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Royal Air Superiority: The Royal Air Force and Operation Overlord

Of the beaches that were landed on and the air forces deployed on June 6th, 1944, Omaha beach and the contributions made by the United States Army Air Force are among some of the most well-documented parts of the not just Operation Overlord, but of the entirety of the Second World War, especially within Western media. Scenes of the landing are iconic within the memory of American audiences, but an often-overlooked front are the massive amounts of aerial operations ran by the British Royal Air Force in preparations for the landings and during the landings themselves. In fact, almost half of all of the aircraft that were involved during the Normandy landings (Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund)were operated by the Royal Airforce, as well as numerous personnel and vehicles during the landings themselves. As a combined effort to seize control of Normandy and gain a spearhead into France against Nazi Germany, the efforts that the Royal Air Force put in for their missions in reconnaissance, tactical bombing, meteorological information gathering, and patrolling the English Channel helped make sure that, beyond just D-Day, Operation Overlord would become a massive success for Allied forces during the war. To remember these efforts, looking over the logistics and heroic efforts made by the Royal Air Force during the prelude to D-Day is critical.

Before the operation began, there were several key things that had to occur first, such as the fact that targets had to be initially identified and scouted by specialized reconnaissance aircraft. Even by the end of the war, the role of reconnaissance was still one that was predominantly made by the Royal Air Force, and even the United States Army Air Force used the RAF’s reconnaissance aircraft that took the form of the de Havilland Mosquito and the Supermarine Spitfire – of which, the Mosquito was particularly loved by its pilots for its speed and its second occupant, who could focus on operating the camera in the pilot’s (Bowman). The intelligence gathered via RAF reconnaissance aircraft, prized for their speed, were crucial in the strategic planning of tactical targets that could be hit by Allied close air support and heavy bombers.

The preemptive heavy bombing of industrial, rail, and fortified German target was also extremely vital to the success of Operation Overlord. For the months leading up to the ground invasion, ground-attack aircraft were attacking airfields, supply convoys, and radar stations, denying the ability to move supplies and accurately defend against further aerial attacks – further aerial attacks that would progress massively during D-Day proper. On D-Day itself, according to the Museum of the Royal Air Force, “Bomber Command had sent over a thousand heavy bombers to pound beach defences in Normandy with over 5,000 tons of bombs. Other bombers flew on diversionary operations, parts of an elaborate deception scheme to confuse the Germans. In an incredible display of flying skills, 218 and the famous 617 Squadrons slowly flew back and forth low over the Channel, dropping strips of metal called ‘window’ which showed up on German radar screens as masses of ships” (Royal Air Force Museum). The RAF’s heavy bombers, deployed on that day, made up a massive effort to distract and destroy, and in this role, they achieved monumental success.

It’s of course easy to note that, for the duration of Operation Overlord, most of the airfields that would be used in the initial days of the operation would be those established and made by the RAF in England for usage throughout the entirety of the war, and these airfields would be the staging ground for things such as the massive paratrooper movement that preceded the mass naval landing. Without bases close by, the opening days of the Normandy landings would have struggled immensely without the aerial supremacy and close air support that these nearby airfields would allow for. As well, in order to increase the range of both RAF and USAAF aircraft, RAF personnel had landed on the Normandy beaches as well to construct airfields on the French mainland to use.

All of these efforts to distract and destroy German reinforcements, however, would have been completely useless had the invasion not been able to go off as planned – which there was a very real chance of happening due to the rough nature of the Atlantic’s weather. With the wrong weather, the invasion would have easily fallen apart; it was an RAF squadron of bombers, stripped of their equipment, that were used to be able to predict the weather and see the weather brewing over the Atlantic. This role was a dangerous one, as it meant quite literally flying through storms – often at night, even – on long missions and reporting back so that the weather could be analyzed (Ross). These reports were necessary for making sure that the weather would allow for such a massive, combined arms assault, at tremendous risk to the pilots who flew them – on par with the dangers posed with the daylight raids ran by heavy bomber crews that were bombing Germany. The RAF’s squadron responsible, the 518, were responsible for delaying the invasion by a day, and that day proved critical to assuring that the landing craft would be able to get the assistance they needed from other Allied forces to survive and take their various beaches (Buttle).

If those landing craft and the ships carrying them could not be safe in the English Channel, however, as even late in the European theater, German U-boats were still a credible threat to Allied shipping, and even the terrain of the English Channel, without adequate protection, would not render ships there safe. In order to make sure that the landing ships, battleships, and other various surface vessels that would be operating off of the coast of Normandy during D-Day would be protected from the German U-boat threat, the RAF was predominantly in charge of the fleets of aircraft – more than fifty squadrons in total – that were part of the RAF Coast Command that sought to search and destroy any of the U-boats that they would find and detect within the English Channel (Royal Air Force Museum). In this task, they were so successful that their accomplishment was practically overlooked – none of the forty-nine U-boats that were deployed to the English Channel were able to sink any of the Allied vessels, and the patrol aircraft had managed to sink six and severely damage another six.

The monumental contribution of the RAF during Operation Overlord is not to be trivialized in the slightest. In much of American media, the contribution played by the Royal Air Force is often underrecognized and underappreciated within our media, as were the successes of British troops on their own respective beaches of Normandy. These contributions, however, were critical to the success of not just the opening days of D-Day, but the entirety of Operation Overlord and assisted in the success of the invasion of mainland Europe in the closing hours of the Second World War. The success of the Royal Air Force in ensuring that the Normandy landing could go off cannot be understated in the slightest.

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