In May 1944, the Western Allies were finally prepared to deliver their greatest blow of the war, the long-delayed, cross-channel invasion of northern France, code-named Overlord. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower was supreme commander of the operation that ultimately involved the coordinated efforts of 12 nations.

After much deliberation, it was decided that the landings would take place on the long, sloping beaches of Normandy. There, the Allies would have the element of surprise. The German high command expected the attack to come in the Pas de Calais region, north of the river Seine where the English Channel is narrowest. It was here that Adolf Hitler had put the bulk of his panzer divisions after being tipped off by Allied undercover agents posing as German sympathizers that the invasion would take place in the Pas de Calais.

The following are photos and descriptions of D-Day, as it came to be known, from The National WWII Museum in New Orleans.
D-DAY

A TIMELINE OF THE ATTACK

Members of the 101st Airborne Infantry Division and the 4th Infantry Division crowd aboard an LCT on the way to Utah Beach on June 6, 1944.

[PHOTOS FROM NATIONALWW2MUSEUM.ORG]
In the early hours of June 6, 1944, 156,000 servicemen from the Allied nations boarded more than 5,000 ships and landing craft that ferried them across English harbors to the beaches of France toward a hail of German gunfire and into history. At the same time, paratroopers and gliders descended into the pitch-black Normandy countryside with the objective of clearing the way for troops on the beaches to head inland.

U.S. dead numbered 2,499 in just the first day (total Allied losses topped 4,000). Those who survived the assault were in for a long and treacherous journey that would not end until the surrender of Germany, almost a year later. This is the story of D-Day told in the words of those who lived to tell about it and through the things they carried with them — all from the collection of The National WWII Museum.

- **0000 to 0100**
  U.S. and British Airborne divisions landed in Normandy.

- **0016 hours**
  Members of the 6th British Airborne Division, aboard 8 Horsa gliders, landed near the Caen Canal (Benouville) and Orne River bridges. Their mission was to capture the bridges and hold them. The first glider of the group stopped some 40 meters from the Benouville bridge, thanks to superb piloting during the middle of the night. Within 15 minutes, both bridges were captured.

- **0100 to 0200**
  The “All American” 82nd Airborne Division jumped into combat in Normandy.

- **0151 hours**
  Some 369 C-47s arrived over Normandy carrying Paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division. Their aim was to land near Sainte-Mère-Église, Amfreville and Picauville. Unfortunately, a number of paratroopers landed in areas flooded by the Germans and drowned. The survivors’ objective was to seize beach exits from Utah Beach, capture the town of Sainte-Mère-Église and control the major causeway just outside of town.

- **0155 hours**
  The first 2,000 aircraft of the US 8th and 9th Air Forces took off from England to support the ground forces of the invasion on the Normandy coast.

- **0200 to 0300**
  Fighting started outside areas where paratroopers began to regroup. All German units were placed on alert.

- **0211 hours**
  The German 716 Infantry Division reported that enemy paratroopers had landed east of the Orne River.

- **0015 hours**
  101st Pathfinders followed by Paratroopers of the 101st Airborne jumped into Normandy. Their objective was to control the Western flank of Normandy by capturing Sainte-Mère-Église and seizing the major exits that link to Utah Beach.

- **0215 hours**
  The German 709 Infantry Division reported that enemy paratroopers had landed around Sainte-Mère-Église.

- **0300 to 0500**
  Thousands of warships and transports began to anchor and lower landing craft into the water.

- **0354 hours**
  CG-4 (WACO) gliders landed in Normandy with extra troops and supplies to support the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions that were already engaged in combat.
0400 hours
Elements of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division captured the town of Sainte-Mère-Église.

0415 hours
Assault units were transferred from transport ships to LCVPs and LCAs off of Omaha Beach.

0500 to 0600
RAF bombers dropped some 6,000 tons of bombs on coastal defenses in Normandy.

0535 hours
Companies B and C of the 741st Tank Battalion, with Sherman tanks equipped with Duplex Drive to enable movement in water, were launched from their LSTs. However, the seas were rough; of the 32 DD tanks launched, 27 sank and three couldn’t launch from their transport. As a result, despite risks from German artillery, the 743rd Tank Battalion decided to land their tanks directly on the beach.

0537 hours
The German-held Longues-sur-Mer battery opened fire for the first time, targeting the USS Emmons. It failed to hit the ship. It then fired on USS Arkansas and missed. At that point, the German battery focused its guns on nearer targets.

0550 hours
Warships opened fire on the German Utah Beach batteries. Shortly after, B-26 Marauders of the 9th Air Force dropped more than 4,000 bombs on targets from Les Dunes-de-Varreville to Beauguillot.

0555 hours
B-24s of the 446th Bomb Group dropped bombs above Vierville, focusing on the strongpoints along the coast between Port-en-Bessin and the Pointe de la Percée. Due to poor weather and poor visibility, however, their efforts to knock them out were a failure.

0558 hours
Daylight broke, showing a continuation of gray, cold and rainy weather. Winds stirred up waves up to and beyond two meters. Warships started to open more concentrated fire on the coastal batteries to prepare the way for beach landings.

0600 to 0700
Barges with rocket launchers attached approached the landing beaches and sprayed them with rocket fire.

0630 hours — Omaha Beach
The 1st Infantry Division and 29th Infantry Division landed their first wave of troops under heavy fire. Immediately, GIs coming ashore attempted to make their way toward the seawall for cover from the enemy fire.

Tightly packed troops crouch inside their LCVP as it plows through a wave. In the distance is the coast of Normandy.
0630 hours — Utah Beach
The bombardment stopped and the 4th Division headed to shore. Strong currents and confusion placed elements of the division ashore on a less well-defended section of beach.
0658 hours
The bombing over Gold Beach and the west of Juno Beach began. The 1st Bombardment Division struck the coastal batteries and strong points between Longues-sur-Mer and Courseulles-sur-Mer. Simultaneously, B-17s of the 3rd Bombardment Division bombed the eastern part of Juno sector to Sword Beach.

