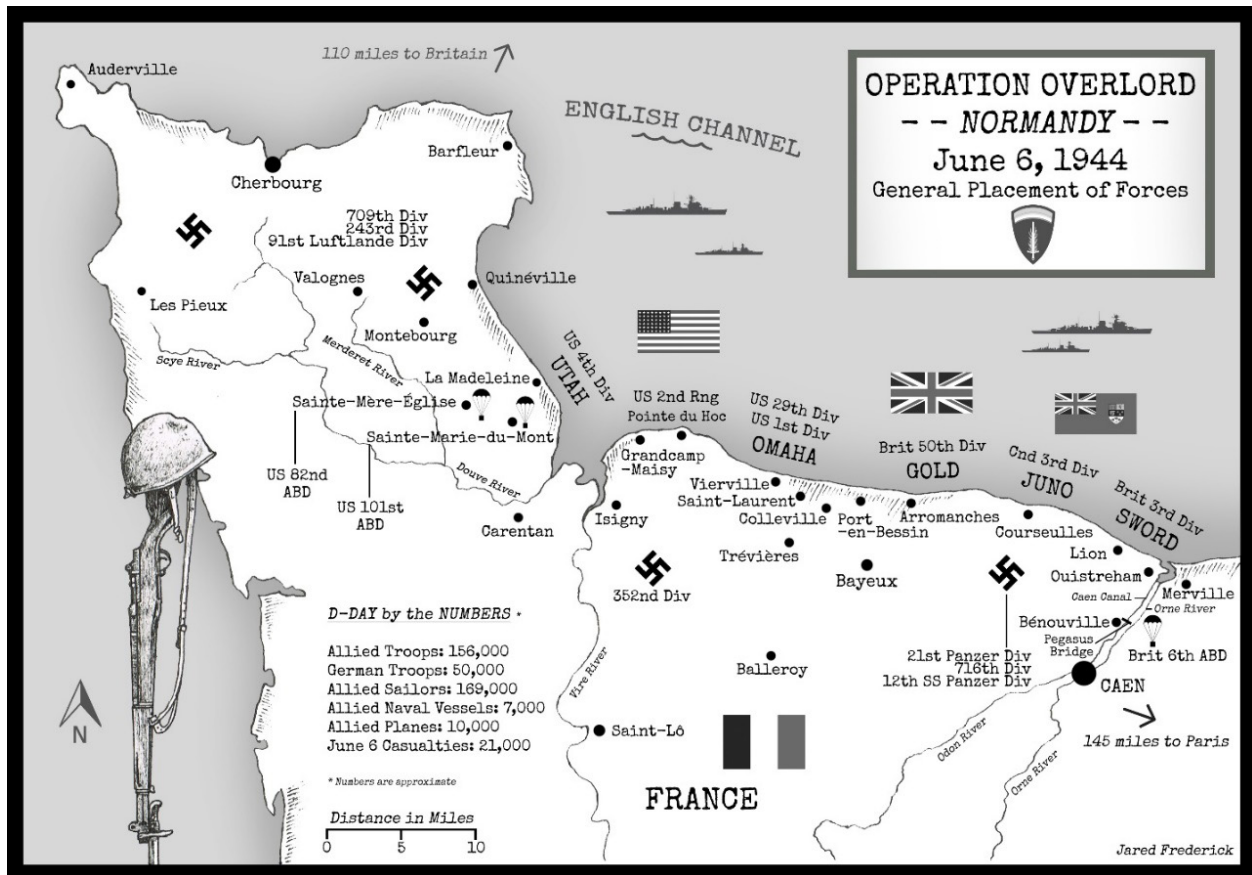


# “The Great Crusade:” Ike and the Men of D-Day

## Activity A: D-Day Overview and Background

Have your students read the following summary of D-Day, review the included map, and answer the reflection questions that follow.



By the summer of 1944—four long years after Germans armies had taken over France and Western Europe—the Allied nations were finally ready to liberate the European continent. After pushing back German forces in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy, now the Allied countries—with the United States, Great Britain, and Canada leading the way—had turned their focus to an invasion of Western France. This effort was known as Operation Overlord.

Because the United States was contributing the most men and equipment to this invasion, American leadership was able to choose the commander for the attack. In December 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt selected General Dwight D. Eisenhower to be the Supreme Allied Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, leading the way into Europe. Eisenhower had led amphibious invasions in North African and Sicily, and had a great ability to work with others, making him an excellent choice for this job.

General Eisenhower had a very difficult task, and in the months leading up to the attack, he and his staff had to make many crucial decisions. Crossing the English Channel was a difficulty, as was getting through the German defenses along the French coastline. Allied planners chose the region of Normandy for the attack, believing that the Germans would not expect the Allies to land there. The beaches of Normandy also offered enough coastline for the Allied soldiers to attack from the sea. In order to confuse the Germans, the Allies launched Operation Fortitude, creating fictitious army divisions and feeding the Germans disinformation to hide their real plans. Eisenhower also made decisions about a strategic bombing campaign in France to diminish the Germans' ability to move reinforcements to the coast when the attack did finally occur.

The Allies also had to decide just how many troops to use in the attack. The scale of the invasion itself was enormous—over 150,000 soldiers, sailors, and airmen were involved, with 11,000 aircraft and over 6,000 ships supporting and transporting them across the English Channel.

Organizing so many men and so much equipment was no easy task. In addition, Eisenhower had to make sure that the Allied commanders—representing many different countries. Perhaps Eisenhower's most significant decision was regarding the weather itself. On June 4, Eisenhower had to postpone the invasion by 24 hours due to a terrible summer storm that was hitting the coast of France. On the morning of June 5, he met with his top advisors and generals to decide on whether to postpone the invasion once more. Storms and cloud cover could hamper the paratrooper drops that were to precede the invasion, and stormy seas could overturn landing craft bringing soldiers to

the beaches. Meanwhile, the longer the Allies delayed the invasion, the greater the chance was that the Germans would discover their plans. Believing the weather would soon break, Eisenhower ordered the attack to proceed, a tremendous gamble knowing what was at stake. If the weather did not improve, the attack would most certainly fail. Thankfully for the Allies, the storm soon subsided, and the attack went forward. That evening, before the attack began, Eisenhower visited the men of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to wish them well.

On the night of June 5, thousands of American and British paratroopers were dropped behind German lines, and a few hours later, on the morning of June 6, 5 American, British, and Canadian infantry divisions landed on the beaches of Normandy. Heavy fighting raged that morning as wave after wave of landing craft arrived, gradually increasing the number of soldiers in Normandy. Dwight Eisenhower was only able to watch and hope all of the planning had worked. British soldiers landed on Gold and Sword Beaches, the Canadians at Juno Beach, and the Americans at Utah and Omaha Beaches. Of the five, Omaha saw the fiercest fighting and the highest casualties.

By nightfall, Allied forces had established a foothold in occupied France, and the liberation of Europe had begun. It was a victory, though it came at quite a cost—over 10,000 Allied soldiers were killed, wounded, or missing, over 6,000 of whom were Americans.

While the war was far from over—the Germans did not surrender until May 8, 1945—Allied forces had finally begun to take back Western Europe. Eisenhower's work was not over, but he had successfully led the Allies to a victory in what was possibly the most consequential day of World War II.

Reflection Questions:

- What was Operation Overlord?
- What was General Eisenhower's role in Operation Overlord?
- Name at least two things which General Eisenhower did or decisions which he made in the planning for the D-Day invasion.
- Why did Eisenhower decide to go ahead with the D-Day invasion?