



Grupo de Investigación
Historia Militar



Oberstleutnant Dr. Heiner Bröckermann, Leiter Bereich Grundlagen der Historischen Bildung, Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr, Potsdam, Deutschland

LTC (German Army) Heiner Bröckermann, Ph.D., Branch Head Fundamentals of Historical Education, Center for Military History and Social Sciences of the Bundeswehr, Potsdam, Germany

2021-10-09

Rommel's Defensive Strategy and the Battle of Normandy

[For publication of the proceedings of the International Seminar of the 77th Anniversary of the Normandy Landings, organized by INISEG and AUSA (Association of the United States Army)]

In modern war, there is seldom the only decisive battle. The Second World War did not end immediately on June 6, 1944. In retrospect, however, the invasion of June 1944 must be seen as a decisive battle. Not only had the soldiers who fought in battle, but also the technical and military elites of the warring states given their best to a victorious operation. Both sides had long foreseen this day and planned for it. In addition, the storming on the beaches of Normandy had something epic about the struggle for the good of the new North Atlantic community of values against the absolute evil of the Greater German Empire. The crusade against the Third Reich was excellently equipped and morally superior. Moreover, the latter was decisive in the combination, as the Prussian war philosopher Carl von Clausewitz already had known: "The physical [causes and effects] are almost no more than the wooden handle, while the moral are the noble metal, the real bright-polished weapon." ¹ For the German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, planning the defence against an invasion and the fighting in Normandy should be among his last military tasks. In addition, it looked as if the "desert fox" on the coast was acting completely contrary to the operational leadership skills of his past campaigns.

Coastal defence on the Atlantic Wall

The defeat in the Battle of Britain in 1940 also meant the end of German plans to invade Great Britain. With the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the French coast became a secondary theatre of war from the army's point of view. In 1941, the decision was made to build a "new west wall" on the Atlantic coast. From the Norwegian North Cape to Biarritz in France, this line was to be expanded militarily over a distance of about 5000 km. In total, around 10,000 larger bunkers and around 6,000 makeshift bunkers were built by the work of the Todt Organization by 1944/45. In addition, there were countless smaller facilities used by the Wehrmacht construction troops. The Normandy coast was one of the focal points of the Atlantic Wall. „On-the-Ground Divisions“ primarily provided the military garrisons of this gigantic line of defence. These were military units with older, chronically ill, and often wounded soldiers. There were also so-called Eastern Troops (Osttruppen), recruited from Eastern European and Central Asian prisoners of war. The troops in the west were

¹ Vom Kriege. Hinterlassenes Werk des Generals Carl von Clausewitz, 17. Ed., Dümmler: Hannover, Hamburg, München 1966, p. 255.

increasingly weakened to support the eastern front and in return received personnel replacements from other fronts. Often soldiers with low operational value due to frostbite, malaria or other diseases. The troops of the Atlantic Wall were also not mobile, but were only used as fortress garrison personnel on site. Each of these divisions should cover an area of up to 20 km. In focal points, the width has been reduced to around 10 km. Smaller landing operations, such as at Dieppe or St. Nazaire, led to an expansion of the facilities in France in 1942. By the summer of 1943, 15,000 large and small fortresses were to be built; around 15 to 20 bunkers per kilometre of a stretch of coast. The line was to be occupied by 300,000 soldiers, to whom about 150,000 soldiers in the hinterland were to be assigned as reserves. However, the plans were too ambitious and illusory. That is why a move was made to declare and expand selected coastal towns and islands as fortresses by the spring of 1944. For this reason alone, around 115,000 soldiers were tied to these places for defence between Holland and the French Gironde. In June 1944, around 160,000 men, including 16,000 Germans, were working on the construction site of the Atlantic Wall.²

The military command of the Atlantic Wall, along with other theatres of war, was organized with a Führer directive No. 40 "Command powers on the coasts" of March 23, 1942. The defence of the Atlantic Wall was defined as a task of the Wehrmacht, which, contrary to the typical organization of the armed forces, was to be carried out from a single source. The coastal defence in France was put under the control of the Commander-in-Chief West, who was directly subordinate to the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW, High Command of the Armed Forces). How the struggle should be waged is made clear by Hitler's directive in a few sentences:

"In the battle for the coast (...), when evaluating recent combat experiences, the responsibility for the preparation and implementation of the defence must be clearly and unreservedly united in one hand. For this purpose, the commander in charge must use all available combat forces and resources of the Wehrmacht, the divisions and units outside the Wehrmacht and the German civilian agencies deployed to destroy the means of transport of the enemy and his landing troops in such a way that the attack if possible before, but at the latest after Reaching the coast collapses. Landed enemy must be destroyed in an immediate counterattack or thrown into the sea. All weapon carriers - regardless of which part of the Wehrmacht or which units outside of the Wehrmacht they belong to, are to be assigned uniformly for this purpose."³

The Commander-in-Chief West, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, organized the coastal defence based on the Führer instruction as support for the fight against the Soviet Union. In an order from July 1942, Rundstedt emphasized the task of "keeping the Fuehrer's back free for his operations". The order culminated in the statement: "In any case, we must prevent a 'second front' from arising. That is our historical task! You own our entire workforce, our entire personality and our lives." ⁴

² Dieter Ose, Entscheidung im Westen 1944. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der alliierten Invasion. Reprint from 1982, Helios Verlag: Aachen 2013, pp. 22-24 und p. 29; Rudi Rolf, Der Atlantikwall. Die Bauten der deutschen Küstenbefestigungen 1940-1945, Biblio: Osnabrück 1998, pp. 161-226.

³ Adolf Hitler, Weisung Nr. 40. Betr.: Befestigung an den Küsten. In: Dieter Ose, Entscheidung im Westen 1944. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der alliierten Invasion. Reprint from 1982, Helios Verlag: Aachen 2013, pp. 279-282, cit. S. 279.

⁴ Cit. see Dieter Ose, Entscheidung im Westen 1944. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der alliierten Invasion. Reprint from 1982, Helios Verlag: Aachen 2013, p. 26.

The Management of Chaos

The Wehrmacht lacked an effective leadership organization in many places. In part, this was a consequence of the National Socialist leader principle, which consisted of a multitude of competitions and dependencies. Disputes could only be decided on a case-by-case basis by a higher management level. This was also made clear by the defence of Western Europe in 1944. Field Marshal von Rundstedt led Army Group D in France. In 1943 General Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was also used in France with his Army Group B. Rommel's task was to defend the coast and was placed under the command of Army Group D Rundstedts, which was given the title of Commander-in-Chief West. From May 1944, Army Group G was also established in southern France. Only "if there was a risk of Allied landings" were subordinate to Commander-in-Chief West, Field Marshal von Rundstedt, Air Fleet 3 (Field Marshal Hugo Sperrle) and the Navy Group Command West (Admiral Theodor Krancke). After all, Field Marshal Sperrle, who was also responsible for the anti-aircraft units on the Atlantic Wall, was the deputy of Commander-in-Chief West in a secondary function.⁵ The example of the coastal artillery showed that the promised pooling of responsibilities did not work. It was organized by the German Navy according to the principles of naval combat. This meant, among other things, that the guns were set up directly on the coast with a view of the sea. However, this also enabled easy reconnaissance and combat of the gun emplacements from the sea. From the point of view of the navy, they only wanted to fight sea targets. This meant that an activity in other areas or even in the hinterland of the positions was not planned and so any such plans were not pursued by the navy. In addition, the navy was in command as long as the enemy was on the water. When the enemy landed, the command should go to the army. Ultimately, this did not meet the requirements for combat in an ongoing landing operation. A clarification with Hitler requested by General von Rundstedt only led to the confirmation of the regulation and the indicated way out that in the fight, if necessary, a decision from Hitler should be obtained through official channels via the OKW.⁶

Defence on the "Second Front"

General Field Marshal von Rundstedt, in view of the impending danger of an Allied landing, described the "Great Situation" as early as October 1943 with an extensive memorandum to Hitler and the OKW to point out the problems and weaknesses of the coastal defence. Rundstedt expected a landing in the area around Calais. Despite good preparation on the coast itself, he saw many shortcomings in comparing the experiences of World War I with trench warfare. Nothing went beyond watching and securing in the front line. This would mean that if you had to give up the coastline quickly, you would not be able to take advantage of the obstacle value of the sea. The defence lacked great depth. The flexible warfare preferred by German leadership, with counter-attacks, intercepting and smashing the enemy, could therefore not succeed due to a lack of mass and quality. The few available forces of the army could not withstand allied divisions in a free operation in the hinterland of

⁵ Peter Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg. Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44*, R. Oldenbourg Verlag: München 2007 (=Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte, 69), pp. 49-51 und pp. 82-83.

