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D-Day: Decisive Moment of the Second World War in the West

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It was Sir Michael Howard who once reminded me of a simple, and yet most significant truth about the historian's craft: "There was a time", he said, "when events now in the past were still in the future". How obvious this is; and yet how great is the trap for those who reflect upon the past, of falling prey to belief in the inevitability of what took place. It is not my intention this evening to rehearse the familiar narrative of events on the beaches of Normandy on 6 June 1944, but rather to try to set in context one of the great military events of the 20th century. When I began to write my own book on Operation Overlord, 14 years ago, my interest in revisiting the theme was stirred, appropriately enough, by a remark of Basil Liddell Hart. He argued, as early as 1952, that Western historians had since 1944 been reluctant to reflect upon the Allies' huge superiority in Normandy, and draw appropriate conclusions: "There has been too much glorification of the campaign, and too little objective investigation". It must be quite wrong to look back upon D-Day solely with scepticism. In a war which came as near as any in history to a crusade by the forces of good against the forces of unqualified evil, the invasion of Normandy was a triumphant step towards the liberation of Europe, which it seems entirely right to celebrate in this anniversary year. But Liddell Hart was surely correct in arguing that hard questions, and hard answers, are by no means disqualified in reviewing the Allied victory.

No outcome in warfare has ever been inevitable. In our own recent memories, the western alliance achieved devastating victory over the Iraqis in the Gulf - so devastating indeed that some commentators afterwards recoiled from the supposed one-sidedness of the contest. Yet these were the same commentators who, in advance of the ground war, predicted that American military incompetence was so great that the allies might be thrown back. In 1982, I was an eye witness of the crushing British victory over the Argentines in the South Atlantic. Whatever anybody might say today about the great natural superiority of the British soldier over the Latin-American, that superiority seemed far less assured as we crouched shivering in

the bottom of a landing craft in the darkness, heading for a hostile shore amid the concussions of the supporting naval bombardment, at the beginning of the Falklands war.

Of all human activities, warfare is arguably the most unpredictable. Its entire history is beset with examples of campaigns in which superior firepower and manpower have been confounded by generalship, weather, chance, morale, human error. Today, it may seem possible to look back upon the events of 6 June 1944 on the coast of Normandy, and conclude that the Allies' success in landing an army and keeping it there was inevitable. They possessed overwhelming superiority in air and seapower, and there was little realistic prospect of this being challenged. The German army had been devastated by three years of war in Russia, where it had already suffered close to two million dead. The British and American armies assembled in Britain outnumbered the Germans in France, and hugely outgunned them in tank and artillery power.

And yet, for all this, in the spring of 1944 some of the foremost personalities in the allied high command were consumed with misgivings about that leap across the Channel to confront the Wehrmacht. "Why are we trying to do this?", cried Winston Churchill in a bitter moment of depression about Overlord, in February 1944. "I am very uneasy about the whole operation", wrote the great Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, as late as 5 June 1944. "At the best, it will come very far short of the expectations of the bulk of the people, namely all those who know nothing about its difficulties. At its worst, it may well be the most ghastly disaster of the whole war". In February, the senior American airman General "Tooe" Spaatz said at a meeting that "he feared that the Allied air forces might be batting their head against a stone wall in the Overlord operation the proposed cross-Channel operation is highly dangerous and the outcome is extremely uncertain. A failure of Overlord will have repercussions which may well undo all of the effects of the strategic bombing effort to date."

"If I were directing the overall strategic operations", said General Spaatz, who was one of America's foremost commanders of the Second World War, "I would go into Norway, where we have a much greater chance of ground force success, and where I believe Sweden would come in with us. Why undertake a highly dubious operation in a hurry, when there is a surer way to do it?".

Some of you may never have heard of a project codenamed Operation Rankin. Rankin never happened. Yet as late as the autumn of 1943, some senior British commanders still cherished the hope that it could supplant Overlord. Rankin was a plan for taking an Allied army to France for a more or less unopposed landing, in the event that bombing, Russian offensives, or internal revolt in Germany caused organised resistance by the Nazis to collapse before Overlord could be launched. On 11 November 1943, Britain's chiefs of staff recorded in an aide-memoire: "We must not regard Overlord as the pivot of our whole strategy, on which all else turns... We firmly believe that Overlord (perhaps in the form of Rankin) will take place next summer. We do not, however, attach vital importance to any particular date, or to any particular number of divisions in the assault and follow up, although naturally the latter should be made as large as possible consistent with the policy stated above".

