

Invasion of Normandy, June 6, 1944

The Allied invasion of Hitler's "Fortress Europe" began in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944 when American and British paratroops dropped behind the intended invasion beaches to disrupt German communications. At dawn, the sea invasion began as an Allied Armada disgorged thousands of troops at five beaches along France's Normandy coast.

By the end of the day, the Allies had achieved a tenuous toehold that would be laboriously expanded over the next weeks and would lead ultimately to the Nazi defeat in the West.

Landing!

Marie-Louise Osmont lived in a chateau overlooking the Normandy beaches with her husband, a physician. The occupying Germans appropriated the home for their own use after invading France in 1940 but allowed the Osmonts to stay in a few rooms. The house stood near the point on the Normandy coast designated for attack by the British forces - Sword Beach. Marie-Louis kept a diary of her experiences.

During the night of June 5-6, 1944, Marie-Louise's sleep is disrupted by the sound of cannon fire and aircraft overhead. The commotion intensifies and the Germans start packing equipment into trucks in preparation of leaving the area. Confused, Marie-Louise is unsure whether the aircraft and gunfire are German or Allied. We join her story as dawn breaks on the 6th of June 1944.

"Little by little the gray dawn comes up., but this time around, from the intensity of the aircraft and the cannon an idea springs to mind: landing! I get dressed hurriedly. I cross the garden, the men recognize me. In one of the foxholes in front of the house, I recognize one of the young men from the office; he has headphones on his ears, the telephone being removed there. Airplanes, cannon right on the coast, almost on us. I cross the road, run to the farm, come across Meltemps. 'Well!' I say, 'Is this it, this



American troops expectantly make their way towards the beach, June 6, 1944

time?' 'Yes,' he says, 'I think so, and I'm really afraid we're in a sector that's being attacked; that's going to be something!' We're deafened by the airplanes, which make a never-ending round, very low; obviously what I thought were German airplanes are quite simply English ones, protecting the landing. Coming from the sea, a dense artificial cloud; its ominous and begins to be alarming; the first hiss over our heads. I feel cold; I'm agitated. I go home, dress more warmly, close the doors; I go get Bernice (a neighbor) to get into the trench, a quick bowl of milk, and we run - just in time! The shells hiss and explode continually.

In the trench in the farmyard (the one that was dug in 1940) we find three or four Germans: Leo the cook, his helper, and two others, crouching, not proud except for



Leo, who stays outside to watch). We ask them "Tommy come?" They say yes, with conviction. Morning in the trench, with overhead the hisses and whines that make you bend even lower. For fun Leo fires a rifle shot at a low-flying airplane, but the *Spiess*(the German Sergeant-Major) appears and chews him out horribly; this is not the time to attract attention. Shells are exploding everywhere, and not far away, with short moments of calm; we take advantage of these to run and deal with the animals, and we return with hearts pounding to burrow into the trench. Each time a shell hisses by too low, I cling to the back of the cook's helper, it makes me feel a little more secure, and he turns around with a vague smile. The fact is that we're all afraid."

The tanks

Later in the morning a lull in the shelling allows Marie-Louise and her neighbor to return to the farmhouse and prepare their lunch:

"Around noon a bit of a lull. We leave to try to have lunch; I busy myself with the fire, Bernice with the soup and potatoes; it's cooking. We start to seat ourselves around the table, two mouthfuls of soup, and then everything changes with tremendous speed. Someone - a Frenchman on the road, the soldiers at the gate - someone said: 'The Tommies!' We watch the soldiers. They hide on both sides of the gate, watching in the distance in panic, confusion painted on their faces. And suddenly we hear these words: 'The tanks!' A first burst of tracer bullets, very red, sweeps the gate; men crouch down. Bernice and I hide in a corner of the room. There's banging in every direction. We're going to have to go somewhere else. Standing in our corner, we gulp a plate of soup, while the *Spiess*, who has been shouting orders, comes with his revolver in hand to see whether men are hiding with us. Everything starts happening. Evidently, they're going to try to leave with their trucks. A German tank arrives and takes the *Spiess* away. The shells bang."



American troops struggle onto Omaha Beach under German gunfire

Destruction

The continuing bombardment forces the Frenchwomen to flee the farmhouse for the relative safety of the trench. Around two o'clock in the afternoon the first British soldiers are spotted near the farm. The Germans hold their ground while the two women huddle in the trench:

"Around six o'clock a lull. We get out and go toward the house to care for the animals and get things to spend the night underground. And then we see the first damage. Branches of the big walnut broken, roof on the outbuildings heavily damaged, a big hole all the way up, a heap of broken roof tiles on the ground, a few windowpanes at my place - hundreds of slates blown off the chateau, walls cracked, first-floor shutters won't close - but at Bernice's it's worse. An airplane or tank shell has exploded on the paving in her kitchen at the corner of the stairs, and the whole interior of the room is devastated: the big clock, dishes, cooking equipment, walls, everything is riddled with holes, the dishes in broken pieces, as are



Library of Congress
Ecumenical prayer service, New York City, June 6, 1944. As word of the invasion reached the States, many spontaneously went to their place of worship to pray.

almost all the windowpanes. The dog Frick that I had shut up in the next room so he wouldn't get killed on the road, is all right and sleeping on a seat. But we realize that if we had stayed there, we would both have been killed. In the face of this certainty, Bernice takes the disaster very well; we try to straighten up the unspeakable mess a little. Out of the question to eat the soup and mashed potatoes that have been prepared; everything is black with dust and full of shards of glass. Someone gives us soup from the farm. We talk with them for a short while and note the Germans haven't taken away all the trucks from the drive; there are also a lot of vehicles still in the park."

Silhouettes

Marie-Louise and Bernice inspect the rest of the house and step outside to find cows lying dead in the pasture. Meanwhile, the battle continues:

"The English tanks are silhouetted from time to time on the road above Periers. Grand impassioned exchanges on the road with the people from the farm; we are all stupefied by the suddenness of events. I take a few steps down the drive, toward the Deveraux house, and suddenly I see the replacement *Speiss* and his comrade hugging the wall of the pasture. I tell him that he must still have comrades at the guns, since we can still hear the battery firing. You feel that these two men are lost, disorientated, sad. Later, almost night, I see them again, their faces deliberately blackened with charcoal, crossing the park. What will be their fate? How many of them are still in the area, hiding and watching?"