⁶ Dieter Ose, *Entscheidung im Westen 1944. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der alliierten Invasion*. Reprint from 1982, Helios Verlag: Aachen 2013, p. 27.

the coasts. Despite the fact that Rundstedt saw the only option in defending the coast and holding it at all costs, he advised further planning of a mobile defence using the hinterland. This made clear that the Commander-in-Chief West should again submit more mobile units with higher combat strength. The success of the memorandum was Directive No. 51, with which Hitler wanted to strengthen the defence in the West. A large Allied landing was assumed for the future not only in France, but also in Denmark. Both regions should be strengthened militarily. Here, too, it became clear that the aim was to prevent the "Second Front":

"The danger in the east has remained, but a greater one is looming in the west: the Anglo-Saxon landing! In the east, the size of the room allows, in extreme cases, a loss of soil even on a larger scale without fatally hitting the German lifeblood. The West is different! If the enemy succeeds in breaking into our defence on a broad front, the consequences will be incalculable in a short time."⁷

On January 17, 1944, Hitler once again strengthened the position of Commander-in-Chief West. From then on, he was allowed to declare certain sections of the terrain as "combat area" and thus to subordinate himself to everything in the combat area. This soon affected the coastal strip in particular up to a distance of about 20 kilometres from the seashore.⁸

In his Basic Order No. 37 of February 24, 1944, the Commander-in-Chief West emphasized once again that he saw the main obstacle off the coast: "Our approach obstacle is the sea, the best anti-tank ditch!" The position in front of the coast was to be held. In the words of the order: "There is no evasion in the western area." In order to compensate for the superiority of the Allies on land and at sea, the bunker positions and high combat value of the German soldiers should be sufficient. The fundamental questions of repelling an enemy invasion were decided long before the invasion of June 6, 1944 at the top military level. An exception to this rule was the question of where the mobile reserves should be stationed in advance of the expected invasion. A controversy between Rundstedt and Rommel did show this.⁹

Defense planning and "tank controversy"

With the Fuehrer directive No. 51 of November 1943, the focus of the defence of Fortress Europe was initially placed on the west again. The threat of invasion had taken on more concrete forms. In November 1943 General Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was transferred to France as Commander in Chief of Army Group B. First, however, Rommel should devote himself to defense preparations in Denmark. Then he visited the sections between the Somme and Scheldt in France. In addition to the Pas-de-Calais, Rommel saw the areas between Boulogne and the Somme estuary as possible landing areas. Finally, Rommel also

⁷ Adolf Hitler, Weisung Nr. 51 vom 3. November 1943. In: Dieter Ose, Entscheidung im Westen 1944. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der alliierten Invasion. Reprint from 1982, Helios Verlag: Aachen 2013, pp. 305-307, Cit. p. 305; Ose, *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸ Peter Lieb, Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg. Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44, R. Oldenbourg Verlag: München 2007 (=Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte, 69), p. 83.

⁹ Detlef Vogel, Deutsche und alliierte Kriegführung im Westen. In: Horst Boog, Gerhard Krebs, Detlef Vogel, Das Deutsche Reich in der Defensive. Strategischer Luftkrieg in Europa. Krieg im Westen und in Ostasien 1943-1944/45, DVA: Stuttgart, München 2001 (=Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, 7), pp. 417-639, hier mit Zitaten pp. 463-464.

toured the beaches of Normandy. His appearance on the Atlantic Wall alone had a certain military value. Rommel was not only considered a capable military leader, but also a public relations general. Its nimbus as a "desert fox" and military adversary of Great Britain should also secure the fortress Europe in the west through propaganda.¹⁰