It was about that same time as this memorandum was written, less than eight months before D-Day, that a memo was written in the US Chiefs of Staff office, declaring that "it is apparent that the British, who have consistently resisted a cross-Channel operation, now feel Overlord is no longer necessary". In this note, it was suggested that the British believed bombing, the Mediterranean operations and the Russians will be sufficient "to cause the internal collapse of

Germany and thus bring about her military defeat without underdoing what they consider an almost certain "bloodbath".

Today, D-Day is a fact of history. But the remarks above are only a small sample, designed not only to caution against belief in its inevitability, but also to show how deep were the fears and misgivings of the Allied High Command even when they had committed themselves to the execution of Overlord. Earlier today, the admirable John Grigg has been debating with others here his own thesis, that with more decisive leadership the western allies could, and should, have landed in France and opened a western front in 1943, not 1944. I respect this argument, but I do not accept it. On paper, there are good grounds for supposing that the logistic difficulties of mounting D-Day a year earlier could have been conquered, and that the forces deployed to fight the Germans in Italy could have been used to better advantage in north-west Europe. The great, and in my eyes decisive, doubt stems from the problems of allied will and psychology. We must recognise the frame of mind of the British high command in 1943. Their planning was dominated by a spirit of cautious gradualism. Four years of war, and many defeats, had rendered them deeply wary of the power of the German army. It is a truth now widely accepted, but barely acknowledged publicly for two or three decades after 1945, that man for man the German was the most formidable fighting soldier of World War II. Even when the tide had turned, and America's vast industrial capacity was transforming the resources available on every front, the British feared the consequences of a campaign of attrition in western Europe. It was not merely the casualties they had already suffered in World War II. For the 1940s generation of British ministers and British generals, the fact of these losses was overlaid upon the terrible memory of World War I's 744,000 British dead. By 1943, it is true that there was no doubt in senior Allied minds about the inevitability of final victory in the Second World War. But British commanders - for reasons which I think deserve sympathy, closely entwined with their perception of Britain's shrinking power and resources against those of the Americans - wanted victory on the best available terms for their own country. I am not thinking now of diplomatic or political terms, but of terms which included the smallest possible further outpouring of British blood. This was by no means an ignoble objective, but it was to colour British strategy, tactics and sometimes performance on the battlefield throughout the last year of the war. The allies knew that they were going to win. There was none of the gotterdamerung, last ditch defence of the fatherland spirit which prevailed to a remarkable degree until the end, among the German armies. In North-West Europe after the invasion, many allied soldiers were bitterly resentful that the Germans continued to fight, and to seek to kill them, long after all logic dictated that their cause was lost. Some men even used this as an excuse to justify shooting German prisoners, a practice more widespread than many people like to imagine today. An American armoured officer once told me that the attitude of himself and his comrades in Normandy was: "Anything you do to the krauts is okay because they should have given up in Africa. All this is just wasted motion".

This certainty of eventual victory inspired in the American high command, in 1943 and 1944, a forceful impatience to bring matters to a decision. It has always been my own contention that, but for American determination to land in France at the earliest possible date, there would have been no D-Day before 1945. All the impetus, the haste for a decisive confrontation with the German army in France, came from the United States. The British wished to see German power progressively beaten down by indirect methods, above all blockade and strategic bombing, not to mention Russian soldiers, before they once more engaged a major German land army.

In the immediate aftermath of Pearl Harbour, the British were successful in dissuading the United States from an early invasion. A fantastic American notion for a landing in France in 1942, was easily resisted. It proved more difficult to contain American impatience to mount a campaign in north-west Europe in 1943. But at the Casablanca conference of January 1943, by dint of brilliant military diplomacy, for the last time in the war the British gained acceptance of their own idea about the manner in which operations should be prosecuted in that year. The Americans reluctantly acceded to HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily, with the prospect of further operations in Italy. They also undertook a commitment to an even greater combined bomber offensive against Germany, operation POINTBLANK, designed to "weaken Germany's war-making capacity to the point to which invasion would become possible".

But President Roosevelt and his chiefs of staff returned to Washington irritably conscious that they had been persuaded to accept a course they did not favour - "sideshow" operations in the Mediterranean which they believed were designed chiefly to serve Britain's imperial and diplomatic purposes. The Americans were thenceforth irrevocably determined that France must be invaded in 1944. Only by confronting the German forces in France, they believed, could the western allies precipitate the decisive campaign in the west which they wanted. They were wholly impatient (pace the eccentric remarks of Spaatz quoted above) of schemes for landings in Norway or the eastern Mediterranean, designed to nibble at the vulnerable edges of the Nazi empire. Only through France could Allied ground forces launch a campaign aimed at the very heart of Germany, which the Americans desired with a conviction shared by some British officers, but to which others merely paid lip service.

