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The Decision

Southwick House is a large Regency building with a stucco façade and a colonnaded front. At the beginning of June 1944, five miles to the south, Portsmouth naval base and the anchorages beyond were crowded with craft of every size and type – grey warships, transport vessels and hundreds of landing craft, all tethered together. D-Day was scheduled for Monday, 5 June, and loading had already begun.

In peacetime, Southwick could have been the setting for an Agatha Christie house party, but the Royal Navy had taken it over in 1940. Its formerly handsome grounds and the wood behind were now blighted by rows of Nissen huts, tents and cinder paths. Southwick served as the headquarters of Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, the naval commander-in-chief for the invasion of Europe, and also as the advanced command post of SHAEF, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force. Anti-aircraft batteries on the Portsdown ridge were positioned to defend it as well as the dockyards below from the Luftwaffe.

Southern England had been enjoying a heatwave compounded by drought. Temperatures of up to 100 degrees Fahrenheit had been recorded on 29 May, yet the meteorological team attached to General Dwight D. Eisenhower's headquarters soon became uneasy. The group was headed by Dr James Stagg, a tall, lanky Scot with a rather gaunt face and a neat moustache. Stagg, the leading civilian weather expert in the country, had just been given the rank of group captain in the RAF to lend him the necessary authority in a military milieu unused to outsiders.

Since April, Eisenhower had been testing Stagg and his team by demanding three-day forecasts delivered on a Monday which were then checked against the reality later in the week. On Thursday, 1 June, the day before the battleships were due to sail from Scapa Flow off the north-west tip of Scotland, weather stations indicated some deep depressions forming over the North Atlantic. Rough seas in the English Channel could swamp the landing craft, to say nothing of their effect on the soldiers cramped on board. Low cloud and bad visibility presented another great threat, since the landings depended on the ability of the Allied air forces and navies to knock out German coastal batteries and defensive positions. General embarkation for the first wave of 130,000 troops was under way and due to be completed in two days' time.

Stagg was plagued by a lack of agreement among the different British and American meteorological departments. They all received the same reports from the weather stations but their analysis of the data simply did not match up. Unable to admit this, he had to tell Major General Harold R. Bull, Eisenhower's assistant chief of staff, that 'the situation is complex and difficult'.

'For heaven's sake, Stagg,' Bull exploded. 'Get it sorted out by tomorrow morning before you come to the Supreme Commander's conference. General Eisenhower is a very worried man.' Stagg returned to his Nissen hut to pore over the charts and consult the other departments yet again.

Eisenhower had other reasons for 'pre-D-Day jitters'. Although outwardly relaxed, with his famous open smile for everyone whatever their rank, he was smoking up to four packs of Camel cigarettes a day. He would light a cigarette, leave it smouldering in an ashtray, jump up, walk around and light another. His nerves were not helped by constant pots of coffee.

Postponing the invasion carried many risks. The 175,000 soldiers in the first two waves risked losing their fighting edge if cooped up in rough weather on their ships and landing craft. The battleships and convoys about to head down British coasts towards the Channel could not be turned round more than once without needing to refuel. And the chances of German reconnaissance aircraft sighting them would increase enormously.

Secrecy had always been the greatest concern. Much of the southern coast was covered with elongated military camps known as 'sausages', where the invasion troops were supposedly sealed off from contact with the outside world. A number of soldiers had, however, been slipping out under the barbed wire for a last drink at the pub or to see sweethearts and wives. The possibilities of leaks at all levels were innumerable. An American air force general had been sent home in disgrace after indicating the date of Operation Overlord at a cocktail party in Claridge's. Now a fear arose that the absence from Fleet Street of British journalists called forward to accompany the invasion force might be noticed.

