



Grupo de Investigación
Historia Militar

Historic Battle, Modern Doctrine: How We Can Learn Lessons From Omaha Beach Using the US Army's Modern Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield Doctrine

By Tyler R. White, Ph.D.

Introduction

Volumes of books and articles have been written chronicling the June 6, 1944 D-Day landings in Normandy and the process, including intelligence efforts, leading up to the invasion. Much has been also published on the unique challenges of each landing spot, the most notorious of which was Omaha Beach. This article does not seek to summarize or relitigate this familiar territory. Instead, I simply seek to look at the tactical intelligence and operational challenges presented by the landings at Omaha Beach and compare the preparation and prosecution methods of the landing to current day US Army Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) to understand the scope of the task in modern day terms.

This article very briefly discusses the historical circumstances that led to the invasion, summarizes the strategic and tactical situation, then compares the prosecution of the landings to modern doctrine. The landings at Omaha Beach were almost a failure due to poor planning and a failure to address essential tactical problems associated with the landing area.¹ By examining a historical case study, we also objectively comment on lessons learned and show how modern doctrine developed to address some of those weaknesses.

¹ Murray, Williamson and Allan R. Millett. *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War*. Cambridge Press, 2000. p. 418-419

The Strategic Situation

The tide of war had slowly begun to swing toward the allies by early 1944. Unable to bring Great Britain to its knees in the summer of 1940, Hitler all but guaranteed the eventual attempt by the Allies to land on the European continent. While the location was a mystery, the massive buildup of arms and men in 1943 through early 1944 gave the Germans every indication that a landing attempt was imminent.

The precarious strategic situation for Germany in the winter of 1943 became worse as the tides had turned against the Nazi war effort in the east and the combined bomber offensive from the west began. A decisive defeat of Friedrich Paulus's sixth army at Stalingrad and the effective end of Operation Zitadelle put the Wehrmacht and SS units on a perpetual, retreat toward Germany. Defeats for Axis powers were also beginning to pile up in the Mediterranean as American and British forces began to expose Hitler's soft underbelly in Sicily and Salerno. Yet, good landing options in France remained elusive for the Allies. Attempting to keep the Allies out of France, Hitler began to reinforce his relatively poorly equipped and war weary divisions in France, focusing on the Pas de Calais, where the Germans believed an invasion was most likely. The 'Atlantic Wall,' as Hitler called it began to take shape.

Providing Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt with General Erwin Rommel and Army Group B to defend the French coast, Hitler's attempt to create a fortress Europe in the west was backed by capable and deadly force. Rundstedt and Rommel differed on how panzer forces should be used in attempts to repel an Allied invasion.² Rundstedt preferred to keep his panzers in reserve while Rommel wanted them on the front line. German attempts to prepare the

² Parker, R.A.C. *The Second World War: A Short History*. Oxford Press, 1989. p. 196

battlefield intensified dramatically and included beach obstacles, fortified bunkers, gun and panzer revetments, and mines. Despite these efforts, the Wehrmacht could only guess where a potential landing could take place, and with the devastating losses delt to the Luftwaffe by the combined bomber offensive, prospects for control of the airspace were dubious at best.

Poor German intelligence helped the Allied efforts by spreading the Wehrmacht all along the West European coast. Additionally, large strategic intelligence operations were aiding Allied planning for D-Day. Bletchley Park had broken German message encryption through Ultra. American and British forces pulled off incredible deception operations Bodyguard and Fortitude, convincing the Germans that Patton's mythical 1st Army Group would invade France through the Pas de Calais. Nevertheless, the Allies would face a nearly insurmountable task in successfully completing a cross channel invasion of France. The strategic situation was set. How the combatants would prepare and then negotiate the battlefield remained to be seen.

