



THE NATIONAL
WWII MUSEUM
NEW ORLEANS

Where in the Word War? Mapping the Geography of WWII

A Lesson from
the Education Department

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Where in the World War?

Mapping the Geography of D-Day

For the soldier coming ashore on D-Day the ability to read a map accurately could mean the difference between life and death. Deciphering a map today is less deadly but is still an important skill. Students, however, still need to learn how to read maps for the historical information they can provide. This map-reading exercise will require students to understand scale, a legend, iconography, national flags, and western European geography.

OBJECTIVE: Students will analyze a map of the D-Day invasion of Normandy and answer questions relating to their analysis.

GRADE LEVEL: 7-12

STANDARDS: History Thinking Standard 2—the student comprehends a variety of historical sources and can draw upon historical maps in order to obtain or clarify information on the geographic setting in which the historical event occurred.

Content Era 8 (1929-1945), Standard 3B—the student understands World War II and how the Allies prevailed.

TIME REQUIREMENT: One class period.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Use the map transparency provided for this activity.
2. After presenting a lesson on the history of D-Day (you may use the included D-Day Fact Sheet), review the map with students pointing out the different elements of the map.
3. Have students fill out the question sheet.
4. Hold a brief discussion about the map: What elements of this map do the students like? What parts are confusing? What information is not on this map that could be? Are the design elements of the map appropriate (colors, shapes, icons, etc.)?
5. After the discussion, look at the picture of the cloth map of Omaha Beach. This is a map a soldier would have carried with him onto the beach during the Normandy invasion. What important information is on the map? What is the purpose of the map? Do you find the map difficult to read? Why or why not? Why does the map have “Top Secret” written along the bottom? What does this map tell us about the dangers and complications the Allies faced in the invasion?

ASSESSMENT: Components for assessment include the completed student worksheet and class discussions.

ENRICHMENT: Have students research and create a historical map of another WWII battle: the attack on Pearl Harbor, Midway, The Battle of the Bulge, etc. Display these maps on the wall.

D-DAY (JUNE 6, 1944)

Since Nazi Germany forced the Allies out of France to Great Britain in the spring of 1940, the Allies had been planning a cross-Channel assault to retake the continent and defeat Hitler's Third Reich. By the spring of 1944 an elaborate plan—code-named Operation *Overlord*—was secretly in place. The Allies, led by American General Dwight Eisenhower, faced an enemy determined to keep them from landing successfully anywhere along the western European coastline. To ensure against such a landing, Hitler ordered Field Marshal Erwin Rommel to complete the Atlantic Wall—a 2,400-mile fortification made up of concrete bunkers, barbed wire, tank ditches, landmines, fixed gun emplacements, and beach and underwater obstacles. Many of these obstacles were specially designed to rip out the bottoms of landing craft or blow them up before they reached the shore. Others were made to trap soldiers on the beach where they would be exposed to intense gunfire from fortified positions.

On the eve of June 5, 1944, 175,000 men, a fleet of 5,000 ships and landing craft, 50,000 vehicles, and 11,000 planes sat in southern England, poised to attack secretly across the English Channel along a 50-mile stretch of the Normandy coast of France. This force, one of the largest armadas in history, represented years of rigorous training, planning, and supplying. It also represented a previously unknown level of cooperation between allied nations, all struggling for a common goal—the defeat of Nazi Germany. Because of highly intricate deception plans, Hitler and most of his staff believed that the Allies would be attacking at the Pas-de-Calais, the narrowest point between Great Britain and France.



In the early morning darkness of June 6, thousands of Allied paratroopers and glider troops landed silently behind enemy lines, securing key roads and bridges on the flanks of the invasion zone. As dawn lit the Normandy coastline the Allies began their amphibious landings, traveling to the beaches in small landing craft lowered from the decks of larger ships anchored in the Channel. They assaulted five beaches, code-named *Utah*, *Omaha*, *Gold*, *Juno*, and *Sword*. The bloodiest fighting occurred at *Omaha*, where the Americans suffered more than 2,000 casualties. By nightfall nearly all the Allied soldiers were ashore at a cost

of 10,000 American, British, and Canadian casualties. Hitler's vaunted Atlantic Wall had been breached in less than one day. The beaches were secure, but it would take many weeks before the Allies could fight their way out of the heavily defended Normandy countryside and almost a full year to reach and defeat Germany in the spring of 1945.

Operation *Overlord* was not just another great battle, but the true turning point of WWII in Western Europe. While the U.S. and Great Britain had earlier engaged the Axis powers on the periphery of the Europe (North Africa, Sicily, Italy), it was not until the invasion at Normandy that they brought on the beginning of the end for Hitler and his Nazis. Had the invasion failed (*Eisenhower was prepared to read a statement over the radio taking full responsibility if Allied troops were driven from the beaches*), Hitler would have been able to pull troops out of France to strengthen his Eastern Front against the encroaching Soviets. A second Allied invasion into France would have taken more than a year to mount. Hitler, meanwhile, would have further strengthened his Atlantic Wall, his newly developed V-1 flying bombs would have continued to rain down on England from launching pads across the Channel, and the Nazis' *Final Solution* against European Jews might well have succeeded completely.