I would add as an aside here, that some historians have been too ready to take for granted this American commitment to a death grapple with the Germans in western Europe. It remains remarkable to some of us that, at the end of 1941 in the wake of Pearl Harbour, the Americans so readily conceded the principle of "Germany first", in their initial strategic discussions with their new British allies. Hitler helped, of course, by removing any scope for domestic American controversy by declaring war upon the United States after the Japanese attack. But not only was Japan America's principal aggressor, there was also a formidable faction headed by the Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral King who, throughout 1942, 1943, 1944, waged a bitter battle to see the lion's share of American resources committed to the Pacific. If the will of King and his supporters had prevailed, it is highly doubtful whether the European war would have ended as soon as May 1945.

But King was thwarted. Roosevelt, Marshall and the other key policy markers committed themselves firmly to making the defeat of Germany the first strategic priority of the Alliance. And the US Department of the Army never seriously wavered in its view that this could only be achieved by launching a land campaign through the coast of France.

Never after Casablanca were they deflected from their purpose, although the British proposed a variety of further "side- show" operations in the eastern Mediterranean. From early 1943 onwards, the approximate date of D-Day was set, and the British were obliged to acquiesce. Even sophisticated and important British commanders were astonished thereafter, by the speed and ruthlessness with which Americans addressed and solved huge logistic problems which the British, innured to chronic shortages and lack of resources, considered intractable.

There is still a sharp divide in Britain, which I am sure will be reflected in much that is written and broadcast around the anniversary of D-Day, in understanding the Second World

War. For more than 20 years, most serious British historians have clearly recognised the shape and limits of Britain's role in the conflict, and their writings have been available to anyone who wished to read them. Yet there remains a large part of the British public which simply does not wish to know the realities, and cherishes instead the myths. I hesitate to teach this erudite audience to suck any eggs, but it is useful to recap on a few academically obvious, but popularly unwelcome facts. Britain's defiance after 1940 was morally admirable, but promised to be wholly ineffectual militarily in threatening Hitler's command of the continent, until the Americans came in. The campaign in the North African desert, which plays so large a part in the British legend of World War II, seldom involved more than 2 or 3 German divisions, at a time when 150 were committed on the Russian front. Much of the British army spent four years training in England, far from any battlefield, between 1940 and 1944, a situation which roused Stalin's contempt and even caused lifted eyebrows among the more courteous Americans. In private, there were plenty of Americans who were prepared to say to each other in 1942 and 1943 that the British seemed content to do remarkably little militarily to end the war, save wait for the Americans and Russians to do it for them.

From a British perspective, of course, the situation seemed very different. From 1940 onwards, as much as a third of Britain's entire industrial effort was engaged in supporting the bomber offensive against Germany, which was waged at terrible human cost on both sides. Some of the leaders of the RAF sincerely believed that, by this means alone, Germany could eventually be brought to defeat, without the painful necessity for a ground campaign. Skilful propaganda made maximum use of the bomber offensive through those years of relative military inactivity, to maintain the morale of the British people, to convince them that real progress was being made towards the defeat of Hitler. Britain's naval and military leadership, and by late 1943 even Churchill himself, were sceptical about the RAF's claims upon resources for strategic bombing, and also about the airmen's exaggerated claims for the impact of air attack upon Germany. No one but a small cluster of air marshals supposed that area bombing could render a ground campaign in the west unnecessary. But almost all the senior political and military figures acknowledged that bombing must in some measure be weakening Germany's capacity eventually to resist an invasion, and lent some sense of purpose to the long months and years of military idleness, while the armies gathered and made ready to fight once more in France.

At sea, the mere effort to keep Britain fuelled and fed through the Battle of the Atlantic was a dominant preoccupation of the nation's leadership, and rightly so. Defeat sometimes came very close. Churchill always recognised that the consequences of allied failure in the Atlantic were so great that the battle was vital. Yet, at the same time victory at sea, while it ensured that Germany could not win the war, could contribute only indirectly to breaking the Nazi grasp upon the continent.