Rommel knew that the British and American soldiers should not be underestimated. Other officers who, unlike Rommel, had also fought on the Eastern Front, believed more in the superiority of the Wehrmacht, especially the armored weapon. In addition, combat units, such as the Panzerlehrdivision, were regarded as units with high combat value. Rommel wanted to turn the Atlantic Wall and the entire coast against England into an impregnable line of defence. Mine barriers and infantry positions were set up for this purpose. A company position should have a width of 1.500 meters and a depth of 700 meters. In addition to the soldiers' rifles, 12 machine guns, two grenade launchers and an infantry gun were planned. 2.000 to 3.000 mines should secure the position. Ultimately, protection was planned for an infantry division with around 150.000 mines in connection with a position area up to 30 kilometres wide and up to 10 kilometres deep. Obstacles near the beach and in the hinterland should make landing operations at sea or on land more difficult. The so-called "Rommel asparagus", posts with wire obstacles or explosive charges, became famous. Since it was assumed that the landing would have to take place at high tide, the obstacles were created accordingly to the high tide. When the tide was out, obstacles had to be built, which made it difficult for boats to land. Further support weapons were ultimately dependent on coordination with the OKW, the air force and the navy.¹¹

In the spring of 1944, a controversy arose between General Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt and General Field Marshal Rommel about the correct use of tank weapons and the conduct of the defence in the event of an invasion. It was also about the question of the more static spatial defence versus the advantages of war of movement.¹² Rundstedt knew that the General Inspector of the Panzer Troops, Colonel General Heinz Guderian, and the commander of the Panzer Group West were behind him. General of the Panzertruppe, Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, had received the command of the armored Panzer Group West in February 1943.¹³ He wanted to wait with his units in the hinterland of the coastal defence for the right time to counterattack and at the crucial moment to deploy and destroy the Allied troops. Rundstedt even wanted to keep armoured reserves available south and east of Paris. He saw them as the "ultima ratio" for conducting the struggles. Everything had to be relocatable in all directions. Far from the coast. The fewer forces one had, the more centrally the decisive weapon systems had to be managed. Nevertheless, with the

¹⁰ Peter Lieb, Rommel in Normandy. In: Rommel. A Reappraisal, Ed. by Ian F.W. Beckett, Pen&Sword Military: Barnsley 2013, pp. 112-136, see p. 117-119; Thorsten Heber, Der Atlantikwall. 1940-1945. Die Befestigung der Küsten West- und Nordeuropas im Spannungsfeld nationalsozialistischer Kriegsführung und Ideologie. Band I. Die militärhistorischen Hintergründe und die Ausführung bis zur Invasion im Juni 1944, BoD: Norderstedt 2008, pp. 432-447.

¹¹ Maurice Philip Remy, Mythos Rommel, List: München 2002, pp. 201-223; Manfred Rommel, 1944 – das Jahr der Entscheidung. Erwin Rommel in Frankreich, Hohenheim Verlag: Stuttgart, Leipzig 2010, pp. 89-91.

¹² Hans Wegmüller, Die Abwehr der Invasion. Die Konzeption des Oberbefehlshabers West 1940-1944, 2nd Ed., Rombach: Freiburg im Breisgau 1986, pp. 142-164; Markus Pöhlmann, Der Panzer und die Mechanisierung des Krieges. Eine deutsche Geschichte 1890 bis 1945, Schöningh: Paderborn 2016 (= Zeitalter der Weltkriege, 14), pp. 440-448.

¹³ Peter Lieb, Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg. Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44, R. Oldenbourg Verlag: München 2007 (=Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte, 69), pp. 87-88.

strategic advantage of the inner line. This mobile combat management, geared towards the decision of a battle, corresponded to the spirit of the tank troops. In addition, there were no German regulations for defending against an amphibious landing on which one could rely in case of a conflicting opinion. The Commander in Chief of Army Group B, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, was himself an experienced tank man. However, he drew different conclusions from his experience of the African campaign (especially the Gazella and El Alamein positions) and from evaluating the recent landings at Nettuno and Anzio in January 1944. Above all, he wanted to be able to react quickly to an invasion. Due to the Allied air superiority and for reasons of timesaving, armoured units should be assigned to individual sections of the coast and fight landed enemies in the area of the landing zones. This should save time in order to lead armoured divisions from the coastal zones to dangerous break-ins if necessary. Finally, with the close involvement of the tank units, there was also the hope that Hitler would then hardly be able to withdraw units for use on the Eastern Front or in Italy.¹⁴

