D-DAY - THE LANDINGS

D-Day - 6 June 1944 was one of the most momentous days in European history.

It was the moment when the Allied nations led by the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada began the military offensive to free Western Europe from the occupying forces of Nazi Germany which had overrun France and other nations four or more years earlier.

British forces came ashore below this memorial on "Gold Beach' and on "Sword Beach" to the east.

Canadian and British forces landed on "Juno Beach".

To the west, American troops landed on "Omaha Beach" and "Utah Beach".

Throughout the day British naval and air forces supported the landings on all five beaches.

On D-Day, more than 156,000 Allied troops landed in Normandy by sea and air. Of these, nearly 62,000 were British.

By nightfall on 6 June 1944 thousands of Allied troops had been killed or wounded, but the plan had worked. The Allies were firmly ashore. The Battle of Normandy had begun.

The door to the Liberation of occupied Western Europe had been opened.

THE BEACHES AND THE BRIDGEHEAD

6 June to 15 June 1944,

It was the greatest amphibious assault in history.

It was 6 June 1944, when British forces played a critical role - alongside forces from the United States, Canada and other Allied nations - in the landings which opened the way to the Liberation of Western Europe and the restoration of peace and freedom.

It was "D-Day" - a day which altered the course of our history, when tens of thousands of Allied troops landed on five beaches in Normandy and in airborne operations inland, to overcome the tyranny which had spread across France and much of Europe from Nazi Germany.

D-Day was just the beginning of the campaign known as Operation Overlord. On 7 June and for weeks beyond that, the Allied fleet continued to rush troops to Normandy while warships offshore continued to provide crucial gunfire support. By mid-June, the Allied land forces under the command of Britain's General Sir Bernard Montgomery were firmly ashore. But German forces were fighting back. The outcome of one of the most important battles of the twentieth century hung in the balance.

STRUGGLING TO ADVANCE

16 June to 30 June 1944

British and other Allied forces were fighting in the thick vegetation and high hedgerows of Normandy's "bocage" terrain which the Germans found ideal for defence.

For four days (19-22 June) a major storm hit the English Channel. Rough seas and high winds almost halted the process of unloading troops and supplies.

The British artificial Mulberry Harbour off Arromanches survived the storm: the American Mulberry Harbour at Omaha Beach was destroyed.

The main objective on the British-Canadian sector was to advance towards the city of Caen. Operation Epsom (26-30 June) was a major British attack to the west of Caen but military gains were limited.

Poor weather often restricted support from Allied air forces. British troops reached but could not hold the high point known as Hill 112. British casualties were heavy. By the end of June there were around 400,000 British troops in Normandy.

BATTLE FOR CAEN

1 July to 15 July 1944

The British attack to the west of Caen had not achieved its full objectives. The Germans made powerful counter-attacks against the ground captured in recent fighting but suffered severe losses.

British and Canadian troops attacked Caen from the north, supported by 450 heavy bomber aircraft (Operation Charnwood, 8-9 July). They liberated the northern part of the city, though it was heavily damaged as a result of weeks of Allied attacks.

British forces then attacked further to the west, seizing an area including the northern part of the critical observation point of Hill 112. In the fierce fighting over the next days, some locations were captured and recaptured several times. Losses on both sides were very high particularly amongst the infantry.

Overall, the British forces made a gradual advance but at great cost.

CAULDRON OF BATTLE

16 July to 29 July 1944

The gruelling struggle continued. Casualty rates mounted but neither side had a decisive advantage.

The next major British offensive was Operation Goodwood (18-20 July). The attack - at the eastern end of the British-Canadian sector - made use of the high number of tanks operated by British forces supported by nearly 2,000 British and American heavy and medium bombers.

Although Operation Goodwood did not lead to as big an advance as some had hoped, the threat from British-Canadian forces in the Caen area meant that many of the strongest German units were held in that region rather than being sent against the Americans.

The British and Canadians faced more than three times as many German tanks as did their American comrades further west. This aided the American break-out to the south of Saint-Lô that began on 25 July (Operation Cobra).

THE BREAK-OUT BEGINS

30 July to 15 August 1944

At the end of July. British forces moved to the west of Caen for a major attack, Operation Bluecoat 30 July -7 August).

The objective was Mont Pinçon, the highest point in Normandy. Despite heavy fighting British forces advanced rapidly. By 6 August the summit of Mont Pinçon had been captured. Operation Bluecoat and American advances further west left the German forces in Normandy weakened but still capable of fierce resistance.

To the south of Caen, First Canadian Army launched Operation Totalize (8-10 August) followed by Operation Tractable (14-15 August), both in the direction of Falaise. This Canadian-led force also included British and Polish units. Supported by heavy bombers from the UK and the tactical air forces in Normandy, significant advances were made which would contribute towards the encirclement of the majority of the German forces in the region.

VICTORY IN NORMANDY

16 August to 31 August 1944

Allied forces were advancing along virtually the entire front. The Americans approached from the south, while British, Canadian and Polish forces closed in from the north. As German forces retreated under heavy ground and air attack the Allies closed what became known as the Falaise Gap, preventing further German escape.

American troops reached the River Seine on 19 August. German resistance was fierce, but on 25-26 August the Canadians and then the British crossed the Seine, while Paris was liberated by French and American troops. Fighting continued in many places until, on 30 August, German resistance to the south of the Seine was ended.

On 1 September General Dwight D. Eisenhower took direct command of the Allied armies for the next phase of the fighting. The Battle of Normandy had ended with Allied victory, but at great cost to both sides - and to the French people who inhabited what had become a battlefield.

UNITED IN EFFORT

D-Day would not have been possible without the courage and sacrifice of many people from the United Kingdom and its allies, who made vital contributions to the success of the operation.

In the months and years before D-Day, Allied personnel flew reconnaissance flights over France and made secret surveys of the French coast. Secret agents operated behind enemy lines alongside the French Resistance. From early 1944 Allied air forces attacked targets to weaken the German defences.

Personnel from many other nations fought alongside and supported the British in Normandy. They included men and women from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland. the Netherlands, New Zealand. Norway, Poland, South Africa and the United States of America.

Supporting the efforts of the military forces were millions of civilians in factories and dockyards in the UK and further afield.

Many who lived through D-Day and the Battle of Normandy were forever marked by their experiences. Some later died from wounds received during the campaign, others suffered at length from psychological trauma.

They all played their part. Many gave their lives.

Copy of the plaques at the British Normandy Memorial made on a visit by R M James on 8th May 2026