The British people, and their leaders, were terribly bruised by the early defeats of Second World War, right through to the disasters in the Far East in the first months of 1942. I believe some historians, in their assessments of the second half of the war, have given too little weight to the impact upon Churchill and Alanbrooke of the British army's failures in 1940, 1941 and 1942. Both these men had been given good reasons to question the effectiveness of the British fighting soldier against his German or Japanese counterpart. Both were cautious-though Alanbrooke less so- in venting openly their doubts. But Churchill and Alanbrooke's strategic views in 1942 and 1943 were greatly influenced by their respect for the German army's record against the British, and indeed after the Torch landings in North Africa in November 1942, against the green Americans also. We should never forget that in 1940 and

1941, the German and Japanese command of the air were widely cited to explain British defeats on the ground. Yet in 1943, and even more in 1944, the Allies possessed air superiority on a scale the Luftwaffe and the Japanese air force never dreamed of. This proved helpful on the battlefield, but it did not prevent the Axis armies from mounting dogged and painfully effective resistance.

My argument about the attitude of Britain's leadership to D-Day is not intended to suggest that they wholeheartedly opposed it. From June 1940 onwards, Churchill and his colleagues repeatedly acknowledged the need to return in arms to the continent. But I do believe that the British attitude was cautious, and even prevaricatory, compared with that of the Americans, and that such caution persisted in 1944. Many British soldiers admired and envied the huge resources and logistical abilities of their American counterparts. But they retained private fears about their fighting abilities. Amphibious operations are complex and difficult. The Western allies had gathered in England large forces- 17 British and Canadian divisions and 20 American. As the British were acutely aware, their own forces represented the summit of national armed manpower, doomed inexorably to decline as a continental campaign advanced. The Americans, however, possessed many more divisions, ready to be shipped directly to Europe from the United States once a lodgement had been gained. The American initial landing force of 130,000 men was to be followed by a further 1.2 million by D + 90 days, supported by 137,000 wheeled and semi-tracked vehicles, 4,217 tracked vehicles, 3,5000 artillery pieces.

But total theatre manpower and firepower were never the issue. What mattered was the size and success of the force that could be landed on the coastal battlefield on D-Day, and the speed thereafter at which this could be reinforced by sea, compared with the build-up of the German counter-attack, across land lines of communication. For many months before D-Day, Allied staffs wrestled with gloomy forecasts. As late as April 1944, a SHAEF assessment suggested that, by D+14, the Germans would have 28 divisions in Normandy against 19 1/3 Allied; by D+20, 30 to 24 2/3; by D+30, 33 to 28 2/3. They were conducting their planning against the background of bleak experience with amphibious operations in Sicily and Italy. There, small German forces handled with skill and speed, fighting with great determination, repeatedly prevented the Allies from exploiting initial lodgements ashore quickly enough to destroy - as distinct from drive back- the defending forces. Anzio, above all, stood as a terrible warning in the last months before D-Day: a coastal landing in February 1944, designed to outflank the German defence across Italy, had become bogged down in a crowded beachhead, from which the Allies broke free only after almost four months of bloody attrition. The SHAEF appreciation in April of the prospective landings in Normandy highlighted "the grave risk of stabilization"- a euphemism for stalemate- "around D+14... The greatest energy and initiative will be required during this period to ensure that the enemy is not allowed to stabilize his defence".

50 years on, it may seem to the student of the archives of the Second World War that Allied strategy and tactics were characterized by wariness and caution, in contrast to the extraordinary German and Japanese record of boldness. It may certainly be noted, that when the Allies ventured upon a daring stroke, as at Dieppe and Anzio and Arnhem, they were terribly punished by the German responses. Today, we have long ago parted company with the stereotypes of 1950s war films, which portrayed the German soldier as a square-headed plodder, whose sentries were always prepared to turn their backs to allow the swift British commando to dispose of them. The reality, as a host of scholarly studies have emphasised, is that Hitler's army was one of the finest fighting forces the world has ever seen, however

odious the cause in which it fought. Its most noteworthy characteristic in most of its campaigns was speed of response to the unexpected, and a capacity for local initiative far in excess of what was expected of most of its Allied counterparts.

In January 1944, when D-Day was being planned, Hitler deployed 179 divisions on the Eastern front, 26 in south east Europe, 22 in Italy, 16 in Scandinavia, 53 in France and the Low Countries. By 6 June, there were 59 in France and the Low Countries, 28 in Italy and still 165 in Russia. 18 Panzer divisions remained in the east against 15 in the West. These raw figures mask immense differences in strength and fighting power between individual formations. The crude truth remains that the weight of the German army was still in Russia. But the advantage of being able to move forces by land rather than by sea gave the Germans the theoretical prospect, at least, of concentrating greater forces in Normandy than the allies in the early weeks of the western campaign.