Everyone in Britain knew that D-Day was imminent, and so did the Germans, but the enemy had to be prevented from knowing where and exactly when. Censorship had been imposed on the communications of foreign diplomats from 17 April, and movement in and out of the country strictly controlled. Fortunately, the British security service had captured all German agents in Britain. Most of them had been 'turned' to send back misleading information to their controllers. This 'Double Cross' system, supervised by the XX Committee, was designed to produce a great deal of confusing 'noise' as a key part of Plan Fortitude. Fortitude was the most ambitious deception in the history of warfare, a project even greater than the *maskirovka* then being prepared by the Red Army to conceal the true target of Operation Bagration, Stalin's summer offensive to encircle and smash the Wehrmacht's Army Group Centre in Belorussia.

Plan Fortitude had several aspects. Fortitude North, with fake formations in Scotland based on a 'Fourth British Army', pretended to prepare an attack on Norway to keep German divisions there. Fortitude South, the main effort, set out to convince the Germans that any landings in Normandy were a large-scale diversion to draw German reserves away from the Pas-de-Calais. The real invasion was supposedly to come between Boulogne and the Somme estuary during the second half of July. A notional '1st US Army Group' under General George S. Patton Jr, the commander the Germans feared the most, boasted eleven divisions in south-east England. Dummy aircraft and inflatable tanks, together with 250 fake landing ships, all contributed to the illusion. Invented formations, such as a 2nd British Airborne Division,

had been created alongside some real ones. To increase the illusion, two fake corps headquarters also maintained a constant radio traffic.

One of the most important double agents to work for British intelligence on Fortitude South was a Catalan, Juan Pujol, who had the codename 'Garbo'. With his security service handler, he constructed a network of twenty-seven completely fabricated sub-agents and bombarded the German intelligence station in Madrid with information carefully prepared in London. Some 500 radio messages were sent in the months leading up to D-Day. These provided details which together gradually made up the mosaic which the Double Cross Committee was assembling to convince the Germans that the main attack was to come later in the Pas-de-Calais.

Subsidiary deceptions to prevent the Germans moving troops to Normandy from other parts of France were also dreamed up. Plan Ironside conveyed the impression that two weeks after the first landings a second invasion would be launched on the west coast of France directly from the United States and the Azores. To keep the Germans guessing, and to prevent them moving the 11th Panzer-Division near Bordeaux north into Normandy, a controlled agent in Britain, known as 'Bronx', sent a coded message to her German controller in the Banco Espirito Santo in Lisbon: '*Envoyez vite cinquante livres. J'ai besoin pour mon dentiste*.' This indicated 'that a landing would be made in the Bay of Biscay on about the 15th June'. The Luftwaffe, clearly fearful of a landing in Brittany, ordered the immediate destruction of four airfields close to the coast. Another diversion, Operation Copperhead, was mounted in late May when an actor resembling General Montgomery visited Gibraltar and Algiers to suggest an attack on the Mediterranean coast.

Bletchley Park, the highly secret complex about fifty miles north-west of London which decoded enemy signals, adopted a new watch system for Overlord from 22 May. Its experts were ready to decrypt anything important the moment it came in. Thanks to these 'Ultra' intercepts, they were also able to check on the success of Fortitude disinformation provided by the main 'Double Cross' agents, Pujol, Dusko Popov ('Tricycle') and Roman Garby-Czerniawski. On 22 April, Bletchley had decoded a German signal which identified the 'Fourth Army', with its headquarters near Edinburgh and two component corps at Stirling and

Dundee. Other messages showed that the Germans believed that the Lowland Division was being equipped for an attack on Norway.

Ultra decrypts revealed in May that the Germans had carried out an anti-invasion exercise, based on the assumption that the landings would take place between Ostend and Boulogne. Finally, on 2 June, Bletchley felt able to report: 'Latest evidence suggests enemy appreciates all Allied preparations completed. Expects initial landing Normandy or Brittany followed by main effort in Pas-de-Calais.' It looked as if the Germans really had swallowed Plan Fortitude.

Early on 2 June, Eisenhower moved into a trailer hidden in the park at Southwick under camouflage nets. He dubbed it 'my circus wagon', and when not in conference or visiting troops, he would try to relax by reading westerns on his bunk and smoking.

