

Prologue

MONDAY, 15 MAY 1944. Down by the River Thames at Hammersmith in west London, field marshals, generals, air chief marshals, admirals as well as the British king and prime minister had gathered at St Paul's School for Boys for what the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, called the 'final review' of plans for the cross-Channel invasion of France. It was a warm, sunny day that seemed to augur well as grand staff cars gently purred up to the entrance of the Victorian red-brick main school building. Guards clicked to attention as staff officers greeted the dignitaries and ushered them into an assembly room, at the end of which stood a low stage. At the front a couple of comfortable armchairs had been set, and it was to these that the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, and King George VI had been directed. Behind, on rather narrow, curved and somewhat inappropriate school benches, were the service chiefs and army and force commanders for this giant enterprise, as well as other war leaders, including a South African field marshal, Jan Smuts, who had once been Britain's enemy but was now a trusted friend and advisor.

The pupils had long since been moved elsewhere – back in 1940, when it was Britain that had been facing the prospect of invasion – but since January the school had been headquarters of 21st Army Group, commanded by General Sir Bernard Montgomery, an old boy of the school and the man who would be in overall command of all Allied land forces for the landings and for the immediate weeks that followed.

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Both the king and Churchill were smoking, the former a cigarette, the latter one of his cigars; this was a rarity, as Montgomery was a non-smoker and had strict rules that no one was allowed to smoke in his presence on his turf – that had even included General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had been sharply reprimanded for doing so when the two had first met in the spring of 1942. But even Monty could hardly tell the prime minister to stub out his cigar and it was certainly not his place to admonish the king. What's more, despite the somewhat unexceptional setting, with notices on the walls announcing that the sons of clergymen could apply for scholarships, this was a rather exceptional gathering. Rules could be bent on this occasion.

On the stage was set a giant map that Montgomery had been using since taking over command of the main planning for Operation OVERLORD, as the invasion was code-named. The present form of the plan had taken shape from the moment the current team had been appointed in December 1943, and although Monty took the lead, it was very much a collaborative effort. The principles had first been discussed at the St George's Hotel in Algiers, Allied Forces Headquarters in the Mediterranean, between Montgomery, then still British Eighth Army commander in Italy, Eisenhower, then newly appointed Supreme Allied Commander, and his chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Walter Bedell Smith. Back in England, Monty's joint Anglo-US planning team had then got to work adjusting and refining earlier, more restricted plans for OVERLORD. These had quickly taken shape and on 21 January had been shared with Bedell Smith, who had then presented them to his boss, who had in turn shared them with the British and American chiefs of staff.

When these plans had been broadly approved, they began to develop in detail, with the staffs of the various component parts all working on their own specific areas. Numerous conferences had been held to resolve the inevitable concerns and difficulties that had arisen. The Allies now commanded vast air forces and navies as well as land forces – coordinating these was a fraught

and extremely difficult enterprise and often tempers flared. However, by 7 April a strategy for the ground forces had been agreed and confirmed, allowing detailed planning to continue in other areas. Those preparing the naval plan, Operation NEPTUNE, had two months in which to master the unbelievably complex shipping requirements.

On 15 May, the invasion was now just three weeks away. The day of judgement was almost upon them. In the school assembly room, the atmosphere was palpably tense. So much rested on this enormous enterprise to which they were all committed. Failure was inconceivable, yet transporting armies across more than 80 miles of sea, through waters peppered with enemy mines and landing on beaches defended by armed forces that had cowed much of Europe just a few years earlier, and with secrecy of paramount importance, seemed a Herculean task. And so it was. Much could go wrong.

The headquarters in which they were assembled might have been Montgomery's, but Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander, had called the meeting and it was he who opened proceedings. Eisenhower, known to his friends and colleagues simply as 'Ike', was a fifty-three-year-old career soldier. Bald, with a kindly face and an air of imperturbability, he was, in many ways, an unlikely candidate for this most testing of jobs. Born in Texas, he had been raised in Abilene, Kansas, a small town in the middle of the flat plains of the Midwest. Despite these somewhat humble beginnings, he had gained a place at West Point, the United States Army's officer academy, and had repeatedly proved himself as a highly able staff officer. Affable but resolute, clear-thinking and with rare skills of diplomacy, he had taken command of all US troops in Britain following America's entry into the war in December 1941, had then been given overall command of Allied forces for the invasion of north-west Africa in November 1942, and a few months later had been elevated to the first Allied Supreme Commander in the Mediterranean. In this role he had overseen victory in North Africa, then Sicily and after that the invasion of southern Italy. His subordinate commanders, both

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American and British, all liked and respected him, he had proven theatre experience, and he had continued to show good judgement while also working valiantly to create an atmosphere of close partnership between the Allies.

This was a term that sounded closer and more official than was the reality, because the 'Allies' weren't actually allies at all. They might be fighting alongside one another, and agreeing strategy and even sharing arms and war materiel, but they were coalition partners, united in the desire to defeat the Axis powers yet not bound by a formal alliance. Directly under Eisenhower were unquestionably experienced, skilled and talented men, but most were strong characters with very different personalities. There were cultural divergences too, but more often than not tensions arose less on national lines than through differing levels of understanding of the complexities of modern warfare and all its rapid changes – changes that had been dramatically accelerated by the necessity of winning this current and catastrophic global conflict. These were men prepared to fight their corner, the strength of their convictions often driven by personal experience and by the knowledge that on their actions and decisions the lives of thousands, if not millions, might depend. That was a terrible burden. Keeping these disparate men on an even keel and unified in purpose was no easy matter. Tensions simmered. Personalities clashed. Suspicions and mistrust were easily aroused.

They were, however, all largely singing from the same hymn sheet that morning in the assembly hall at St Paul's School, and Eisenhower wanted to keep it that way, especially once the invasion got under way. All had been repeatedly consulted about the plan and there had been plenty of opportunities for each to say his piece, and this was what Eisenhower wanted to underline now. None of the men assembled there was born yesterday; they all knew the old adage that the first thing to go awry in battle was the plan, but clarity and a singleness of purpose were still needed and that was what was being delivered.

The Supreme Commander stood before them, wearing his

immaculate special short ‘Ike’ jacket based on the British battle-dress. Before he spoke he looked around at the men assembled in front of him and smiled – a smile of warmth and quiet confidence.

‘Here we are,’ he said, ‘on the eve of a great battle to deliver to you the various plans made by the different force commanders. I would emphasize but one thing: that I consider it to be the duty of anyone who sees a flaw in the plan not to hesitate to say so.’ This was the crux of the meeting. ‘I have no sympathy with anyone,’ he continued, ‘whatever his station, who will not brook criticism. We are here to get the best possible results and you must make a really cooperative effort.’

All those assembled knew these plans intimately already and had had ample opportunity to question and challenge what was being proposed, but to emphasize the point, the force commanders then briefly went through the separate land, naval and air plans once again: Montgomery in battledress and trousers with cut-glass creases, then Admiral Bertram Ramsay, commander-in-chief of the Allied Naval Expeditionary Force for the invasion, and then Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, his opposite number for the air forces. Two further commanders stood up and spoke: Lieutenant-General Carl ‘Tooe’ Spaatz, commander of all US European Strategic Air Forces – the heavy bomber force – and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, his counterpart at RAF Bomber Command. Occasionally the prime minister interjected to clarify a point, but otherwise not one person there quibbled with the plans that had been drawn up.

Later, after lunch, Churchill made a brief speech. It was no secret that he had had doubts about the invasion and the terrible cost in lives it might cause. But now his rallying cry was one of optimism and growing confidence. ‘Gentlemen,’ he told them, ‘I am *hardening* to this enterprise.’

No one there, however, was under any illusions. The task before them was a monumental one and their plan based on assumptions and variables over which they had little control. It was no wonder they were feeling the heat that warm early-summer day in London.

PART I

**The Battle Before
D-Day**

CHAPTER 1

The Atlantic Wall

THERE WERE FEW PLACES lovelier in Nazi-occupied Europe than May than Normandy in north-west France. It had not been fought over during the Battle for France four years earlier, and although it had always remained within the territory directly controlled by Nazi Germany rather than that of Vichy France under Maréchal Philippe Pétain, this coastal region had avoided the worst hardships of occupation, and that applied to both the occupied and the occupiers. Normandy had always been a largely agricultural area, with its rich, loamy soils, lush fields and orchards; here, the harsh rationing that affected city dwellers was felt far less keenly. Normandy, even in the fifth year of war, was a land of plenty: the patchwork small fields – the bocage – were full of dairy cows; the more open land around its major city, Caen, still shimmered with corn, oats and barley; and its orchards continued to produce plentiful amounts of fruit. Now, in May, it looked as fecund as ever. Pink and white blossom filled the orchards, hedgerows bursting with leaf and life lined the network of roads and tracks. It looked, in some ways, a kind of Eden, with centuries-old farmsteads and quiet villages dotting the landscape, while beyond its coastline of rugged cliffs and long, golden beaches, the English Channel twinkled invitingly in the sunshine.

For all this loveliness, however, the war was getting closer. Normandy that May was also now a scene of intense military activity as the beleaguered German defenders braced themselves for the

Allied invasion they knew must surely come soon. To this end, a race against time was going on, because only since January had action really got under way to turn the Germans' much-vaunted Atlantic Wall from a mere concept of propaganda into an effective defence against enemy invasion. Certainly, when Feldmarschall Erwin Rommel had begun his inspection of the north-west Europe coastal defences in December the previous year, he had been shocked by what he discovered. There were coastal batteries and defences around the major cities and in the Pas de Calais; parts of Denmark were well defended too; but there were far too many gaps for his liking and especially so in Normandy and Brittany.

Nor had the troops manning these areas been much cause for confidence. The German Army had always had more than its fair share of poorly equipped and under-trained troops, even back in the glory years of the Blitzkrieg, but this part of north-west France seemed to have an excess of the very old and very young, and of ill-trained and unmotivated foreign troops in the Ost-Bataillone – eastern battalions – and of veterans recovering from wounds by eating way too much cheese and drinking far too much cider and calvados.

One of those unimpressed by what he had seen so far was twenty-four-year-old Leutnant Hans Heinze, recently posted to join the newly formed 352. Infanterie-Division. Heinze was a veteran of the Eastern Front and one of the few to have escaped the hell of Stalingrad, where he'd served as an NCO. Wounded three times before even being sent to an aid station, he had even then refused to leave his men. Only when slipping into unconsciousness had he been evacuated. That had been Christmas Eve 1942, only five weeks before the German Sixth Army's surrender; most of those he had left behind at Stalingrad had since perished either in the fighting or in captivity.

Having recovered from his wounds, Heinze was considered suitable officer material and so posted to *Waffenschule* – weapons school – and given a commission. In the pre-war and early war

years, officers had to serve in the ranks as a *Fahnenjunker* – officer cadet – and only after nine months to a year would they then be sent for an intense and lengthy stint at a *Kriegsschule*, or war school. This process had been abolished, though, as manpower had dwindled along with everything else and standards had to be cut out of necessity. Heinze, however, was as good a bet to become a decent officer as any: he certainly had the experience and had already proved himself a leader, albeit a non-commissioned one. So it was that he now found himself in Normandy and posted to the Grenadier-Regiment 916, one of the 352.'s new infantry units.

Although the division had its headquarters at Saint-Lô, some 20 miles south from the coast, Heinze had wasted no time in visiting the coastal defences in his sector. On arrival, he and his colleague could not find much evidence of the Atlantic Wall until eventually they spotted some bunkers surrounded by wire. Leaving their vehicle, they stepped through the wire with ease and without once snagging their trousers, and met a *Landser*, an ordinary soldier, who cheerily told them he had been based in Normandy since 1940. If the Tommies decided to invade, he said, they would soon roll out their guns and teach them how to feel scared. 'We found no cheer or solace in this remark,' noted Heinze. 'It was clear that much work was ahead of us.'

Soon after, Heinze was given 5. Kompanie and briefed to lick them into shape. The 352. had been given a good number of experienced officers and NCOs – some 75 per cent had been in combat, mainly on the Eastern Front – but only 10 per cent of the rest had any front-line experience at all. The first troop train delivering new recruits, for example, unloaded several thousand mostly seventeen-year-olds: *Grünschnabel* – greenhorns – fresh from a mere three weeks' training in Slaný in the former Czechoslovakia. By contrast, barely a single Allied soldier waiting to cross the Channel had had less than two years' training. A further 30 per cent of German troops were newly drafted conscripts from the Alsace region, or from Poland and various parts of the Soviet Union. Other infantry divisions in Normandy had an even higher

number of foreign troops. Language barriers were a major issue, but so too was an inherent lack of trust; many German officers and NCOs worried that when the fighting began they might well find themselves with a bullet in the back rather than the chest.