0700 to 0800
There was confusion among the troops in the field and German high command. Gen. Alfred Jodl refused to send in Panzer reinforcements before receiving Hitler's approval. Hitler was in bed and was not to be awakened before 0900 hours.

0700 hours — Omaha Beach
The second wave landed at Omaha Beach.

0700 hours — Sword Beach
The 3rd British Division landed on time. Heavy fighting in the area slowed down the soldiers' progress.

0730 hours
The attack on Pointe du Hoc began. Rangers under Lt. Col. James Rudder attacked and climbed the eastern face of the cliffside at Pointe du Hoc, hoping to take out the (155mm) German artillery battery that intelligence believed was situated at its summit. This battery was a threat to troops on Omaha and Utah beaches. Approximately 20 minutes later, the case-mates were taken from the Germans, but the artillery pieces had been moved. They were later found 1,100 meters away and were promptly destroyed. Surviving Germans in the area were captured and became prisoners of war. For 36 hours, 190 able Rangers resisted a violent German counterattack. Only 90 soldiers came out of this heroic exploit alive.

0745 hours
Juno Beach: The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division started to land and were running 15 minutes behind schedule. The German resistance was relentless.

0800 to 1200
The offensive began from Utah Beach. American losses at Omaha Beach. Brits and Canadians moved inland.
0800 hours

A U.S. Army weapons carrier moved through the surf toward Utah Beach after being launched from its landing craft on June 6, 1944. There was a .50 caliber machine gun on the vehicle, pointed skyward for anti-aircraft defense.

Signal Corps photo of the approach to Utah Beach on D-Day.
**0900 hours — Omaha Beach**
WN60 was captured. WN stands for Widerstandsnest (“resistance nest”) and is typically a fortified concrete cave or stronghold that defended an area of the beach. It was the first strong point of the day to fall to the Americans.

**0915 hours**
Hitler awoke and listened to the latest news and reports.

**1030 hours**
Strong point WN65 was destroyed at Omaha Beach. This German fortification point protected Exit E1 and access to the Ruquet Valley.

**1200 to 1600**
The beaches continued to be cleared. Except for small pockets of resistance, the Atlantic Wall no longer existed. Wounded were starting to be evacuated from Omaha beach and troops were advancing overlooking Easy Green and Easy Red sectors.

**1300 hours — Omaha Beach**
WN72 stronghold, situated in the Dog Green Sector of Omaha Beach, was surrendered. It protected the D-1 Exit from the beach.

**1330 hours**
The city of Caen underwent its first bombing of the day.

**1430 hours — Omaha Beach**
The WN62 fortification situated in the Easy Red sector fell. This strong point protected the beach exit E3 and gave access to the village of Colleville-sur-Mer.

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**1000 hours**
American troops moved among beach obstacles and minefields on Omaha Beach, regrouping units and searching for an exit off the beach. Some 2,000 dead and wounded lay on the beach, mixed in with drowning victims brought in by the tide.
**1600 to 1800**
More of Omaha Beach opens up.

**1630 hours**
Caen was bombed again.

**1700 hours**
After heavy combat all day, Exit D-1 on Omaha Beach was finally secured. Exit D-1 was a natural draw, or valley, between the cliffs at Omaha Beach that provide a natural exit inland from the beach. There were multiple exits such as this on Omaha Beach, and each was heavily fortified by the Germans in defense of an invasion.

**1800 to 0000**
Troops on both sides were exhausted. Most fighting stopped at sunset. Evening overflights dropped flares to prevent German reinforcements from closing off conquered zones.

**2230 hours**
Caen was bombed for a third time, with the port area being damaged.

**0000 hours — June 7, 1944**
Some 170,000 or more troops by this point were fighting in Normandy. Reinforcements of Allied troops continued to arrive throughout the night. Losses at this point were estimated at about 6,600 Americans, 4,000 British and Canadian troops and some 4,000 to 9,000 Germans were killed during the first 24 hours of the invasion.
You’ve all heard the phrase “straight from the horse’s mouth.” When you’re trying to piece together some event from the past, you have to start with eyewitnesses, with the participants, with those who lived through the day you’re discussing. Sure, writers can add the sheen later, explaining this and analyzing that, but it has to start with the eyewitness. If you want straight talk on what happened, you must go to the source ... er ... the “horse.”

The National WWII Museum’s oral history collection is currently at more than 10,000 and rising. These are taped interviews with WWII veterans. Once, in the “olden times” 30 years ago, they were exclusively audio cassettes, but now they exist on high-definition digital video.

The effort continues, and the museum remains committed to interviewing every WWII veteran we can. The good news is that there are still more than 450,000 of them alive. The bad news? That figure represents just 3 percent of the men and women who donned the country’s uniform in WWII, and time and age are taking their toll. Some 362 of them die each and every day.

Pvt. Harold “Hal” Baumgarten was one of those veterans, and although he passed in 2016, we’re fortunate to have his oral history at the museum. And an amazing story it is! Hal is in the thick of it on D-Day, landing in Normandy with Company B of the 116th Regiment, 29th Infantry Division. The fortunes of war have put his division on Omaha Beach, the scene of the bloodiest D-Day fighting by far, and another stroke of “luck” has placed his company on the Dog Green sector of Omaha Beach, where German firepower is at its most ferocious.
Hal’s testimony about the landing is some of the most chilling narration you’ll ever hear in your life. The ride to the beach in the LCA (Landing Craft, Assault) is a nightmare of wind, rain and 20-foot waves. The boats are “thrown around like matchsticks,” he recalls, and every man is “immediately soaked with the icy cold English Channel water.” With the boat filling with water up to their knees, Hal and his comrades have to bail frantically with their helmets for three full hours merely to stay afloat.

