



Sand and Steel: The D-Day Invasion and the Liberation of France

by Peter Caddick-Adams.

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It is fortunate indeed that author,¹ broadcast commentator, and academic Peter Caddick-Adams² writes a page-turner, because *Sand and Steel* has over eight hundred pages to turn. He is a superb writer who combines scholarly thoroughness with the skills of an accomplished narrator. His magisterial new work will be the gold standard for serious study of Operation Overlord for decades to come.

Sand and Steel comprises thirty-five chapters divided between Parts One, “Preparation,” and Two, “Invasion.”³ The book’s principal strengths are its author’s lucid prose and deft transitions between explaining the reasoning behind the Allied planning and prosecution of Overlord and vivid accounts of the skill and courage of the airmen, commandos, paratroopers, and infantrymen at its cutting edge. All this with an empathy only a former regular infantry officer could bring to the task.

The book begins and ends with Charles de Gaulle, the French colonel who, in May 1940, twice stalled the German invasion of his country and was promoted to *général de brigade* for his heroism—a rank he held for the rest of his life. De Gaulle regarded himself as French civilization in exile, the only legitimate alternative to the collaborationist and anti-Semitic Vichy regime. Post-war D-Day commemorations were nonetheless bittersweet for him, reminders of his powerlessness during the German occupation. France’s humiliation was indistinguishable from his own and it drove him to petulant Anglophobic behavior as president of the Fifth Republic, despite his genuine and deep gratitude to Winston Churchill and England (862–66).

The goal of Overlord was in the first instance only the liberation of France, but more fundamentally, it marked the commencement of the last act of World War II in Europe. In the book’s opening pages, Caddick-Adams puts the events of the longest day in perspective, stressing that

It is ... easy to forget that the main German effort [in 1944] was still on the Eastern Front: Normandy was a “secondary show” for the Third Reich, but not so for the Western Allies. The statistics confirm this: on 1 June 1944 [*Generalfeldmarschall* Gerd von] Rundstedt had fifty-eight divisions in the West; elsewhere, however, lurked 228 divisions, mostly facing the Red Army. (47)

1. His previous works include *Monty and Rommel: Parallel Lives* (NY: Overlook Pr, 2011), *Monte Casino: Ten Armies in Hell* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013), and *Snow and Steel: The Battle of the Bulge, 1944–45* (id., 2015).

2. He has been lecturer at Cranfield University’s Centre for International Security and Resilience; director of the Defence and Global Security Institute; and Lecturer in Air Power, Leadership and Strategy at the UK Defence Academy at Shrivenham and RAF Halton, Aylesbury. He was involved in the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and has testified to the House of Commons Defence Committee. He also visited war zones in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Afghanistan.

3. Ancillaries include a glossary, orders-of-battle for Allied and Germany forces, eighty-six pages of notes, a bibliography, and an index, with photographs and high-quality maps throughout.

None of this diminishes the significance of the cross-Channel invasion of France. Overlord's Anglo-American planners knew well that the Soviet Union had since 1941 endured most of the struggle against Germany. This fact informed and troubled their political and military debates about when and where to open a second front against Germany. The debacle of the Anglo-Canadian raid on Dieppe in 1942, the American defeat at the Kasserine Pass in 1943, and the stubborn German defense of Tunisia fed Churchill's scepticism about a cross-Channel invasion of France. He was, after all, among those in awe of the German army.⁴ But he was also keenly aware that British resistance to such an invasion might move President Franklin Roosevelt to reconsider his Germany-first policy.⁵ Hence, Churchill adopted a "don't argue the matter" policy as early May 1942 when he ordered Louis Mountbatten at Combined Operations HQ to work on the design for Mulberry harbors; the policy was soon applied to other engineering and logistical challenges involved in placing and sustaining overwhelming Allied strength ashore at any given point (118–25).

Planning for the invasion had begun the year before, with the establishment of the first Allied planning group under the (not yet appointed) Chief-of-Staff, Supreme Allied Commander (COS-SAC), which, after considering promising invasion points along the French coast, settled on Normandy as the best option. With Roosevelt's appointment of Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in December 1943, COSSAC's ideas took on harder contours.

