

# **RETREAT TO THE REICH: The German Defeat in France, 1944**

*Samuel W. Mitcham, Jr.*

**PRAEGER**

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German infantry and a camouflaged panzer. The tank is of Czechoslovakian manufacture.

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# **RETREAT TO THE REICH**



# CHAPTER I

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR DISASTER

On July 17, 1944, a pair of German soldiers dragged an unconscious officer into the Catholic hospital near Vimoutiers, France. His left cheekbone was destroyed, he had many shell splinters and fragments in his head, his skull was fractured, his left eye was injured, and his temple was penetrated. At first the medical staff gave him no chance to live.

What had happened to him was not unusual. Throughout Normandy this violent summer, Allied fighter-bombers were plastering any German vehicle that moved during daylight hours, killing or wounding tens of thousands of German soldiers, immolating tanks and armored vehicles, reducing German facilities to rubble, cutting their supply lines, and making it impossible for the Germans to launch anything resembling a major counterattack. Now not even Dr. Joseph Goebbels's propaganda machine talked about throwing the Allies back into the sea; it spoke only of how the German soldiers on the Western Front were bravely holding their positions—which, for once, was nothing but the truth. This task had just become infinitely more difficult, however, because of the identity of the unconscious officer. He was arguably Germany's most gifted tactician, a fearless leader, and the man who had imposed stalemate on the Western Allies in Normandy, despite the fact that he was heavily outnumbered in every material category. He was a man among men, the holder of Germany's highest decorations, including the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Sword and Diamonds, the commander in chief of Army Group B, and a field marshal—the highest rank in the German Army. More important, he was the man most respected by the German soldier and most feared and respected by the men on the other side of the line. He was Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel—the Desert Fox.

It had all begun many years before, when Germany lost World War I and made the transition from the Second Reich (empire) to a democratic

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form of government called the Weimar Republic. Led to believe that the peace treaty ending the war would be predicated on U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, the German people had instead been handed the very harsh Treaty of Versailles, which they called the "treaty of shame," because Germany had to admit that it alone was responsible for World War I, when clearly this was not true. The treaty was also tantamount to economic rape. In rapid succession, over a period of only 5 years, Germany had lost a world war; witnessed the collapse of its royal house (which had ruled Prussia for 19 generations and 507 years); was forced to give up all its colonies and one-eighth of its national land area, as well as its entire air force, virtually all of its navy, and most of its army; had to pay huge reparations; underwent a civil war (which the Germans called "the war after the war"); and underwent a period of unbelievable hyperinflation, during which the value of the mark fell from 8 marks to 1 American dollar to 4,210,500 million marks to 1 dollar. The price of an egg increased from 25 pfennings (one-fourth of a mark) in 1918 to 80 billion marks in 1923. A newspaper now cost 300 billion marks, and a beer cost 150 billion marks. Had the American dollar inflated at the same rate, a postage stamp would have cost 11,900 million dollars.<sup>1</sup>

The brilliant economic policies of Dr. Hjalmar Horace Greeley Schacht, the Reich currency commissioner and president of the Reichsbank, changed all that and temporarily restored the German economy. By November 1923, the mark was stabilized at 4.2 per American dollar. It was too late for the Weimar Republic, however. German faith in democracy had been completely shattered. Now, like a tree without roots, it was subject to falling under the force of the first moderate wind that struck it.

The next wind, however, was far from moderate: It was the Great Depression of 1929, which shook Germany to its core. Factories closed, wages fell, and tent colonies of middle-class people—now homeless—surrounded every city. In Berlin alone, a city of 4 million people, there were 750,000 unemployed. By 1932, German unemployment exceeded 5.5 million, out of a work force of 29 million, and nobody knows how many other Germans, who had exhausted both their unemployment benefits and their hopes, simply no longer bothered to register.

Onto this stage walked Adolf Hitler, undisputed leader (Fuehrer) of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei), called the NSDAP or Nazi Party for short. An undeniably brilliant orator and a master politician, he promised to return Germany to greatness. More important, he offered her people hope for the future. Hungry and desperate, they turned to him in droves. In 1933, he became the legally elected chancellor of Germany.

At first, it seemed to the Germans that Hitler was keeping his word—

and, for a time, he did. This was certainly not because integrity was a hallmark of his character—it was not—but because he was blindly ambitious and he really did have certain core beliefs, perverted though some of them were. The general German public, along with its military leaders, was unable to tell the difference. In addition, admittedly Hitler did some positive things for Germany in the 1930s. He stimulated the economy with his public works programs, built the autobahns, eliminated unemployment, restored a measure of political stability to Germany for the first time since 1918, drastically reduced crime, eliminated street violence (largely by suppressing his own Storm Troopers) and reintroduced compulsory military service to the nation. It must be recalled that the typical German male of that time felt that he had been cheated of his birthright if he did not have the opportunity to serve in the military. *Heerlos, Wehrlos, Ehrlos*—no army, no defense, no honor—was an often-repeated slogan during the Versailles years, and Hitler's restoration of universal military suffrage was celebrated by the masses and seen even by most anti-Nazis as a definite positive.

Hitler's foreign policy prior to 1939 was also a brilliant success. After establishing the Luftwaffe and keeping his promise to make Germany strong again, he launched the *Blumenkrieg*—his "Flower Wars." In three dizzying years, he reannexed the Saar to the Reich, remilitarized the Rhineland, annexed Austria, reclaimed the Sudetenland, and reduced the hated Czechoslovakian Republic to military and diplomatic impotence. In achieving all of this, however, the German people paid a price. They lost their political freedom. As Hitler pursued his agenda, he outlawed all other political parties, established the Nazi dictatorship, abolished the Weimar Republic, and established the Third Reich. By February 1938, he had even brought the army under his control. The Germans in general, however, were happy with the exchange, and when they spoke of freedom at all, they spoke of losing the freedom to starve.