At 10.00 hours that Friday, in the library in Southwick House, Stagg gave Eisenhower and the other assembled commanders-in-chief the latest weather assessment. Because of the continuing disagreement among his colleagues, particularly the over-optimistic American meteorologists at SHAEF, he had to remain Delphic in his pronouncements. Stagg knew that by the evening conference he must produce a firm opinion on the deterioration of the weather over the weekend. The decision to proceed or to postpone had to be made very soon.

At the same meeting, Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, the air commander-in-chief, outlined the plan 'to establish a belt of bombed routes through towns and villages thereby preventing or impeding the movement of enemy formations'. He asked whether he was free to proceed 'in view of the civilian casualties which would result'. Eisenhower announced his approval 'as an operational necessity'. It was decided to drop leaflets to the French to warn them.

The fate of French civilians was just one of many worries. As supreme commander, Eisenhower had to balance political and personal rivalries, while maintaining his authority within the alliance. He was well liked by Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and by General Sir Bernard Montgomery, the commander-in-chief of 21st Army Group, but neither rated him highly as a soldier. 'There is no doubt that Ike is out to do all he can to maintain the best

of relations between British and Americans,' Brooke wrote in his diary, 'but it is equally clear that he knows nothing about strategy and is *quite* unsuited to the post of Supreme Commander as far as running the war is concerned.' Monty's characteristically terse judgement on Eisenhower after the war was: 'Nice chap, no soldier'.

These opinions were certainly unfair. Eisenhower demonstrated good judgement on all the key decisions over the Normandy invasion and his diplomatic skills held a fractious coalition together. That alone represented a considerable feat. Brooke himself acknowledged that 'national spectacles pervert the perspective of the strategic landscape'. And nobody, not even General George S. Patton, was as difficult to deal with as Monty, who treated his supreme commander with scant respect. At their very first meeting he had ticked off Eisenhower for smoking in his presence. Eisenhower was too big a man to take such things badly, but many of his American subordinates felt he should have been tougher on the British.

General Montgomery, despite his considerable qualities as a highly professional soldier and first-class trainer of troops, suffered from a breathtaking conceit which almost certainly stemmed from some sort of inferiority complex. In February, referring to his famous beret, he had told King George VI's private secretary, 'My hat is worth three divisions. The men see it in the distance. They say, "There's Monty", and then they will fight anybody.' His self-regard was almost comical and the Americans were not alone in believing that his reputation had been inflated by an adoring British press. 'Monty,' observed Basil Liddell Hart, 'is perhaps much more popular with civilians than with soldiers.'

Montgomery had an extraordinary showman's knack which usually radiated confidence to his troops, but he did not always receive a rapturous response. In February, when he told the Durham Light Infantry that they were to be in the first wave of the invasion, a loud moan went up. They had only just returned from fighting in the Mediterranean and had received little home leave. They felt that other divisions which had never left the British Isles should take their place. 'The bloody Durhams again' was the reaction. 'It's always the bloody Durhams.' When Montgomery drove off, all ranks were supposed to rush to the road to cheer him on his way, but not a man

moved. This caused a good deal of angry embarrassment among senior officers.

Monty had been determined to have seasoned troops to stiffen the untried divisions, but this idea was greeted with a good deal of resentment by most of his desert veterans. They had been fighting for up to four years abroad and considered that it was now the turn of others, especially those divisions which had not yet been committed in any theatre. A number of former Eighth Army regiments had not been home for six years, and one or two had been away for even longer. Their resentment was strongly influenced by wives and girlfriends at home.

The US 1st Division, known as the 'Big Red One', also grumbled when picked yet again to lead the way in a beach assault, but its experience was badly needed. A major assessment report on 8 May had rated almost every other American formation allocated to the invasion as 'unsatisfactory'. American senior officers were stung into action and the last few weeks of intensive training were not wasted. Eisenhower was encouraged by the dramatic improvement, and privately grateful for the decision to postpone the invasion from early May to early June.

