

D-Day and the RAF

In this podcast, we tell the story of the Royal Air Force's involvement in the Normandy Campaign, 6th June to the end of August 1944.

In his interrogation after the war, the Commander-in-Chief of German Forces in France in 1944, Field Marshal von Rundstedt, stated that: "The main difficulties which arose for us at the time of the invasion were the systematic preparations of your air force."

The invasion he refers to was a turning point in world history – the Allied landings in Normandy and the start of the liberation of Western Europe from Nazi rule. On D-Day, 6th June 1944, the greatest invasion fleet ever seen crossed the English Channel. It sailed to success under the umbrella of the combined might of the Royal Air Force and United States Army Air Force, the largest and arguably most successful air force ever gathered.

For months the Royal Air Force had been preparing for the invasion. Attack aircraft from both the RAF and USAAF had been pooled together under a single command, the 2nd Tactical Air Force, or 2TAF. Fighter-bombers from 2TAF had ranged across France and the Low Countries attacking German airfields and bases, shooting up trains and convoys, sweeping the Luftwaffe from the skies and making it impossible for the enemy to move troops or supplies by day. Further attacks put out of action more than twenty radar stations, completely removing German radar coverage for large parts of the English Channel.

Photo-reconnaissance aircraft provided intelligence vital to planning the D-Day assault, mapping out German positions and lines of communications. Hundreds of these photographs and maps can be seen in our Archive at the RAF Museum London. From March 1944 Bomber Command began following the Zuckermann or "Transport Plan", attacking the infrastructure needed by the German forces to

react to any landings, destroying railway junctions, bridges, and marshalling yards. Medium bombers followed up these attacks by destroying vital road bridges across the River Seine. The Royal Air Force raided into Normandy and all across northern France and Belgium, paralyzing the enemy's war machine and giving no clues as to where the invasion would land.

By the dawn of 6th June, the RAF had already had a long day. Meteorological flights far over the North Sea and the Atlantic had provided the weather information needed to make sure it was safe to launch the invasion. Bomber Command had sent over a thousand heavy bombers to pound beach defences in Normandy with over 5,000 tons of bombs. Other bombers flew on diversionary operations, parts of an elaborate deception scheme to confuse the Germans. In an incredible display of flying skills, 218 and the famous 617 Squadrons slowly flew back and forth low over the Channel, dropping strips of metal called *Window* which showed up on German radar screens as masses of ships. This way two more Allied invasion fleets (Code-named *Taxable* and *Glimmer*) were seen to be creeping across the English Channel, diverting German troops and resources to Boulogne and Le Harve and away from the Normandy beaches. Other aircraft used electronic devices to jam or disrupt the German radar system just enough to keep the deception looking real.

RAF Transport Command had also been very busy. The first Allied troops to land on D-Day were an assault team to seize Bénouville Bridge. These men were successfully delivered to their objective in gliders, courtesy of RAF tug aircraft. Soon after more aircraft, including the 15 squadrons of Nos 38 and 46 Groups, were dropping paratroops and gliders full of men to seize other vital bridges and roads in and out of the invasion area, stopping German reinforcements from reaching the beaches. A Douglas Dakota of the type used for these drops can be seen at our Cosford site. A further deception, Operation

Titanic, saw dummy parachutists (known as ~~Ruperts~~) dropped across northern France.

Perhaps the unsung heroes of D-Day are the more than 50 squadrons of RAF Coastal Command. It is only because Coastal Command had achieved their aim so completely that they tend to be overlooked. On D-Day, the Germans intended to flood the English Channel with submarines to destroy the invasion fleet from the north and the south. Intensive Coastal Command patrols protected both approaches, and within four days of the landings of the 49 U-Boats launched in the south six had been sunk, another six seriously damaged, and just one had managed to attack the invasion fleet. By the end of June, fourteen U-Boats had been sunk and fifteen seriously damaged, and the Germans had to call off their plan. The battle for the English Channel would cost the Germans more than 40 U-Boats, although the cost to Coastal Command was also high in aeroplanes. Even so, this plan worked so well that on 6th June not a single Allied ship was confirmed as sunk by the German Navy. Examples of their aircraft can be seen at both of our sites, such as the Short Sunderland and Consolidated Liberator in London, or the Consolidated Catalina at Cosford.