To prevent this development, the allies relied, of course, upon the use of their massive air forces. Despite strong opposition from most of the air chiefs, who wished to continue to pound Germany's cities and industries, in the weeks before and after D-Day the allied high command committed scores of bomber squadrons to attacks upon the rail and road communications of north-west Europe. They were obliged to strike across a very wide front, to mask their real focus- upon Normandy. Despite Churchill's deep unhappiness, they were compelled to accept the inevitability of killing tens of thousands of French and Dutch-Belgian civilians in the process- an incidence of "Friendly Fire" casualties whose cruel necessity makes mockery of the pathetic public anguish in more recent times about infinitely slighter episodes of this kind.

The air attacks on French communications were as successful as could reasonably have been expected. As in every similar deployment of modern times, whether in Korea or Vietnam or the Falklands or even the Gulf War, the bombing was effective in gravely impeding the movement of German forces. But it could not wholly prevent it. Many German formations arrived on the Normandy battlefield days or even weeks later than their commanders wished. This was of critical importance to the Normandy campaign. But even massed heavy bombing could not prevent the Germans from reinforcing and supplying their men in the line, above all by the use of night movement. Arguably the greatest achievement of allied air superiority was that it ensured that the allies could move their own forces to Normandy with only minimal interference from the German Luftwaffe. More than that, the air forces delayed the German build-up sufficiently to prevent Hitler's armies from gaining a decisive superiority on the battlefield in the first vital days. But, for all the ambitious claims of the airmen about what their forces could do, even massive bombing could not prevent the need for the most bitter and costly battle of attrition by the men on the ground, before the German front in Normandy could be broken. The overwhelming lesson of air power in the past 50 years is that it can be devastatingly effective against forces conducting movements in daylight. It is far more fallible against well entrenched positions and units, or at night.

Most of these factors were clearly understood and predicted by the planners in the weeks before D-Day. They knew how good was the Germany army, and how great was its capacity to respond speedily and effectively to a surprise attack- if Hitler's demented personal interventions allowed. They were sensibly sceptical about the limits of air power, however important its contribution.

Above all, they recognised the difficulty of translating fighting men between two elements—from ships bucketing upon the sea, to a land battlefield upon which they must immediately plunge into a struggle of deadly intensity. In considering the achievement of D-Day and the campaign that followed, it is essential to give full weight to the difficulties which amphibious operations present. Even for forces with the marvellous technological support of the allied armies in north-west Europe, it remained a very great task, to land and supply them from the sea across open beaches. General Sir Frederick Morgan, who led the staff which carried out all the early planning for D-Day, wrote in his initial report in July 1943: "An operation of the magnitude of Operational OVERLORD has never previously been attempted in history. It is fraught with hazards, both in nature and magnitude, which do not obtain in any other theatre of the present world war. Unless these hazards are squarely faced and adequately overcome, the operation cannot succeed. There is no reason why they should not be overcome, provided the energies of all concerned are bent to the problem".

The experience of the First World War created a fashion for regarding headquarters staffs with derision, contempt, even hatred. Siegfried Sassoon's "scarlet-faced majors at base" were perceived as the architects of four years of dreadful blundering on the battlefield. Whether or not this was a sensible judgement even 1918 is debatable. Yet the cynicism of soldiers about army staffs, institutions which existed only in rudimentary form before the 20th century, has persisted in popular legend to the present day. In truth, however, most successful modern military operations have been above all triumphs of staff planning on an industrial scale. D-Day stands foremost among these. If the generals who led the armies in battle in Normandy were all professional soldiers, many of the key planners were civilians drafted into uniform for the war, scientists and mathematicians and businessmen and professionals, some of them outstanding brains of their society. Their contribution was unheroic, unglamorous. In their thousands, they sat in their uncongenial uniforms, men who could scarcely march and in many cases regarded small arms with distaste, at their desks in obscure and shabby office buildings all over the south of England. They pored for months, in some cases for years, over loading tables and shipping calculations, railway schedules and fuel graphs. The fruits of their labours were the organisation and method by which two million men were transported to France, armed and fed and fuelled and supported through the 11 months of combat that followed. The Allied armies required 26,000 tons of stores *a day* to sustain them in north-west Europe. It is an interesting footnote that this represented 30 pounds weight per man for every American soldier, 20 for a British soldier. The German quota sometimes fell to 4 pounds a man. I have always intensely mistrusted and disliked the promiscuous abuse of the word hero, and indeed in my own most recent incarnation I have banned it from the pages of *The Daily Telegraph*. But there was indeed a heroic quality about the struggle and achievement of the planners and logisticians who made D-Day and the subsequent land campaign possible. Theirs was the least glamorous of functions, and yet among the critical. When considering the 20th century's subsequent wars, I have always believed that some campaigns fought by non-conscript Western armies have suffered from the absence of that immensely able leavening of civilians in uniform in the middle reaches of army staffs. Bill Williams, for instance, Montgomery's chief of intelligence from 1943 to 1945, was a 31 year-old Oxford don, thinly disguised in the uniform and red tabs of a brigadier.