It only gets worse as the company approaches the beach. One of the LCAs to the left of Hal’s strikes a mine and blows up, killing all 30 men on board, showering the men in his boat “with wood, metal and body parts — and blood.”

But if the approach is bad, the landing itself is hell. When the ramp on Hal’s LCA comes down, it seems as if every German machine gun on Omaha opens up at once, a stupefying blizzard of fire that kills just about every man on the boat. His lieutenant, Harold Donaldson, goes first, killed while still in the boat, along with men to his right and left. Hal stands behind the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) man, Clarece Riggs, and Riggs, too, falls in the opening seconds, killed by German machine gun fire while he’s still on the ramp.

Hal doesn’t emerge unscathed: a German bullet creases the left side of the helmet. He is lucky to be alive, but he probably isn’t feeling all that lucky as he jumps into the bloody water. Hal is a big guy — 5 feet 10 — and he is in water up to his neck.

As he and the survivors of the other boats struggle ashore, Hal is under fire constantly. He remembers running forward, carrying his rifle at “port arms” (across his chest, that is) and hearing a loud thud on his right front. His rifle vibrates. When he turns it over, he sees “a clean hole through its receiver,” the rectangular plate in front of the trigger guard. The seven bullets in his magazine, in other words, have stopped the German bullet, saving his life.

Other men around him aren’t so fortunate. To right and left, Hal sees them cut down. He names his comrades meticulously, along with their point of origin: Pvt. Robert Ditmar from Fairfield, Connecticut, on his right, crying “I’m hit, I’m hit. Ma ... mother ...,” and then going silent; Sgt. Clarence Roberson from Lynchburg, Virginia, on his left, “staggering by me without his helmet, gaping hole in the left side of his forehead.” Clarence’s blond hair is “streaked with blood,” and Hal keeps yelling at him to “Get down, get down.” It is too late for Clarence, though, and he probably can’t hear Hal anyway, given the tremendous noise on the beach, the roar of the guns, the explosions, the screaming. His last view of Clarence is the stricken man kneeling in 3 inches of water, praying on his rosary, when a burst of German machine gun fire from the bluffs in front of them literally cuts him in half.

Hal will never forget the scene, and for years afterward will suffer from the same nightmare, desperately crying out “Get down, get down” to the men around him.

By now — just moments into the invasion — 28 of the 30 men on Hal’s boat have been killed; he and a buddy named Charles Connor are the last men standing. His company as a whole has suffered the monstrous total of 85 percent casualties in the first 15 minutes of D-Day.
As we’ve seen, Hal has already come perilously close to adding another name to the casualty list, and he isn’t out of the woods yet. In the first two days of the fighting in Europe, he is wounded no fewer than five times: three times on June 6 and twice on June 7.

“Now you might say to yourself,” he remarks, “what kind of an idiot would keep fighting, being wounded?”

It’s a good question. His company has been slaughtered and all around him men are dead or dying. The beach looks like a scene from a horror movie. “The tide pools were full of bloody water,” Hal remembers. “The beach itself looked like it was painted with a red paint brush.”

But as Hal puts it in his oral history, fighting on was a simple matter of logic.

“So we were left with options,” he says: “Stay there and die, give up the beach to the Germans, or fight wounded.” Options one and two being unacceptable, “we decided to fight wounded.”

Hal is a crack shot, and he looses off a round at a German machine gun position. While it is impossible to tell if he hits his target or not, the fire dies down from that position. Hal is fighting back, along with a lot of other “Hals” up and down Omaha Beach, men who have spent the morning watching their buddies being killed right and left of them and who are burning for revenge.

Hal has just fired his shot at that machine gun when a blinding explosion hits just in front of him. An 88mm shell blows off his left cheek, puts a hole in the roof of his mouth, and shatters his left upper jaw, leaving teeth and gums lying on his tongue. The shell has killed men all around him. Hal is still alive, by chance. “My number wasn’t up,” he says, but who knows whether it is about to come up? In what is perhaps the understatement of the 20th century, he remembers thinking, “I better get off the beach.”

In 2006, Baumgarten published a book about his experiences on D-Day.

The wristwatch Baumgarten wore ashore at Omaha Beach on D-Day. [NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM PHOTOS]
That means crawling up to the seawall where he might find a minimal degree of protection. But even here the news is bad: One of the first men he sees at the base of the wall is his best buddy, Robert Garbet, lying face down, killed by a German sniper round. For the first time that day, Hal breaks down, "crying mad," as he remembers it, tears and blood streaming down from his face, his torn cheek flapping in the wind. He is about to lose it altogether — he starts to charge over the seawall to "kill some Germans," but another soldier yanks him back and holds him down. A good thing, too: Just then a German MG opens up with a burst that would have killed him instantly.

The "longest day" isn't even half over, but Hal had already seen more action and endured more brushes with death than any 10 men. He gets his face patched up, courtesy of A Company's aid man, Cecil Breeden. "Up till today," Hal says, "I still picture him with a halo over his head because he was an angel of mercy." Breeden spends hours pulling dead bodies out of the surf and binding up the wounded, "the biggest hero of D-Day," Hal calls him.

Hal could have been evacuated at that point — he has certainly paid his dues. But instead, he joins up with a small band of 11 other guys, remnants of this unit and that, who are in the same shape he is. This column of "walking wounded" climbs the bluffs, skirmishing with the Germans the whole way. In the course of the fighting, the 11 are whittled down in number, not so much killed in action as simply fading away from their previous wounds.