Only gradually did this opinion begin to change. The first shudders were felt on Crystal Night, also known as the Night of the Broken Glass, November 9–10, 1938, when rampaging Brownshirts and other Nazis smashed the windows of Jewish homes, shops, businesses, and synagogues. Not confining themselves to windows, the Nazis wrecked and plundered 267 synagogues, 815 shops and businesses, and a large number of private homes. At least 36 Jews were killed, 20,000 Jews were arrested, and about 6 million marks worth of damage was done. The Nazi government blamed the victims, confiscated the insurance money, and imposed a billion-marks fine on the Jewish community.<sup>2</sup>

This lawless outrage decisively turned world public opinion against Germany, but most Germans passively accepted even this. The economy, after all, was fine. Then, on March 15, 1939, the Fuehrer occupied the rump Czechoslovakian state. Unlike the case with Hitler's previous for-

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eign adventures, there was no way this newly annexed region could be considered German. Perhaps Hitler had been serious in 1924 when he wrote *Mein Kampf* and spoke of lebensraum (living space), which Germany would have to take in the East, or so the more thoughtful and intelligent Germans wondered. If so, they realized, lebensraum could only be taken by means of another major European war—perhaps even a second world war. The remaining Germans who thought this way, however, dared not verbalize it publicly, for fear of the Gestapo. It was too late now to object to the Nazis; Hitler was firmly at the controls, and there was no one left who could fire the engineer. He would be able to take the train wherever he wished, and they would have to stay on for the ride.

In 1939, Hitler finally miscalculated and drove the train over the edge and into the abyss. Thinking that the British and French would back down when faced with a physical confrontation, he invaded Poland on September 1. London and Paris declared war on September 3. They refused to make peace even after the Wehrmacht (German armed forces) overran Poland in less than four weeks.

Thanks primarily to his exalted General Staff, which Hitler feared and hated but with whom he had to work, the German Army had grown from 100,000 men in 1933 to 2.5 million in 1939. Hitler used this superb instrument to conquer Poland in 1939; the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France in 1940; and Yugoslavia, Greece, Crete, and most of Libya in 1941. Then Hitler made a second fatal mistake. Without subduing or making peace with the United Kingdom, he invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. By the end of the year, his invasion had been checked at Leningrad and turned back before the gates of Moscow, and he was at war with the United States. By December 1941, those who were in a position to know knew Germany could not win the war. The Third Reich and its partners were outnumbered almost 2 to 1 in population, and Italy, militarily speaking, counted for little (Table 1.1). Worse still, all three of the Reich's principal opponents outproduced her industrially. Table 1.2, for example, shows German and Japanese aircraft production for 1942 and 1943 versus those for the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain. Ratios were similar in every material category. Nevertheless, Hitler—an inveterate gambler—pressed recklessly on, and the Wehrmacht suffered defeat after defeat. The German 6th Army was encircled and destroyed at Stalingrad, costing the Reich 230,000 men. The Battle of Britain was lost, England recovered, the U.S. two- and four-engine bombers arrived in Great Britain in significant numbers, and German cities were devastated by Anglo-American bombs. The Allies won the Battle of the Atlantic, and despite an occasional success, the armies of the Reich were pushed steadily back in the East, losing tens of thousands of men, hundreds of tanks and assault guns, and tons of ma-

**Table 1.1**  
**Population, Major Allied and Axis Countries, 1939 Estimates**

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<b>Allies</b>	
Soviet Union	167,300,000
United States	130,000,000
United Kingdom	47,700,000
Total	345,000,000
<b>Axis</b>	
Germany	68,400,000
Japan	70,600,000
Italy	43,800,000
Total	182,800,000

---

terial in the process. Meanwhile, in North Africa, German supply lines collapsed and Army Group Afrika was forced to surrender in May 1943, costing Germany another 130,000 men. The loss of Sicily, the defection of Italy, and the Allied invasion of Italy followed. By early 1944, the Wehrmacht was on the defensive everywhere, and Hitler's empire faced its greatest challenge: the invasion of Western Europe.

In 1944, everyone knew that the Allies would attempt to return to France via amphibious landings. This invasion represented both the greatest threat to and the greatest opportunity for Nazi Germany. If the Reich could repulse the invasion, the Allies would not be able to mount another for perhaps a year. A score of divisions—including several elite panzer and SS (Schutzstaffel) panzer formations—would be released for the Eastern Front. Allied military and political leadership would be thrown into chaos, the Churchill government might fall, and it was conceivable that the Allied coalition might fall apart altogether. Even if the Wehrmacht was not able to reestablish German military superiority in Europe, it might at least be able to reestablish a balance of power and force the Allies to accept a negotiated peace. Even if this failed, German scientists would have another year to develop or perfect their “miracle weapons,” including new and more dangerous U-boats, flying bombs, guided rockets, jet airplanes, and perhaps even atomic bombs. On the other hand, if the invasion succeeded, there would be little hope left for the Third Reich.

Since March 1942, OB West (the German abbreviation for *Oberbefehlshaber West*, the commander in chief, West, or his headquarters) was Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, a 69-year-old Prussian aristocrat who had served the Fatherland since 1892.<sup>3</sup> (See Appendix I for a table of comparative ranks.) An officer of the Old School, Rundstedt planned to fight



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**Table 1.2**  
**Military Aircraft Production (All Types)**