Closer to the actual landings, fighters protected the fleet and the beaches. Cover was so heavy that only two enemy aircraft managed to attack the beaches on the first day of the landings.

As the days passed, the pressure was kept up. Transport Command brought in more troops and dropped much needed supplies, while also flying wounded soldiers back to hospitals in England. Bombers pulverized transport links and German reinforcements, destroying counter-attacks before they could start. Fighters gave close support to the troops on the ground with rockets and bombs, attacking tanks and strong points. They gave air cover to the vulnerable fleet and beachhead, and by 9th June RAF fighters were flying from bases in France

for the first time since 1940. Air Observation Post aircraft, such as the Taylorcraft Auster, which can be seen at our Hendon site, could direct Allied artillery fire with such devastating accuracy that their mere presence over the battlefield was enough to make German troops and artillery cease fire in case they drew attention to, and fire on to, themselves.

As the beachhead slowly expanded parts of 2TAF began to deploy to advanced landing grounds. From the middle of June they took an increasing role in attacking German positions and armoured vehicles. This created one of the enduring images of the campaign, of RAF Hawker Typhoons destroying German tanks en masse with rockets. In fact, the rockets were quite an inaccurate weapon, but they were still highly effective when used in numbers. On 7 August the Germans mounted a counter attack with four Panzer Divisions around Mortain. Typhoons, ranging freely over the battlefield as fighters, again kept the German Air Force at bay, wrought havoc, and soon even the sight of Typhoons overhead was enough to make German crews abandon their tanks, and German strong points surrender. The most complete Typhoon in the world is on display at our London site.

While 2 TAF engaged in a war of attrition with the German Army, Bomber Command was called back repeatedly to try and blast holes in the German defences and allow a breakout from the beachheads. Operation Charnwood on 7 July saw 450 heavy bombers, with fighter escort, bomb the outskirts of Caen; an act repeated for Operation Goodwood on 18 July. On 14 August another heavy raid led to tragedy when a breakdown in co-ordination led to the RAF Pathfinders marking the intended target with yellow flares, the same type that the Army was using to mark their positions on the ground. In the confusion 65 British and Canadian soldiers were killed, and over 300 more wounded.

In these hectic months Bomber Command averaged 5,000 sorties a week . more than for all of the first nine months of the war.

From late July the Germans launched their new offensive on Britain, using V-1 flying bombs. Increasingly, chasing and destroying these rockets, and finding and bombing their launch sites, known together as Operation Crossbow, drew RAF resources from the Normandy campaign. However, this Operation did see the first widespread use of jet aircraft in front line service, with the introduction of the Gloster Meteor, examples of which are at both our London and Cosford sites.

Through the middle of August, as attrition- largely from the air- wore down the German defences, both the British and American forces in Normandy began to break out from the beachheads. As they did so, the German Seventh Army was increasingly surrounded in a pocket, until they were almost cut off. The only escape route was through what became known as the Falaise Gap. 2TAF relentlessly attacked both the pocket and the gap, until the gap was finally closed in late August. Over 60,000 Germans were killed or captured in the Falaise pocket, and 95% of their armour destroyed. The German Army in France would never recover from this blow. On 25 August Paris was liberated, and within weeks almost the whole of France was once again free.

The RAF had played a critical role in the Battle for Normandy. They had flown 225,000 sorties, at the cost of over 2,000 aircraft and 8,000 crewmen. They had swept the skies clear and hammered the enemy on the ground, opening the way for the Allies to land. They had devastated German transport and communication, hindering reinforcements and allowing the beachhead to be established and grow. Finally, they had cleared the way for the Allies to break out and begin the advance that would free Europe.