

Fortitude and Fortune: The Journey to Normandy

by Alec Head

Smoke fills the air as the staccato of gunfire, pounding *thuds* of artillery shells, and screams of the wounded shake the beachside. It is the morning of June 6, 1944; D-Day has finally arrived, and an unprecedented cooperation between naval forces, those in the air, and those on the ground unfolds into one of the greatest battles of World War II.¹ Much planning and preparation went into this day, setting the stage for the war's crescendo, the clash that would decide the course of the ongoing conflict. However, in order for the success of Allied forces on D-Day, a combination of subterfuge, planning, and not a small bit of fortune was required.

Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union had long called for a western front to be opened by British and American forces. This would relieve the staggered Soviet forces, who were steadily being pushed back by Adolf Hitler's *Wehrmacht* forces.² On June 22, 1941, Hitler had made a bold move by launching Operation Barbarossa, a full-scale invasion of Russia.³ The ensuing loss of life and (most importantly to Stalin) territory led to the proposed plan of a western front, dividing German forces and crushing them between a pincer.

However, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill resisted the idea, instead choosing to launch initially in Northern Africa. While not pleasing to Stalin, it is clear from a modern perspective that the amphibious assaults on Northern Africa, as well as the subsequent assaults on Sicily and Italy garnered invaluable logistical data. This would later be applied to the assaults of Normandy.

Finally, after much distant quibbling, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, collectively called "The Big Three", agreed to meet at the Tehran Conference. On December 1, 1943, all three initialed a series of military conclusions, among which was the long-awaited western front.⁴ Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of France, was to be launched in the following May, specifically on the first.⁵ Stalin agreed to launch a

¹ Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010). Digital version.

² David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear Part II: The American People in World War II*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Tehran Conference, 1943*. Manuscript. From Library of Congress, *U.S. Treaties*. <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000003-0863.pdf>

⁵ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 258.

simultaneous invasion from the east, to divert German forces.⁶ Most significantly to the success of the operation, however, were Churchill's proposed deceptions. The iconic phrase used to describe the plan was that "truth deserves a bodyguard of lies."⁷

Designated Operation Bodyguard, the widespread deception was soon adopted by the Allies. One of the most significant aspects of the operation were the maneuvers of the spies referring to themselves as "XX," a visual pun on the phrase "double cross."⁸ First proposed by Tar Robertson of MI5, the British Security Service, the plan required the conversion of all German spies within England.⁹ After this success, the spies served Bodyguard by passing a steady stream of misinformation to their superiors in Berlin. Meanwhile British diplomats attended international cocktail parties, deliberately dropping false hints to be overheard by spies, strengthening the credibility of those in England.¹⁰

One particularly unique method for controlling the flow of information was proposed by Flight Lieutenant Walker, who had long observed the German Himmler's usage of carrier pigeons. Walker suggested mixing in poorly-disguised British pigeons, trained to fly alongside those of the Germans. By doing this, the purposefully shoddy job disguising the pigeons would be noticed, forcing the German pigeon controllers to recall all pigeons to root out the imposters. This lessened the chance of the converted spies being discovered, as it reduced the frequency of communications.¹¹

Potentially the most significant operations under Bodyguard was a two-pronged deception in preparation for Normandy. After much debate regarding the name (as Churchill simultaneously wanted to give nothing away, yet wanted a significant name), the plan was codenamed Operation Fortitude.¹² Shrouded in secrecy, the plans remained classified until 1972, marked "TO BE KEPT UNDER LOCK AND KEY," Split into Fortitude North and South, each aspect sought to disrupt the defensive preparations of the German forces by planting alternate invasion sites within their hands.¹³

Fortitude North made it apparent that an attack was imminent on Norway. Other targets highlighted were Greece, the Dalmatian Coast, Northwestern Italy, Bulgaria, and Denmark. This wide range of locations led diverted German forces to

⁶ *Tehran Conference*.

⁷ WC0208s. Manuscript. 1943. From Library of Congress, *Churchill and the Great Republic*. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/churchill/images/wc0208s.jpg> (accessed March 15, 2016).

⁸ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 269.

⁹ Ben Macintyre, *Double Cross: The True Story of the D-Day Spies*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2012), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 180-3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 175-6.