Country	1942	1943
United States	47,836	85,898
Soviet Union	25,436	34,900
United Kingdom	23,672	26,263
Germany	15,409	24,807
Japan	8,861	16,693
Allied Total	96,944	147,061
Axis Total	24,270	41,500

a conventional, 1940-type battle. He intended to let the Allies land, build up, and move inland; then he would attack and decisively defeat them with his highly regarded panzer divisions somewhere in the interior of France, far beyond the range of Allied naval gunfire. For this purpose he created Panzer Group West under the command of his friend and fellow aristocrat, General of Panzer Troops Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg, and gave him control of all 10 of OB West's panzer and panzer grenadier divisions.<sup>4</sup> What von Rundstedt, von Geyr, and their colleagues had failed to grasp was that the days of the blitzkrieg were over. Allied aerial domination had made this type of strategy obsolete. It was simply impossible for Germany to fight a 1940- or 1941-type battle in 1944—at least on the Western Front. To make matters worse, Rundstedt was content to isolate himself in St. Germain, his luxurious headquarters in Paris, with his cigarettes, brandy, cognac, and cheap detective novels (which he loved), and he did not stay abreast of recent developments in his profession. Even his friend von Geyr admitted to his interrogators in 1947: "Of all the German generals, Field Marshal von Rundstedt knew the least of panzer tactics. He was an infantryman of the last generation. He and his staff were armchair strategists who didn't like dirt, noise and tanks in general—as far as I know, Field Marshal von Rundstedt was never in a tank. Do not misunderstand me, however," Geyr quickly added, "I have the greatest respect for von Rundstedt, but he was too old for this war."<sup>5</sup>

Rundstedt's staff adopted the same attitude as their commander. When Vice Admiral Friedrich Ruge visited Rundstedt's headquarters, he found "a fatalistic acceptance of the deteriorating situation and a lack of alertness in looking for possible improvements."<sup>6</sup> OB West was further handicapped by its amiable but mediocre chief of staff, Lieutenant General Guenther Blumentritt, who, as General von Geyr recalled, was "unsuited [for his post] in ability or character."<sup>7</sup> Blumentritt, in fact,

suspected that the entire invasion was a colossal bluff that might well not take place at all.<sup>8</sup> With these generals in charge, little was done to improve the “Atlantic Wall,” as the propaganda ministry dubbed the German coastal defenses of Western Europe.

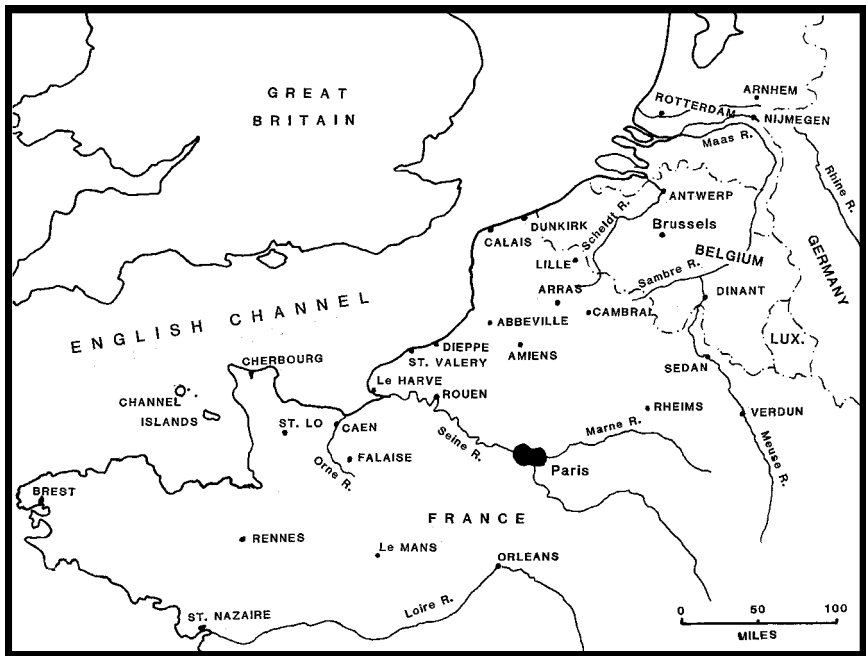
By December 1943, Adolf Hitler and his chief military adviser, Colonel General Alfred Jodl, the chief of operations of Oberkommando des Wehrmacht (the High Command of the Armed Forces, or OKW), among others, had begun to suspect that something was wrong in the West.<sup>9</sup> To investigate matters, Hitler summoned Field Marshal Rommel to Rastenburg, his headquarters in East Prussia. At the time, Rommel was in charge of Army Group B z.b.V. (“for special purposes”), but neither he nor his skeleton staff had a specific assignment.<sup>10</sup> The Fuehrer felt they could do useful work by assessing the state of the German defenses in Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. This appointment left Rundstedt wondering if the younger and much more energetic Rommel had been earmarked to succeed him.

Rommel conducted a whirlwind inspection of the defensive sectors from Denmark to the Pyrenees Mountains on the Spanish frontier from December 11 to 23, 1943, and was not at all impressed by what he saw. The Atlantic Wall had been touted by the German media as an invincible barrier against which the invading Allies would dash all of their hopes, but a soldier of Rommel’s caliber saw through this curtain of deception almost immediately. He was soon denouncing it as a farce—an “enormous bluff” and a “figment of Hitler’s *Wolkenkuckucksheim*” (cloud cuckoo land).<sup>11</sup> Later, he bitterly denounced it as “the Propaganda Wall.” Meanwhile, on December 15, he stopped in Paris to discuss the situation with Gerd von Rundstedt.

It is hard to imagine two officers more diverse than Rommel and von Rundstedt. From all appearances, Rommel was the quintessential prototype of a Nazi general—young, tough, blunt, energetic, uncompromisingly competent, and a man of action. Rundstedt was elderly, aloof, cynical, tired, and somewhat jaded—the product of a bygone era. Their backgrounds were equally divergent. Rundstedt was a Prussian aristocrat, whereas Rommel was the son and grandson of schoolteachers. Rundstedt was prone to compromise, even on matters of principle, and he enjoyed luxurious living and the finer things of life, whereas Rommel had simple, puritanical tastes and absolutely refused to compromise on matters of principle. Finally, Rundstedt had made his way to the top of his profession as a General Staff officer, whereas Rommel earned his spurs on the front lines, where he had won the *Pour le Merite*, all four grades of the Knight’s Cross, and the Wounded Badge—five times. A clash between the pair seemed inevitable. To everyone’s surprise, however, the two marshals quickly developed an understanding and even a

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Figure 1.1  
Northwest Europe



faint liking for one another. This was because Rundstedt compromised again. Even though he and Rommel had serious disagreements over how the West should be defended (see below), he offered Rommel command of his two largest armies and the sectors most seriously threatened by an Allied invasion. Even though Rundstedt was giving up a great deal, Rommel would now be subordinated to Rundstedt; therefore, there would be no danger of the Desert Fox replacing him as OB West. (Rundstedt had no way of knowing that his fears were completely unfounded.) The two marshals jointly proposed to Fuehrer Headquarters that Army Group B be subordinate to OB West and that it be given responsibility for northern France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. A surprised Hitler was not particularly pleased by this development because he had planned to use Rommel on the Eastern Front, but in the end, he acquiesced. Erwin Rommel was given the 7th and 15th Armies and Wehrmacht Command Netherlands. The Desert Fox received his most difficult command. Figure 1.1 shows his principal area of operations.

