

'The most ghastly disaster of the whole war'

Was D-Day more of an epic human tragedy than a military triumph? Tomorrow, Donald Trump and the Queen will lead the world in marking the 75th anniversary of a famous Allied victory.



Classic: A still from the famous opening sequence of the D-Day epic, *Saving Private Ryan*.

Almost exactly 75 years ago, on 6 June 1944, the largest seaborne invasion force in history landed on the beaches of Normandy.

Even before the landing started, hundreds of paratroopers, dropped behind the lines, had drowned in the flooded fields.

The Allied bombers missed most of the German shore defences, and the invasion force initially failed to reach any of the major objectives set for the assault, even though the defenders had anticipated the landing to take place elsewhere.

Allied casualties in battle were not significantly lower than those of the German defenders — despite the fact that most German army units in France were made up of child soldiers forcibly drafted into fight, and deaf war invalids from the Eastern Front.

Nearly 20,000 French civilians were killed in Normandy alone during and immediately after the landing, most of them as a result of misguided Allied bombing attacks that failed to destroy German defensive positions, but hit civilian dwellings instead.

By the end of the campaign, 50,000 French civilians had died — a death toll that exceeded that of the actual combatants.

Antony Beevor, the British historian, has called the RAF's bombing of Caen, which destroyed the entire city except for the German

defensive positions, "stupid, counterproductive and, above all, very close to a war crime".

Allied commanders were deeply pessimistic. On the eve of the invasion, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke confided, "It may well be the most ghastly disaster of the whole war."

The supreme Allied commander, General Eisenhower, prepared a provisional press release announcing that "the landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed".

And yet, measured against these grim expectations, D-Day proved to be a great military success.

The operation began the liberation of German-occupied France, and later Europe, from Nazi control — and laid the foundations of the Allied victory on the Western Front.

To land 70,000 soldiers under enemy fire, within a few hours, was a remarkable strategic achievement.

From the shores of occupied France, the German defenders watched the approaching fleet with a combination of awe and horror.

To one of the Wehrmacht soldiers guarding the French coastline, the approaching 7,000 vessels looked like "a gigantic town on the sea" unleashing a naval bombardment "like an earthquake".

The story has been told thousands of times, notably by Stephen Spielberg in his 1998

blockbuster movie *Saving Private Ryan*. (The film has been re-released for this anniversary.)

The long opening sequence of the beach landings has been called "probably the most realistic battle sequence ever filmed". Yet many critics have also questioned its attempt to rediscover American innocence with a climax that combines "just about every cliché in the book".

T-Day?

Tomorrow's commemoration, led by the Queen and Trump, will offer thanks and honour to the many who died in battle. It will not shy away from the horrific realities of war. But it is also inevitable that it will present D-Day as a strategic triumph that forged the alliances, guaranteeing generations of future peace and stability for the western world.

Surely it is now time to be more honest, say the critics. Like all war, D-Day was a mess and a disaster. Sir Alan Brooke was righter than he thought. And what we are witnessing tomorrow is really T-Day or Trump Day — the might of one huge, ego-driven economic power, the USA, basking in the *obeisance* of its former imperial partner, Britain.



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READING HOMEWORK

1. Why did it initially look like D-Day would be unsuccessful?

2. Should D-Day be remembered as a success or failure in history? Explain your thinking.
