



Anglo-American leaders decided on a “Germany first” strategy for reasons of sheer self-survival. “If Britain wins decisively against Germany we could win everywhere,” one official explained. “If she loses . . . we might possibly not win anywhere.”

At first, American military leaders, led by Generals George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower, wanted to invade northern Europe through German-occupied France in late 1942 or 1943. The Soviet Union was fighting a million-man German army, battling for its very survival. A **second front** in the west would force Adolf Hitler to divide his army to defend the German homeland. Such a move could possibly save Russia from total defeat. Marshall argued that if the Soviet Union fell, the war could be lost.

“We should not forget that the prize we seek is to keep 8,000,000 Russians in the war.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower, July 1942

But there were problems with this strategy. The United States had yet to fully **mobilize** for war, and U-boats were massacring Allied shipping in the ongoing Battle of the Atlantic. Most critically, there were not enough landing craft available to mount a major **amphibious invasion**.

If a direct attack on Hitler’s “Fortress Europe” was unfeasible at this early date in the war, where could American forces strike? One option

was to attack Axis forces in North Africa. The British were already fighting German and Italian armies in the deserts of Libya and Egypt. American support could tip the balance. The invasion, launched in November 1942, was code-named Torch, and Eisenhower was its commander. Torch was his first-ever combat assignment.

Allied forces landed in Morocco and Algeria and moved toward Tunisia where they hoped to hook up with General Bernard Montgomery’s desert army, which was marching westward from Egypt after defeating General Erwin Rommel at El Alamein. The Americans suffered a number of early setbacks, most devastatingly at Kasserine Pass, but in the late spring of 1943 the two armies trapped hundreds of thousands of Axis

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The rugged, reliable Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress was the mainstay of American heavy bomber units in Europe. It dropped more bombs than any other American aircraft during the war. (Image: National Archives and Records Administration, 342-FH-3A-22073.)

troops between them, forcing their surrender.

As Operation Torch was winding down, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met at the Casablanca Conference to decide where to strike next. The objective would not be northern France, as Marshall and the other American generals had hoped, but what Churchill

erroneously called Europe's "soft underbelly." Sicily was the first target, and the decision to invade mainland Italy would not be made until that campaign was underway. Marshall objected strenuously, but at this early stage of American involvement in the war, with US industrial machinery only partly **mobilized**, Churchill and the British were calling the shots. Another

consequence of the Casablanca Conference was the decision by Roosevelt and Churchill to demand nothing less than unconditional surrender from the Axis powers.

Allied forces under Generals George Patton and Montgomery landed in Sicily in July 1943. As they fought their way toward the Italian mainland, King Victor Emmanuel III deposed the nation's fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, and the government opted to surrender to the Allies. Hitler responded swiftly, rushing in additional divisions and taking over the country. His ordered his generals to fight to the last man to keep Italy.

“It was most difficult at night. Half our people were awake at all times, mostly . . . There was little grouching, only about being cold and hungry. Our primary concern was staying alive.”

Bill Dunfee, 505th Parachute Regiment

Under Field Marshal Albert Kesselring—a master of defensive, attritional warfare—the German army fought with resolve in Sicily, but was no match for the Allies and their overwhelming air superiority. Kesselring's army escaped, however, to the mainland over the Straits of Messina. The army nearly drove the Allied invasion force back into the sea at Salerno on the Amalfi Coast and again further north at Anzio in early 1944, causing Churchill to doubt if the D-Day landings scheduled for that June would succeed.

To disrupt the German response to an Allied invasion, the American and British air armadas destroyed bridges, rail yards, moving trains, and airfields in Belgium and northern France. And in a steady succession of massive bombing raids over Berlin and other Nazi production centers, the Allied fighter planes that escorted the heavy bombers killed nearly all of Hitler's best pilots and destroyed thousands of aircraft, nearly annihilating the *Luftwaffe*. By late May 1944, the once-formidable German air force ceased to

be a threat to the Allied invasion fleet.

On June 6, 1944, a force of 175,000 assault troops crossed the English Channel and landed in Nazi-occupied France. They were part of an unprecedented assemblage of ships and aircraft, the largest amphibious force in the history of warfare. The Germans had been expecting an invasion, but the Allies caught them off guard by landing in Normandy rather than Calais where the channel was far narrower and Axis defenses stronger. Later that summer, a second Allied force landed along the French Riviera, near Marseilles, and moved northward cleansing southern France of the Nazi occupiers.

After breaking out of the torturous hedgerow country beyond the Normandy beaches, the Allied forces under Eisenhower liberated Paris and all of northern France and Belgium. They drove the shattered but still dangerous German army back toward its own territory where it would prepare a mighty final stand.

The Allied race through France in the summer of 1944 raised hopes that the war might be over by Christmas, but in September long supply lines all the way back to the Normandy beaches and difficult terrain on the German border slowed the offensive to a crawl. The Allies also came up against the Siegfried Line, a dense belt of bunkers, barbed wire, and obstacles along the German border. An initial attempt to liberate the Belgian port of Antwerp and a risky campaign to land paratroopers in the Netherlands to outflank the Siegfried Line (Operation Market Garden) failed in September. In the nearly impenetrable Huertgen Forest near the German city of Aachen, and everywhere else along the Siegfried Line, Allied forces fought costly battles for small gains, but were unable to break through into the heart of Germany. In November, unusually cold winter weather set in, making ground conditions nearly intolerable. Heavy, persistent cloud cover limited the effectiveness of Allied air support of ground troops.

On December 16, Hitler launched his final offensive campaign. What came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge was the largest American infantry engagement of the war. Allied



US paratroopers preparing for a jump over Normandy, France, during the D-Day invasion, June 6, 1944. (*National Archives and Records Administration.*)

forces were caught by surprise when German **panzer** units and supporting infantry attacked through the thick Ardennes Forest and pushed them back in a panicked retreat that created a deep wedge, or bulge, in their defensive line. But just as suddenly the battle turned. American airborne troops trapped at Bastogne were rescued by Patton's tankers, and when the skies cleared days before Christmas, Allied aircraft pounded the invading army. Then began a massive **counteroffensive** that extended well into January, when the last German units were pushed back across the Rhine.

The Battle of the Bulge was almost entirely a soldier's fight, a confusing, close-quarters slugfest won by thousands of small fighting units without much direction from headquarters. Guts, self-respect, and loyalty to comrades

prevailed over an ideologically driven German army short of ammunition, air support, and oil.

The Allied victory came at a terrific cost: over one million soldiers were engaged, 600,000 of them Americans. About 19,000 American GIs were killed, 47,000 wounded, and 15,000 captured. The Germans suffered over 100,000 casualties, men the depleted *Wehrmacht* could not replace. It was the beginning of the end for Germany.