INTRODUCTION

By the spring of 1944, Germany had occupied France and much of the European continent for almost four years. A narrow stretch of water, the English Channel was all that separated the German forces from Great Britain.

An Allied raid on the French coast at Dieppe in August 1942 had resulted in heavy losses, particularly for Canada, but by 1944 the Allies had made strong gains against German troops in both Italy and the Soviet Union.

The Allies knew they would have to defeat Germany in Western Europe to win the war and decided to mount a major campaign for 1944. Planning lasted more than a year, taking great effort and involving many elements. Ground, sea and air forces rehearsed endlessly to make sure their timing and coordination was perfect. Great numbers of troops, boats, tanks, supplies and equipment were gathered in total secrecy in southern England. Portable docking facilities were built for the supply ships to off-load their cargoes in the days after the Allies had landed. A long flexible pipe, called “Pluto,” (“Pipe Lines Under The Ocean”) was even built to carry fuel under the sea from England to Normandy, the region of northwestern France where the Allies would come ashore.

FORTRESS EUROPE

Even with all these preparations, the Normandy Campaign would be very difficult. The shores of Northwest Europe were littered with German land mines, barbed wire, heavy artillery batteries and machine-gun nests. There were also anti-tank walls, shelters constructed of thick concrete, anti-aircraft guns and many other types of defensive positions. For these reasons, the coastline from Denmark to the south of France was known as “Fortress Europe.”

For the Allied offensive to be successful, harbours along the continent’s coastline would have to be secured for the many transport ships that would be needed to ferry food, medical supplies, weapons and fresh troops after the initial landings. As well, Allied armies would continue to need “Pluto” to help transport the fuel needed to liberate occupied Europe.

An Allied defeat on the beaches of Normandy would have meant certain disaster as there would be no way to remove troops to safety. But if the landings succeeded, the Allied forces would finally gain that all-important foothold in Western Europe and a chance to liberate France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark from German occupation.

ON LAND, BY SEA, IN THE AIR

Allied aircraft paved the way for the landings, bombing coastal defences in the months leading up to the attack. On June 6, 1944—D-Day—a massive Allied force crossed the English Channel to engage in Operation Overlord. Their destination: an 80-kilometre stretch of the heavily defended coast of Normandy. There were five landing zones, given special codenames: Juno Beach (Canada); Gold Beach (United Kingdom); Sword Beach (United Kingdom and France); Utah Beach and Omaha Beach (United States).

Seven thousand vessels of all types, including 284 major combat vessels, took part in Operation Neptune, the assault phase of the D-Day offensive. Destroyers and supporting craft of the Royal Canadian Navy did their part and shelled German targets while many Royal Canadian Air Force planes were among the 4,000 Allied bombers (plus some 3,700 fighters and fighter bombers) which attacked German beach defences and inland targets.

More than 450 Canadian soldiers parachuted inland before dawn on June 6 and engaged the enemy. A few hours later, some 14,000 Canadian troops began coming ashore at Juno Beach in the face of enemy fire. Their mission: to
establish a beachhead along an eight-kilometre stretch fronting the villages of Courseulles-sur-Mer, Bernières-sur-Mer, and Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer. Once secure, the troops would push inland to help capture the city of Caen, an important communications centre for the Germans.

A HARD-WON VICTORY

Many Canadian soldiers in the Normandy campaign were young and new to battle, but their courage and skill meant they often helped lead the Allied advance against a determined enemy. Canadians soon captured three shoreline positions on D-Day and established themselves near the village of Creully, but this was to be only the beginning of the struggle to liberate France. Savage fighting in Normandy continued and grew even more intense as Canadian forces faced powerful German Panzer tank divisions in the struggle for Caen.

Through the summer of 1944, the fighting continued through choking dust and intense heat. The conditions were terrible and the enemy was ruthless, but the troops moved forward. Canadians played an important role in closing the “Falaise Gap” in mid-August as the Germans finally retreated in the face of the Allied offensive. On August 25, 1944, Paris was liberated by the Allies, bringing the Normandy Campaign officially to a close.

SACRIFICE

Against difficult odds, the Canadians advanced against the best troops the enemy had. Victory in the Normandy Campaign, however, would come at a terrible cost. Three hundred and forty Canadians were killed on D-Day alone and the Canadians would suffer the most casualties of any division in the British Army Group during the Battle of Normandy. More than 5,000 made the ultimate sacrifice, losing their lives, and lie buried in a place far from their homes and loved ones. Others returned home with injuries to body and mind that they carry to this day.

THE LEGACY

Victory in Normandy would be only the beginning of many months of hard fighting on the ground in Western Europe. Canadians would play an important role in the offensives that would finally defeat the Germans and end the war in this part of the world.

The brave Canadians who served in the Normandy Campaign were among the more than one million men and women who served in the cause of peace and freedom during the Second World War.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about Canada’s role in the Second World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at veterans.gc.ca or call 1-866-522-2122 toll free.

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