Operation Overlord

Pas de Calais was a tempting landing spot for the Allies. Closer to the Reich, containing a large port, and being closer to Great Britain, it seemed a natural choice. Helping the Germans reach that conclusion was not difficult, although some commanders and units remained open to the idea that the attack would come from elsewhere.³ Allied commanders, under General Dwight D. Eisenhower had indeed identified five landing spots for five Allied divisions in Normandy, not Calais. Beaches codenamed Sword and Gold would be assigned to the British, Juno to the Canadian Division and Utah and Omaha to the American forces.

³ Murray and Millet p. 412

Accomplishing the landings required the Allies would commit 6,039 sea vessels, 11,590 aircraft that flew 14,647 sorties, 1,150 tanks, and about 130,000 soldiers.⁴ This made the D-Day landings the largest amphibious operation in history. Normandy offered the Allies, for the most part, good landing ground and defensible positions. British and American paratroopers largely protected landing grounds from counterattack. One notable exception existed, however. The critical long sandy beach that ended in a 200 foot well defended cliff codenamed: Omaha. Sitting between Utah beach and the British landing zones to the east, Omaha beach represented a make-or-break situation for the Allied invasion, and it nearly failed due to poor tactical intelligence planning and gathering.

Upon arriving in Europe, fresh off a tour in the Pacific, General Charles Corlett readied himself to apply the lessons learned during his amphibious assaults on Attu and Kwajalein. Instead, he found Generals and war planners completely incurious about his experiences during the successful landings in the Pacific.⁵ Corlett reviewed the battle plans for Omaha beach and found them lacking in supporting naval firepower, ammunition allocations and tactical understanding of the battlefield itself.⁶ In short, General Omar Bradley lacked, or in some cases, ignored the tactical intelligence needed to ensure success on Omaha beach, to the point that at one point he briefly contemplated evacuation.⁷

Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB)

⁴ Holland, James. *Normandy '44: D-Day and the Epic 77-Day Battle for France*. Grove Press, New York. 2020. p. 647-648

⁵ Murray and Millet, p. 418

⁶ Ibid, p. 418

⁷ Russell F. Weigley in Lewis, Adrian R. *The Failure of Allied Planning and Doctrine for Operation Overlord: The Case of Minefield and Obstacle Clearance*. *The Journal of Military History*. Lexington, VA. Vol. 62, Issue 4. October 1, 1998.

The modern incarnation of intelligence preparation of the battlefield or IPB is a deliberative and continuous process intended to inform the decisionmakers, before and during battle, of changes in the environment and the enemy positions, capabilities, and course of action (COA). IPB is initiated through the army intelligence directorate of the branch or joint-command that is initiating battle planning. Usually initiated and facilitated by the G-2/J-2 (Intelligence branch), the IPB requires inputs from across the unit.

The process consists of four steps, that when taken together allow the commander flexibility and the opportunity for course correction. Defining the battlefield environment, describing the battle effects, evaluating the threat, and determining the threat's courses of action. In basic terms, it creates a picture of the battlefield that the commander needs to see, not necessarily one they want to see. This process can allow commanders to spot problems early and adjust. It is also recommended that commanders and staff down the chain of command to the individual soldier have IPB inputs and plans of their own, ensuring more precise and flexible combat units.⁸

The explicit goal of IPB is to support decision making before and during the operation. This being the case, the process is organized to meet three primary objectives: mission analysis, developing COAs, analyzing potential COAs. This phase allows the planning staff to ask big questions about the operation and how it could succeed or fail. The process also helps to select and refine doctrine that will be used. The analysis of courses of action directly supports the fourth phase of IPB; determining the threats courses of action. It raises possible enemy actions and then tactical adjustments that can be made to counter them. Through the creation of

⁸ Field Manual (FM) 34-130. Headquarters. Department of the Army. Washington DC, 8 July 1994, p. 1-4

matrices, overlays, and wargames, the final product is a more synchronized staff that can engage with more options to adapt and overcome obstacles and threats. The process continues during operations for an updated and accurate COAs.