After a meeting with Hitler in March 1944, Rommel believed that he had prevailed. A little later, Hitler supported Rundstedt's plans. Ultimately, Hitler decided on a typical compromise that avoided a clear allocation of forces. Rommel received three tank divisions for defence in a coastal formation, which, however, remained subordinate to the Panzer Group West. The Panzer Group with five other, widely distributed divisions was not subordinated to Rommel, but to Rundstedt. However, Rundstedt was only allowed to use this force if Hitler had approved it. Rommel complained unsuccessfully to the chief of the Wehrmacht command staff in the OKW, Colonel General Alfred Jodl, about the decision. Jodl responded to Rommel with a focus on maintaining an operational reserve:¹⁵

"In order to ensure rapid intervention by tank units, at least at the most important points, three tank divisions are directly subordinate to the Army Group. I agree with you that if the enemy deployed airborne troops on a large scale, they will be deployed close behind the coast, but I do not expect them to make these airborne troops into our reserves, given the good reconnaissance of the enemy, which can be assumed with certainty. Free spaces for this will always be available, even if we allow all reserves to be unlocked close behind the coast. Given the current lack of clarity about the enemy's intentions, the possibility of operational leadership through the elimination of modest reserves must be preserved. These OKW reserves must, as there is clarity about the enemy's intentions and focus, be released for use without a request."

Invasion and Check of Reality

¹⁴ Peter Lieb, Rommel in Normandy. In: Rommel. A Reappraisal, Hrsg. von Ian F.W. Beckett, Pen&Sword Military: Barnsley 2013, pp. 112-136, p. 118-121; Manfred Rommel, 1944 – das Jahr der Entscheidung. Erwin Rommel in Frankreich, Hohenheim Verlag: Stuttgart, Leipzig 2010, pp. 86-90; Hans Speidel, Invasion 1944. Ein Beitrag zu Rommels und des Reiches Schicksal, Wunderlich/Leins: Tübingen 1949, pp. 69-73; Thorsten Heber, Der Atlantikwall. 1940-1945. Die Befestigung der Küsten West- und Nordeuropas im Spannungsfeld nationalsozialistischer Kriegsführung und Ideologie. Band I. Die militärhistorischen Hintergründe und die Ausführung bis zur Invasion im Juni 1944, BoD: Norderstedt 2008, pp. 453-470.

¹⁵ Manfred Rommel, 1944 – das Jahr der Entscheidung. Erwin Rommel in Frankreich, Hohenheim Verlag: Stuttgart, Leipzig 2010, p. 91-92; cit. p. 92.

After this letter from Jodl, Rommel actually had to realize the total failure of his efforts. However, Rommel continued to work on his plans and travelled the coast from March to June 1944. Of more than 20 business trips, five took him to Normandy. For Rommel and the OKW it was still most likely that the Allies would attack the Pas-de-Calais. After all, the defences there were about 70 percent complete, while in Normandy only about a quarter of the intended barriers and positions had been built. For the days around June 6, 1944, the Navy had predicted bad weather and an invasion therefore seemed unlikely. The outpost boats were supposed to wait for the bad weather and were withdrawn. Rommel wanted to see Hitler to negotiate the plans again. On the way to the Obersalzberg, he used June 6th to celebrate his wife's birthday at home. When he received the news of the invasion there, he immediately drove to his headquarters in La Roche-Guyon, where he arrived around 9:30 p.m. on the same day. The coastal front could not be held, and the OKW had not given clearances for the tank reserves in good time. The 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitler Youth" and the Panzerlehrdivision could only be subordinated to the 7th Army on the late afternoon of June 6th. The approach to the coast was a long one. The Allied Air Force made sure that it was difficult. The German air force was not a factor in the defence of Normandy. The weakness of the Air Force allowed the Allied Air Forces largely undisturbed attacks on transport infrastructure and approximately 36 airfields up to a distance of 130 miles from Caen. For June 6, 1944, it is assumed that the approximately 12,800 Allied aircraft were facing only 319 German aircraft, of which around 100 planes were fighters. The invasion was an Allied success from day one. When the Germans realized that this landing was not a deception for another landing, it was too late for a coherent defence. Moreover, on the Eastern Front, Operation Bagration began at the end of June to destroy Army Group Centre.¹⁶

