



Caen Controversy: The Battle for Sword Beach 1944 by Andrew Stewart.

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In *Caen Controversy*, military historian Andrew Stewart (King's College London) follows the British Third Infantry Division and the Sixth Airborne Division "as these troops fought throughout the day and into the evening of 6 June 1944 to secure their objectives" (vii). He concentrates on the events at Sword Sector during that first day of the Normandy landings.

Chapters 1-3 concern the year-long military planning for Operation Overlord. The goal of the Allied commanders was to "identify where the landings would take place" and to successfully "concentrate in a specific area" (14, 15). Caen, France, was to be one such site, because it was considered a vital logistical hub of important road and railway networks.

Stewart focuses on the preparation of British forces under the leadership of Gen. Sir Miles Dempsey: "Every month from January to March 1944 all of the NEPTUNE assault divisions had taken part in two large-scale exercises" (26). These included studying photographs showing the topography and terrain of the area and learning about its civilian populations. Stewart asserts that "It can be safely said that no army had ever before had such a wealth of information made available to help it fight" (32). The Allies were well prepared to make the seventeen-hour voyage across the English Channel and to land on the Normandy beaches in summer 1944.

Stewart also discusses the German planning to repel the invasion, which "was based entirely on the Atlantic Wall absorbing the initial shock and containing any assault on or near the beachhead for a sufficient period of time to enable armoured reserves to move up and push the invaders back" (37) into the English Channel before they could set up antitank defenses. There were differences of opinion among both the German and the Allied intelligence officers. Stewart highlights the efforts of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel to strengthen the coastal defenses.

Chapter 4 turns to the considerations that underlay the selection of a specific day to start the assault. Favorable tides and weather were essential, but the "the calculated odds were just under 100-1 against the right conditions being met" (47). Generals on both sides met with meteorologists to determine if and when an invasion might take place. They ultimately decided that the invasion force of 285 warships, 4100 landing craft, and 1600 supply vessels would set out on the sixth of June. The Germans, Stewart writes, miscalculated both the timing and magnitude of the invasion. Rommel had left the area for Bavaria, assuming the assault would be small and ineffective. When the true proportions of the D-Day invasion became clear, he returned immediately to the warfront.

Chapters 5-7 describe the three-hour airborne assault before the main beach landings and the events of H-Hour when the invasion forces landed on the beaches and the infantry assault began. Stewart notes that the extreme west and east "flanks of the invasion force needed to be secured if OVERLORD was to have any hope of achieving success" (59). Overall, the air plan worked despite less than ideal weather conditions. But "Whilst it was later confirmed that the strongpoints on the beaches and inland had waited until the first waves of craft had touched down before responding, the weight of fire put down on them was huge" (74). In addition, the congestion on the beach made it hard to locate gaps through which to advance, and long delays ensued.

Chapters 8–11 elaborate on the breakthroughs on the beach, with close attention to the intricacies of planning and disagreements among generals. The author credits the leadership with a shrewd deployment of the Staffordshire Yeomanry regiment “as part of the follow-up force landing directly behind the assault armour of the 13/18 Hussars on the most easterly beach where they would act as the left flank of the whole operation” (116). He also identifies problems of contingency planning in carrying out a rapid landing on a small beach. Nonetheless, casualties on Sword Beach were “costly but not catastrophic” (143).

The book concludes with an assessment of the “Caen controversy.” Although the Allies gained solid lodgments on the Normandy coast on D-Day, they did not capture Caen and would not do so for some time. Many blame the excessive caution of Maj. Gen. Thomas G. Rennie, commanding officer of the Third Infantry Division, and Brig. K.P. Smith, commanding officer of the 185th Infantry Brigade, during the drive inland after D-Day. But the author argues that the causes of the failure to take the city on schedule were multifaceted, as shown in the work of many biographers and historians. He persuasively contends that, though Caen was not officially taken as planned, the efforts of the involved units should not be underestimated.

A minor criticism: though the book is commendably both succinct yet sufficiently detailed, the absence of more thorough organizational charts makes it hard for readers to form a clear sense of the overall invasion. On the plus side, the book’s many black-and-white photographs convey strong visual impressions of the individuals and actions described in the text: for example, Adm. Sir Bertram Ramsay, the beaches of the Orne estuary, and the village of St. Aubin d’Arquenay being cleared by troops. The volume’s colorful maps, though a bit too small, are a significant enhancement.¹ There is also a useful bibliography of primary and secondary sources, as well as a short index.

Andrew Stewart is to be commended for shedding new light on a much studied controversy in military history and pointing the way for future discussions of the subject. Both specialists and general readers will profit from reading *Caen Controversy*.

1. Stewart notes that they “form part of the 1944 series specifically produced for the D-Day landings” (v).