

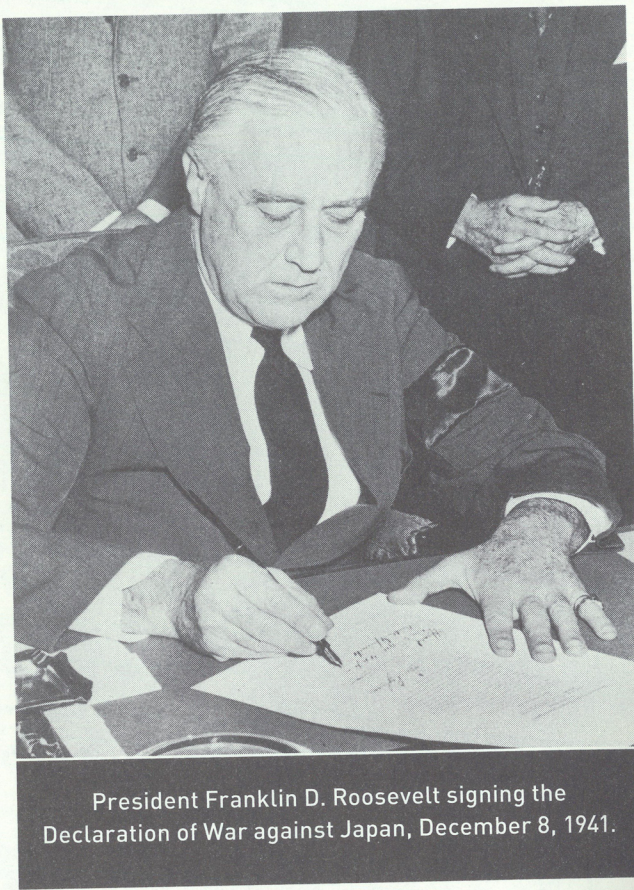


## **OPERATION OVERLORD**

**W**hat had to happen for thousands of young paratroopers like David Kenyon Webster to jump out of an airplane, and for tens of thousands more to cross the English Channel to struggle ashore on the beaches of Normandy? Where does the story of D-Day begin?

We could begin on September 3, 1939, when Great Britain and France declared war on Hitler's Nazi Germany after it invaded Poland. We might trace D-Day's roots to May 1940, when British forces were overpowered and retreated to Dunkirk, France. There, to prevent certain defeat, troops were evacuated by naval ships and a flotilla of civilian boats of all sizes. Britain had wanted to return to France ever since.

Or we might begin with the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i on December 7, 1941. The next day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the declaration of war against Japan; the United States declared war on Germany and Italy on December 11, which widened the global conflict and gave Great Britain, at last, a powerful ally in the fight against Hitler. By the time the United States entered the war, Hitler had Europe in his grip: The German Army had invaded



President Franklin D. Roosevelt signing the Declaration of War against Japan, December 8, 1941.

France, the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark, the Soviet Union, and Greece, among others.

Then again, we might start on August 19, 1942, when 6,000 British and Canadian forces launched a raid on the French port of Dieppe. Its failure made it clear the invasion of France couldn't happen right away. Britain alone simply didn't have the needed capacity. The invasion would have to wait until "the German Army had been worn down by the Russians, the Luftwaffe [German Air Force] bled white by Allied air power, the U-boats thwarted, and American war production

expanded." In other words, Germany needed to be weakened before there was any hope of winning.

We could begin telling the story of the complex history of planning for the invasion of France at any of these points in time. Instead, though, we will begin on a day largely forgotten in D-Day history, a rather ordinary day: March 12, 1943. That's when a forty-nine-year-old British officer named Frederick E. Morgan stepped into an elevator on his way to a meeting at New Scotland Yard in London.

"Just as the lift was taking off, in jumped Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten [a top British military official] himself, fresh from discussion with the British Chiefs of Staff, who proceeded to congratulate me vociferously in spite of the presence of a full load of passengers of all ranks," Morgan recalled.

Morgan had absolutely no idea what Mountbatten was talking about. He found out a few minutes later when General Hastings Lionel Ismay, Prime Minister Winston Churchill's chief of staff, handed him a mountain of paper. The stack contained all the previous plans for an assault on Hitler's "Fortress Europe."