Hitler added some surprising clauses to the terms of Rommel's appointment: He was given a measure of authority over Rundstedt's other

**Table 1.3**  
**The Order of Battle of OB West, May 1, 1944**

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OB West: Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt

Army Group B: Field Marshal Erwin Rommel  
 Armed Forces Netherlands: General of Fliers Friedrich Christiansen  
 15th Army: Colonel General Hans von Salmuth  
 7th Army: Colonel General Friedrich Dollmann

Armeegruppe G<sup>1</sup>: Colonel General Johannes Blaskowitz  
 19th Army: General of Infantry Georg von Sodenstern<sup>2</sup>  
 1st Army: Colonel General Johannes Blaskowitz<sup>3</sup>

Panzer Group West: General of Panzer Troops Baron Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg

1st Parachute Army<sup>4</sup>: Luftwaffe Colonel General Kurt Student

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup>An Armeegruppe was not a regular Heeresgruppe (army group) but, rather, was an ad hoc headquarters, normally intermediate between an army and an army group in the chain of command. This one was activated on April 28, 1944, and was eventually upgraded to full army group (Heeresgruppe) status.

<sup>2</sup>Succeeded by General of Infantry Friedrich Wiese on June 29, 1944.

<sup>3</sup>Succeeded as commander of the 1st Army on May 3, 1944, by General of Panzer Troops Joachim Lemelsen. On June 4, Lemelsen was replaced by General of Infantry Kurt von der Chevallerie.

<sup>4</sup>At this time, 1st Parachute Army was employed as a training command only. It had no organic combat divisions.

two armies in matters of coastal defense. He was ordered to inspect their sectors and show himself publicly, to deceive the enemy as to what his area of responsibility was and to advance the myth that there were more troops south of the Loire than there were. Early that spring, Hitler even proposed that if the enemy attacked in southern France, Rommel would immediately assume command there, leaving Rundstedt to command in the North. The OB West, however, objected to this confusing arrangement, and it was dropped.

Perhaps to counter Rommel's growing influence in the West, Field Marshal von Rundstedt created a new command: Armeegruppe G, under Colonel General Johannes Blaskowitz. It controlled the 1st and 19th Armies, which were responsible for the defense of southwestern and southern France, respectively. Table 1.3 shows the German Order of Battle on May 1, 1944.

Rommel had a formidable task, and he did everything humanly possible to prepare his men for it. The lethargy he found at Rundstedt's

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headquarters had pervaded the entire Western Front; now Rommel shook them out of it. With that intangible gift he had for instilling a fighting spirit and an aggressive attitude in his men, the Desert Fox hurled himself into his work. The rank and file were eager to serve under a military genius of Rommel's caliber, and morale soared, even as their workload increased. In six months, Rommel laid three times as many mines as OB West had laid in the previous four years. He built fortifications, constructed strong points and bunkers at and near the coast, laid hundreds of thousands of offshore obstacles (many with mines or heavy shells attached, in order to blow up landing craft), constructed many *Scheinbatterien* (dummy batteries) to deceive enemy fighter-bombers, flooded selected areas to drown enemy paratroopers, and erected scores of antiglider poles, which the troops called "Rommel asparagus." He could do little, however, to improve the fragmented German command structure (he had no control over and little influence with the navy or the Luftwaffe—including the III Flak Corps); he could do nothing about the manpower drain to the Eastern Front; nor could he deploy the panzer divisions that were in France in the manner that he knew was best. "Our friends in the East cannot imagine what they're in for here," Rommel said. He added:

It's not a matter of fanatical hordes to be driven forward in masses against our line, with no regard for casualties and little recourse to tactical craft; here we are facing an enemy who applies all his native intelligence to the use of his many technical resources, who spares no expenditure of material and whose every operation goes its course as though it had been the subject of repeated rehearsal.<sup>12</sup>

Of the German commanders in the West, only Rommel had faced the British since 1940 or the Americans since 1918. Only he had experienced Anglo-American air power firsthand, when it devastated his Panzer Army Afrika at Alam Halfa Ridge and El Alamein and later when it smashed Army Group Afrika in Tunisia. Only he understood that the magnitude of Anglo-American air superiority would not influence the success of the invasion—it would decide it in favor of the Allies—unless the German Army could mount a major armored thrust within 48 hours of the initial landings and hurl the invading force back into the sea. To accomplish this task, it would be necessary to position all 10 of OB West's mobile divisions very near the coast. This strategy, however, was in diametric opposition to Rundstedt's, which called for concentrating the panzer divisions in the interior of France—well out of the range of the big guns of the Royal and U.S. navies. Typically, Rundstedt remained aloof of the debate and did not involve himself personally; his point of view was represented by Baron Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg.