One of the many German Army troops from the east was twenty-one-year-old Kanonier Alois Damski, a heavy-set Pole serving as a private in Artillerie Regiment 352. Attached to the III. Bataillon based at La Noé and Tracy-sur-Mer just to the west of Arromanches, he was part of the fire-control team. To say he was a less than enthusiastic soldier was an understatement.

Damski had been born in the town of Bydgoszcz, renamed Blomberg under the Germans, which was around a hundred miles south of Danzig. Like most Polish families, tragedy had never been far away. His father had died during the war, and so too had his older sister; it had been typhus that had done for her, while a prisoner of the Gestapo. Damski had been working for the Germans in a munitions factory until February 1943, when he'd been called in by the factory manager. With the manager was a German official who told him he was needed in the Wehrmacht. He didn't have to join, but if he refused he would be considered 'politically undesirable', and although Damski was a somewhat naïve young man, he knew enough to understand what that meant: a concentration camp was the very best he could expect. 'I was only twenty,' he said, 'and loved life. I did not know much about what was going on but thought the army would be preferable.' After basic training he was sent to Normandy and joined the Artillerie Regiment 352, among a mixed unit of Poles, Russians and Czechs and under the command of German officers and NCOs. His treatment was reasonably fair, he reckoned, and life was made tolerable because, since being in Normandy, he had been billeted with an old French lady who was sympathetic towards him because of his Polish background and who gave him extra food.

In fact, by May 1944, Damski had reason to feel he had more than made the right decision to join the Germany Army. He had

dated local French girls, was allowed into Bayeux from time to time and was paid enough to buy plenty of local beer and calvados. At their observation post on the cliffs they would often listen to the BBC on the radio, even though it was strictly forbidden to do so. The German lieutenant would rail against it, decrying British claims as rubbish and nothing more than propaganda. On one occasion, the battery hauptmann had collared Damski and asked him how German he now felt. 'I am speaking to you not as a captain but as a man,' he had said.

'Well, since we are talking like this,' Damski replied, 'I will tell you the truth. I was born in Poland, had ten years education, my parents are Polish and live there now and how can I feel anything but Polish?' The hauptmann did not reply, but Damski had noticed he'd been more reserved since that conversation. In truth, it must have been very hard for German officers in charge of eastern troops. Integrating them into the culture and ethos of the Wehrmacht was always likely to be more wishful thinking than reality.

None of these troops defending the Normandy coast were well equipped, and they wore a variety of uniforms that had been cobbled together from stocks left over from the North African campaign, many of which were dark green denim, as well as the more normal woollen field grey. They had barely enough weapons; these were a mixture in any case, and included Russian, French and other rifles, submachine-guns and machine-guns. The French MAS rifle, for example, was perfectly good, but it fired a different calibre bullet to that of the German K.98, which, of course, only added to the difficulties of the quarter-master.

Nor was there remotely enough transport. The artillery could not train to begin with, for example, because there were neither sights for their guns nor the correct harnesses for the horses who were to tow them.

Another problem for the newly formed 352. Division was malnourishment. Rationing in Germany, and especially further east, was harsh, with a notable lack of fruit, meat and dairy products.

One of the challenges for the division's staff was not only training them properly but also feeding them up. Requests to 7. Armee for an increased dairy ration were refused, so Generalleutnant Dietrich Kraiss, the division commander, had authorized his staff to buy or barter for extra supplies of milk, butter, cheese and meat locally. It certainly helped, but standards of food supplied to the men, even in Normandy, were poor and most were dependent on buying eggs and other luxuries to supplement rations. Gefreiter Franz Gockel was a young recruit serving in I. Bataillon of Grenadier-Regiment 726, part of the 716. Infanterie-Division. One day he helped bring a pot of soup from the field kitchen to their coastal bunker. His comrades all lined up in anticipation as he took a ladle and gave the soup a good stir. Feeling something substantial move at the bottom, he pulled out the ladle to discover the remains of a dead rat. They then found another in the second canister. 'How is this possible?' he wondered.

The 716. Division was even more poorly equipped than the 352. and, unlike the core of NCOs and officers in the latter, had no combat experience at all, having been based in northern France since its formation in May 1941. Infantry divisions had already been reduced from the 16,000 men that had been standard at the start of the war to just over 12,000, but the 716. was just 8,000 strong and until the deployment of the 352. had been holding the entire Normandy coastline from Carentan to the River Orne, a stretch of around 60 miles. The 716. had no vehicles of any note; its infantry were issued with bicycles and, like most infantry divisions in Normandy, it was largely dependent on horses and carts to bring forward supplies.

The inherent weakness of the 716. Division along this stretch of coastline meant that the 352., considered to be of much higher quality despite its own obvious shortcomings, was given more to do than perhaps it should have been. On 15 March, orders had reached Generalleutnant Kraiss direct from Rommel. They were now to take over much of the 716.'s part of the coast, while that division would instead cover the stretch north of Caen. They were

rapidly to improve the coastal defences, but also to build and maintain defensive positions further inland, all the way to Saint-Lô. In between all this construction work the 352. was also to continue training.

This was expecting a lot, particularly since the division still had to be on permanent standby to be moved elsewhere, which Kraiss and his staff assumed would be the Eastern Front. This in turn meant they could keep on hand only what they could easily transport should the division be suddenly redeployed. However, because the area they were covering was far greater than it had been, it meant a lot of time, manpower and fuel were being wasted in never-ending trips to the supply depots of the LXXXIV. Korps, to which they were attached.

Clearly, the standby alert should have been taken off the division; that it wasn't was typical of the mess in which the German Army now found itself. Quite simply, the Germans no longer had enough of anything with which they could realistically turn around the fortunes of the war. They didn't have enough food, fuel, ammunition, guns, armour, men, medical supplies or anything needed to fight a rapidly modernizing war. They knew the Allies would attempt a cross-Channel invasion, although where, when and in what manner remained the subject of fevered debate. The Atlantic Wall, protecting Fortress Europe, was thousands of miles long: Germany had been building coastal gun positions, bunkers and defences all the way from the Arctic Circle in northern Norway to the southern Atlantic coast of France. It was no wonder Normandy and Brittany had looked a bit light on defences; there was only so much manpower, steel and concrete.