Caddick-Adams describes in detail the preparations for and strategic calculations behind the choice of the Normandy beaches and its concomitant logistical imperatives, as well as the delicate diplomacy involved in Eisenhower's choice of commanders for the American, British, and Canadian soldiers under his authority. These included such self-regarding personalities as Omar Bradley, Bernard Montgomery, and George Patton. He then discusses the minutiae of training the soldiers who would ultimately find themselves locked in combat in the hedgerows of the French countryside. Lessons drawn from "Spartan," a Canadian training exercise, had ramifications for American and British troops fighting a year later in Normandy, especially with regard to the experience of tactical air support of ground troops in North Africa (164–65). The inhabitants evacuated from the many British villages chosen for countless other pre-invasion exercises could testify to the intensity of the training:

When civilians returned to the Devon settlement of Slapton—another Domesday village—after the D-Day training was over, they would find the roof of St James' Church, dating to 1318, pitted with shell holes, its medieval stained glass shattered beyond repair, and at the very minimum every single window in their homes shattered by explosions, missing roof tiles and, frequently, treasured possessions looted. Ironically, it was German and Italian POWs who cleared up the mess, whilst the Canadian and American Red Cross donated replacement crockery, pans and bed linen. The villagers of nearby Blackawton proudly insisted their tavern be renamed the Normandy Arms. (213)

Of course, the damage was nothing like that visited upon the towns and villages of Normandy after 6 June 1944 or the nightmare of violence suffered by invasion forces. This is where Caddick-Adams manages to write a form of military history that brilliantly evokes the human drama known to those who were actually present. Captain John G. Wilhelm Finke, one of the first officers to reach Omaha Beach, had sprained an ankle in the marshaling area; undeterred, he used a

4. See Brian Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars against Germany: Myth, Memory and the Distortions of Hindsight* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2014) 156–57.

5. See, further, Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2003) 79–102.

cane rather than a rifle “to very good effect to just whack [his men] until they moved” (666) out from behind the obstacles that gave them cover from machine-gun fire. Approaching Juno, the future novelist, Douglas Reeman, noted how tall waterspouts “shot towards the sky and then drifted away very slowly,” while vivid blobs of tracer fire came “licking out from the shore in straight, lethal lines” (749). On Sword Beach, another future novelist, David Holbrook, recalled that

Two shells straddled our ship and with crackling pillars of sea, spoke to us closely of death and the enemy. This was the new thing that showed it was not an exercise. Everything else we had done so much before that it was automatic and uninteresting, but the violence of the battle onshore, and the new factor of calculated death directed at you, produced a dryness of mouth. (827)

Once the invaders began to move inland, hugely bolstered by armor and artillery, many of their fears never materialized. The fearsome 21st Panzer Division, for example, among the best units in Erwin Rommel’s Afrika Corps days, was poorly led in 1944 by *Generalleutnant* Edgar Feuchtinger, who was away enjoying a leave in Paris on D-Day. And, too, Ultra intercepts had yielded wildly inaccurate estimates of the unit’s composition, which included only 112 (not 240) Mark IV tanks and not one of the much dreaded Tigers. Only three of the German heavy tank battalions ever found their way to Normandy (836).

Yet, even if the Allies were misinformed about this or that detail of what awaited them in France, the German command had little grasp of what they would face in June 1944 or, more critically, where the blow would land:

In the German minds, the events of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain in 1940 had driven home the advantage of Allied air power operating from bases close to France, ten to fifteen minutes flying time away. By 1944 this had morphed into a terrible destructive capacity, and for this reason, many German commanders assumed the Allies would play to this advantage and mount landings under the tightest—and closest—umbrella of air power. Thus the Calais area beckoned. To OB [German Army Command] West the option of Normandy, being further away, required more flying time and fuel, and would require greater numbers of aeroplanes to maintain continuous air cover over an invasion. Fortitude and spies played into these German assessments. (885)

Sand and Steel brings to bear an extraordinary volume of primary and secondary material on both familiar and lesser known actions, all the while weaving the personal narratives of the men involved into an analysis of the operational context of their part in the longest day. As if that were not enough, Peter Caddick-Adams offers in passing sober assessments of D-Day’s historiography, correcting inaccuracies and dispelling hallowed myths. All in all, an extraordinary achievement in the true sense of the word.