Hitler should have chosen between Rommel's coastal defense theory

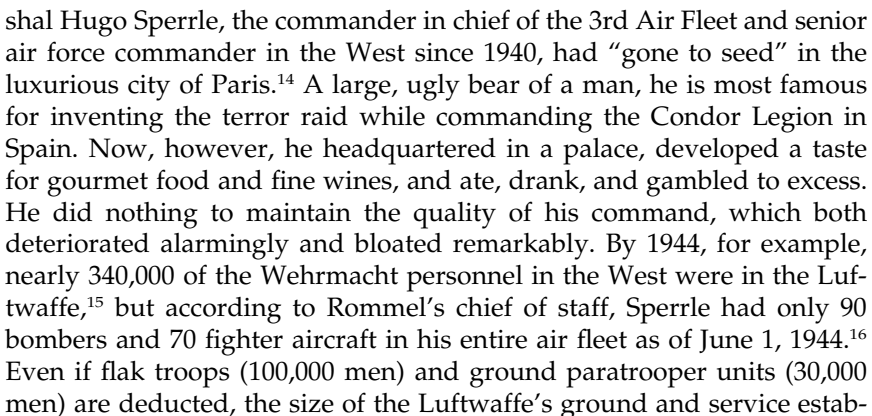
and Geyr's armored counterattack theory; instead, he compromised between them. He gave Army Group B three panzer divisions: the 2nd, 21st, and 116th; three others (the 9th, 11th, and 2nd SS) were assigned to the soon-to-be activated Army Group G, which was responsible for the defense of southern France. This left Geyr's Panzer Group West with only 4 mobile divisions—the 1st SS Panzer, the 12th SS Panzer, the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier, and Panzer Lehr—instead of its original 10. Even these could not be employed without OKW's permission. Rundstedt now had no armor under his personal command. The compromise satisfied no one. Rommel still did not have the strength to execute his plans for an immediate counterattack, whereas von Geyr and Rundstedt no longer had the armor necessary to fight their kind of battle in the interior of France. In short, by compromising, Hitler made both defensive theories impossible. Figure 1.2 shows the dispositions of OB West just before D-Day.

While the army generals reorganized, improved the coastal defenses, and debated strategies, the Allied air forces swept the Luftwaffe from the skies of France.

In February 1944, the 8th U.S. Air Force under Lieutenant General James H. Doolittle began a program of bombing deliberately aimed at provoking aerial battles with the Luftwaffe. Although the German fighters, led by Lieutenant General Adolf Galland, put up quite a struggle, they were unable to overcome the swarms of U.S. Army Air Force (USAAF) and Royal Air Force (RAF) Spitfires, Hurricanes, Mustangs, Lightnings, and Mosquitoes that protected the bomber streams. Even when they were able to break through the fighter screens, the bombers themselves fairly bristled with guns. Although the Allies suffered heavier losses, they could afford them; the Luftwaffe—whose training establishment had already virtually collapsed—was already facing a shortage of experienced fighter pilots. Due to the demands of the various fronts, demand for fighter pilots exceeded supply as early as 1939. To meet this demand quickly, the pilot training program of the Luftwaffe had been steadily reduced from 260 hours of flight time per student in 1940 to as little as 50 in 1944, and even then it could not keep up with losses. The new, green German pilots were no match for the superbly trained British and American aviators. Many of the German pilots could not even land properly. In May 1944, for example, the Luftwaffe lost 712 aircraft to hostile action and 656 in flying accidents.<sup>13</sup> The burden of the battle fell more and more on the veteran aviators, whose numbers were steadily reduced. As a result, by June, the Luftwaffe had been decisively defeated, and Allied bombers were flying over Berlin in broad daylight, unchallenged except by anti-aircraft guns.

In the West, the situation was even worse. Here Luftwaffe Field Mar-

**Figure 1.2**  
**Dispositions, OB West, June 5, 1944**



ishments versus the number of airplanes they could put into the air is still enormous.<sup>17</sup>

Hitler, Hermann Goering, and their staffs played right into the Allies' hands by dissipating their remaining air power on strategically senseless terror raids against civilian targets in England. Despite Rommel's pleas that the bombers concentrate against Allied embarkation ports (especially Portsmouth and Southampton), the attacks attempted to answer terror with terror and focused on the heavily defended city of London. When this so-called "Baby Blitz" began on January 21, 1944, Attack Command England had 462 operational aircraft. By the end of May, only 107 remained. Conditions deteriorated to the point that the Luftwaffe had to abandon its airfields near the coast and retreat to the interior of France.<sup>18</sup>

U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied commander, finally gained control over the Allied strategic air forces in April 1944 and used them with devastating effect against two main targets: the French rail system and the French highway system. Against Rommel's wishes, but with the full backing of Hermann Goering, General of Flak Artillery Wolfgang Pickert, the commander of the III Flak Corps, had scattered his command all over the map.<sup>19</sup> It thus had a presence everywhere but no real strength anywhere. Both III Flak and 3rd Air Fleet were totally unable to protect the rail network, as hundreds of Allied bombers, fighters, and fighter-bombers shot up hundreds of locomotives and blew up bridges faster than the Germans could repair them. (Rommel wanted the flak corps concentrated in Normandy, which he suspected might be the target of the invasion.) By the middle of May, every bridge on the Seine below Paris and every bridge on the Loire below Orleans had been knocked out; by the end of April, 600 army supply trains were backlogged in France alone. Repairs simply could not keep up with the destruction. Before the aerial onslaught began, the German transportation staff was running more than 100 supply trains per day in France. By the end of May, only 20 trains per day were operating in the country, and traffic over the Seine, Oise, and Meuse rivers was at a complete standstill. By June 6, the French National Railway was operating at only 10% of its normal capacity.<sup>20</sup>

Although not hit as hard as the railroads, the French road system was by no means neglected by the Allied airmen. Normandy and the approach routes to it were subjects of particular attention from the Allied bombers and fighter-bombers, and the region had, for all practical purposes, become a strategic island. German reinforcements to the invasion sector would have to get there via overland march using a badly damaged road system, adding days to their travel time when hours counted. When Hitler finally released the 1st SS Panzer Division from OKW reserve and ordered it to Normandy, for example, it took the division



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seven days to cover the 186 miles (300 kilometers) from Louvain, Belgium, to Paris. This trip normally took only one day by train—and the 1st SS was still 90 miles from the combat zone.<sup>21</sup> From here, it had to proceed by road and was exposed to repeated attacks by fighter-bomber squadrons reserved specifically for that purpose.