Not Hal. He continues to fight, and to be a magnet for German ordnance. As he is crawling forward, he triggers a "Bouncing Betty" German S-mine, blowing a hole in his foot, and then takes a machine gun bullet to the face, shattering the other side of his jaw. Adrenaline has masked some of the earlier pain, perhaps, but now he’s feeling the hurt. He gives himself a big dose of morphine. Just before he loses consciousness, he remembers seeing three German planes flying overhead. He thinks that the D-Day landing has failed.

"What would you have thought?" he asks. "I’m laying in the dark with six dead bodies. German planes are going over. There’s a guy with a machine gun down the road … who was going to come down the road to finish me off … I thought we lost the battle."

**A story that must be told**

There's more in Hal's oral history — a lot more. It's the details that will stick with you, not just of the hair-raising combat variety, but the everyday little things. How does a soon-to-be war hero like Hal Baumgarten prepare for his fateful moment? Well, just before the landing, he eats a "last meal." He doesn't like the British food on offer to him and his comrades, however, but he does manage to down a few pre-battle Cadbury chocolate bars. Just hours before being lowered into the LCA, he takes a shower on his bigger landing ship. It’s isn’t the Ritz — salt water and Lava soap — but it’s the last shower he’ll have for a while. He has a terrible headache that morning, and decides to take two aspirin. Hal will become a medical doctor later in life, but he isn’t one yet, and he doesn’t realize that aspirin makes you bleed faster when wounded. He’s going to have an opportunity — five opportunities — to discover that curious fact just a few hours later.

Hal’s oral history is the real deal, straight talk from a man who was there, who fought and bled, who watched his friends go down one by one, and who lived to tell the tale. He considered it his duty to tell the tale, in fact, and at The National WWII Museum, we consider it our duty to preserve Hal’s story for future generations.

For more of Harold Baumgarten’s oral history, with details of his life, pre-battle training and postwar career, go to ww2online.org/view/harold-baumgarten.

*Dr. Rob Citino is Samuel Zemurray Stone senior historian at The National WWII Museum.*
How to conduct an ORAL HISTORY

1. Inform the interviewee: Before any interview takes place, you should inform your interview subject of the purpose of the interview, the general subjects to be covered, the time and place of the interview, how the interview will be conducted (will it be taped, video taped?) and what will be done with the information.

2. Perform background research: You should do appropriate background research on the oral history topic before you conduct an interview. A trip to the library, as well as research online, is crucial to make sure that you have a familiarity with the subjects to be covered.

3. Prepare questions: You should have prepared questions written down. These questions should be broad enough to let the interviewee describe or explain the how, what, where and why of a subject, but should be limited enough so that the interviewee knows what you are interested in learning.

4. Be an active listener: You should be able to monitor the quality of what an interviewee is relating while also listening to clues or inferences that may reveal new areas or topics worth exploring. Don’t just stick to your scripted questions — be prepared to follow up on interesting or important stories or themes if the opportunity presents itself.

5. Take notes: Taking notes will give you a chance to jot down new questions as they come to mind. It is also a good idea to write down names used during an interview so you can check for spelling accuracy with the interviewee after the interview.

6. Listen for inaccuracies: If the interviewee appears to be presenting a distorted account, simply state that other sources you have consulted have taken an opposite view and ask the interviewee to comment. Be careful not to directly challenge the knowledge or truthfulness of the interviewee. It is also best to save more personal and sensitive subjects for the middle of the interview when a more relaxed atmosphere has been established.

7. Accept silence: Expect and accept a little silence. Never rush the interviewee into answering. One of the most common mistakes that novice interviewers make is to repeat or rephrase a question when the interviewee does not immediately respond. Another frequently made mistake is moving on to the next question at the interviewee’s first pause. People often need time to put their thoughts in order. If you allow them a few more seconds, they will probably add more to their earlier statements.

8. End strongly: Before the interview concludes, ask the interviewee if there is anything else they would like to tell you that you did not ask about. Conclude by thanking the interviewee for his or her time. If you have taped the interview and agreed to supply the interviewee with a copy, tell him when you will have that tape prepared. After the interview, write a thank-you letter to the interviewee.

9. Label your tape: If you are recording your interview, clearly label your tape with the date, the interviewee’s name and the subject of the interview. It is always a good idea to start your interview by recording a short introduction at the beginning of the tape that includes the above information (labels can fall off). If you have the ability, digitize your tape onto your computer.

10. Transcribe your interview: Recording your interview only on tape will not be very helpful to others wishing to use your interviews for further research. Typing out your interview is time-consuming, but important. Not only will it make your interview more accessible to researchers, but it will oblige you to listen more closely to the content of the interview.
CONSTRUCTING GOOD QUESTIONS

Constructing good questions is just as important as getting good answers. A good question is one that is easy to understand and allows the interviewee to explain the who, what, when, why and how of an issue or an occurrence. Remember, the idea of an interview is to gather meaningful historical information.

Yes or no questions

These will get you some information, but broader-based questions will allow your interviewee to better explain, describe, elaborate and inform. “Were you angry when you heard about Pearl Harbor?” is not as good a question as, “How did you feel when you heard about Pearl Harbor?” Ask yes or no questions and other simple factual questions early on in the interview to get needed background information and let both parties get comfortable with the interview process.

Overly broad questions

A question like, “Can you tell me what it was like in the Army?” is probably too broad. Interviewees will usually appreciate it if you give them some parameters to work between: “Can you tell me what barracks life was like in the Army?” or “What was it like the first time you saw combat?”

Multi-part questions

“What do you think about the way President Johnson conducted the war before and after the Tet Offensive and how do you think domestic events affected his ability to lead?” If you want the answers to each part of this question, break it down into at least three questions. If you don’t get answers to the questions you ask (after an appropriate pause), rephrase the questions, or simplify them.

Leading and biased questions

Be careful not to ask leading or biased questions: “Didn’t you hate having to live in a barracks with so many other women?” Instead ask, “What was it like having to live in a barracks with so many other women?” This gives the interviewee an opportunity to share her positive, negative and neutral opinions with you.

Get the facts before

Don’t ask factual questions that you should have researched before the interview: “What year did the war start?” or “Who was president then?” It is your responsibility to go into an interview as fully prepared as possible. Good research leads to good questions. Don’t be afraid to follow up on information that comes up that you don’t know. If your interviewee says, for instance, that he was in basic training at Camp Beauregard, you should feel free to follow up with, “Where is Camp Beauregard located?”

Respect your interviewee

Always respect the privacy and sensibilities of your interviewee. If he or she is uncomfortable about a subject or refuses to answer a question, move on to another subject. Remember, the interviewee is doing you a favor answering your questions.

Practice

It takes time to find just the right way to put a question so that the interviewee knows the kind of memories you are looking for, but has the freedom to develop and elaborate on his or her memories as the interview progresses. The more interviews you perform, the better you will become at crafting and delivering questions.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWING SOMEONE FROM THE HOME FRONT

When and where were you born? What were you doing before the war? Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked? Did you have any family members who served in the military? If so, how did your family life change due to their absence? What are your memories about rationing? Did you participate in scrap drives? What about War Bond rallies? Did your family or anyone you know plant a Victory Garden? Did you or anyone you know work in a defense industry? Do you have any special memories about celebrating holidays during the war? What are your most profound memories of the war? What are your memories of D-Day? V-E Day? Where were you and what did you do when you heard the war was over? How did you feel when the war ended? What were some of your most memorable experiences during WWII? Did WWII affect the rest of your life? If so, How? What did you do after the war? What lessons for today’s generation would you like to pass on? Is there anything I forgot to ask you about your life on the home front?

— The National WWII Museum
Since the D-Day invasion 75 years ago, it has become an epic of our history, bathed in hues of heroism and valor. The invasion marked a crucial milestone on the path to victory in Europe, placing powerful armies in Western Europe and forcing the German Wehrmacht into the impossible task of fighting on two fronts. For Americans, winning World War II in Europe is unthinkable without Operation Overlord.

But what if D-Day had failed? All military operations have to face that possibility. No campaign is guaranteed to succeed. No matter how carefully you plan, no matter how meticulously you prepare, no matter how superior you are in numbers, things can still go wrong. Although the Allies were far superior to the German defenders in terms of men, ships and planes, nothing about D-Day was foreordained.

Dicey situation

Consider the events of June 6, 1944. The Allies landed at five beaches in the Cotentin Peninsula of Normandy, France. They came ashore at three of those beaches (Utah, Gold and Sword) with little trouble and relatively light losses. At a fourth beach (Juno), the Canadian attackers had a rougher go. They got a late start, experienced extremely rough seas, met a fully alerted German defender, and had to negotiate a sea wall in the course of their landing. They, too, managed to overcome all these obstacles and prevail.

As anyone who has seen “Saving Private Ryan” knows, there was a fifth landing beach, code-named Omaha, and it was here that things nearly fell apart altogether. U.S. forces met a deadly combination: a full-strength German infantry division, hulking concrete bunkers and tall bluffs looming over the beach. German fire was murderous, with mortars crumping and machine guns chattering away, and losses were heavy among the first American troops ashore. One of the assault boats belonging to Company B of the 116th Infantry Regiment had 28 of its 30 men killed, and the company as a whole suffered the horrific total of 85 percent casualties in the first 15 minutes of the invasion.

For the first few hours, the situation remained dicey in the extreme. U.S. troops were under constant direct fire from German resistance nests, and were desperately trying to find whatever cover they could behind the tiny rocky ledge at the waterline, the “shingle.” The beach was littered with the dead and the dying, and even the water was red with blood. U.S. commander Gen. Omar N. Bradley actually gave serious consideration to evacuating Omaha, as he later admitted in his memoirs.

While U.S. forces managed to cling to their beach and even drive inland by the end of the “longest day,” it wouldn’t have taken much to drive history in a very different direction here. The worst-case scenario would have been a German counterattack a few hours into the landing, when American fortunes were at their lowest. The Germans had a full-strength unit deployed in the vicinity, the 915th Grenadier Regiment (sometimes known as “Battle Group Meyer” for its commander, Lt. Col. Ernst Meyer), but it spent the morning responding to contradictory reports and orders, marching hither and yon across the battle sector. What if Meyer had decided on his own to make a beeline for Omaha at the height of the crisis and launched a vigorous counterstrike against the American force still milling around the beach?
Or consider that famed handful of U.S. commanders who rallied the demoralized troops on Omaha and got them moving inland again. Brig. Gen. Norman Cota of the 29th Infantry Division rallied the 5th Ranger Battalion on the beach, telling them to “lead the way” (actually, as always, he used a little saltier language than that). Likewise, consider Col. George Taylor of the 16th Infantry Regiment, who stood up amid the fire and tumult on Omaha and uttered the immortal words, “There are two kinds of people who are staying on this beach: those who are dead and those who are going to die. Now let’s get the hell out of here.”

Commanders like Cota and Taylor were essential, first, in stabilizing morale and then in helping their men retrieve a sense of mission and hustling them forward. We immortalize these officers in our memories, and justifiably so. But what if they were among the hundreds of U.S. soldiers killed in the first hour of the assault? Who rallies the troops? It’s possible that other commanders would have done so, but it isn’t a sure thing.

**What could have been**

So, let’s assume that the Omaha landing fails. What happens then? Well, a lot of things, and let’s just say that none of them are good.

Omaha is the central landing beach, and if the Allies don’t get ashore here, the entire Overlord effort is in trouble. Eisenhower would have been looking at a fragmented map: U.S. forces ashore to the west (at Utah Beach) and British/Commonwealth forces ashore to the east, at Gold, Juno and Sword. Between them he has a big, German–held gap. The U.S. force at Utah is isolated and vulnerable to a German counterattack. U.S. divisions here are not driving forward, as they did historically, toward the big port of Cherbourg. Instead, they’re hunkering down and grimly readying themselves to repel a German counterattack. They know it’s going to be a test, and let’s just say they’re not feeling particularly confident.

Eisenhower’s fragmented map has consequences. Instead of all five Allied beachheads linking up within a week, forming a firm base for offensive operations against the German army in the West, the link-up doesn’t happen until late July, maybe even August. The Allies don’t capture Cherbourg for months, meaning serious logistical difficulties. Supplies of ammunition, fuel, food are going to be in shorter supply than they were historically — and they were bad enough in the actual campaign.

On the other side of the lines, German defenses are even stiffer than they were historically, which is saying something. That, too, is another impact of an Allied failure at Omaha: a renewed sense of confidence on the part of German forces, renewed loyalty in the Führer. After all, he predicted he would smash the invasion in the West, and at one spot, at least, he can claim to have done exactly that.
The Allied breakout from Normandy, which happened in our world in late July, might not have taken place until mid-September 1944. We’re already two months off the historical timetable, in other words. Two months might seem insignificant in the overall scheme of things, but they wouldn’t have been here.

Recall that at the same month the Allies landed in Normandy, the Soviets launched their own offensive, one of the greatest military operations in history. The target of Operation Bagration in June 1944 was the center of the German front in the East, near the city of Minsk in Byelorussia. In real life, Soviet armies halted before Warsaw and the Vistula River. Might Stalin not have urged his armies onward to the West, if the Americans and the British seem to be stalled in Normandy?

Let’s assume the Red Army decides to cross the Vistula, take Warsaw in September 1944, and continues to drive west. Soviet forces are now sitting across a long, lazy plain from Berlin. The Western allies might as well be on a different planet, just getting out of Normandy and still some 800 miles away from Berlin. Historically, the Western Allies linked up with the Soviets in late April more or less in the geographic center of Germany and Europe, at Torgau on the Elbe River. But in this scenario, the linkup happens far to the West of where it did historically, more or less on the Rhine River, in July or August of 1945. The Red Army, in other words, is in occupation of all of postwar Germany and has a direct border with France, the Netherlands and Belgium. Those three countries can’t be feeling very secure, either.

So much for the map. But let’s go deeper into the situation on the U.S. home front. It isn’t just the military campaign that has hit a pothole. The political scene is feeling the reverberations of what U.S. dailies are calling “the Omaha catastrophe.” The American people have remained solidly behind the war effort since 1941. President Franklin Roosevelt is still firmly in charge, or at least he has been until the failed landing. But as always happens after a failure, discordant voices are now being heard, and they are especially important given the political ritual that happens every four years in the U.S.: 1944 is an election year. In real life, GOP candidate Thomas Dewey was unable to get much traction because Roosevelt was so popular and the news from the military fronts was so positive. In our scenario, the Republican challenger is starting to sense a groundswell in the heartland. Many folks are saying that FDR is old, tired and not up to the challenge. It’s time for some new blood. And perhaps FDR himself is changed. He’s been so sure of himself up to this point, but now even his closest friends and family see he is lethargic, tentative — and who can blame him? Defeat will do that to a person. Does Dewey win? Probably not, but it’s clear that the U.S. home front is no longer so solidly united as before.

And what of the postwar world? FDR has had big dreams about peace and stability, centered on a new body known as the United Nations, which would work to tamp down military conflict and prevent aggression. But Stalin’s occupation of Germany, his nearly complete domination of postwar Europe, has already begun to generate serious U.S.-Soviet tensions. The “Cold War,” which in our world develops gradually over the course of several years, is already in full swing by the middle of 1945. Tensions threaten constantly to explode into a new global conflict.

New U.S. President Harry Truman has never shared FDR’s idealism about working peacefully with the Soviets in the postwar world, and he doesn’t particularly like what he sees. From the moment he enters the Oval Office, Truman faces one foreign policy crisis after the other. The temptation to play the trump card he holds in his hand — a U.S. monopoly on nuclear weapons — is strong from the outset of his presidency. And in that explosive environment, who knows how things might have developed over the course of the next few years? A new war over the perceived Soviet threat to Western Europe would not have been outside the realm of possibility.
The point here is not merely to craft a nightmare scenario or alternate history. Instead, it is to point out how crucial Omaha Beach was, not only to the course of Operation Overlord and World War II, but to the entire shape of our postwar world. All our actions have consequences, not only in the now, but also for the future. They might not have known it, but those brave American boys fighting for their lives on Omaha Beach 75 years ago were saving a lot more than Private Ryan.

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American soldiers recover the dead after D-Day. [WIKIPEDIA]
Operation Neptune, code name for the Allied invasion of Normandy during WWII.
[NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND, NAVY.MIL]

British forces during the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944. [WIKIPEDIA]

German troops using captured French tanks (Beutepanzer) in Normandy, 1944. [WIKIPEDIA]

Members of the French Resistance and the US 82nd Airborne division in Normandy, 1944. [WIKIPEDIA]
Army troops on board an LCT, ready to ride across the English Channel to France. Some of these men wear 501st Airborne Division insignia.
British troops come ashore at Jig Green sector, Gold Beach, the center beach of the five designated landing areas of the Normandy Invasion. [WIKIPEDIA PHOTOS]

Sherman tanks and other vehicles of 13th/18th Royal Hussars, 27th Armoured Brigade, aboard LCT 610 approaching the French coast on June 6, 1944.

Soldiers crowd a landing craft on their way to Normandy during the Allied invasion.

German soldiers during a visit to a destroyed glider.
British Forces during the invasion of Normandy.

German POWs being escorted along one of the Gold area beaches, June 6, 1944.

American assault on Utah Beach during D-Day.
German POWs disembarking from LCI(L)-500 on one of the Gold area beaches, June 6, 1944. [WIKIPEDIA]
The pontoon causeway at Utah Beach, forming part of Mulberry B, the man-made harbor off the coast of France built to protect landing craft from storms in the English Channel. [WIKIPEDIA]

Commandos with the British Army coming ashore from Landing Craft Assaults on Jig Green beach, Gold area, June 6, 1944. [WIKIPEDIA]

Members of a landing party help injured soldiers to safety on Utah Beach during the Allied invasion of Europe on D-Day, June 6, 1944. [THE U.S. ARMY]
**Normandy invasion, Pointe du Hoc, June 6, 1944.** U.S. Army Rangers resting in the vicinity to support Omaha Beach landings on D-Day. [U.S. Navy photograph, now in the Collections of the National Archives]

**Operation Overlord (the Normandy landings), D-Day.** Men of 4 Commando (British Army) being briefed by Lt. Col. Robert Dawson in preparation. [Wikipedia]

**New York, June 6, 1944.** Noon mass at St. Vincent de Paul's Church. “The reaction of many Americans, whenever they found out what was happening that day, was to attend religious services,” says Keith Huxen, the senior director of research and history at The National World War II Museum. [Wikipedia]
The USCG-1 escorted the first waves of landing craft into the Omaha assault area on D-Day morning. The crew pulled 28 survivors from a sunken landing craft out of the English Channel right off the beaches before 0700, June 6, 1944. [THE U.S. COAST GUARD]
Paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division photographed in England shortly before the invasion of Normandy. [THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES PHOTOS]

British forces during the invasion of Normandy. [WIKIPEDIA]

Paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division move through the Norman village of St. Marcouf on D-Day.
Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower tours the battlefields of Normandy in a jeep, June 1944.

C-47 transport aircraft make a low pass over U.S. troops during a training exercise.

Gen. Eisenhower stands before a large situation map in his London headquarters, January 1944.

A U.S. soldier guards a C-47 transport at an unknown airfield.
A view of the flight deck in the C-47 transport aircraft. [THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES PHOTOS]

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower meeting with some of his field commanders during the Normandy Campaign.

Paratroopers of the 502nd and 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division display a captured Nazi flag on June 6, 1944.
Glider-borne troops of the 82nd Airborne Division wait for the word at their airfield in England, June 1944. [THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES]


Medical staff members of the 24th General Hospital pose in front of a C-47 in Naples, Italy. [GIFT OF DOROTHY POITEVENT, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM]

Paratroopers seated in the cabin of a C-47 transport aircraft during a training exercise. [THE NATIONAL WORLD WAR II MUSEUM]
Troopers of the 82nd Airborne Division assist each other with their parachute harnesses as they prepare for the invasion of Normandy.

[THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES PHOTOS]

Glider-borne troops of the 82nd Airborne Division wait for the word at their airfield in England, June 1944.

Pathfinders from the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division pose in front of the C-47 transport aircraft that will fly them into Normandy. The Pathfinders' mission on D-Day was vital, as the first paratroopers on the ground in France — it was their job to set up radio beacons that would guide the vast armada of C-47 transport aircraft carrying the rest of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions into Normandy.
Paratroops exit their C-47 transport aircraft during a training jump at Ft. Benning, Georgia. [US ARMY SIGNAL CORPS PHOTOGRAPH, COURTESY THE NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM]

Glider-borne troops of the 82nd Airborne Division wait for the word at their airfield in England, June 1944. [THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES]

A jeep is loaded aboard a C-47 transport aircraft during the Normandy operation, June 1944. The C-47 was an all-around workhorse that delivered heavy equipment and supplies to the frontlines, as well as flew U.S. and Allied Airborne Forces into combat. [THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES]
Paratroopers of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division prepare to board the C-47 transport aircraft that will fly them to Normandy. [THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES]

A C-47 transport nicknamed “Peaches from Mobile” sits on the runway shortly before departing to drop paratroopers of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division into Normandy on the night of June 5/6, 1944. [GIFT OF TOM BLAKEY, COURTESY THE NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM]

A C-47 transport aircraft in flight. [THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES]
Landing craft from the U.S. Coast Guard-manned USS Samuel Chase disembarks troops of the U.S. Army’s First Division on the morning of June 6, 1944. [WIKIPEDIA]

A C-47 transport aircraft towing a CG-4 “Waco” glider into the air during a training exercise. Due to space limitations on transport aircraft of the day, heavy equipment such as jeeps and artillery pieces that could not be dropped by parachute were flown in by glider. The powerless gliders were towed to the target area by C-47s, where the glider pilots released tow from the tug aircraft and crash-landed onto the battlefield. [THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES]

The sleek, highly maneuverable P-51 proved ideal for long-range escort missions and an equal match to the Luftwaffe’s fighters. Pilots who flew it praised its maneuverability and visibility during close-order engagements with enemy fighters. [DOD PHOTO, HOMESTEAD AIR RESERVE BASE]
The 437th during Operation Overlord. [WIKIPEDIA]

A soldier on a landing craft approaching Omaha Beach. [WIKIPEDIA]

U.S. soldiers of the 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division move out over the seawall on Utah Beach after coming ashore. Other troops rest behind the concrete wall. [U.S. NAVY PHOTO]
U.S. soldiers disembark a landing craft on Utah Beach during the D-Day landings. [NATIONAL ARCHIVES PHOTO]

American assault troops of the 3rd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st U.S. Infantry Division, who stormed Omaha Beach. Colleville-sur-Mer, Normandy, June 6, 1944. [WIKIPEDIA]
German prisoners being marched along Queen Beach, Sword area, June 6, 1944. [WIKIPEDIA]
A North American P-51 Mustang (with red markings) and other squadron planes soar in the lobby of The National WWII Museum in New Orleans. [WIKIPEDIA PHOTOS]
The inspiration for creating The National WWII Museum — originally known as The National D-Day Museum — can be traced to a comment made to a young New Orleans historian by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the mid-1960s, when memories of the fierce world struggle were still fresh.