The continent was protected by a system of coastal defenses known as the Atlantic Wall. Stretching from Scandinavia to Spain, it included troops, manned gun placements, beach obstacles, and mines—all designed to thwart invading forces.

Now the time had come to make the attempt. An assault across the English Channel had been high on the agenda at the recent January 1943 Casablanca Conference. At this Allied

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leaders' summit, Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt agreed the Allies were ready to launch an invasion of France in 1944.

Of course, there was no firm plan in place for any of this. In fact, Morgan was being "invited" to come up with one. The target date was May 1, 1944—less than a year away. It didn't give much time. As for when he should have his plan ready, Morgan was told, "No hurry, old boy, tomorrow will do."

General Ismay added one final comment on Morgan's task: "Well, there it is; it won't work, but you must bloody well make it."

Along with his new assignment, Morgan was given a title: Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (Designate), a mouthful soon shortened to COSSAC. (In January 1944, COSSAC offices became SHAEF, Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force.)

Morgan was headquartered at Norfolk House, 31 St. James's Square in London. At first the planning team was just Morgan and a couple of aides. He commandeered an unoccupied space and moved in. "The equipment consisted of a couple of desks and chairs we found in the room, and we were lucky enough also to find a few sheets of paper and a pencil that someone had dropped on the floor."

And with that, Frederick Morgan set out to plan the largest military endeavor in history.

From the start, Morgan and the team he eventually assembled faced enormous challenges. The schedule was brutally

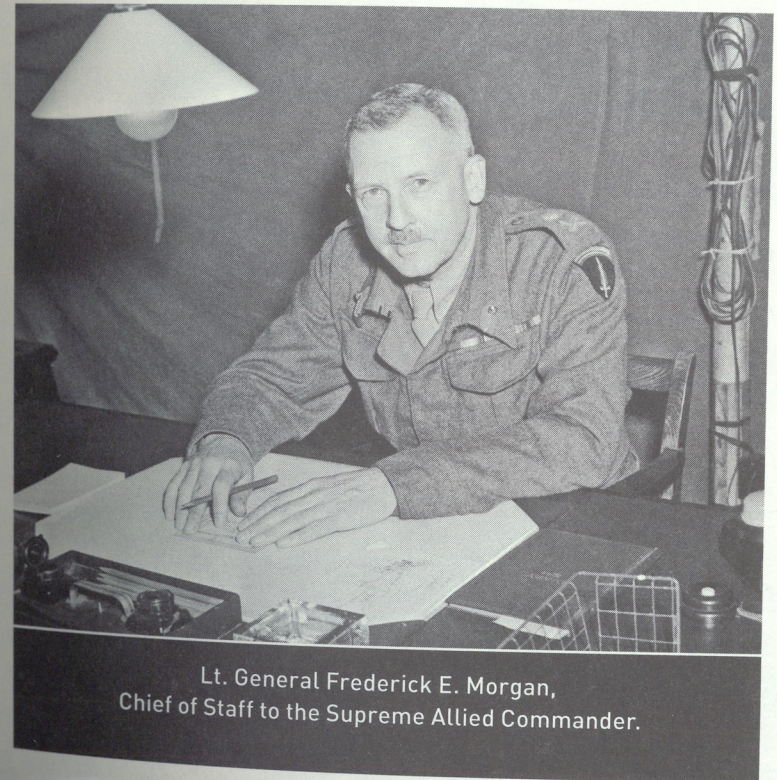
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demanding: The plan needed to be reviewed by the British Chiefs of Staff in July 1943, just a few months away.

As for who would lead it: Well, no Supreme Commander for the Allied Expeditionary Force had yet been named. In the meantime, Morgan, who had no decision-making power or ability to lobby higher-ups for additional resources, would just have to do the best he could within the parameters he was given.

At least the endeavor, formerly known as Roundup, had been given a new code name, chosen from a list of possibilities by Prime Minister Winston Churchill himself.

It was called Operation Overlord.



Lt. General Frederick E. Morgan,  
Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander.