



Media Backgrounder

D-Day and the Normandy Campaign

Australians who served

- » Over 555,000 Australians served overseas in the Second World War.
- » Some 3,000 Australians were involved in the D-Day landings.

Major Australian Units

- » Nos 451,453,455,460,461,462,463, 464,466 and 467 Squadrons RAAF.

Casualties

- » More than 39,000 Australians died during the Second World War.
- » 18 Australians are known to have been killed on D-Day, this includes Australian airmen killed on the night of 5-6 June.

Specific medals

- » Australians who participated in the European campaign of 1944-45 were awarded the air Crew Europe Star or the France and Germany Star.

Countries involved

- » UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Germany, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and Poland.

More information

- » www.ww2Australia.gov.au/raaf/
- » www.awm.gov.au/units/event_212.asp

By 1944, with the Second World War in its fifth year, German forces still occupied France, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Balkans, Denmark, Norway, much of Italy, and large, but ever-shrinking, areas of eastern Europe.

It became clear that to defeat Germany the allies would have to launch an amphibious operation from Britain, landing on the coast of France. The invasion plan was known as operation overlord.

Months before the invasion allied bombers struck transport targets throughout France to isolate the invasion beaches and slow or prevent the movement of German reinforcements.

On 6 June 1944, D-Day, thousands of British, Canadian, French and United States paratroopers began landing behind the invasion beaches to secure the allied flanks, destroy artillery positions and seize and hold vital junctions and causeways until infantry and armour could make their way inland.

The landings that began around 6:30 am, were met in some instances by light resistance and in others, such as on Omaha Beach in the American sector, by a fierce defence that took hours and hundreds of lives to overcome. By the first afternoon the allies had established a series of beachheads along the Norman coast.

After the initial success of the landings, the campaign to break out of Normandy lasted until early August, as German resistance and the Norman countryside proved difficult for the allies to penetrate.

After months of fighting, Paris finally fell to the allies on 25 August and there was a widespread feeling that Germany might be defeated in 1944. But by the end of the year the Germans had regrouped, strengthened their defences on the border with France, and repelled an allied attempt to reach the Ruhr through the Netherlands, launching an offensive in the Ardennes that became known as the Battle of the Bulge, and prolonging the war until May 1945.

Operation Overlord and the subsequent fighting in Normandy was borne mostly by United States, Canadian, British and French forces. Soldiers, sailors and airmen from other countries, such as Poland, were also involved on the allied side.

Australia's involvement in Overlord was limited. By June 1944 most Australian service personnel were engaged in the South West Pacific area, but estimates suggest that some 3000 Australians played a part.

Australian involvement

Australia's main contribution to D-Day was in the air. Some 2,000 to 2,500 Australian airmen serving in Royal Air Force and Royal Australian Air Force Squadrons took part in operations associated with the invasion.

Australian aircrew served in transport and glider-towing squadrons which delivered airborne troops on D-Day, in fighter and fighter-bomber squadrons which operated directly over the beaches, and in heavy bomber squadrons which dropped thousands of tons of bombs in support of the landings.

Some 500 Australian sailors served on Royal Navy vessels, from battleships and corvettes to motor torpedo boats and landing craft. About a dozen Australian soldiers were also attached to British army formations to gain experience in preparation for amphibious operations in the Pacific later in the war.

Fourteen Australians are known to have been killed on D-Day: two members of the Royal Australian Navy and twelve members of the Royal Australian Air Force. Many other Australian airmen lost their lives in operations directly related to the invasion of France in the period leading up to 6 June 1944 and in the days that followed, as allied air crew flew in support of ground troops now engaged in the bitter Normandy fighting.