Supply shortages were one thing, but there was no doubt that Germany was making life even harder for its put-upon commanders by the convoluted and muddle-headed command structures that had blighted the army ever since Hitler had taken direct command back in December 1941. The Führer remained utterly convinced of his own military genius, but a key feature of his leadership, first of the German people, then for the past two and a

half years of the army, was his iron control. Naturally lazy, he none the less had a gift for absorbing detail and, while he left much of the day-to-day running of the Reich to others, he would, conversely, often stick his nose into the kind of minutiae of military operations that simply should not have concerned him. He also liked to operate through a policy of divide and rule, creating parallel command structures that tended to pit subordinates against one another, while also making predictions and command decisions that defied military logic but from which he could rarely, if ever, be dissuaded.

The German Army of the early years of the war had achieved its successes largely because it had created a way of operating in which both speed of manoeuvre and striking with immense concentrated, coordinated force were the key components. Tied in with this had been the freedom of commanders on the spot to make swift decisions without recourse to higher authorities. That had all gone as Germany's armed forces found themselves horrendously stretched and with almost all major decisions now requiring consultation with the Führer. The *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* – OKW, the combined General Staff of the Armed Forces – was merely his mouthpiece and neither Feldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel, the head of the OKW, nor General Alfred Jodl, the chief of staff, was willing to play any role other than lackey to Hitler's megalomania. To say that the Führer himself was a handicap to Germany's war aspirations was, on so many levels, a massive understatement.

Battling the endless supply challenges, as well as a particularly counter-productive command chain, was Feldmarschall Erwin Rommel, now fifty-two and, as of 15 January 1944, the commander of Heeresgruppe B – Army Group B. Rommel's war had so far been one of extraordinary highs but, like many of the Wehrmacht's senior commanders, of lows as well. He had rampaged across France in 1940 as a panzer division commander, and had then been feted by Hitler and become a pin-up back home for his dash

and flair in North Africa. Awards and promotions had followed in swift succession, so that by the summer of 1942 he was the Wehrmacht's youngest field marshal – despite not commanding enough men for such a rank, nor having achieved enough to warrant such an accolade.

Then things began to go wrong, as British generalship improved along with their supply situation and dramatically more effective Allied air power. At Alamein in Egypt, Rommel was twice defeated, the second time decisively enough to send his Panzerarmee Afrika all the way back across Egypt and Libya into Tunisia. There he made one last striking attack in February 1943, forcing the bewildered and still-green US forces back down the Kasserine Pass. But Rommel pushed too far, just as he had done before Alamein, over-extending his supply lines and running out of steam as American and British opposition stiffened. Ill and disillusioned, he left Africa in early March 1943, never to return.

By the autumn, recovered but increasingly convinced the war was now lost, he had been put in charge of German forces in northern Italy. However, whereas in North Africa Rommel's cut and dash had overshadowed Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring, the German theatre commander, it was Kesselring who now outdid Rommel, throwing up a vigorous and determined defence against the Anglo-US invasion of southern Italy in September 1943 and causing Hitler to overturn early plans to retreat well to the north of Rome. Suddenly, Rommel's role there had become redundant. It had been a shattering blow for him, flinging him into depression. He was, however, about to be thrown a lifeline.

Overall military commander of the West was Feldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt, who had entered the German Army eight months before Rommel was born and was the Wehrmacht's oldest active field marshal while Rommel was its youngest. He had commanded the main strike force of Army Group A during the invasion of France and another army group for BARBAROSSA, the invasion of the Soviet Union. Since then he had been sacked then reinstated as commander of Oberbefehl – High Command – West. In October

1943 he had submitted a report on the state of the Atlantic Wall, making it clear it was far from fit for purpose – a report that had jolted Hitler and the OKW into action, because, as they were well aware, at some point in the not-too-distant future the Allies would launch an invasion of the Continent.

General Jodl at the OKW suggested to Hitler that he appoint the humiliated Rommel to carry out an inspection tour of the Atlantic Wall. Reinvigorated, Rommel began at the start of December, heading first to Denmark and then south towards the Pas de Calais, where the Channel was at its narrowest and the defences strongest. His renewed energy and swift grip of the situation encouraged von Rundstedt to suggest making Rommel commander of the Channel coastal areas, where logic suggested the invasion was most likely to come. Von Rundstedt, ageing, patrician and disillusioned, was not prepared to rock the boat. He remained superficially loyal to Hitler, but was happy to hand over military command to Rommel; he might have been commander of OB West, but, as he quipped bitterly, in reality he only commanded the guards outside his Paris headquarters.

So, on 15 January 1944, Rommel had become commander of Heeresgruppe B, charged with defending northern France and the Low Countries and throwing any Allied invasion back into the sea. The task, he had known, was a stiff one. The defences of the Atlantic Wall and the state of the forces under his command were far worse than had been suggested by von Rundstedt; Rommel had been horrified. Since then, he had been tireless: more defences had to be built, training intensified, red tape cut, more supplies diverted. He toured the front constantly, encouraging his subordinates, urging his men, and laying out his vision for the defence of the Continent. In between, he pleaded, cajoled, bartered and bullied staff officers, bean-counters and his superiors. It was why the 352. Infanterie-Division found themselves holding a lengthy strip of the coast while also preparing defences in depth and carrying out training as the mixed bag of veterans tried desperately to turn their raw young recruits and eastern ‘volunteers’

into a half-decent infantry division capable of blunting any Allied attack from across the sea. It was a tall order, but there was no alternative. Not if disaster was to be averted.

In the second week of March, Rommel had moved his headquarters south to the small town of La Roche-Guyon on the banks of a big loop in the River Seine. Rommel's was a large command, geographically, and La Roche-Guyon was about as well placed as he could reasonably hope for – tucked away from prying enemy aircraft, but only 45 miles west of Paris and the headquarters of von Rundstedt as well as those of General Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, both the military commander of occupied France and also the head of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA, the SS security forces in the country. To the north, Calais was 160 miles away, while Caen was around 100 and Rennes, the main city of Brittany, about 180. Rommel rather eschewed luxury, but even so, in basing himself in the elegant renaissance chateau that stood beneath the ruined medieval castle, he was hardly slumming it. He was enchanted by the lovely, elegant library and large drawing room with its terrace beyond and views across the Seine. Even better, tunnels linking the renaissance and nineteenth-century chateau to the old castle above made ideal and easily expanded bunkers and a communication hub.