Attempting to compare a World War II battle to modern conditions is a challenge. Modern battle planning involves accounting for new domains and capabilities not even imagined in the Second World War. However, the process of intelligence gathering and analysis, both before the battle and then in real time may prove insightful here. My aim is not to make a perfect comparison, that would be a near impossibility, but to find new insights on the landings at Omaha beach using a modern framework.

Defining the Battlefield (Operational) Environment

Step one in the IPB process consists of three different goals: to identify characteristics of the battlefield that will influence friendly and threat operations, to establish the limits of the area of interest (AI), and to identify gaps in intelligence holdings.⁹ These steps comprise the initial intelligence gathering effort that informs war planning. Focusing the remainder of the IPB process means in-depth evaluations of key AI characteristics including geography, weather, logistical infrastructure, and demographics. This process raises key questions that may require further intelligence gathering.

In the case of Omaha Beach, Allied efforts to define the AI proved adequate. The five mile stretch of beach nestled between the villages of Colleville and Vierville offered Allied planners five potential landing spots, two of which had developed tracks running toward each village. Landing zones were divided into Charlie, dog, easy, and fox, with dog, easy and fox

⁹ Field Manual (FM) 34-130. Headquarters. Department of the Army. Washington DC, 8 July 1994, p. 1-1

being subdivided by color. Historically considered a natural gateway into Europe, Normandy was also located straight across from the Isle of Wight, a place rich in port and rail facilities that made launching and supplying an invading armada easier.

The cliffs along the beach offered defenders an unobstructed view of the approaching armada and amphibious forces. German fortifications overlooking the main landing tracks near Colleville and Vierville were formidable, but the remainder of the fortifications and gun encampments were only sprinkled over the remainder of Omaha beach. To shore up defenses along the otherwise open landing zones were a significant number of mines, offshore and onshore obstacles, thick layers of anti-personnel wire and an anti-tank ditch than ran the length of the AI.¹⁰ Above all other considerations was the fact that Normandy did not have a large port and its slowly sloping shoreline would keep deep draft ships away from the shore.¹¹

Describing the Battlefield's Effects

The second step in IPB is to describe how the environment described above will influence operation for both the friendly and enemy forces. Specifically, planners want to know the population status overlay, a clear picture of the military aspects and effects of terrain, the weather analysis (could also include moon phase or tide), and what potential obstacles can be expected. These efforts guide the planning process but also serve as critical updates as the battle progresses. Focused on physical and social forces that impact warfighting, planners and commanders can adjust to increase the efficacy of their force's efforts.

Attempts to liberate France in 1944 would necessarily involve invading French towns and villages all along the landing zones. Likely too, would be fierce fighting in those towns and

¹⁰ Holland, p. 68

¹¹ Berman, Mildred. *D-Day and Geography*. Geographical Review Vol. 84, No. 4, October 1994 p. 470

villages that would be populated with French civilians. Key would be French support for Allied troops after the pacification of the area. Prior to the D-Day landings, French Resistance fighters provided good intelligence that was helpful in planning. Contact with French Resistance fighters, especially for paratroopers during and after the invasion was possible.

Weather along the English Channel is notoriously inconsistent and often harsh during the spring, complicating any attempt to cross the channel. Meteorological teams indicated the odds of having the desired weather as 24-1 in May 13-1 in June and 33-1 in July.¹² Syncing weather with lunar and tidal cycles was also a necessity. Large obstacles on the beach required a low tide so that landing craft could see them and not risk sinking or damage. Only three days in June met both the tidal and lunar requirements: June 5th, 6th, and 7th. Heavy overcast or rain also impacts the ability to perform reconnaissance, ground attack, or bombing from the integrated air support. Ultimately, after calling off the invasion once due to weather, Eisenhower made the final decision to invade at 4:15 am.