When evaluating the German Wehrmacht in the Battle of Normandy and the French campaign of 1944, perhaps the factor that should be considered more serious than any other in the outcome of the battle is the deterioration in quality of the German Army and Luftwaffe vis-à-vis their opponents. Five years of war had definitely taken their toll, and the quality of the German Army facing Eisenhower's invasion in 1944 was far below that which had so triumphantly overrun France in six glorious weeks in 1940. True, their panzers were better in 1944 than they had been in 1939, but the secret of the blitzkrieg had never been in its equipment. In 1940, for example, most of the German panzers were inferior to those employed by their French and British counterparts, which they crushed so thoroughly and destroyed so utterly. (Not a single French armored unit escaped; virtually every British tank was destroyed or had to be abandoned at Dunkirk.) The secret to the blitzkrieg lay in the ranks; it was found in the hearts and minds of the men who executed it. Now most of these men were crippled or dead or were rotting away in a prisoner-of-war camp. The days of the quick, decisive campaign were over; now it was a war of attrition. And Germany was near the end of its manpower reserves. By the spring of 1944, the Fatherland had suffered more than 2.5 million casualties. In the West, it faced a serious shortage of first-rate combat troops. Of the 4.27 million men in the German Army in December 1943, more than 1.5 million were over 34 years of age. Many below 34 were very young (17–19), were victims of third-degree frostbite, were ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche), or were "Eastern Troops" (Osttruppen)—non-Germans recruited from occupied countries. The average age in the whole army was 31.5 years, or more than 6 years older than the average for the American army in 1943. In the LXXXIV Corps, which defended Normandy, 8 of 42 rifle battalions were made up of Osttruppen,<sup>22</sup> who were mainly recruited out of prisoner-of-war camps. Many of them chose to serve in the Nazi army as an alternative to starving to death. Their loyalty to the Third Reich was dubious at best.

By 1944, the Eastern Front was taxing Hitler's empire to the breaking point. In 1943, German losses in Russia reached 2.086 million, of which 677,000 were permanent (killed, missing, permanently incapacitated, or captured), and this figure excludes losses in any other sector, including North Africa, where two armies had been lost. Of the 151 German divisions fighting on the Russian Front, 10 panzer and 50 infantry divisions

**Table 1.4**  
**Dispositions of German Divisions by Theater, June 1, 1944**

Theater	Army	Luftwaffe Field	SS	Total
East	149	—	8	157
Finland	6	—	1	7
Norway-Denmark	15	—	—	15
Western	47	3	4	54
Italy	23	3	1	27
Balkans	8	—	7	15
Total	248	6	21	275

Source: Albert Seaton, *The Russo-German War, 1941–45* (New York: 1971), p. 458.

were classified as “fought out.” The abbreviation “KG” now appeared with alarming frequency on the German Order of Battle charts. It stood for *Kampfgruppe* (“battle group”)—a division that had been reduced by casualties to the value of a regimental-sized battle group. And still the Russians kept on coming. To meet this threat, Hitler called on units stationed in the West. By October 1943, he had transferred 36 infantry and 17 mobile (panzer and panzer grenadier) divisions from OB West to other fronts. A few of these were sent to Italy, but almost all of them ended up in the East. Despite these reinforcements, the situation in Russia remained critical. In the spring of 1944, the Red Army still fielded more than 5 million troops in 300 divisions, despite horrendous casualties. Germany had only 2 million men in 157 divisions.<sup>23</sup> Table 1.4 shows the dispositions of Germany’s divisions by theater as of June 1, 1944, and clearly shows the manpower drain caused by the Eastern Front.

Many of the divisions in Rundstedt’s command were units previously mauled in the East. Many of them (though by no means all) had six understrength infantry battalions, instead of the nine full-strength infantry battalions that was standard for a German infantry division in 1939. In fact, the standard German infantry division at full establishment in 1939 had 17,200 men. This establishment had been reduced to 13,656 by 1943, and a full-strength 1944-type division had only 12,769 men, but very few of the 1944-type divisions were at 100% strength.

The material requirements of the Eastern Front also put a catastrophic strain on the German war effort. First priority of equipment was to the East until January 1944, because tank losses there were tremendous. Between October and December 1943, 979 Panzer Mark IIIs and IVs were lost, along with 444 assault guns (see Appendix III for a description of the various Allied and German tanks.) In the last six months of 1943,

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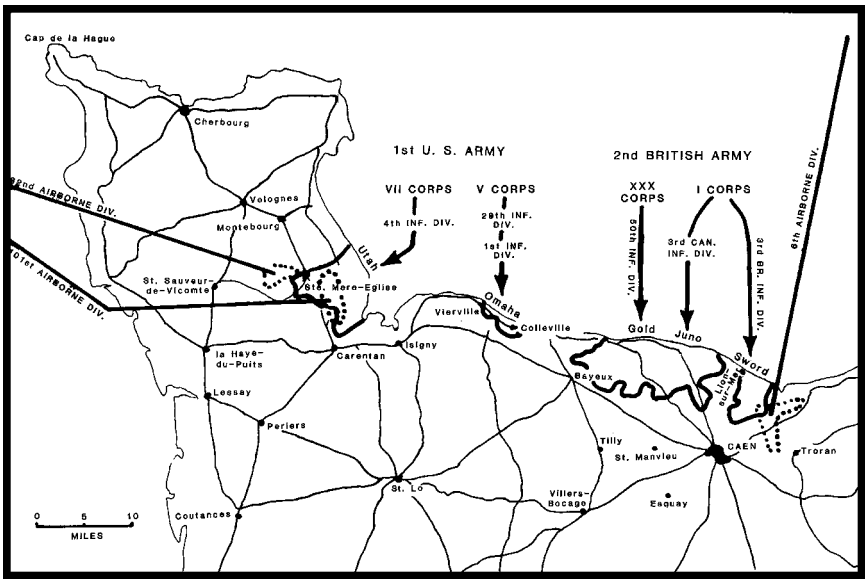
Germany lost 2,235 field guns and 1,692 antitank guns on the Russian Front alone. By February 1944, however, the threat in the West became real enough for Hitler to order an increase in tank delivery to OB West. Although the bulk of new Panzer Mark VI (PzKw VI or “Tiger”) tanks still went east, PzKw V “Panther” (PzKw V) output was mostly sent to France. By the end of April, OB West had 1,608 German-made tanks and assault guns, of which 674 were PzKw IVs and 514 were Panthers.<sup>24</sup> This still fell far short of the great concentrations that occurred in the Soviet Union. During the Battle of Kursk in July 1943, for example, Hitler’s legions lost almost 2,000 tanks. On June 1, 1944, at approximately its peak strength, OB West could muster only 1,552 tanks.<sup>25</sup>