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Mapping the geography of D-Day
Student Worksheet

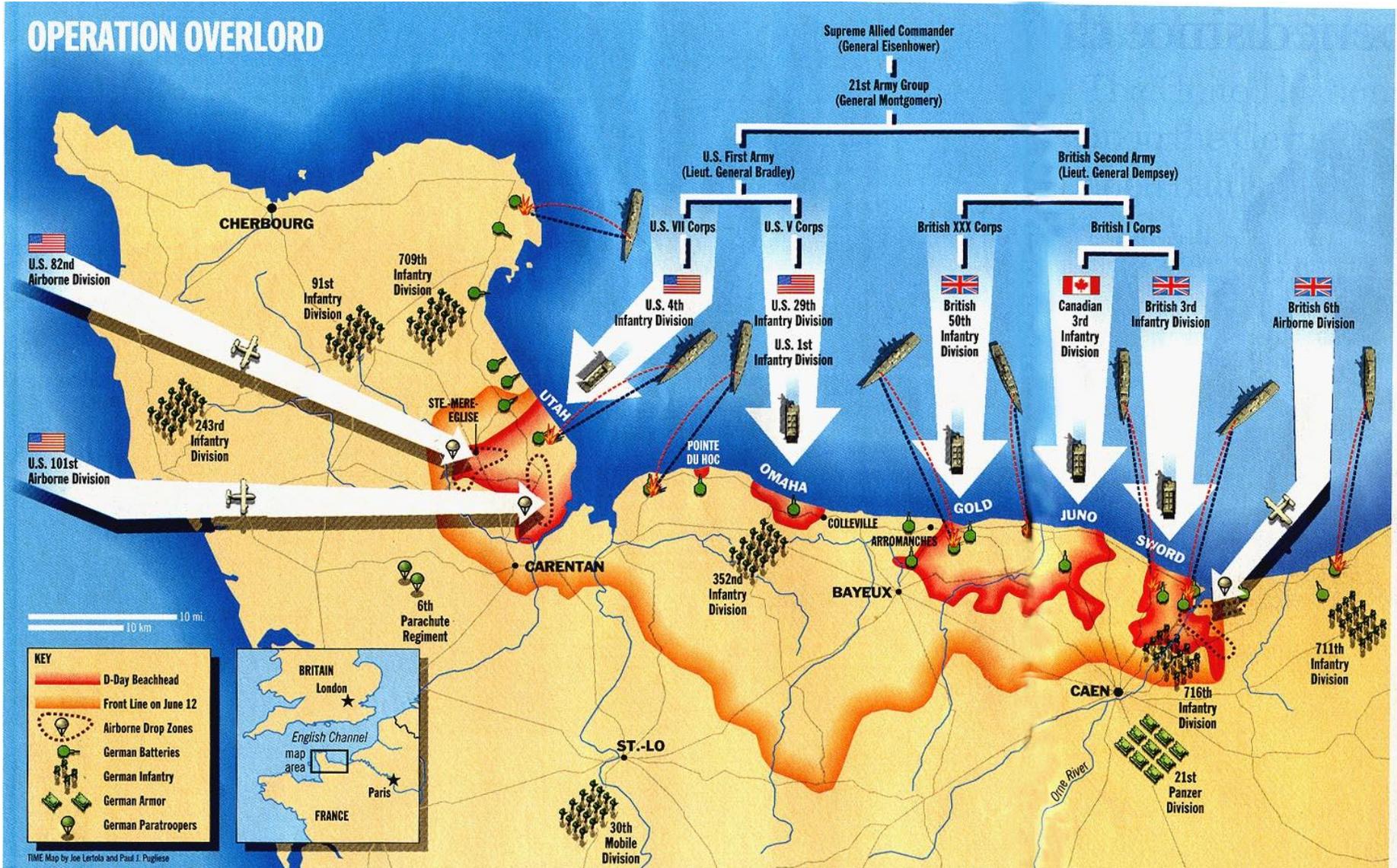
Directions: Answer the following questions (you may need to consult another map to answer question 13).

1. How many U.S. divisions took part in the D-Day invasion of Normandy?
Name them:
2. How many British divisions took part in the D-Day invasion of Normandy?
Name them:
3. How many Allied divisions in total took part in the invasion?
4. What beach did the Canadians assault?
5. Which two major Normandy towns had the Allies captured by June 12?
6. Approximately how many miles is the length of the entire invasion area?
7. To get from Normandy to Paris you must travel _____ (direction).
8. What geographical obstacle kept the 21st Panzer Division from attacking the Allies on D-Day?
9. Which beach had the smallest Allied advance of D-Day?
10. Which town did U.S. Airborne troops capture?
11. To get to London from Normandy you must travel _____ (direction).
12. Can you determine how many miles the Allied armada traveled across the English Channel? Explain:
13. Parts of three countries are shown on this map. What are they?
14. From this map, can you tell if Hitler's *Atlantic Wall* was a success? Explain:

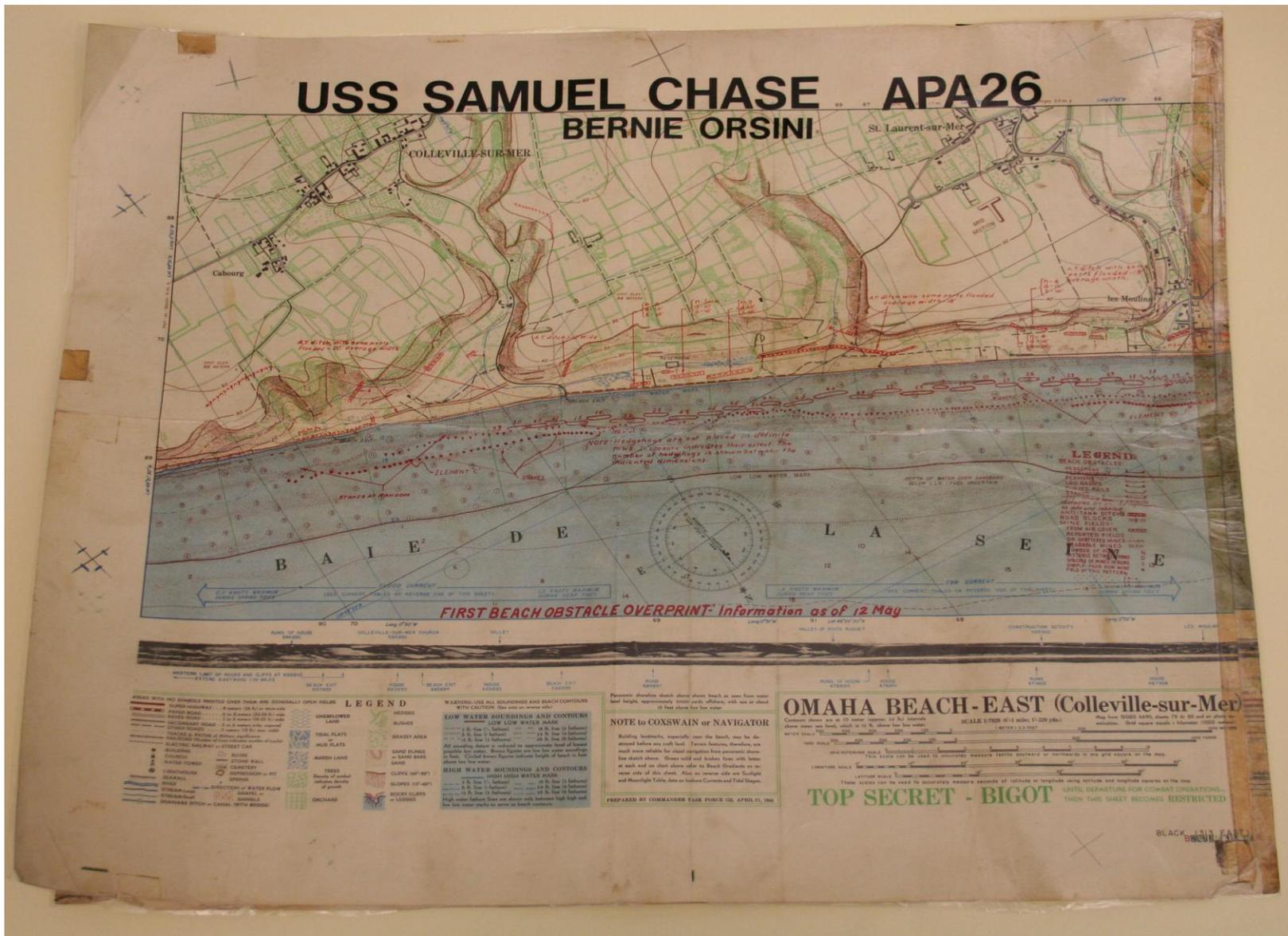
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Student Worksheet Answers:

1. Five divisions: 1st Infantry, 4th Infantry, 29th Infantry, 82nd Airborne, 101st Airborne
2. Three divisions: 50th Infantry, 3rd Infantry, 6th Airborne
3. Nine divisions
4. Juno Beach
5. Carentan and Bayeux
6. 60 miles or 90 kilometers
7. East or southeast
8. Orne River
9. Omaha
10. Ste. Mere-Eglise
11. North
12. Two possible answers: No—the scale of miles on the map is not scaled for the inset map. Yes—use the scale of miles on the map to determine the length of the Normandy invasion area, and then use that length as a new scale of miles on the inset map.
13. Great Britain, France, Belgium (in the inset map)
14. Hitler's Atlantic Wall was not a success because the Allied armies were able to breach it within one day.



Map courtesy of *TIME* magazine



Cloth Map of Omaha Beach, Collection of National WWII Museum, Gift of Bernie Orsini 2000.243.001