

D Day Remembered: The Logistics of an Invasion

June 3, 2012 By [John Skelton](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

Good logistics alone can't win a war. Bad logistics alone can lose it.

—General Brehon B. Somervell
Commanding General
Army Services Forces, 1942



This morning, June 3, 2012, I attended a Memorial Service in recognition of the 68th anniversary of D Day.

On June 6, 1944, Allied Armed Forces attacked Axis defenders at the beaches at Normandy. Of the five task forces to land, three were British, and two were American. Canadian forces – under British direction – were tasked to take Juno Beach. The Americans landed on Omaha and Utah Beaches. The remaining Beaches – Gold and Sword – were also under British responsibility.

The invasion of Normandy was the beginning of the end of Nazi German domination of Western Europe. The invasion was a success, marked by countless acts of heroism and sacrifice. It is to these soldiers and commanders that we owe our freedoms and standards of living. Lest we forget.

“Logistics. The Driving Force of Human Achievement.” This is the motto of Canada’s *The Logistics Institute*.

There was no more important date in history than June 6, 1944 that proved this motto to be true.

Often clouded behind the blaze of battle, logistics preparations had begun years before D Day.

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Although not as popular or as widely studied as tactics, logistics has been the key to every major conflict since the dawn of modern warfare. World War II provided the backdrop for the biggest logistics operation ever attempted. The D-Day landing and force buildup alone involved millions of tons of supplies, thousands of ships, and hundreds of thousands of personnel. To carry out this massive logistics operation, planners used supply point and throughput resupply operations, which involve stockpiling supplies at depots in the rear, transporting them to forward depots, and moving them to the units.

The logistics buildup in Kuwait before the invasion of Iraq this spring was reminiscent of the logistics techniques used by First U.S. Army in World War II and repeated in the Korean War and the Gulf War of 1991. This article will look at the First Army’s logistics buildup and sustainment operation from D-Day through its race across France into Germany and at current and future battlefield logistics. It also will examine the validity of moving from a supply-based logistics operation to the real-time logistics operation proposed in the Army Transformation.

Gearing Up for War

Preparations for the World War II invasion of France began 2 years before the actual operation. From January 1942 to June 1944, the United States shipped over 17 million tons of cargo to the United Kingdom. Included in the shipments was everything from general supplies and equipment to 800,000 pints of blood plasma, 125 million maps, prefabricated harbors (known as Mulberries), a replacement rail network, cigarettes, and toothbrushes.

The invasion operation divided the Allied forces into five task forces—three British and two American. The invasion forces landed on 6 June 1944 at five beaches in Normandy: Omaha, Utah, Gold, Juno, and Sword. At Omaha and Utah, the two American beaches, only 6,614 of the

planned 24,850 tons of cargo were discharged in the first 3 days, which is indicative of the difficulties the Americans experienced in beach resupply operations.

The 12 quartermaster units that arrived with the assault forces provided everything from general supplies to transportation to graves registration. Although the Americans took several days to link up with the British forces, it was quite apparent by 7 June that the invasion was a success. Once the landing forces secured the beaches of Normandy, they had to organize to receive the supplies, equipment, and troops needed to sustain the invasion forces.

Port Discharge Problems

Shipments of supplies to the United Kingdom for the Normandy invasion not only had to compete with other combat operations in the European theater but also were restricted by the amount of supplies British ports could handle. By December 1943, steady shipments of supplies were flowing into the United Kingdom. By July 1944, more than two million tons had been shipped to the United Kingdom, which taxed the capability of the port facilities to hold and process the supplies. Supplies and equipment bound for France could not be discharged quickly enough to accommodate the new supplies, so a logjam developed.

Docking facilities were critical to the quick discharge of supplies and equipment in France. Mulberries were used to receive the tons of supplies and equipment needed to keep the invasion force moving forward. When the quantity of supplies coming in exceeded the number of Mulberries available, the remaining supplies were offloaded using logistics over-the-shore operations.

As the supply operation matured, 56,200 tons of supplies, 20,000 vehicles, and 180,000 troops were discharged each day at Omaha and Utah beaches. That was slightly less than half of the supplies, nearly two-thirds of the vehicles, and all of the troops that had been projected for offload each day. Performance on the American beaches improved rapidly as a more favorable tactical situation developed and, by 11 June 1944, all of the area up to the Aure River was under V Corps control. Until the securing of fixed port facilities at Cherbourg, Le Havre, Rouen, and Antwerp, Belgium, resupply and staging operations consisted entirely of Mulberries and logistics over-the-shore operations.

By the end of June, over 289,827 tons of supplies had been offloaded onto the Normandy beaches. However, shortages still occurred because supplies could not be discharged from British ports quickly enough and ships could not be turned around fast enough to keep up with the requirements of the landing forces. Therefore, by 15 June, supplies were being shipped directly to Normandy from the United States. At Normandy, supplies were stockpiled on the docks and beaches and then moved to forward units by truck.

The longer it took U.S. forces to secure the port of Cherbourg, the more supplies, equipment, and troops piled up on the beaches waiting to be trucked forward. In early August, the port at Cherbourg was cleared and opened so large quantities of supplies and equipment (more than 20,000 tons a day) could be loaded and moved forward by truck and rail. General William Whipple, Jr., USA (Ret.), former Chief of the Logistics Branch, G-4, Supreme Headquarters

Allied Expeditionary Force, wrote in a 16 May 1967 letter to Brigadier General Eugene A. Salet, Commandant of the Army War College—

“Up to September, U.S. forces were supported largely across the beaches, but the U.S. beaches were known to be substantially unusable after 1 October on account of the weather. U.S. had the port of Cherbourg, which could handle about 20,000 tons a day; but this was inadequate, and was a long way from the front. Ports of Le Havre, Rouen, etc. . . . were so damaged as to be largely unusable, and such channel ports as were available had to be reserved with first priority for British use.”

Port discharge problems led the way for the second major logistics problem in the logistics of invasion—moving supplies from the port to the front-line troops.