Rommel planned to attack the US Army in Normandy with the armoured divisions in the main, in order to prevent the occupation of the peninsula of Cotentin and Cherbourg. Attacks on the UTAH and OMAHA landing areas, where the German defenders urgently needed support, were supposed to serve this purpose. However, the OKW ordered the centre of gravity near Caen in order to counter the British attacks and to protect airfields in the hinterland. These struggles should go on for a long time. The British and Canadian landing companies were successful, tying up the German troops and relieving the American units with several offensive operations. When Rommel wanted to force the concentration of German forces to defend Cherbourg on June 16, together with the commander of the 7th Army, Colonel General Friedrich Dollmann, Hitler's order to hold the previous positions thwarted these plans. This time Rundstedt also advocated Rommel's plans, but to no avail. Ultimately, this was not changed by a personal meeting between Rommel, Rundstedt, and Hitler on June 17 in Margival near Soissons. Rommel had taken the view to Hitler that the war was lost and that Hitler should draw the conclusions from it for the German Reich. Rommel tried to do this on another occasion in Berchtesgaden a little later at the end of June. However, Hitler did not allow any discussion. On July 3, 1944, Rommel wrote down his "considerations from the beginning of July" on the justification for the loss of the Normandy coast as well as the peninsula and the port city of Cherbourg in the form of a staff study, listing all the deficiencies on the German side. During a meeting at the Fuehrer's

¹⁶ Horst Boog, The Luftwaffe Role. Situation and Response. In: Overlord. 1944. Bracknell Paper No. 5. A Symposium on the Normandy Landings. 25 March 1994, Alan Sutton: Bodmin 1995, pp. 37-52; Manfred Rommel, 1944 – das Jahr der Entscheidung. Erwin Rommel in Frankreich, Hohenheim Verlag: Stuttgart, Leipzig 2010, pp. 94-102.

headquarters at the end of August, Hitler viewed Rommel's behaviour with contempt: "He did the worst that a soldier could ever do in such a case: looked for other ways out than military ones!"¹⁷

On July 11, 1944, the Allies were able to unite the individual bridgeheads in Normandy to form a large bridgehead about 120 km wide. In good weather, the Allied air superiority was devastating. The port of Cherbourg had already been captured at the end of June. By mid-July 1944, other cities such as Caen and St. Lo fell into the hands of the Allies. At the beginning of July, Rundstedt had been replaced by General Field Marshal Günther von Kluge. The hapless tank general Geyr von Schweppenburg had already been deposed in July 1944. As early as June 10th, Allied bombers had reduced his headquarters to rubble and ashes. Generaloberst Dollmann died at the end of June and was replaced by SS-Obergruppenführer Paul Hausser. Rommel was able to participate in the planning that later led to the successful defence against the British attacks of Operation "Goodwood". Then came July 17, 1944 and Rommel was seriously wounded in a low-flying attack near Sainte-Foy-de-Montgomery and as a result had to give up command of his army group. After the attempted coup d'état on July 20, 1944, Rommel was considered a co-conspirator and was forced to commit suicide on October 14, 1944 at his place of residence in Herrlingen near Ulm. The invasion troops in France had already achieved their first important operational successes. In August 1944, the American breakthrough at Avranches and the failure of a German counterattack marked the long-awaited start of the Allied War of Movement in France. In an effort to attack the Allies at Avranches again despite an obvious defeat, the Germans had given up operational freedom again and thus made the Falaise pocket possible. The coastal defence against the invasion was already history back then.¹⁸