¹³ Joshua Levine, *Operation Fortitude: The Story of the Spies and the Spy Operation that Saved D-Day*, (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2012).

monitor each, in case they were determined to be legitimate. Norway being the biggest theoretical target, a false British force was even created for the imaginary invasion, the British Fourth Army, stationed at Scotland.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Fortitude South served as the more direct deception for the D-Day invasion of Normandy, by suggesting the attack would fall upon Pas-de-Calais.¹⁵ Calais was seemingly an ideal target, as it represented the narrowest part of the English Channel, making for a more rapid crossing.¹⁶ Two months prior to the invasion, which due to logistics had been shifted to June 5, the Allies launched a series of air strikes, wide in scope, with an emphasis on the Calais area.¹⁷ This succeeded not only in drawing more attention to Calais, but to damaging the routes between Calais and Normandy, hampering forces' transfer after the invasion would begin.

These strategies led to dissension and arguments among the German military leadership. The central argument took place between Field Marshals Erwin Rommel and Gerd von Runstedt.¹⁸ Rommel wished to position tanks dug in at the beaches (primarily Calais) to repel attacks as they landed, whereas Runstedt said the tanks should be kept in reserve northwest of Paris, and sent to quell invasions when a definitive target was known.¹⁹ Rommel (accurately) believed that such reserves would easily be hit by American and British bombing raids before they could arrive at any beach.²⁰ Hitler finally was forced to step in and implement a compromise: Rommel would be granted control over three divisions to position on various beaches, while the rest would remain in reserve. Ever-cautious, Hitler also declared that the reserve tanks could only be mobilized with his strict permission. Of Rommel's three divisions, he positioned the 21st Panzer Division, which was a shambled hodgepodge of battered tanks alongside those captured during the fighting, in Caen, near Normandy.

Following in the footsteps of the prior-mentioned British Fourth Army, the American military leadership formed the First United States Army Group, or FUSAG.²¹ Stationed in Kent, they were set in a prime position to launch an invasion at Calais. The supposed force was led by General George Patton, who was ideal as Hitler considered him the best of the American commanders.²² Patton had recently been suspended for slapping a pair of soldiers in Sicily; the first was suffering from malaria and dysentery,

¹⁴ Levine, *Operation Fortitude*, 179.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁶ "Allied Assault Routes" Normandy Allied Assault Handout.

¹⁷ Jonathan Martin, *World War II in Color, Season 1 Episode 9: Overlord*, Narrated by Robert Powell (2011; United Kingdom: NM Productions, 2016.), Television.

¹⁸ Levine, *Operation Fortitude*, 218.

¹⁹ Martin, *World War II in Color*; Levine, *Operation Fortitude*, 218.

²⁰ Martin, *World War II in Color*.

²¹ Levine, *Operation Fortitude*, 193.

²² *Ibid.*, 194.

while the second was shell-shocked. Patton called both men cowards, and went so far as to declare, "There's no such thing as shell shock! It's an invention of the Jews!"²³

Whilst Patton marched around in plain view at Kent, barking orders, he also served as commander of the American Third Army in preparation of the true assault at Normandy. When he could break away, he would tour to their locations, giving rousing speeches along the way. Emphasizing the importance of secrecy at the beginning of his speeches, one of his most significant is quoted as follows:

Don't forget. You don't know I'm here at all. No word of the facts is to be mentioned in any letter. The world is not supposed to know what the hell they did to me. I'm not supposed to be commanding this army – I'm not supposed to be in England. Let the first bastards to find out be the goddamn Germans. Some day I want them to raise up on their hind legs and howl, "Jesus Christ! It's the goddamn Third Army and that son-of-a-bitch Patton again!"²⁴

To make the staging at Kent more convincing, Allied forces implemented one of Stalin's former tactics, by his recommendation.²⁵ The transcripts of the Tehran Conference show that he offered the tactic with the implication of pushing the invasion; while he was pushing back against Hitler, the second front he had so desperately wanted would ease his advance. A series of inflatable tanks, planes, and ships were staged for the sake of German reconnaissance planes.²⁶ The tanks, which consisted of a foldable wire frame and a fabric surface, could be erected by a group of men, as seen in photos.²⁷ They were light enough to be lifted into the air by a single man. Dummy soldiers were loaded inside, and to make the semblance of movement realistic, the vehicles were moved around. For planes in particular, car lights were moved around hastily-constructed false airfields. Soldiers were brought in to simulate radio traffic consistent with such a buildup, reading from scripts for hours at a time.²⁸ Recordings of sound were blasted over speakers to mimic the sounds of vehicles and troops in training. Aiding the constructs was the fog of the area, which obscured the vision of German reconnaissance pilots, thus making the dummies believable.

