

History of World War II: German Plans to Defeat Western Allied Landing

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Global Research, March 27, 2024

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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The Third Reich's manpower reserves was reaching its end as 1944 began which is now eight decades ago. The average age of a soldier in the German Wehrmacht through 1943 was 31.5 years, which was four years older than the average age in the German Army in 1917.

At the start of 1944 Nazi Germany on paper had 304 divisions in operation, 179 of which were in eastern and central Europe, 53 were in France, 26 in the Balkans, 24 in Scandinavia and 22 in Italy. Growing numbers of German divisions fighting against the Soviet Army had been "fought out". They were no longer of division size due to the heavy casualties they had suffered. Through 1944 German forces stationed in western and northern Europe were increasingly sent eastwards in a vain attempt to offset their losses.

The great majority of the damage inflicted against the Wehrmacht in World War II was caused by the Soviet military.

It can be stressed that Russia possessed more than enough capabilities, manpower and military resources to defeat the Nazis, and without the need for a Western Allied amphibious landing in France.

In May 1944 the number of Germans fighting against the Russians had sunk to its lowest total since Adolf Hitler's invasion of Russia had begun on 22 June 1941, while the number of Soviet troops in May 1944 had reached its highest point, and altogether they outnumbered the Germans by almost three-to-one.

Yet according to author Samuel W. Mitcham, in May 1944 the Germans at their closest point were 290 miles from Moscow, whereas the Soviet soldiers that month were still 550 miles from Berlin at their closest point. This would change dramatically in coming months with

large-scale advances made by the Russians, such as during Operation Bagration, which was launched exactly three years after the Nazis had attacked Russia.

German units seriously depleted by Russian troops were often transferred to France, where some of them underwent reorganisation to prepare for a Western Allied landing. While it is normal for top level commanders to be of an experienced age, often over 60-years-old, one of the Germans' main issues in the war's latter stages was in shortages of frontline soldiers of an appreciably younger age. Some of the newly recruited men in the German gun-crews in France were 55-years-old or more.

With an American-led landing in western Europe becoming an inevitability, in early November 1943 Hitler had appointed Field Marshal Erwin Rommel as inspector of German coastal fortifications in the west which stretched from Norway southward to France. Rommel was not impressed by Germany's defences, called the Atlantic Wall, and the many hundreds of miles of coastline meant the Nazis could merely erect a system of strongpoints and not a continuous line of concrete structures and minefields. By January 1944 even the strongpoint system was far from finished.

To strengthen the defensive lines, Rommel requested vast amounts of mines of different types, such as anti-tank mines, anti-landing craft mines, anti-personnel mines and nonferrous mines, the latter of which would be unidentifiable on enemy mine detectors, the Germans hoped. They also wanted mines detonated by trip wires and remote-controlled mines.

If the Anglo-Americans could be delayed on the French beaches, and if high casualties could be inflicted on them before they were allowed to reinforce, the Germans might decisively defeat their landing and force them back into the sea. Admiral Friedrich Ruge, a German naval officer stationed in France for most of the war and who was advising Rommel in 1943 and 1944, wrote how the field marshal "knew that there was no hope of winning, but hoped that the war could be brought to a tolerable end... So he looked for a way to defeat the landing on the beach, and to win a respite which could be exploited politically".

From early 1941 to early 1944, around 1.7 million mines had been laid by the Germans in western and northern France. On 13 January 1944 Rommel requested a major increase of mine deployment to General Alfred Jodl of the Wehrmacht high command, who was visiting France. Rommel wanted two million mines to be laid each month. Rommel had a number of other ideas relating to Germany's fortifications in western Europe. To solidify the defence, the mined and fortified areas were to be extended five to six miles inland. The number of strongpoints along or beside the coast would be increased, as would anti-tank guns and heavy machine guns in the forward sectors.

The panzer units were moved much closer to the coastlines where a Western Allied landing was expected, to enable the Germans to launch a counterblow towards the beaches in the opening hours of the amphibious assault. The enemy landing would have to be defeated within the first day, Rommel felt. Allied soldiers, upon arriving on the beaches or water's edge, would have no tanks, artillery or heavy weapons. Some of them would probably be suffering from varying degrees of seasickness, due to the often unsettled waters of the English Channel which separates southern England from northern France, across which the Allies had to sail.

Rommel demanded the laying of mines in the English Channel itself. The German Navy, which had never been the strongest branch of the country's military, lacked the vessels needed to drop significant numbers of mines into the English Channel. Rommel was also having problems in his relations with German Army officers, like Colonel-General Hans von Salmuth, who was commanding the German 15th Army in the region of Pas-de-Calais in the far north of France.

Colonel-General von Salmuth had previously commanded different Wehrmacht forces following the Nazi invasion of the USSR in 1941, such as the 30th Corps and the 2nd Army, and he was then sent to France in August 1943. Rommel first inspected von Salmuth's 15th Army in December 1943, and he informed the colonel-general that he wanted hundreds of thousands of mines to be laid along his section of the coastline. Less than four weeks later Rommel again visited von Salmuth's command area to see how things were going, and he was not satisfied with the progress made.

Rommel told von Salmuth to increase the amount of hours per day that troops under his command spent laying mines, even if it meant reducing time for training. Von Salmuth responded to Rommel in a haughty manner, telling the field marshal that he wanted his troops to be well-trained and prepared, and not overextended as a result of mine laying. Rommel replied, "Evidently you don't intend to carry out my orders".

Von Salmuth informed Rommel there was no realistic hope of the field marshal completing his program within a year, and that anyone who told him he could is either "trying to flatter you or he's a pig idiot". Von Salmuth's superior attitude made it obvious that he felt he knew more than Rommel about military affairs. Rommel, who was quietly furious, waited until the other officers had disappeared into their vehicles, before he pulled von Salmuth to one side and severely criticised him for his disrespectful behaviour.

Mitcham wrote that "Salmuth's face was red when he escorted the marshal [Rommel] back to the car, and his manner had changed completely. Rommel bade him farewell as if nothing had happened. As they drove away, the Desert Fox winked at Admiral Ruge and said: 'He is a thoroughly rude fellow and has to be treated the same way!'" From January 1944, minefield and obstacle building in von Salmuth's 15th Army increased substantially. Rommel's angry words made the colonel-general see sense.

There was, as noted, a shortage of troops in the Wehrmacht. Major-General Karl-Wilhelm von Schlieben's German 709th Infantry Division, which was stationed in Normandy, France, and would be engaged in heavy fighting when the Western Allies landed there on 6 June 1944, had to defend a 40-mile wide front. A division could be expected to successfully defend a front of six miles in width against a large enemy force, not 40 miles, which gives an idea of how stretched the Germans were.

Part of Rommel's solution to von Schlieben's problems was the sowing of mines and construction of concrete bunkers. These obstacles would help to slow the Western Allies down and inflict significant losses on them, but the overall strategy remained to rapidly defeat the enemy on the beaches. Rommel discovered that the Normandy coast, located in northern France, was particularly neglected up until January 1944.

Between the port of Dieppe in the Normandy region, 600 miles along the coast to Saint Nazaire in western France, just 11 German batteries were in position with a combined force of 37 guns. By early 1944, the only adequately fortified areas were Cap Gris-Nez in the

northern tip of France, the port of Brest in the extreme west of France, and the Nazi-occupied Channel Islands (Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney, Sark and Herm) located not far off the French north-western coast.

The Nazi construction and engineering force, Organisation Todt, was almost entirely committed to building fortifications around the ports along with railroad reparations and maintenance. As a result, Rommel chose to put the German soldiers themselves to work in laying the minefields, anti-landing devices and other barriers. By 20 May 1944, the Germans had laid 4,193,167 mines in the stretch of northern France resting on the English Channel which included Normandy.

The Germans erected obstacles underneath the water and on the sand, to act as blockers to disable enemy ships coming ashore and personnel carriers. Some of the underwater obstacles consisted of stakes driven into the ground with an anti-tank mine connected to the tip. When a vessel struck the stake, the mine would detonate; other obstacles comprised of concrete triangular-shaped devices (tetrahedrons) with steel blades or anti-tank mines attached.

Further instruments of war were used like the nutcracker mine, consisting of a stake discreetly sticking out of a concrete housing which contained a heavy shell. Should something accidentally make contact with the protruding stake, the heavy shell would explode and strike the unsuspecting enemy.

The Germans proved effective at building fake or dummy gun emplacements and batteries, which regularly fooled Allied pilots on their bombing raids. By the time of the Anglo-American landing in Normandy, the US and British air forces had destroyed a modest 16 German guns in total, all in northern France, eight in Pas-de-Calais, five in the Seine-Somme area and three in Normandy. The Germans believed that the Western Allies would execute their landing at high tide, to reduce the distance they had to travel from the beach to solid ground inland which would provide some cover.

On the 2nd of January 1944, Rommel resumed his inspection of German coastal defences, this time in Belgium and the Netherlands. As he travelled in his vehicle through the interior of those countries, Rommel was understandably left in a sour mood by the liberalism and debauchery he repeatedly saw when driving along the Belgian and Dutch streets. Rommel rarely intervened to rectify the behaviour which he encountered, but on occasion he would be compelled to when out of strict military necessity. He wrote to his wife in various letters and complained to her about the attitude of the western Europeans, and in general he disliked the atmosphere that he came across.

The Germans thought it unlikely the Anglo-Americans would attempt their landing in Belgium or the Netherlands. Large parts of the Belgian and Dutch terrain consists of marshy or boggy ground, which is not suitable for armoured vehicles, and there are great numbers of obstacles like canals, rivers and streams scattered across Belgium and the Netherlands.

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This article was originally published on [Geopolitica.RU](#).

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