Evaluating the Threat

The third step in IPB is a focus on threat doctrine, capability, intention, and preference. A well-known enemy will avail the commander with existing knowledge of doctrine, tendency, capability, tactics, and equipment. Commander experiences, intelligence both historic and current can also be used to fill in gaps and assumptions about the adversary's potential COAs. IPB products produced in this phase are often graphics, charts, and maps that detail capability, movement, and position.

¹² Berman p. 472

The Wehrmacht defenses along the 'Atlantic Wall' were formidable but only in some places. Undergirding the strategic and tactical plans of the German defenders was a hope that the Allies would be forced to attack in a place of their choosing. The ports at Calais led the Germans to reinforce the defenses there, but Rommel, in charge of the defenses to the south correctly identified Omaha beach as the most likely landing spot.¹³ Given the uncertainty of the precise landing place however, the Wehrmacht positioned 58 divisions (out of nearly 300) along the coast in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Rundstedt commanded Army Group B in Northern France and the Netherlands, Army Group G was in the South of France. Nestled within Army Group G was Rommel's Seventh Army in charge of Normandy and Brittany.

Experience varied widely for soldiers in the Seventh; from experienced paratroopers and Panzer units to new recruits and so called 'stomach and ear' units, filled with older soldiers or soldiers back on the frontline after suffering war weariness.¹⁴ In the area of Omaha Beach was the 352nd Infantry Division (which slipped in undetected by Allied Intelligence) and was reinforced by 914th and 916th Grenadier regiments with the 915th held in reserve. Additionally, the 726th infantry regiments and 352nd Artillery Regiment also served at Omaha Beach. All told the 352nd consisted of 12,020 men, of which 6,800 were experienced combat troops. Panzers, which were not directly under Rundstedt or Rommel's control, would be held in reserve.¹⁵ All orders for reinforcements would come directly from Adolph Hitler.

Determining Threat COAs

¹³ Greenwald, Byron. 'Why Normandy Still Matters: Seventy-Five Years On, Operation Overlord Inspires, Instructs, and Invites Us to Be Better Joint Warfighters. Joint Forces Quarterly: JFQ, 2019-10-01, p. 58

¹⁴ Holland p. 14-15

¹⁵ Enemy Defenses. Omaha Beachhead. United States Army Center of Military History. 1994 (20 September 1945). p. 25. Retrieved 2007-06-10.

Finally, step four is a focus on the threat or adversary's potential COA. Care is taken to try to mitigate adversary COA or to induce COAs favorable to friendly forces. Doing this requires an analysis of friendly COAs from the planning phase through the operational phase, analysis from planning through operation of the AI and threats or opportunities to friendly forces. Models of potential enemy COAs, given their attributes and the characteristics of the AI can begin to map out possible COAs as the operation progresses and give commanders the ability to try and force the enemy into their preferred COA.

The clear and overarching strategic objective of Operation Overlord was to establish an overlapping and interlocking beachhead that, once secured, could provide a base from which to begin unloading troops and supplies on to the European Continent. German strategy was predicated on keeping the Allies from being able to come ashore. Fortifications and distributed firepower would be used to push the Allies back should they attempt to land. The earliest phases of the operation would determine German COAs. Allied efforts to bomb defensive positions and to land paratroopers behind the beaches focused on diminishing and then trapping German forces.

Operational Analysis

Operation is considered a smashing success that created the foothold the Allies needed to liberate Western Europe and defeat Nazi Germany. It continues to be an enduring example of getting the overarching war planning correct through a competent policy making process.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Omaha beach was the site of the worst casualties on D-Day and some of the fiercest fighting. This invites many questions; including whether there was a failure in

¹⁶ Greenwald p. 63

battlefield preparation, intelligence, or whether circumstance simply made Omaha Beach a more difficult landing zone. The reality is that all these reasons are at least partially correct.