Here, Rommel kept a tight team. Generalleutnant Hans Speidel was his new chief of staff, having arrived in April from the Eastern Front at Rommel's request; his former CoS, Generalleutnant Alfred Gause, had served under Rommel in North Africa and the two were old friends, but Gause had upset Lucie, Rommel's wife, and she had demanded he go. Speidel and Rommel were both from Swabia, in south-west Germany, which stood them apart from the Prussian aristocratic elite that dominated the army high command. They had served together briefly during the last war and Speidel had an outstanding reputation as a highly intelligent and efficient staff officer – indeed, back in the twenties he had earned a PhD in political and military history.

There were a few other trusted colleagues, such as thirty-six-year-old Oberst Hans-Georg von Tempelhoff, Rommel's chief operations officer, who had an English wife. The bushy-browed Generalleutnant Wilhelm Meise, his chief engineer, was playing an increasingly vital role in the construction of coastal defences; Hauptmann Hellmuth Lang was his aide-de-camp, another Swabian and a Knight's Cross-winning panzer commander; while a fourth member of his inner circle was yet another from Swabia, Vizeadmiral Friedrich Ruge, his naval advisor. 'In our circle we spoke quite frankly and openly,' noted Ruge, 'since we trusted each other implicitly. The trust was never misused.' And while there was no doubting who was the boss, Rommel was not a man to dominate the dinner conversation and was always interested in what others had to say. 'He had a good sense of humour,' noted Ruge, 'even when he was the butt of the joke.'

Ruge was forty-seven, a career naval officer, jovial and good company, and until joining Rommel's staff in Italy he had been in charge of naval coastal defences in France. The two got on well, and in evenings back at La Roche-Guyon they would often go for walks in the grounds and the woods beyond, where Rommel would talk quite candidly about his thoughts, plans and the future. Certainly, Rommel increasingly thought Normandy was a likely place for the invasion; his hunch told him it would come either side of the Seine estuary, even though in March OB West and the OKW had accepted the Pas de Calais as the most probable location.

As a senior commander, Rommel was unusual in having never fought on the Eastern Front, but he had experience of battling both the British and the Americans and understood how debilitating their air power could be; combatting overwhelming enemy air forces was something with which veterans of the Eastern Front had far less experience. 'Our friends from the East cannot imagine what they're in for here,' he told his old friend from North Africa, Generalleutnant Fritz Bayerlein, now commanding the Panzer-Lehr-Division. '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 . . . Dash and doggedness alone no longer make a soldier, Bayerlein.'

His mission to repel an Allied invasion had unquestionably given him renewed self-confidence and he was tackling the challenge with a sense of grim determination, despite the shortages and supply issues being exacerbated by never-ending Allied air attacks. 'I have to be satisfied with what little I've got,' he told Hauptmann Lang, 'and try and defeat the enemy with only the most modest means. And defeated they must be, if Bolshevism is not to triumph over us.' The fear of a westward spread of communism was very real to many Germans and was certainly one of the reasons they continued to fight. 'Even then,' Rommel added, 'when we have defeated Britain and the United States, the war with Russia won't be over because she has enormous resources of men and raw materials. Perhaps then a united Europe will come forward to fight this enemy.' This, then, was Rommel's motivation. Despite the reverses, despite the defeats, and despite the chronic shortages and the overwhelming material advantage of both the Allies and the Soviet Union, in May 1944 he still believed that the battle was worth fighting and that there was some hope.

Rommel was certain that if the Allies were allowed to make a landing and create a firm foothold, all would be lost. The key, then, was to fight them at the coast, at the crust. The infantry and the coastal fortifications would be the first line of defence and would, with the help of minefields, booby traps and the thousand fighter aircraft that the Luftwaffe had promised, hold the Allies at bay. Then would come the coordinated counter-attack by the mobile armoured divisions now in France. These were the best equipped, only fully armed and generally best trained available in the West; crucially, for the most part they were also the most motivated. These units were bursting with half-tracks, assault guns, Panzer Mk IVs, as well as Panthers and even

Tigers – monsters both with their heavy armour and powerful high-velocity guns. The full force of these divisions – ten in all in the West – would, Rommel believed, be enough to push the enemy back. This would buy Germany vital time, because clearly there could then be no second Allied invasion attempt for a long while after.

There was, however, a snag with this theory. Because of Allied air power, moving these mobile divisions swiftly into a massed counter-attack – and Rommel was talking about within a day or two – would mean holding all of them very close to the coast where the invasion was likely to happen. This was a huge gamble, because for all the soothsaying from Hitler's headquarters, no one was really certain where the invasion would land. For Rommel, this was an all-or-nothing gamble that simply had to be taken. A punt, yes, but, frankly, not a bad one. He had a point, and the old Hitler of 1940 – then the gambler to beat all gamblers – might have agreed. But this was 1944 and Hitler was no longer the same man.

Had Rommel been able to convince von Rundstedt, things might have been different, but the old field marshal had never had much cut and dash and, in any case, these days preferred to hedge his bets. So too did General Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, who, shortly after Rommel had been given Heeresgruppe B, had been appointed commander of Panzergruppe West with the brief to train up and coordinate the actions of the panzer divisions. Geyr – as he tended to be known – was a highly cultured and decorated panzer commander. He had been military attaché in London in the 1930s, spoke fluent English, had repeatedly proved himself on the Eastern Front and was a protégé of Generaloberst Heinz Guderian, in many ways the father of Blitzkrieg and now commander of Germany's armoured troops. That Geyr was a highly able panzer general was not in doubt, but for all his knowledge of the British he had never yet fought against them and unquestionably was underestimating the effect of Allied air power. As far as he was concerned, the panzer divisions could be held

further back and still quickly brought together in a swift and successful counter-attack.

These differences of opinion had surfaced early and, no matter how much they discussed the matter, neither Rommel nor Geyr – or von Rundstedt for that matter – was prepared to shift their stance. Rommel demanded that Geyr and his panzer divisions should be subordinated to him and their deployment be his decision. Geyr, busily training his panzers against air attack and on night exercises, was convinced this tactic was a mistake; he was against being put under Rommel's command and had the influential Guderian to support him.

Back in March, Rommel had believed the debate had finally been resolved by Hitler himself. Having summoned Rommel on the 19th to the Berghof, his mountain home near Berchtesgaden in Bavaria, the Führer had first expounded his belief that Normandy and Brittany were the most likely invasion locations and then, the following day, and confidentially during a one-to-one, had agreed to consider giving Rommel full control of the panzers. Rommel, who had openly boasted to the Führer that the Allies would be kicked straight back into the sea on the first day, had believed this was as good as a promise. However, in the days and weeks that followed, there was still no formal order from Hitler putting the vital panzer divisions under his command. Rommel continued to lobby hard. 'Provided we succeed in bringing our mechanised divisions into action in the very first hours,' he told Jodl on 23 April, 'then I'm convinced that the enemy assault on our coast will be defeated on the very first day.'

But still no confirmation had come and so Rommel had simply gone over the head of von Rundstedt and Geyr and ordered 2. Panzer-Division towards the coast at Abbeville. Furious, on 28 April Geyr arrived at La Roche-Guyon, followed shortly by Guderian. 'Subject:' noted Ruge in his diary, 'fundamental questions of tactical employment, especially the use of the panzer divisions.' Whatever the disagreements, however, Ruge enjoyed the subsequent dinner, when Guderian, especially, appeared to be on lively

form and there was no sign of the tactical disagreement that had dogged invasion preparations since January. 'It was to be hoped,' wrote Ruge later that evening, 'that the commitment of the panzer units would soon be decided in Rommel's favour.'

Such hopes were swiftly dashed, however. On Thursday, 8 May, Hitler finally presented OB West with a horrible fudge. Rommel was to have tactical command of 2. Panzer, 116. Panzer and 21. Panzer, this last the only mobile division already in Normandy. A new grouping, Army Group G, was to be formed in the south of France and would be allocated 2. SS-Panzer and the newly formed 9. and 11. Panzer. Geyr kept hold of four: the 1. and 12. SS-Panzer-Divisions of I. SS-Panzerkorps, as well as Panzer-Lehr and the 17. SS-Panzergrenadier-Division. No one, not even Rommel with his allocated three divisions, was authorized to move them into a concentrated counter-attack without the direct say-so of Hitler himself. In an ill-considered stroke, this meant kissing goodbye to any rapid concentration of force or flexibility of command. With this order, Hitler, once so ready to throw caution to the wind and back the dash of the gambler, had nullified both. Having repeatedly told his audiences that Brittany and Normandy were where the Allies would most likely land, he was no longer willing to back his hunch or, with it, Rommel. To all intents and purposes, the ten mobile divisions – the only possible key to repelling the Allies, for all the mines and hastily built defences – were to remain flung to the four winds.

Rommel intended to lobby hard to have this carving up of the panzer divisions overturned, but the following day, 9 May, as he and Ruge set off for another two-day inspection tour of Normandy, he was still grumbling to his companion. He had two armies under his command, the Fifteenth and the Seventh, but they both contained badly equipped and mostly low-grade infantry divisions, although there were some Luftwaffe *Fallschirmjäger* – paratrooper – units as well, who generally were cut from a better cloth. The 15. Armee had nineteen divisions, covering the coastal regions of northern France and the Low Countries, and had a

very competent and experienced commander in Generaloberst Hans von Salmuth. He did, however, have blood on his hands, like so many Eastern Front commanders, having assisted the *Einsatzgruppen* – the Action Groups – to round up and execute Soviet Jews. He had later broken his 2. Armee out of Stalingrad against Hitler's wishes, for which he was sacked and demoted, but was soon after promoted again and given 15. Armee. He now loathed Hitler and the OKW, and was clearly disillusioned. Rommel thought he had become a little lazy.

The 7. Armee covered Normandy and Brittany, and now had fourteen divisions. It was commanded by Generaloberst Friedrich Dollmann, a man who exemplified the wildly varying skills and experience levels of both commanders and units under Rommel's charge. Although a career soldier and artilleryman, Dollmann had been an early enthusiast for both Hitler and the Nazis, had correctly read which way the wind was blowing and, by actively promoting National Socialism within the army, had been quickly promoted. Given command of 7. Armee in 1940, he had remained in post ever since, mostly sitting on his backside and gaining an ever-widening girth as he enjoyed the full delights of the countryside in which he was based. Fat and indolent, he made absolutely no effort to learn about or understand modern warfare. Consequently, he was hopelessly out of touch and a woefully ineffective army commander.

On the other hand, the commander of LXXXIV. Korps in Normandy, General Erich Marcks, thin-faced and bespectacled, was every bit as cultured and intellectual as he looked and brought with him considerable experience of high-level staff work and combat command. He had even lost a leg during Operation BARBAROSSA, but had overcome his disability with a determination and courage that had earned him great respect. Rommel had wanted him as 7. Armee commander, but Hitler insisted on keeping Dollmann in post. It paid to be a good Nazi.

It was to see Marcks that Rommel and Ruge were now heading, as he was far more able to give an accurate and intelligent report

than Dollmann; in effect, Rommel was simply cutting his army commander out of the loop. En route they stopped to inspect coastal defences south of the Seine. With Meise's help, Rommel had supplemented concrete with vast numbers of offshore obstacles that ran the depth of the beach at low tide. There were steel tetrahedrons, as well as logs covered with mines, and poles that could jag on to any vessel – some of them tipped with further mines. Each beach was due to have four belts of obstacles, each at a different depth of the beach. Rommel assumed the Allies would land close to full tide in order to let troops get off the beach quickly, but the third and fourth belts were to provide lines of obstacles at low tide too.

While they were looking at this array of obstacles the tide began to rise swiftly. 'On this beach,' noted Ruge, 'it rises three metres in an hour, so we had to leave the beach in a hurry.' Off the beach, thick belts of wire and more minefields covered the coastline, while yet more mines continued to be laid inland – these, Rommel knew from his experiences in North Africa, could be very effective in slowing and breaking up attacks, especially by armour, and giving his poorly equipped infantry more time to fight back. The previous October, some 2 million mines had been laid in Normandy. Now that figure had risen to 6.5 million. Rommel understood such weapons were effective force multipliers, but he and Meise had reckoned 20 million were needed to protect the coast to the level he intended – and they were still a long way from achieving that.

After pausing for an air raid to pass over, they drove on through Caen. Large areas of land around the River Dives to the east and the various river valleys that ran from the River Douve estuary at Carentan had all been flooded on Rommel's orders by shutting a number of sluice gates so that the water built up behind them. This was designed both to hinder any planned Allied airborne drop and to channel any attempted advance inland towards roads that were now mined and blocked. Over larger areas, there were signs that further anti-invasion work was going on – in bigger fields, posts had been

driven into the ground and strung together with wire to prevent gliders from landing.

They met Marcks in fields near Caen. The sun was shining as the one-legged corps commander made his report. There had been plenty of enemy aerial reconnaissance, he told Rommel, over both the Cotentin Peninsula and either side of the River Orne. Air attacks had been targeting coastal artillery positions as well as crossroads and main thoroughfares. Reinforcements had arrived into the Cotentin – the 91. Luftlande-Division – Air Landing Division – who were now digging across its 20-mile width and making the most of the dense hedgerows to hide themselves from prying enemy eyes in the air. He was confident they could respond to any attack on either the east or west coast of the peninsula. Marcks also reported that 50 miles of offshore obstacles had now been completed, as well as 170,000 stakes against airborne landings.

After briefings from the commander of the Cherbourg fortress and Generalmajor Edgar Feuchtinger of the 21. Panzer-Division, they drove on, pausing by the four 150mm coastal guns at Longues-sur-Mer, and then on along the coast to the tiny ports of Grandcamp and Isigny, before finishing for the day at General Marcks's headquarters at the Château de la Meauffe near Saint-Lô.

More inspections followed the next day, while at La Roche-Guyon a message from OKW arrived warning of an invasion around 18 May. 'Irrefutable documentary proof is, of course, not available,' ran the signal. 'Point of concentration first and foremost: Normandy; secondly: Brittany.' But really, it was still anyone's guess.

CHAPTER 2

Command of the Skies

MONDAY, 22 MAY 1944. Sixteen P-47 Thunderbolt fighter planes of the 61st Fighter Squadron were speeding towards the northern German city of Bremen led by the imperturbable Lieutenant-Colonel Francis ‘Gabby’ Gabreski. Shortly before, the 61st, part of Colonel ‘Hub’ Zemke’s 56th Fighter Group, had helped escort almost 300 B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bombers on an attack on the Baltic port of Kiel, but, their escort duty over, their role now was to maraud the skies of northern Germany shooting down any enemy planes they might see and, especially, destroying locomotives on the ground. The intensive train-smashing operation, begun the previous day, had been given the code name CHATTANOOGA CHOO CHOO, after the famous song. A jaunty and jolly jingle it may have been, but the business of shooting up railway engines was a deadly serious one. The German rail network, the Reichsbahn, really was the glue that kept the German war effort together. Almost everything travelled the shrinking Reich by rail: raw materials, weapons, labour, troops, food, Jews being sent to death camps. The more marshalling yards that were smashed, the more locomotives shot up, the more railway bridges destroyed and lines cut, the harder it would be for the Germans to move. The Allies’ greatest fear before the invasion was a concentrated counter-attack by the mass of ten panzer divisions known to be in the West. The aim of the ‘Transportation Plan’, as it was called, was to make it as difficult as possible for the Germans to

move those all-important troops, as well as other reinforcements, to Normandy.

Hub Zemke had introduced a new tactic that day, which the men quickly named the 'Zemke Fan'. There were three squadrons in the group, each flying sixteen planes in flights of four, and to make maximum use of them on the return leg he ordered them to maraud over three distinct areas rather than all flying together back to base. So, the 62nd FS had been sent to hunt over the Paderborn area, the 63rd FS to Hanover, while Gabreski's bunch had sped south-west towards Bremen.

They were around 20 miles east of the city when a couple of locomotives were spotted. With their clouds of white steam, they were easy enough to spy on such a lovely clear day, so Gabreski ordered Evan McMinn's Yellow Flight down to shoot them up, while the remaining twelve Thunderbolts circled as cover at around 15,000 feet. They had barely begun circling, however, when Gabreski spotted a not very well camouflaged air base below. Moments later, McMinn's voice crackled over the radio saying he could see some Focke-Wulf 190 fighters taking off.

Gabreski felt the now familiar surge of excitement as he led the squadron down towards them. The Thunderbolt was a big fighter and unrivalled in a dive. Armed with .50-calibre machine guns, it could pack a big punch, take a lot of punishment itself and was highly manoeuvrable. More to the point, American fighter pilots were in a different league to those in the Luftwaffe in terms of flying skill. Most new pilots joined their squadrons with more than three times the flying hours of their German opposite numbers, and because of the plentiful quantities of fuel and the large pilot overlap in each squadron – usually over fifty to keep sixteen planes flying per mission – there was a lot of time to practise further and hone skills alongside those who had more experience. Because of the chronic shortages of fuel, new Luftwaffe fighter pilots tended to fly on missions only. Most were promptly shot down.

That was about to be the fate of a number of FW190s now. As Gabreski and his men hurtled towards them, he saw around

sixteen of them spread out in line abreast. The enemy fighters were now at a height where they could have turned and fought, but they seemed oblivious to what was happening and instead flew on in steady formation, presenting themselves as juicy targets for the P-47s. Picking out one, Gabreski opened fire and saw his bullets flash all over the German's fuselage and wing. It turned and fell away, then burst into flames. Now Gabreski got behind a second and, closing in, opened fire a second time. This time the canopy flew off and, moments later, the pilot bailed out. Looking over his shoulder, he saw two 190s homing in on him. He managed to climb, turn and shake them off, but then saw one of his men going down in flames and another trailing smoke, which was a big blow. Climbing back up to 12,000 feet, Gabreski ordered his men to regroup on him over the enemy airfield. Soon he had six Thunderbolts together and they spotted some twenty Focke-Wulfs down below. Suddenly, though, the German fighter's own anti-aircraft gunners opened up on them. Someone fired a green recognition flare, but the enemy formation had scattered.