Summary

The Allied landing in Normandy was long awaited. Hitler and some of his generals had actually been looking forward to the opportunity of an alleged decisive battle in the West. A quick victory in the west should be followed by a victory in the east. The eastern front remained the most important front for Hitler. The question of the right strategy for the defence of the coasts of France was determined early on with basic instructions from Hitler, the construction of the Atlantic Wall and the so-called "tank controversy". Ultimately, it was about solving a resource problem and the military-philosophical question of the superiority of defence or attack. Moreover and most of all, this idea could not be turned into reality without the German Luftwaffe and the German Navy. Rommel's idea of defending close to the coast in such a way that the landing itself would be prevented was the opposite of the idea of Generals von Rundstedt and Geyr von Schweppenburg, who sought an operational solution with tanks in the main to defeat the Allies. The correctness of one or the other idea could not be checked in reality, because Hitler had not fully agreed to either one or the other variant of a defence. Hitler's compromise watered down both solutions. However, it is doubtful whether one of the two operational ideas would actually have worked. Because in order to deploy

¹⁷ Hans Speidel, *Aus unserer Zeit. Erinnerungen*, Propyläen: Frankfurt/Main, Wien 1977, pp. 175-189; Manfred Rommel, *1944 – das Jahr der Entscheidung. Erwin Rommel in Frankreich*, Hohenheim Verlag: Stuttgart, Leipzig 2010, pp. 104-110; Rommel's ideas on pp. 167-172 und cit. Hitler p. 173.

¹⁸ Manfred Rommel, *1944 – das Jahr der Entscheidung. Erwin Rommel in Frankreich*, Hohenheim Verlag: Stuttgart, Leipzig 2010, pp. 112-120.

troops in a military focus, this must first be recognized in the evaluation of the situation. When the landing became a reality, the Germans took a considerable delay in drawing the consequences. Another invasion of the canal front was expected weeks after the Normandy landings. The fact that the weak German forces in Normandy were able to hold off the Allies for so long could even be taken as proof of the conviction that something could come elsewhere. After all, the Allies wanted to be on the Loire by mid-August. When the Germans finally fully grasped the dangerous situation and possible options at the end of July, even the failed German counterattack at Avranches in retrospect became supposed evidence of the superiority of Rundstedt and Geyr von Schweppenburg's operational ideas of a flexible defence in the depths.¹⁹

However, the army generals had thought too one-dimensional. The Wehrmacht in 1944 had nothing to counter an outstanding air supremacy and Allied naval power, exemplary Allied logistics despite all the problems and a just cause to win.²⁰ For some time, Rommel seemed to be driven by his idea of defence and the personal realization that the war was ultimately lost. Resistance against Hitler turned more and more from a political option to a moral duty. On the other hand, General Field Marshal von Rundstedt announced in a basic order in February 1944 with a view to the upcoming landing operation: "We fight for Fuehrer, Reich and idea!" In addition, Rundstedt and his chief of staff, General of the Infantry Günther Blumentritt, were both considered excellent military officers and able thinkers. Field Marshal Günther von Kluge, who had been Rundstedt's successor since July 7, 1944, was deposed by Hitler on August 16, 1944 due to his closeness to the military resistance and committed suicide. Rundstedt was reinstated as Commander-in-Chief West on September 3, 1944. Previously, as chairman of the Court of Honour of the Wehrmacht, he had helped expel the resistance officers from the Wehrmacht and thereby deliver them to the People's Court of judge Roland Freisler. Field Marshal Walter Model, who was in the meantime in August 1944 Commander-in-Chief West and of Army Group B, remained a believer of the idea of "Final Victory" until 1945.²¹ Erwin Rommel had recognized both the hopelessness of the situation and his responsibility as field marshal. He was the only German field marshal who had personally prophesied the coming defeat to Hitler in the summer of 1944 and at the same time urged him to end the war by means of politics. How he would actually have behaved during the coup d'état of July 20, 1944, can only be guessed at because of his severe wound on July 17. By mid-August 1944, defending against the invasion alone had cost the lives of more than 25,000 German soldiers. After all, that was just a glimpse of what was to come. Most of the German soldiers of the Second World War died between July 1944 and May 1945. For this, you have to see the countless victims of the National Socialist tyranny and all other victims of the war in Europe. The Allied landing in Normandy and the collapse of Army Group Centre on the Eastern Front marked the beginning of the rapid decline of the Greater German Reich. The dead General Field Marshal Erwin Rommel stayed a worldwide legend