The Wehrmacht was not only short of tanks in 1944—it was short of practically everything else as well. Rundstedt’s regiments were forced to improvise as a result and were equipped with the most astonishing collection of obsolete, foreign, and captured equipment one could imagine. One division’s artillery regiment had so many different kinds of obsolete and foreign guns that it called itself “the travelling artillery museum of Europe.” The 7th Army alone had 92 different kinds of artillery pieces, which used 252 types of ammunition, of which 47 were no longer manufactured.<sup>26</sup> Rundstedt’s trucks were of German, French, Italian, Russian, or Czech manufacture, whereas many of his “mobile” regiments were equipped with bicycles. The 243rd Infantry Division was a real hybrid: It included one motorized regiment, one bicycle regiment, and one “marching” infantry regiment. Like virtually all of the German infantry divisions, its artillery and supply trains were horse-drawn. In most infantry divisions, only the ambulance company was fully motorized.

The Allies landed on the Cotentin peninsula on the coast of Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944 (Figure 1.3). Under the overall command of General Eisenhower’s Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), their ground forces on D-Day were commanded by the British 21st Army Group (General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery), which controlled the British 2nd Army (Lieutenant General Sir Miles Dempsey), and the U.S. 1st Army (Lieutenant General Omar Bradley). They achieved surprise at three levels. They landed at Normandy, when most German generals expected them to land at Pas de Calais, in the zone of the 15th Army; they came at low tide, not at high tide, as expected by Rommel (leaving many of the offshore obstacles high and dry but exposing their assault elements to German machine guns for a longer period as they ran across open beach); and they came in near-gale force conditions, instead of in calm weather, as everyone predicted.

At the higher levels, German reaction was slow and poor. Of the senior German leaders who played a prominent part in the battle that day, only

Figure 1.3  
D-Day: The Allied Assault



General of Artillery Erich Marcks stands out as the one man who grasped the situation quickly, issued the correct orders, and consistently did the right thing.<sup>27</sup> Rommel had made perhaps the worst mistake of his military career the day before when, after consulting the meteorological reports, he concluded that the weather would be too poor for an invasion and left for Germany. He planned to spend a day at home near Ulm (June 6 was his wife's birthday) and then go on to Berchtesgaden, to try to persuade Hitler to give him more divisions. Rommel's chief of staff, Lieutenant General Hans Speidel, now de facto army group commander, concluded that the predawn parachute drops were a diversion and went back to bed. (Some of them were; some, obviously, were not.) He did not telephone Rommel at home until around 10:15 A.M.—eight hours after the invasion began. At 7 A.M., Jodl had concluded that the invasion was a diversionary attack and rejected Rundstedt's request to move the 12th SS Panzer Division behind the invasion beaches. He also turned down OB West's request to alert the Panzer Lehr Division. Rundstedt refused to appeal directly to Hitler (which, as a field marshal, he had the right to do) because he would not deal with the man he habitually referred to as "that Bohemian corporal." He spent the day at his headquarters, fuming. Jodl did not allow anyone to wake Hitler until 10 A.M. Even then it would be five hours before the Fuehrer released the

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12th SS and Panzer Lehr Divisions. When they finally were released, Colonel General Friedrich Dollmann, the commander of the German 7th Army, ordered Panzer Lehr to head for the beaches—in broad daylight.<sup>28</sup> As a result, this elite division lost 80 AFVs (armored fighting vehicles—tanks, armored cars, armored personnel carriers, etc.) to Allied fighter-bombers on its approach march and was crippled before it even reached the invasion beaches.

Meanwhile, 3,467 Allied heavy bombers and 1,645 medium bombers, protected and assisted by 5,409 fighters and fighter-bombers, dropped 11,912 tons of bombs. Within a few hours, they dropped more bombs on Normandy than they had on Hamburg the year before—and Hamburg was the most heavily bombed city in 1943.<sup>29</sup> Then, at 5:30 A.M., the Allied fleets attacked the surviving German batteries with a devastating bombardment from six battleships, 23 cruisers, and 104 destroyers. Shortly thereafter, the actual landings began. Eisenhower came with 7,000 ships and more than 190,000 men. By the end of the day, the U.S. 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, the British 6th Airborne Division, the U.S. 1st, 4th, and 29th Infantry Divisions, the British 3rd and 50th Infantry Divisions, and the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division had landed on five separate beaches. An impressive assortment of armored, armored artillery, combat engineer, and Ranger battalions had landed as well.

Because Hitler had rejected Rommel's pleas to position the panzer divisions near the coast, only 1 was available, and it was the worst: the 21st Panzer Division. Although its human material was excellent, one of its two tank battalions was equipped with 80 obsolete Czech tanks that were too light for modern warfare and had not been manufactured since 1941. Its other tank battalion had 40 PzKw IVs, but they were also obsolete and were fitted with short-barreled guns. (Both battalions were controlled by the 100th Panzer Regiment, which had four additional panzers in its staff company.) The division's two panzer grenadier regiments (the 125th and 192nd) were also equipped with inferior and obsolete equipment.