There were other tensions in the Allied command structure. Eisenhower's deputy supreme commander, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, loathed Montgomery, but he in turn was deeply disliked by Winston Churchill. General Omar Bradley, the commander of the First US Army, who came from poor Missouri farming stock, did not look very martial with his 'hayseed expression' and his government-issue spectacles. But Bradley was 'pragmatic, unruffled, apparently unambitious, somewhat dull, neither flamboyant nor ostentatious, and he never raised hackles'. He was also a shrewd commander, driven by the need to get the job done. He was outwardly respectful towards Montgomery, but could not have been less like him.

Bradley got on very well with Eisenhower, but he did not share his chief's tolerance towards that loose cannon, George Patton. In fact Bradley barely managed to conceal his intense distrust of that eccentric southern cavalryman. Patton, a God-fearing man famous for his profanity, enjoyed addressing his troops in provocative terms. 'Now I want you to remember,' he once told them, 'that no bastard ever won a war

by dying for his country. You win it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for *his* country.' There is no doubt that without Eisenhower's support at critical moments, Patton would never have had the chance to make his name in the coming campaign. Eisenhower's ability to keep such a disparate team together was an extraordinary achievement.

The most recent dispute produced entirely by D-Day jitters came from Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory. Leigh-Mallory, who 'made everyone angry' and even managed to rile Eisenhower, suddenly became convinced that the two US airborne divisions due to be dropped on the Cotentin peninsula faced a massacre. He repeatedly urged the cancellation of this vital element in the Overlord plan to protect the western flank. Eisenhower told Leigh-Mallory to put his concerns in writing. This he did, and after careful consideration Eisenhower rejected them with Montgomery's full support.

Eisenhower, despite his nervous state and the appalling responsibility heaped upon him, wisely adopted a philosophical attitude. He had been selected to make the final decisions, so make them he must and face the consequences. The biggest decision, as he knew only too well, was almost upon him. Quite literally, the fate of many thousands of his soldiers' lives rested upon it. Without telling even his closest aides, Eisenhower prepared a brief statement to be made in the event of failure: 'The landings in the Cherbourg–Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based on the best information available. The troops, the air and navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone.'

Although neither Eisenhower nor Bradley could admit it, the most difficult of the five landing beaches was going to be Omaha. This objective for the American 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions had been closely reconnoitred by a British team from COPP, the Combined Operations Beach Reconnaissance and Assault Pilotage Parties. In the second half of January, the midget submarine X-20 had been towed close to the Normandy coast by an armed trawler. General Bradley had requested that, having checked the beaches selected for the British and Canadian forces, COPP should also examine Omaha to make sure that it was firm enough for tanks. Captain Scott-Bowden, a sapper, and Sergeant Bruce Ogden-Smith of the Special Boat Section swam ashore,

each armed only with a commando knife and a Colt .45 automatic. They also carried an eighteen-inch earth auger and a bandolier with containers into which they put their samples. The sea was unusually flat and they only just escaped discovery by German sentries.

The day after his return, Scott-Bowden was summoned to London by a rear admiral. He arrived at Norfolk House in St James's Square just after lunch. There, in a long dining room, with maps covered by curtains along the walls, he found himself facing six admirals and five generals, including General Bradley. Bradley interrogated him carefully on the beach-bearing capacity. 'Sir, I hope you don't mind my saying it,' Scott-Bowden said to him just before leaving, 'but this beach is a very formidable proposition indeed and there are bound to be tremendous casualties.' Bradley put a hand on his shoulder and said, 'I know, my boy, I know.' Omaha was simply the only possible beach between the British sector on the left and Utah beach on the right.

As soon as the invasion troops moved off for embarkation, the civilian population rushed out to wave goodbye. 'When we left,' wrote a young American engineer who had been billeted on an English family, '[they] cried just as if they were our parents. It was quite a touching thing for us. It seemed like the general public seemed to know pretty much what was going on.'

