

1944–1945: The Second Front

Normandy



Routes taken by the D-Day invasion.

On 6 June 1944, the Allies began Operation Overlord (also known as "D-Day") – the long-awaited liberation of France. The deception plans, Operations *Fortitude* and *Bodyguard*, had the Germans convinced that the invasion would occur in the Pas-de-Calais, while the real target was Normandy. Following two months of slow fighting in hedgerow country, Operation Cobra allowed the Americans to break out at the western end of the lodgement. Soon after, the Allies were racing across France. They encircled around 200,000 Germans in the Falaise Pocket. As had so often happened on the Eastern Front Hitler refused to allow a strategic withdrawal until it was too late. Approximately 150,000 Germans were able to escape from the Falaise pocket, but they left behind most of their

irreplaceable equipment and 50,000 Germans were killed or taken prisoner.

The Allies had been arguing about whether to advance on a broad-front or a narrow-front from before D-Day.^[35] If the British had broken out of the Normandy bridgehead (or beachhead) around Caen when they launched Operation Goodwood and pushed along the coast, facts on the ground might have turned the argument in favour of a narrow front. However, as the breakout took place during Operation Cobra at the western end of the bridge-head, the 21st Army Group that included the British and Canadian forces swung east and headed for Belgium, the Netherlands and Northern Germany, while the U.S. Twelfth Army Group advanced to their south via eastern France, Luxembourg and the Ruhr Area, rapidly fanning out into a broad front. As this was the strategy favoured by the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, and most of the American high command, it was soon adopted.

Liberation of France

On 15 August the Allies launched Operation Dragoon – the invasion of Southern France between Toulon and Cannes. The US Seventh Army and the French First Army, making up the US 6th Army Group, rapidly consolidated this beachhead and liberated southern France in two weeks; they then moved north up the Rhone valley. Their advance only slowed down as they encountered regrouped and entrenched German troops in the Vosges Mountains.

The Germans in France were now faced by three powerful Allied army groups: in the north the British 21st Army Group commanded by Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery, in the center the American 12th Army Group, commanded by General Omar Bradley and to the south the US 6th Army Group commanded by Lieutenant General Jacob L. Devers. By mid-September, the 6th Army Group, advancing from the south, came into contact with Bradley's formations advancing from the west and overall control of Devers' force passed from AFHQ in the Mediterranean so that all three army groups came under Eisenhower's central command at SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces).



Western Front in 1944

Under the onslaught in both the north and south of France, the German Army fell back. On 19 August, the French Resistance (FFI) organised a general uprising and the liberation of Paris took place on 25 August when general Dietrich von Choltitz

accepted the French ultimatum and surrendered to general Philippe Leclerc de Hauteclocque, commander of the Free French 2nd Armored Division, ignoring orders from Hitler that Paris should be held to the last and destroyed.

The liberation of northern France and the Benelux countries was of special significance for the inhabitants of London and the southeast of England, because it denied the Germans launch sites for their mobile V-1 and V-2 *Vergeltungswaffen* (reprisal weapons).

As the Allies advanced across France, their supply lines stretched to breaking point. The Red Ball Express, the Allied trucking effort, was simply unable to transport enough supplies from the port facilities in Normandy all the way to the front line, which by September, was close to the German border.

Major German units in the French southwest that had not been committed in Normandy withdrew, either eastwards towards Alsace (sometimes directly across the US 6th Army Group's advance) or into the ports with the intention of denying them to the Allies. These latter groups were not thought worth much effort and were left "to rot", with the exception of Bordeaux, which was liberated in May 1945 by French forces under General Edgard de Larminat (Operation *Venerable*).^[36]

Allied advance from Paris to the Rhine

Fighting on the Western front seemed to stabilize, and the Allied advance stalled in front of the Siegfried Line (*Westwall*) and the southern reaches of the Rhine. Starting in early September, the Americans began slow and bloody fighting through the Hurtgen Forest ("*Passchendaele with tree bursts*"—Hemingway) to breach the Line.

The port of Antwerp was liberated on 4 September by the British 11th Armoured Division. However, it lay at the end of the long Scheldt Estuary, and so it could not be used until its approaches were clear of heavily fortified German positions. The Breskens pocket on the southern bank of the Scheldt was cleared with heavy casualties by Canadian and Polish forces in Operation Switchback, during the Battle of the Scheldt. This was followed by a tedious campaign to clear a peninsula dominating the estuary, and finally, the amphibious assault on Walcheren Island in November. The campaign to clear the Scheldt Estuary was a decisive victory for the First Canadian Army and the rest of the Allies, as it allowed a



Crowds of French people line the Champs Élysées following the Liberation of Paris, 26 August 1944