The 21st Panzer also had the poorest divisional commander in France. Major General Edgar Feuchtinger had commanded the 227th Artillery Regiment—a horse-drawn unit!—on the northern (Leningrad) sector of the Eastern Front for 14 months. Apparently wounded in action in August 1942, he was without an assignment until May 15, 1943, when he assumed command of the 21st. He was totally unqualified for this position and owed it solely to his Nazi Party contacts—he had been deeply involved in organizing the Nuremberg Rallies for the NSDAP prior to the war. When reports arrived that the invasion might have begun, he could not be found. He was in Paris with his Ia (operations officer—see Appendix II for German staff abbreviations), taking a spot of unauthorized leave in a sleazy Parisian night club. Based upon his subsequent

performance, it would have been better for the German Army had his staff left him in the bar.<sup>30</sup> He did not feel he could move his unit without the permission of OKW, and he adamantly refused to do so, despite pleas, curses, orders and threats from Lieutenant General Wilhelm Richter, whose 716th Infantry Division was being slaughtered on the beaches.<sup>31</sup> When Feuchtinger finally did decide to attack, around 6:30 A.M., he decided to move against the British 6th Airborne Division—*away* from the invasion beaches. It was 2:30 P.M. before General Marcks could get the division under his control and get its 100th Panzer and 192nd Panzer Grenadier Regiments in position to attack the British. The 100th Panzer lost 50 of its 124 tanks to fighter-bombers on the approach march. Then it lost 16 more tanks to British guns before it could even get within range of the enemy positions. Its regimental commander, Hermann von Oppeln-Bronikowski, wisely called off the attack after 15 minutes.<sup>32</sup> The depressed colonel watched despondently as the German troops fell back toward Caen, alone or in small groups. One of them was Wilhelm Richter, the commander of the 716th Infantry Division, who “was almost demented with grief,” von Oppeln recalled. “My troops are lost,” Richter said as tears flowed from his eyes. “My whole division is finished!”<sup>33</sup> This was nothing but the truth. His Osttruppen had surrendered immediately after the Allies landed—as soon as they had a chance, in fact—but his German soldiers had resisted gallantly and in some cases to the last man. Montgomery had planned to capture Caen (a city of 42,000) on D-Day and be 30 miles inland by nightfall. Due to the efforts of the 716th and its sister unit, Lieutenant General Dietrich Kraiss’s 352nd Infantry Division, he did not even cover the 10 miles to Caen. In fact, Colonel Ernst Goth’s 916th Grenadier Regiment of the 352nd almost defeated the American landings on Omaha Beach and inflicted more than 3,000 casualties on the U.S. 1st Infantry Division during the initial assault wave—1 casualty for every six feet of beach. The U.S. Rangers, who attacked Pointe du Hoc on the right flank of Omaha Beach, suffered more than 50% casualties, whereas the U.S. 111th Field Artillery Battalion lost all but one of its howitzers and the U.S. 58th Armored Field Artillery Battalion lost all of its amphibious tanks and most of its men. The U.S. 29th Infantry Division also suffered serious losses on Omaha Beach.

Despite locally heavy losses, however, the invasion was an unqualified Allied success. They were firmly lodged on four of their five invasion beaches by nightfall and had beaten back the only panzer division in a position to threaten their landings. By day’s end, the Anglo-Americans had lost more than 10,000 men but had put 156,000 men ashore and had pushed their way inland an average depth of 4 to 6 miles along a 24-mile front. They had scattered the German 716th Infantry Division (which had lost more than 6,000 men) and had severely damaged the 352nd Infantry and 21st Panzer. The assault landings were now over.

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Now the second phase of the Normandy campaign—the battle of the hedgerows—was about to begin.

The hedgerows of Normandy were nothing like the harmless, decorative bush the average American today associates with the term *hedge*. If you go there today, you will see that few of them remain. In 1944 they were everywhere. They were mounds of earth and stone several feet thick and four to eight feet tall, overgrown with bushes, thornbush, tangled vegetation, and small trees, with a drainage ditch on either side. Used to separate fields, they offered the Germans one excellent defensive position after another. A single machine gun hidden in the hedge could mow down many advancing soldiers, and snipers could be (and were) posted everywhere. Defenders, properly dug in at the base of a hedgerow, were impervious to any kind of artillery or mortar fire except a direct hit. The Norman fields were so small that for the Germans to abandon one hedgerow and to retreat to another involved the loss of very little land indeed. (There were an average of 500 small fields per square mile in Normandy, and the hedgerow country was 60 miles long and 25 miles wide.)<sup>34</sup> The Norman roads also aided the defense. They were usually old trails, worn down over centuries. Overlooked by the hedges, they were death traps for tanks. The alternative for a Sherman—climbing over a hedge—was worse. As it climbed, its main battle gun and machine guns pointed toward the sky, and it exposed its very thin underbelly (its weakest point) to the Germans, many of whom were equipped with *Panzerfausten*: shoulder-fired antitank weapons that allowed them to get very close to Allied armor. It short, Normandy offered Hitler's legions some of the best defensive terrain in Europe. It was therefore imperative for the Allies to quickly break out of hedgerow country (called *bocage* by the French), or the Germans might be able to stalemate them.

That is exactly what happened. Hurriedly, Rommel brought up Panzer Group West to deliver his counterattack with the Panzer Lehr Division on the left, 12th SS Panzer in the center, and what was left of 21st Panzer on the right. With equal haste, the British disembarked their 7th Armoured Division and a number of independent British and Canadian armored brigades. When Panzer Group West finally launched its counterattack on June 9, it was at least two days too late. The fighting itself was inconclusive, but with the Allies growing stronger every hour, it was clear that the invasion had succeeded. By June 12, the Allies had 15 divisions ashore and 5 more landed from June 13 to 19 (including the U.S. 2nd Armored and the British 11th Armoured), along with several separate armored brigades and dozens of battalions of artillery, engineers, and tanks. Rommel initially left Panzer Group West, along with the bulk of his armor, to cover his right flank in front of Caen against