Secrecy was, of course, impossible to maintain. 'As we passed through Southampton,' wrote a British trooper in an armoured regiment, 'the people gave us a wonderful welcome. Each time that we halted we were all plied with cups of tea and cakes, much to the consternation of the Military Police escorting the column, who had strict orders to prevent any contact between civilian and soldier.'

Most troops were moved in army trucks, but some British units marched, their hobnailed ammunition boots ringing in step on the road. Old people, watching from their front gardens often with tears in their eyes, could not help thinking of the previous generation marching off to the trenches in Flanders. The helmets were a similar shape, but the battledress was different. And soldiers no longer wore puttees. They had canvas gaiters instead, which matched the webbing equipment of belt, yoke, ammunition pouches and pack. Rifle and bayonet had also changed, but not enough to make a noticeable difference.

The troops had sensed that D-Day must be close when twenty-four-hour leave passes were offered. For the less enthusiastic soldier this provided a last chance to disappear or get drunk. There had been many cases of soldiers going absent in the pre-invasion period, but relatively few cases of outright desertion. Most had returned to duty to be 'with their mates' when the invasion was on. Pragmatic commanding officers did not want to lose men to a military prison. They left it up to the individual to redeem himself in battle.

Soldiers noticed that officers had suddenly become much more solicitous of their men. Film shows were laid on in the closed camps. A more generous ration of beer was available and dance music played from loudspeakers. The more cynical spotted that quartermasters had suddenly become generous, an ominous sign. The poet Keith Douglas, a twenty-four-year-old captain in the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, wrote to Edmund Blunden, that poet of the previous war, 'I've been fattened up for the slaughter and am simply waiting for it to start.' Douglas was one of a number of men who harboured a strong sense of imminent death and spoke to their closest friends about it. It is striking how many turned out to have been right, and yet perhaps such a belief somehow turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Douglas went to church parade on the last Sunday. He walked afterwards with the regimental padre, who recorded that Douglas was reconciled to his approaching death and not morbid about it. In the view of a fellow officer, he was fatalistic because he felt that he had used up his ration of luck in the desert war.

Almost everyone hated the waiting and longed for the worst to be over. 'All are tense and all are pretending to be casual,' commented an American infantryman. 'Bravado helps,' he added. Many thought of their girlfriends. Some had married them in haste to make sure that they would benefit from a pension if the worst happened. One American soldier bundled up all his pay and sent it to a jeweller so that his English fiancée could select a ring ready for their wedding on his return. It was a time of intense personal emotion. 'The women who have come to see their men off,' noted a journalist shortly before, 'nearly always walk to the very end of the platform to wave their elaborately smiling goodbyes as the train pulls out.'

A few men cracked under the strain. 'One night,' recorded a member

of the US 1st Infantry Division, 'one of the soldiers put on two bandoliers of ammunition and his hand grenades, grabbed a rifle, and took off. Nobody had seen him do this, but the moment they became aware, a search party was formed. The search party found him. He refused to give up, so he was killed. We never did know whether he just didn't want to die on the beach, or he was a spy. Whatever he did, it was dumb. He was a sure dead man versus a maybe.' Perhaps he had had a premonition of what lay ahead on Omaha.

While tanks and troops were still being loaded on to landing ships that Friday evening, Group Captain Stagg conferred again over secure landlines with the other meteorological centres. He had to give a firm report at the conference due to start at 21.30 hours, but there was still no agreement. 'Had it not been fraught with such potential tragedy, the whole business was ridiculous. In less than half an hour I was expected to present to General Eisenhower an "agreed" forecast for the next five days which covered the time of launching of the greatest military operation ever mounted: no two of the expert participants in the discussion could agree on the likely weather even for the next 24 hours.'

They argued round and round until time ran out. Stagg hurried to the library in the main house to present a report to all the key commanders for Overlord.

