembarked from their landing craft and hit the sands of what allied commanders had dubbed "Utah Beach" on the French coast of Normandy. Behind those first brave soldiers were tens of thousands of similar men and landing craft headed for different beaches all over the Normandy Coast with names like Omaha, Gold and Sword. Over 150,000 troops crossed the English Channel that day. Overhead, hundreds of allied bombers and fighters supported the landings. The invasion of Western Europe had begun.

Facing the allied troops was a hail of bullets from thousands of German soldiers dug in on Hitler's so-called "Atlantic Wall", a string of fortifications covering beaches stretching from the Spanish border to the northernmost reaches of Scandinavia. Back in Berlin, the German high command and its fuhrer ordered soldiers to hold firm against the allied advance. In the end, the orders were futile. Although German troops put up a valiant defense, over the course of the next few days, Allied troops would push in from their beachheads, driving the German forces back methodically in their charge towards the Rhine. Within a month, over 1 million Allied troops would cross the channel to join the fight in France. Fighting again on two fronts, the German army was simply outmanned

and out gunned.

Supreme Allied commander Dwight D. Eisenhower and his staff had planned the operation for months. The Normand invasions were considered a critical part of winning the war against NAZI Germany. With Russian troops fighting a savage war on the eastern front and the Allies bogged down in a struggle against tough German forces in Italy, Allied commanders and political leaders knew that opening a western front was key to winning the war. American President Roosevelt and British Prime Minster Churchill also believed that opening a western theater was important in making sure Soviet Premier Stalin's troops didn't take most of Europe in their march west.

During the planning for the invasion, many different locations were considered and subsequently rejected. Norway's coast was too rocky and approaching through the North Sea was problematic at best due to summer storms and rough weather. Southern France was also a possibility, but that meant a higher chance that German intelligence agents could detect and discover the allied movement of troops. Normandy seemed to be the ideal choice, across the channel from England and yet with enough different beaches to confuse the Germans.

Most German commanders believed the invasion ultimately would come at Calais, a port essential to supplying any invasion force. Hitler himself had ordered extra forces to be stationed in the Calais area to repel such an invasion. Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox" from North Africa and the man responsible for fortifying the Atlantic Wall, however, believed that the beaches south of Calais were better suited to an amphibian assault. In the weeks before the invasion Rommel ordered his troops to build obstacles at the high tide mark on the beaches along the Atlantic Wall, obstacles that would ultimately slow down the allied troops during the invasion.

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the events surrounding Operation Overlord (commonly known as the D-Day Invasion of Normandy), why the Allied Supreme Command chose the Normandy beaches for the invasion, and how mistakes made by the German high command before and after the invasion ultimately doomed the Third Reich.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the events surrounding Operation Overlord.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why the Allied Supreme Command chose the Normandy beaches for the invasion.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how mistakes made by the German high command before and after the invasion ultimately doomed the Third Reich.

## **Procedure**

### **I. Anticipatory Set**

- Writing / Question: Why is D-Day so important to the American Memory? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### **II. Body of Lesson**

- Lecture / PPT – D-Day 1944 (20 min)
- Video – D-Day Invasion (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on D-Day and Operation Overlord, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework.
- Suggestion: AP / Advanced students should focus on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on D-Day and Operation Overlord (20 min)

### **III. Closure**

- Assessment – Essay: Explain in detail the events surrounding Operation Overlord (commonly known as the D-Day Invasion of Normandy), why the Allied Supreme Command chose the Normandy beaches for the invasion, and how mistakes made by the German high command before and after the invasion ultimately doomed the Third Reich.

## **Extension**

### **On tour: D-Day Beaches**

While on tour, students will visit the D-Day Beaches in Normandy, where they can see for themselves where Operation Overlord took place. Omaha Beach, of course, is the most famous and most visited. Make sure to visit the American Cemetery in Normandy as well.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-teachers/lesson-plans/pdfs/eisenhower-speaks.pdf](http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-teachers/lesson-plans/pdfs/eisenhower-speaks.pdf)  
Eisenhower Speaks before D-Day (lesson plan with primary sources) – from the National WWII Museum. Highly recommended for all classes as background material.
- [www.army.mil/d-day/](http://www.army.mil/d-day/)  
D-Day (website) – from the US Army
- [www.firstdivisionmuseum.org/](http://www.firstdivisionmuseum.org/)  
First Division (US Army) Museum
- [www.dday.org/](http://www.dday.org/)  
National D-Day Memorial (website)
- [www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dday/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dday/)  
American Experience: D-Day (primary and secondary sources) – from PBS
- [www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/d-day-june-6-1944.html](http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/d-day-june-6-1944.html)  
D-Day June 6, 1944 (primary and secondary sources) – from the National WWII Museum, this site was created to help educators in teaching about D-Day. Highly recommended for all classes.
- [www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/world-war-ii/essays/d-day-or-operation-overlord-june-6-1944](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/world-war-ii/essays/d-day-or-operation-overlord-june-6-1944)  
D-Day or Operation Overlord (academic essay) – from the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History, this secondary source does a great job in giving an overview of the invasion
- <http://pgss.sd57.bc.ca/~rlewis/website/Hist12/Unit3/8%20D%20Day.ppt>  
D-Day (PowerPoint) – from Prince George Secondary School in British Columbia, Canada
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and History classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dljmOcp\\_xhQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dljmOcp_xhQ)  
Operation Overlord (videos) - This documentary, at about 90 min in length, is probably too long for in-class showings, but it is worth it. Highly recommended for all students, especially AP / Advanced.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rS24mmOtAlc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rS24mmOtAlc)  
Uncut Chronicles: D-Day (video) – This 10-minute film is actually a newsreel from the time period and is appropriate for all students.

### Background Information

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normandy\\_landings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normandy_landings)  
Normandy Landings – Wikipedia article

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invasion\\_of\\_Normandy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invasion_of_Normandy)  
Invasion of Normandy – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omaha\\_Beach](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omaha_Beach)  
Omaha Beach – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic\\_Wall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_Wall)  
Atlantic Wall – Wikipedia article

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/winston-churchill-speeches-during-the-blitz](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/winston-churchill-speeches-during-the-blitz)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Churchill’s Speeches
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plan/england/second-world-war-st-paul-stands](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plan/england/second-world-war-st-paul-stands)  
World War II (1939-1945) – St. Paul’s Stands against the Blitz
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/world-war-ii-fall-of-france-1940](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/world-war-ii-fall-of-france-1940)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Fall of France 1940
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/poland/nazi-invasion-of-1939](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/poland/nazi-invasion-of-1939)  
World War II (1939-1945) – German Invasion of Poland 01 Sep 1939
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/miracle-at-dunkirk-1940](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/miracle-at-dunkirk-1940)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Miracle at Dunkirk 1940
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/world-war-ii-operation-barbarossa](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/world-war-ii-operation-barbarossa)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Operation Barbarossa: German Invasion of Russia
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/world-war-ii-stalingrad](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/world-war-ii-stalingrad)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Stalingrad: Turning Point of the War
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/world-war-ii-dday-invasion-1944](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/world-war-ii-dday-invasion-1944)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Operation Overlord: D-Day Invasion of Normandy
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/world-war-ii-liberation-of-paris-1944](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/world-war-ii-liberation-of-paris-1944)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Liberation of Paris 1944

### **Key Terms**

- Amphibious Landings
- Atlantic Wall
- D-Day 06 Jun 1944
- Operation Overlord
- Strategy