¹⁹ Dieter Ose, *Entscheidung im Westen 1944. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der alliierten Invasion*. Reprint from 1982, Helios Verlag: Aachen 2013, p. 270; Gerhard P. Groß, *Mythos und Wirklichkeit. Geschichte des operativen Denkens im deutschen Heer von Moltke d.Ä. bis Heusinger*, Schöningh: Paderborn et.al. 2012 (= *Zeitalter der Weltkriege*, 9), pp. 252-254.

²⁰ Hans Wegmüller, *Die Abwehr der Invasion. Die Konzeption des Oberbefehlshabers West 1940-1944*, 2nd Ed., Rombach: Freiburg im Breisgau 1986, pp. 269-272.

²¹ Peter Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg. Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44*, R. Oldenbourg Verlag: München 2007 (= *Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte*, 69), p. 84.

as the "desert fox". However, he only entered today's German military tradition because of his closeness to the coup d'état of July 20, 1944.

Bibliography:

Horst Boog, The Luftwaffe Role. Situation and Response. In: Overlord. 1944. Bracknell Paper No. 5. A Symposium on the Normandy Landings. 25 March 1994, Alan Sutton: Bodmin 1995, pp. 37-52.

Gerhard P. Groß, Mythos und Wirklichkeit. Geschichte des operativen Denkens im deutschen Heer von Moltke d.Ä. bis Heusinger, Schöningh: Paderborn et.al. 2012 (= Zeitalter der Weltkriege, 9).

Thorsten Heber, Der Atlantikwall. 1940-1945. Die Befestigung der Küsten West- und Nordeuropas im Spannungsfeld nationalsozialistischer Kriegsführung und Ideologie. Band I. Die militärhistorischen Hintergründe und die Ausführung bis zur Invasion im Juni 1944, BoD: Norderstedt 2008.

Dieter Ose, Entscheidung im Westen 1944. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der alliierten Invasion. Reprint from 1982, Helios Verlag: Aachen 2013.

Rudi Rolf, Der Atlantikwall. Die Bauten der deutschen Küstenbefestigungen 1940-1945, Biblio: Osnabrück 1998.

Manfred Rommel, 1944 – das Jahr der Entscheidung. Erwin Rommel in Frankreich, Hohenheim Verlag: Stuttgart, Leipzig 2010.

Peter Lieb, Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg. Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44, R. Oldenbourg Verlag: München 2007 (=Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte, 69).

Peter Lieb, Rommel in Normandy. In: Rommel. A Reappraisal, Hrsg. von Ian F.W. Beckett, Pen&Sword Military: Barnsley 2013, pp. 112-136.

Markus Pöhlmann, Der Panzer und die Mechanisierung des Krieges. Eine deutsche Geschichte 1890 bis 1945, Schöningh: Paderborn 2016 (= Zeitalter der Weltkriege, 14).

Maurice Philip Remy, Mythos Rommel, List: München 2002.

Hans Speidel, Invasion 1944. Ein Beitrag zu Rommels und des Reiches Schicksal, Wunderlich/Leins: Tübingen 1949.

Hans Speidel, Aus unserer Zeit. Erinnerungen, Propyläen: Frankfurt/Main, Wien 1977.

Detlef Vogel, Deutsche und alliierte Kriegführung im Westen. In: Horst Boog, Gerhard Krebs, Detlef Vogel, Das Deutsche Reich in der Defensive. Strategischer Luftkrieg in Europa. Krieg im Westen und in Ostasien 1943-1944/45, DVA: Stuttgart, München 2001 (=Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg,7), pp. 417-639.

Vom Kriege. Hinterlassenes Werk des Generals Carl von Clausewitz, 17th Ed., Dümmler: Hannover, Hamburg, München 1966.

Hans Wegmüller, Die Abwehr der Invasion. Die Konzeption des Oberbefehlshabers West 1040-1944, 2nd Ed., Rombach: Freiburg im Breisgau 1986.