In a conversation with rising military historian Stephen Ambrose, the former Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force praised the Higgins landing craft and its ingenious designer, Andrew Jackson Higgins, for making Allied victory possible in World War II. New Orleans manufacturing plants launched by the daring entrepreneur produced many thousands of the landing boats that were desperately needed to deliver soldiers and equipment to invasion beaches in the European and Pacific theaters. Before the war, America had no boats that could accomplish this feat.

Eisenhower’s remark resonated through time and planted the seed of an idea for a special institution-building effort, one that continues today. People remain fascinated by the historic assault on June 6, 1944. And it is difficult to fathom that fewer than two decades ago, there was no national museum dedicated to the veterans who carried out the greatest amphibious invasion in world history.

Ambrose remembered Eisenhower’s bold assertion about Higgins as he began collecting oral histories and artifacts for his book on the D-Day invasion. Ambrose was dedicated to meeting the nation’s need for a lasting tribute to the military heroes and home front workers.

For years, there was no encouragement from Congressional leaders that a WWII or D-Day museum would ever happen in Washington, D.C.

Finally, in 1990, the idea of a D-Day museum in the Crescent City was born in a backyard conversation over drinks between myself and Ambrose; we were close friends and colleagues at the University of New Orleans and immediately decided we would do it. Long years were spent working to fulfill the vision in the home of Higgins Industries.

At the onset, we had modest ambitions for the institution’s scale. Overcoming many fundraising obstacles and other challenges, we opened The National D-Day Museum on June 6, 2000, a momentous celebration honoring thousands of WWII veterans who paraded through downtown. They were joined by hundreds of thousands of spectators. U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen, Tom Brokaw, Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg, other state and Congressional dignitaries, and nine NATO defense ministers took part.

We soon discovered that the grand opening was just the beginning of a building story. Visiting WWII veterans appreciated our D-Day treatments but immediately asked why other parts of the war — their WWII, in many cases — weren’t covered.
One of these individuals, U.S. Sen. Theodore Stevens of Alaska, a veteran of the China-Burma-India campaign, offered a daunting challenge. Telling me and Ambrose that “this was the best museum in America on the war,” he said if we and museum trustees would agree to expand and tell the complete story of the WWII experience — on land, at sea, in the air and on the home front — then he would help obtain startup funding from Congress. We agreed (with some trepidation), and in the next three years, Stevens and his close friend, WWII veteran and Medal of Honor recipient Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii, worked with Sen. Mary Landrieu and others in our Louisiana delegation to secure funding to purchase three city blocks and develop a master plan for expansion. The state of Louisiana and private donors also provided substantial funding help.

With the land purchase and master plan complete by 2003, the museum announced a capital campaign of $288 million to develop a six-acre, 300,000-square-foot campus. Sens. Stevens, Inouye and Landrieu then gained approval of a resolution from Congress in 2004 designating The National WWII Museum as America’s official museum of the WWII experience.

Ambrose died in 2002, passing the leadership torch to me, the founding president and
CEO. Since 2000, we weathered tremendous setbacks from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, funding challenges and the economic recession of 2008. I worked steadily with the national Board of Trustees and a talented, resilient staff to create extraordinary exhibits and programs. These efforts were rewarded with dramatic increases in visitation and donations.

The museum’s reputation reached new levels in 2009 when it premiered the 4D multimedia experience “Beyond All Boundaries,” produced by the Hettema Group and narrated by Hanks. Next came the opening of the US Freedom Pavilion: The Boeing Center, in 2013, followed in 2014-15 by the permanent exhibit galleries “The Road to Berlin” and “The Road to Tokyo” housed in the Campaigns of Courage: European and Pacific Theaters pavilion. “The Arsenal of Democracy: The Herman and George R. Brown Salute to the Home Front” exhibit, which opened in 2017, devotes its galleries to the citizens who supported the war effort in countless ways. By 2017, the museum was ranked by TripAdvisor readers as the No. 2 most popular museum in America.

The museum’s capstone Liberation Pavilion, opening in 2021, will focus on the war’s powerful legacies — one project driving an increase in our capital campaign goal to $400 million. And for distant audiences unable to visit our campus, the museum has established the Institute for the Study of War and Democracy and the WWII Media and Education Center to produce online content. Both will be housed in the Hall of Democracy, opening later this year.

Meanwhile, our collection of WWII personal accounts — including many videotaped oral histories that can be viewed at ww2online.org — now total roughly 10,000. These accounts include early Ambrose interviews and will always be vital to our mission.

Led by President & CEO Stephen Watson since mid-2017, The National WWII Museum is approaching completion as the premier educational institution for WWII history. We are honoring the millions who served, in distant combat zones and at home, as we explore and teach about an epic time in world history.

Gordon H. “Nick” Mueller is president and CEO emeritus of The National WWII Museum. His new collection of personal accounts from the Allied invasion of Normandy, “‘Everything We Have’: D-Day 6.6.44,” was released in March and draws on the museum’s collection of oral histories and artifacts.
Seventy-five years ago, our Allied forces fought their way onto the beaches of Normandy in the largest seaborne invasion in history.

Today we salute the remaining surviving veterans, those who have passed away, and the thousands who never returned home and lay in eternal rest in simple graves, some with the solemn epitaph, “A comrade in arms known but to God.”

May we never forget their bravery and sacrifice that helped free Europe and the world from Nazi tyranny.

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