In the last weeks before D-Day, all logic dictated that the allied armies ought to be successful in getting ashore and launching the land campaign. A very strong, highly trained and brilliantly equipped initial landing force was to be put ashore. Miraculously, security was maintained to the last about their destination, although of course Normandy was always an obvious possible or even probable landing place. Vast air and sea superiority prevailed. Yet

still the Allied commanders nursed their profound fears. The weather, always the weather, represented a great unknown threat. Low cloud could - and in the event, on one day in three did - shut off tactical air support. The initial landing could be rescheduled by a day or two in the face of a bad forecast, as indeed in the event it was. But thereafter, the men ashore would be at the mercy of the unpredictable. Storms at sea could play havoc with meeting that relentless tonnage requirement for stores and ammunition, and in reality they did so for some frightening days in mid- June.

I have spoken of the private fears of some commanders about the fighting qualities of their own men, against those of the Germans. Above all, however great the odds upon success, they knew that the consequences of failure would be appalling. It was not only the logistic task of gathering the armies again for a second attempt, probably not before 1945; it was the blow to the fragile confidence of the Grand Alliance, the shame and embarrassment before the Russians; the uncertain impact of Hitler's secret weapons, that were known to be close to readiness for launching. The political recriminations in the two great democracies, the impact upon the weary British people would be terrible indeed. Churchill, Brooke, Eisenhower, Montgomery, even in a society in which free speech was moderated by censorship, would face the most bitter excoriation. The Germans would be able to transfer large forces from France to the Eastern front, confident that the Allies could not try invasion again for many months.

We must preserve the wide historical perspective. It is profoundly unlikely, indeed almost impossible, that Allied defeat on D-Day would have altered the outcome of the Second World War. The weight of forces arrayed against Germany was too great for that. The bomber offensive could have continued unimpeded. The pressure upon Germany's resources, above all oil, would have remained unrelenting. Even German reinforcements in the East could have done no more, at that stage, than slow the advance of the Red army. But the moral blow to Western arms, to the entire credibility of the democracies, would have been so great that the geo-political shape of Europe after Germany's defeat might have been very different. Who can say where the Red Army might have ended up?

All these things were starkly apparent before D-Day in Washington and London, and at the headquarters of the armies. However favourable the odds, the stakes were enormous.

Since 1945, a host of books has been written about the dreadful wrangles within the Grand Alliance during the Second World War. The tensions between Montgomery and Eisenhower, between British and American chiefs of staff and airmen, between Patton and almost everyone, have been lavishly and lovingly probed. I could rehearse for you this evening a long procession of quotations from both British and American soldiers, saying the most ungenerous and even bitter things about each other. The British were indeed jealous of American power and almost absolute dominance of the alliance. The British now depended upon American prodigality for many of their tanks, aircraft, ordnance. D-Day was the last great occasion of the war which was dominated by British commanders - Montgomery, Ramsay and Leigh- Mallory on land, and at sea, and in the air. Many Americans cherished a belief that they were patronised and condescended to by the British at every level- and they resented it. They were suspicious that the British sought greater power and influence than they were prepared to pay the blood price for. They questioned British sluggishness and prevarication and perceived inefficiency. They might possess a corner of admiration in their hearts for this creaking old stately home of a nation, but they would have admired it more had it possessed modern plumbing and full central heating. There were deep divisions between

Britain and the United States about the post-war global settlement to which they should aspire, influenced by rival views about the preservation of the European colonial empires.