'Well, Stagg,' Eisenhower said. 'What have you got for us this time?'

Stagg felt compelled to follow his own instinct and overlook the more optimistic views of his American colleagues at Bushey Park: 'The whole situation from the British Isles to Newfoundland has been transformed in recent days and is now potentially full of menace.' As he went into detail, several of the senior officers glanced out of the window at the beautiful sunset in slight bewilderment.*

After questions about the weather for the airborne drops, Eisenhower probed further about the likely situation on 6 and 7 June. There was a significant pause, according to Tedder. 'If I answered that, Sir,' Stagg replied, 'I would be guessing, not behaving as your meteorological adviser.'

Stagg and his American counterpart, Colonel D. N. Yates, withdrew,

* It was still light because they were operating on double British summertime.

and soon General Bull came out to tell them that there would be no change of plan for the next twenty-four hours. As they returned to their tented sleeping quarters, the two men knew that the first ships had already left their anchorages. Stagg could not help thinking of the black joke made to him by Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Morgan, the initial chief planner of Overlord. 'Good luck, Stagg. May all your depressions be nice little ones, but remember we'll string you up from the nearest lamp post if you don't read the omens aright.'

Early the next morning, Saturday, 3 June, the news could hardly have been worse. The weather station at Blacksod Point in western Ireland had just reported a rapidly falling barometer and a force six wind. Stagg felt 'all but physically nauseated' by the weather charts and the way the teams still analysed the same data in different ways. That evening, at 21.30 hours, he and Yates were summoned. They entered the library, its shelves emptied of books. Mess armchairs were arranged in concentric arcs, with commanders-in-chief in the front row and their chiefs of staff and subordinate commanders behind. Eisenhower, his chief of staff, General Walter Bedell Smith, and Tedder sat on three chairs facing the audience.

'Gentlemen,' Stagg began. 'The fears my colleagues and I had yesterday about the weather for the next three or four days have been confirmed.' He then launched into a detailed forecast. It was a gloomy picture of rough seas, winds up to force six and low cloud. 'Throughout this recital,' Stagg wrote later, 'General Eisenhower sat motionless, with his head slightly to one side resting on his hand, staring steadily towards me. All in the room seemed to be temporarily stunned.' Not surprisingly, Eisenhower felt compelled to recommend a provisional postponement.

It was not a good night for Eisenhower. His aide, Commander Harry Butcher, came to him later with the news that Associated Press had put out a tape stating, 'Eisenhower's forces are landing in France.' Even though the agency cancelled the story twenty-three minutes later, it had been picked up by CBS and Radio Moscow. 'He sort of grunted,' Butcher noted in his diary.

When Stagg went off to his tent at about midnight, having heard of the provisional postponement, it was strange to look up between the trees and see that 'the sky was almost clear and everything around was

still and quiet'. Stagg did not attempt to sleep. He spent the early hours of the morning writing up detailed notes of all discussions. When he had finished the forecast was no better, even though outside all remained calm.

At 04.15 hours on the Sunday, 4 June, at yet another meeting, Eisenhower decided that the twenty-four-hour postponement provisionally agreed the night before must stand. Without maximum air support, the risks were too great. The order went out to call back the convoys. Destroyers set to sea at full speed to round up landing craft which could not be contacted by radio and shepherd them back.

Stagg, who had then gone back to his camp bed exhausted, was taken aback when he awoke a few hours later to find that the sky was still clear and there seemed to be little wind. He could not face the other officers at breakfast. But later in the day he felt a certain shamefaced relief when the cloud and wind began to increase from the west.

That Sunday was a day of endless questions. Surely the tens of thousands of men could not be kept cooped up on their landing craft? And what of all the ships which had put to sea and had now been ordered back? They would need to refuel. And if the bad weather were to continue, then the tides would be wrong. In fact, if conditions did not improve within forty-eight hours, Overlord would have to be postponed for two weeks. Secrecy would be hard to maintain and the effect on morale could be devastating.