The First US Army Group itself was kept shrouded in secret by the title Quicksilver, a codename that was subsequently leaked by the XX spies to reveal the existence of the supposed staging.²⁹ FUSAG was supposedly composed of more than a

²³ Ibid., 195.

²⁴ Ibid., 196.

²⁵ WC0208s.

²⁶ Levine, *Operation Fortitude*, 200.

²⁷ Martin, *World War II in Color*.

²⁸ Macintyre, *Double Cross*, 176.

²⁹ Michael J. Donovan, Lieutenant Colonel. "Strategic Deception: Operation Fortitude," *Strategy Research Project*, U.S. Army War College, (2002). Accessed March 15, 2016. <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA404434>.

million men in Southern England, divided between the Third United States Army and the First Canadian Army. Perhaps a nod to the efforts of XX, one aspect of the false Third US Army was the XX Armored Corps.

While artificial plans proceeded, the build-up to the true invasion continued. American forces in particular brought with them supplies of weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and most significantly, men to a war with weary forces on all sides. As noted by General Dwight D. Eisenhower in his speech prior to the invasion's launch, "Our home fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of fighting men."³⁰ This numerical superiority garnered a drastic advantage for the Allies over German forces. The key, of course, was to get the men and supplies onto the beaches in the first place.

After more than half a year's intense preparations, the day finally arrived: June 5, 1944; D-Day. However, as men began loading into transports for the invasion, a harsh storm struck.³¹ The storm would present a myriad of misfortunes to the carefully-planned attack. Landing craft would be slowed in their crossing of the English Channel, Naval bombardments would lose what accuracy they had for pounding defenses, and perhaps most significantly, air support would be virtually nonexistent. Air superiority was a major advantage accounted for in the invasion to come, as most of the German Luftwaffe had been crippled following the Battle of Britain, from July to October of 1940.³² The support of air and naval force was intended to clear a path in the defenses on the beach. By targeting the artilleries and machine gun emplacements, the landing would be easier, though never easy, for the infantry.

A delay at this stage would be disastrous, as it would be a minimum of two weeks before the next opportunity due to planning around the moon and tides.³³ With millions of American and British soldiers on the ground in England, and many millions of tons of supplies and vehicles, a postponed attack would almost surely tear down all Bodyguard and Fortitude had sought to prepare. However, a glimmer of hope shone through the deluge. American meteorologists swore a brief respite in the storm was coming, something their German counterparts were simultaneously denying. After a mere twenty-four hour's delay, the attack was launched on June 6, 1944.

Returning for a moment to the German perspective, the attack landed while they remained totally unprepared.³⁴ Rommel had taken a brief retreat home, under the idea that the storm precluded any attacks, and thus was not present when it arrived. When it

³⁰ The United States Army. "Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's D-Day Message." History | D-Day | June 6, 1944 | Accessed February 13, 2016. http://www.army.mil/d-day/history.html?from=dday_rotator_eisenhower#video.

³¹ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 292.

³² Brinkley, *Unfinished Nation*.

³³ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 292.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 293.

did, Runstedt immediately moved to fulfill his earlier-proposed plan, mobilizing the panzers in reserve to Normandy.³⁵ As per Hitler's instructions, Runstedt sent an official request to Hitler. Fortunately for the Allies', Hitler had just ingested a concoction to help him sleep, and his guards were under strict orders to not wake him. When he was available the next morning, he assumed that the attack was intended as a diversion preceding Calais. This misunderstanding was supported by increasing the volume on recordings of vehicles at Kent, implying to German monitoring that an attack was imminent.³⁶ Fortitude North, Bodyguard, and the XX had done their jobs; the deception was accepted, and the German response was delayed. When Hitler realized his mistake, he gave immediate permission, and while the panzer reinforcements were too far to be of much help at the beaches, though they set out for the journey anyway.³⁷

All the while, the conquered French remained in hiding, biding their time for a chance to prove themselves. After years of waiting, their time had come. Setting ambushes along the panzers' paths, and destroying bridges connecting them to Normandy, the Resistance slowed the reinforcement process drastically. Buying crucially-needed time, the trip was delayed from a mere three days to over two weeks. Along the way, American and British bombing runs destroyed much of the force, taking advantage of the extended process. By the time the panzers arrived, it was far too late, and all five beachheads had been secured. Tragically, the German forces took their frustration out upon the innocent French civilians in areas they moved through in retaliation for the Resistance's bravery.³⁸

The invasion of Normandy has been cited as the largest amphibious invasion in history. A force comprised of "9 battleships, 23 cruisers, 104 destroyers, and 71 large landing craft of various descriptions as well as troop transports, mine sweepers [*sic*], and merchantmen – in all, nearly 5,000 ships of every type..." launched before sunrise, appearing out of the dark to stunned German forces.³⁹ Even with all of the planning and clandestine operations, many felt that the odds of success were moderate at best. In fact, General Eisenhower scratched down a brief note, planning his words in case of a failed attempt.⁴⁰ He wrote, "The troops, the air, and the Navy did all that Bravery could do. If any blame is found attached to the attempt, it is mine alone."⁴¹ These words conclude the anxious general's hastily scrawled note, pocketed to be revisited if the worst were to

³⁵ Ibid., 295.

³⁶ Martin, *World War II in Color*.

³⁷ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 295

³⁸ Martin, *World War II in Color*.

³⁹ Army History. "Normandy." Accessed February 12, 2016.

<http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/normandy/nor-pam.htm>.

⁴⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *In Case of Failure*. Textual Manuscript. 1944. Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, From National Archives, 186470. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/186470>

⁴¹ Ibid.

happen. The tension he must surely have felt is evident in the multiple points scratched out. In fact, his anxiety becomes even more apparent when readers observe that he concluded the note by dating it, July 5, the wrong month entirely.

Despite General Eisenhower's misgivings, however, the invasion was an overwhelming success. By the end of the first day, all five beachheads had been secured. Within a mere three months, two million men had landed, alongside five-hundred thousand vehicles.⁴² Now came the unstoppable march, advancing on German territory. Stalin's envisioned pincer tactic was finally coming to fruition.⁴³ Advancing from the east, the desperate German forces were forced to fight two fronts, splitting and thus weakening their forces. Paris was liberated on August 25, 1944.⁴⁴ Soon, Berlin was reached, and taken by the Soviet military forces between April 16, 1945, and May 2, 1945.⁴⁵

None of this would have been possible were it not for the initial success at Normandy. Had Normandy failed, the war likely would have dragged on for years thereafter, costing innumerable lives. In fact, should the loss have been decisive enough, the entire course of the war could have been changed. A defeat would have granted the German forces time to build their defenses more efficiently. During this theoretical time, the Germans would be fully aware of the deceptions used against them, tricks they would be unlikely to fall for again. While purely hypothetical, it is significant to realize the effect this single battle had on the war as a whole. As stated prior, the success of the invasion would never have been possible without the unprecedented level of cooperation between the Army Air Force, Navy, and Army infantrymen.⁴⁶ However, they themselves would never have gotten so far as they did without a "bodyguard of lies" through Operations Bodyguard and Fortitude.

Fate, as is often said, favors the prepared mind. The Allies were certainly prepared, and fate undoubtedly sided with their goal. While the existence of luck is up for debate, if it exists, it too guided the assault. In order for the Allied success on D-Day, a combination of subterfuge, planning, and fortune was required. Sometimes, it seems, ignoble means are justified, when pursuing a noble, "great crusade."⁴⁷

⁴² William J Duiker and Jackson Spielvogel, *World History, Seventh Edition* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013), 742.

⁴³ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 148.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁴⁶ Brinkley, *Unfinished Nation*.

⁴⁷ Eisenhower's D-Day Message.