The Allies used ingenuity to overcome the major shortcomings in the landing locations. Floatable docks called 'mulberries' were brilliantly employed to overcome the logistical problems associated with the poor and often non-existent docking facilities in Normandy. Purpose built tanks, called 'Hobart's Funnies' in reference to their creator and advocate Major General Percy Hobart, helped to clear mines and obstacles on the British beaches. Precisely timed aircover eroded German defenses as troops came ashore and took advantage of almost complete air superiority.

The Omaha beach efforts suffered from poor doctrinal adherence to minefield and obstacle clearance.¹⁷ Bombers approaching Omaha beach were not able to fly horizontal to the beach due to fuel conditions and instead could only bomb head on in one pass leaving German encampments relatively intact. In fact, only three bombs hit the beach.¹⁸ Finally, a lack of naval firepower, alluded to by General Corlett, in the early phase of the operation meant little to no suppressive fire for the troops landing on the beach. Instead of constraining the German COA as early as possible through sustained preparatory strikes, it forced the infantry and sappers to deal with the enemy encampments.

The physical characteristics of the beach compounded the shortcomings in battle preparation and doctrinal execution. The beach's sheer size combined with steep cliffs made the landing site a difficult one even under the best circumstances. The fact that so many

¹⁷ Lewis, Adrian R. *The Failure of Allied Planning and Doctrine for Operation Overlord: The Case of Minefield and Obstacle Clearance*. *The Journal of Military History*. October 1, 1998, 62, 4 p. 787

¹⁸Badsey, Stephen and Tim Bean. *Omaha Beach*. Sutton Publishing 2004. P. 50

German positions remained when American troops hit the ground and had unobstructed lanes of fire was a recipe for disaster early on. Ultimately 34,000 troops would land on Omaha beach, but at the cost of 2,400 casualties.¹⁹

Conclusion

Perhaps the most steadfast rule in warfare is that not everything will go according to plan. This inevitability is what inspires the creation of new rules, doctrines, articles, and discussions at every level of command. Although the landings at Normandy would ultimately accomplish its goal of establishing a beachhead from which to launch a massive attack on Nazi Germany, the sun set on D-Day with the Allies having not achieved any of their objectives aside from the landing itself.²⁰ The difficulties experienced by the paratroopers inland and the casualties in places like Omaha beach have provided students of warfare with ample opportunities to critique the battlefield preparation in advance of the invasion. We hope that this very simple attempt to map a more modern doctrine on to the invasion of Omaha Beach has generated a few lessons for future war planners to consider.

Sources

Badsey, Stephen and Tim Bean. *Omaha Beach*. Sutton Publishing, 2004.

Berman, Mildred. *D-Day and Geography*. Geographical Review Vol. 84, No. 4 October 1994.

Field Manual (FM) 34-130. Headquarters. Department of the Army. Washington DC, 8 July 1994.

Enemy Defenses. Omaha Beachhead. United States Army Center of Military History. 1994 (20 September 1945).

¹⁹ Murray and Millet p. 445

²⁰ Greenwald p. 65

Greenwald, Byron. 'Why Normandy Still Matters: Seventy-Five Years On, Operation Overlord Inspires, Instructs, and Invites Us to Be Better Joint Warfighters. Joint Forces Quarterly: JFQ, 2019-10-01.

Holland, James. *Normandy '44: D-Day and the Epic 77-Day Battle for France*. Grove Press, New York. 2020.

Lewis, Adrian R. *The Failure of Allied Planning and Doctrine for Operation Overlord: The Case of Minefield and Obstacle Clearance*. The Journal of Military History. October 1, 1998 Volume 62, Number 4

Murray, Williamson and Allan R. Millett. *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War*. Cambridge Press, 2000.

Parker, R.A.C. *The Second World War: A Short History*. Oxford Press, 1989.

Russell F. Weigley in Lewis, Adrian R. *The Failure of Allied Planning and Doctrine for Operation Overlord: The Case of Minefield and Obstacle Clearance*. The Journal of Military History. Lexington, VA. Vol. 62, Issue 4. October 1, 1998.