Yet, when all this has been admitted, when all the rows and bitter disputes have been analysed and avowed, it is essential to the perspective of our judgement upon the Second World War to acknowledge the success of the joint Anglo-American command, above all in North West Europe. At working level, it proved an extraordinary achievement. Some critics simply fail to recognise that it is inevitable that there should be divisions and jealousies in every high command in war, just as there are divisions in high politics and in the industrial direction of companies in peace. Eisenhower's headquarters became absurdly bloated, and bore more than its share of courtiers and knaves and idle mischief-makers. But final judgement upon the direction of the allied armies should rest not only upon assessment of SHAEF in isolation, but also upon comparison with the German high command, OKW. Even leaving aside the demented contribution of Hitler to Germany's military defeat, the bitter rifts between the rival empires within the Nazi regime were a constant handicap to military operations. Intelligence, above all, was chronically influenced by the refusal of OKW to heed signals that conflicted with its own prejudices and inclinations. The German response to D-Day was gravely diminished by rivalries within the command structure, and of course by Hitler's insistence in maintaining personal control over key formations. The grotesque competition between the rival branches of the Nazis' intelligence service crippled their ability to fulfil the first duty of all intelligence activity - to analyse without prejudice the evidence available. Having paid tribute to the German war machine's performance in so many respects, it is useful to emphasise that in the field of intelligence, that of the Allies wholly outclassed it. Once more it should be acknowledged that even a more coherent and rational German command structure could only have extended the war, rather than changed its outcome. But any comparison between the performance of the allied and German high commands in north-west Europe must be to the advantage of the former. The alliance worked, and the whole history of alliances show that this is a foolish outcome to take for granted. D-Day was its most dramatic consummation.

So who were these million men, who in the late spring of 1944 lay in camps that extended across the entire breadth of southern and central England, waiting to form the spearhead of the allied armies in France? It is important to remember how very few of them were soldiers - that is, in the sense that they had made the profession of arms their chosen career. Overwhelmingly, they were a ragbag of civilians drawn from every corner of American, British, French, Polish society, and turned into fighting men solely for the duration of war. Some were young enough, and had been in uniform for long enough, that soldiering had become their accepted way of life, and they savoured their own prowess in it. But most were very unwilling warriors, who yearned above all to finish the job and get home alive. After months and years of training, some were indeed impatient for D-Day, because they knew that until it had taken place, they could not begin the long march that ultimately led to their own homes. But few cherished heroic ambitions. I have always been struck by a memorable story told to me by Colonel Robin Hastings - no relation - who led the Green Howards ashore on D-Day. One of his sergeant majors, a Yorkshire man named Stan Hollis, won a Victoria Cross for three times personally attacking German strongpoints which held up the battalion's advance. "You know", Hastings said to me, "I think Hollis was the only man I met in the entire war who felt that winning it was his personal responsibility. Most men I knew, when they saw that something difficult and dangerous had to be done, simply hoped to God that some other poor sod could be found to do it". I defer to no one in my respect for professional soldiers. But I reserve my deepest admiration for men who never wanted to go to war, who

nonetheless when they found the duty of fighting for their country thrust upon them, summoned reserves of determination and courage to do remarkable things. Most of the men of the Allied armies who landed in France in June 1944 understood that they were taking part in a moment of history. But most also were too young, too callow, to grasp the scale of events beyond their own squad, company, slit trench, bench in the landing craft. The prospect of final victory for one cause's or that of one's nation seemed of little relevance to a soldier whose company, whose section, whose own life might well be part of the sacrifice required to achieve this. I was once talking to an American who landed as an infantryman on D-Day at the age of 18. 40 years on, he recalled his struggle to come to terms with the magnitude of what he was doing: "Me, Lindley Higgins, from Riverdale in the Bronx, was about to invade France. It was a problem that my mind in its then state of maturity couldn't possibly cope with".

Yet Lindley Higgins from Riverdale in the Bronx landed among that great host of British and American and Canadian soldiers in Normandy on D-Day, and did his part- as so many others did theirs- in a fashion which enabled the Allied armies to secure all their beaches, and to establish a decisive lodgement ashore, on 6 June 1944. It is not my purpose here, to retrace ground with which most of you will be very familiar, painting the great drama on the Norman beaches that day, when the German defenders awoke to behold the armada of 6,483 ships arrayed offshore, landing the men of five divisions from the sea, while two more dropped from the air, It is necessary only to consider their achievement by nightfall. The plan for the landings was overwhelmingly that of Montgomery, who had insisted upon much enlarging the original concept of Sir Frederick Morgan. Unlike Morgan, Montgomery possessed the clout to secure the resources that were needed. I am an unashamed admirer of Montgomery, in so many respects an appalling human being, yet a great professional soldier. He seems to me to have possessed a quality lacking in other great British military gentlemen such as Wavell and Alexander- the killer instinct, the ruthless understanding that the business of war is to destroy the enemy on the battlefield. His crippling weaknesses, however, were boastfulness and recklessness with words. Again and again, in advance of operations he made rash and wild predictions about what he expected these to achieve. It was bad enough when he did this before British officers and politicians. It became incomparably worse when he did so before Americans. The Allies' objectives for their landing forces on D-Day, including the seizure of Caen, were ambitious and almost certainly unattainable. But there was nothing at all wrong with declaring aspirations which might, with extraordinary luck, be met if the German defences collapsed. It would have been unforgivable to make a plan which allowed the landing force to do as one British formation had done at the Dardanelles in 1915, climb the cliffs unopposed, and then sit down to make tea for some hours in the sunshine.

Yet why, oh why, did Montgomery feel obliged to chat casually to General Bradley before 6 June, about the prospect of British tanks reaching Falaise on D-Day "to knock about a bit down there ?". He might perfectly reasonably have told Bradley that what mattered was to gain a defensible lodgement, but that with extraordinary luck, it might be possible to stake out territory deeper inland. Yet instead he chose to create an impression of cherishing expectations which were wildly unrealistic. This was neither the first nor last time that he did so, with disastrous implications for American views of his vanity and lack of judgement.

The essence of achievement on the battle field is to maintain momentum in attack. The essence of defensive purpose is to break that momentum. The German positions in the coastal crust of Normandy could not stop the invaders, but they were largely and not surprisingly successful in checking their progress for vital hours. So much has been written about the poor

quality of the German units manning the beach defences that it becomes all the more surprising that this rag tag force performed as well as it did on D-Day, against the cream of the Allied armies. It required considerable fortitude, merely to keep firing and dying against the offensive might thrown against them. Allied soldiers- and above all armoured units- which had landed from the sea, grappled with traffic congestion at beach exits together with debris and wreckage and obstacles everywhere; and determined resistance from forward German strongpoints; could not readily have expected to advance 10 or 15 miles inland except against a grossly incompetent and completely broken enemy. The Germans, as Montgomery well knew, were above all masters of counter-attack. If a British thrust had indeed penetrated beyond Caen on the first day, I believe it would have been ruthlessly cut off and destroyed by the Germans, as several isolated British units were cut off and destroyed when they overreached themselves by hastening inland from the beaches without support. British and American parachute troops performed an immensely useful and often sacrificial role on 6 June, by fighting in isolated pockets well forward of the main front, diverting and confusing the defenders, as well as securing the flanks of the seaborne landings. But if allied armoured units had exposed themselves in deep salients on D-Day, I question whether their advances could have been sustained, especially when it was a serious shortcoming of the equipment of the invaders that their infantry lacked armoured personnel carriers in which to move forward fast in support of the tanks.

I turn again to Basil Liddell Hart's judgement upon the entire campaign in Normandy. He called it: "an operation that eventually went according to plan, but not according to timetable". On D-Day the allied landing forces accomplished as much as could realistically have been expected of them, given the strength of the fixed defences, the performance of the defenders manning these, and the immense complexity of carrying out an amphibious landing on this scale.

Of course the performance of some allied units was disappointing. Of course tactical opportunities were missed. Of course some paratroop drops were botched, some units were sluggish in advancing from the beaches, some of the ingenious technology performed less well than hoped. No battle in history has ever gone entirely according to plan. But what mattered then, and matters to us today, is the grand design and the historical outcome. Gasping for breath on the shore the allied armies might have been on the evening of 6 June 1944, clinging to their footholds shocked by the intensity of their experience and in some cases of their casualties; but they had achieved the vital objective by getting and staying there. They had created the basis for the successful land campaign which followed. A German officer in Normandy once described to me the briefing he and his comrades received in the spring of 1944. "We were told", he said, "the first days were vital. If the Allies successfully established themselves on the shore, then the campaign in the west might be extended for many months; but it could not be won".

So it proved. Once ashore, the relentless reinforcement of Allied superiority in men, tanks, guns, aircraft was bound eventually to overwhelm the Germans, and bring the war in the west to a successful conclusion. Eisenhower, in my view without hyperbole, entitled his memoirs of the 1944-45 campaign *Crusade In Europe*. The allied triumph on D-Day, even allowing for the great odds in its favour, was indeed one of the great military achievements of history. There is very little about war that deserves to be considered romantic or glamorous. But on 6 June 1944, the nobility of the cause for which the Allies fought imbued the occasion with a grandeur which defies the cynicism of history, and which deserves to be celebrated long after the men who did these remarkable things are dead.