Without hesitating further, Gabreski led his men back down, speeding in behind a formation of six German fighters. Moments later, he had shot down his third of the day, but then caught sight of a further Focke-Wulf sneaking up on him on his left. Yanking back the control column into his stomach and cutting the throttle, his Thunderbolt climbed and slowed to a near stall so that his pursuer had no choice but to hop over him. Suddenly, Gabreski was behind him, but with his ammunition low and five more Messerschmitt 109s behind, he reckoned it was time to cut and run. He ordered his men home and they sped west, only to run into a lone Focke-Wulf flitting in and out of cloud. Speeding in behind and using the last of his ammunition, Gabreski shot him out of the sky too, giving him three confirmed kills and one probable for the day.

In all, Gabreski and his men shot down thirteen confirmed, one probable and two damaged that day for the loss of two of their own. A further pilot, Joel Popplewell, managed to get his Thunderbolt back home to England despite counting over a hundred bullet holes

on his ship. Gabreski, now one of the leading aces in the US Eighth Air Force, reckoned it had been one of the toughest missions he had ever been on, but it demonstrated the absolute dominance the American day-fighters now had over the Luftwaffe in the West. A little over two weeks before the invasion, that was good news. Just as good was the hunting that day by Zemke's fighter group: six locomotives destroyed, seven damaged, as well as eighteen river barges shot up. CHATTANOOGA CHOO CHOO was going well.

And there was further cause for cheer just under a week later, on Sunday 28 May, a day that saw the culmination of what had been in effect a five-month battle in the skies for air superiority over north-west Europe. This was a non-negotiable precondition for the invasion that had been uppermost in the Allied war leaders' minds since the previous summer.

All through the summer and autumn of 1943, the US Eighth Air Force, along with the RAF's home commands, had struggled to make much headway, despite their growing numbers, experience and improving navigational aids. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, the C-in-C of RAF Bomber Command, had stubbornly insisted that night bombing of German cities by growing numbers of heavy bombers would be enough to bring not only the Luftwaffe but all of Nazi Germany to its knees. As the months passed, that claim had become an increasingly misguided one for a number of reasons. First, the Luftwaffe had finally put together an increasingly efficient and coordinated air defence system. Second, they had brought much of the Luftwaffe home to defend the Reich, while at the same time dramatically increasing aircraft production. There had been many more night-fighters in the skies to meet Harris's bomber streams than ever before and, what's more, they were now being expertly directed towards the British bombers by a combination of well-organized intelligence, ground control and radar. Bomber Command was still causing lots of damage, but not enough to hustle Germany into surrendering, and bomber crews were being slaughtered in the process.

The Americans had begun bombing Germany by day in the

belief that this would enable them to bomb targets with greater precision and therefore more efficiently and effectively. To do this, they had developed very heavily armed four-engine bombers flying in tight defensive formations, but soon learned the hard way that bombers flying alone could not protect themselves effectively. Like Bomber Command, they were getting hammered.

Over the crisis months of the second half of 1943, the Americans, especially, had recognized they needed to rethink how to achieve air superiority, which was their priority for strategic bombing. This had been agreed as early as January 1943 and more formally in early June that year in a directive called POINT-BLANK. The reason for prioritizing the Luftwaffe as a target was twofold: strategic bombing would be considerably more effective if there were no longer any enemy fighters intercepting them along the way; and gaining air superiority over not just the invasion beaches but the skies of all of western Europe was an unequivocally agreed prerequisite before the Allies launched a cross-Channel invasion. Air power was both absolutely vital to the planning of OVERLORD and rightly seen as key to victory on the ground.

In fact, even Hitler had understood the importance of air superiority over the invasion front; it was why his Luftwaffe had been trying to destroy the RAF before he even considered launching troops across the Channel back in 1940. For OVERLORD, however, air superiority was essential over the invasion front so that troops could land without interference from the air, but was also needed much further inland as well. This was because it was recognized that, for all the millions of men and gargantuan amounts of weaponry and supplies being built up in Britain, shipping and port restrictions limited the number of men and amount of materiel that could be landed in Normandy on D-Day, as the day of the invasion was known, and the days immediately after. If the Germans were to have any chance of throwing them back into the sea, they would need to launch a coordinated counter-attack with all their mobile forces as quickly as they possibly

could. Intelligence had shown there were ten German panzer and mobile divisions in the West, so it was critical for the Allies that these units should be slowed, delayed and obstructed as much as possible in their efforts to reach Normandy. In this, the French Résistance had a crucial role, but the hard yards were to be performed by the air forces, who would strike bridges, locomotives, railways and any vehicle that moved during the nine weeks leading up to D-Day and in the days – and weeks – that followed. For the most part, these operations would be carried out by the tactical air forces – that is, those created specially to support ground operations. The bombers were faster, smaller, two-engined varieties that operated at lower levels with the support of fighters and ground-attack aircraft. To fly effectively at lower altitudes, however, it was essential that the skies were largely clear of enemy aircraft. This was why winning air superiority was so important to the Allies. Without it, OVERLORD was a non-starter.

Until very recently, however, it had seemed like a very distant goal. The dilemma back in the autumn of 1943 had been just how to destroy the Luftwaffe, because bombing alone was clearly not cutting the mustard, not least because most of the enemy factories were deep in the Reich where the daylight bombers and even Bomber Command at night could not effectively reach. What was needed, urgently and in large numbers, was a long-range fighter. Only in the nick of time, however, did they realize the solution was, in fact, right under their very noses.

The RAF had had the opportunity to make Spitfires long range, but – largely because of Bomber Command's continuation with night bombing, and the insouciance and lack of vision of men like Leigh-Mallory and even Sir Charles Portal, chief of the Air Staff – had not thought it necessary. However, the previous year a US-built P-51 Mustang had been equipped with a Rolls-Royce Merlin 61 rather than its original Allison engine, and its performance and fuel economy had improved astonishingly. Extra fuel tanks had been added and had made little difference to its speed or manoeuvrability, then so too had discardable drop tanks.

Suddenly, the Allies had a fighter capable of nearly 1,500 miles and able to fly to Berlin and back with ease. That was a game-changer. Unfortunately, however, the American air chiefs had only woken up to the potential of the P-51 in the summer of 1943.

The question that autumn was whether there would be enough Mustangs to make a decisive difference quickly enough. By November 1943, the first complete P-51B Mustang fighter group, the 354th, was in England and the following month they began flying their first missions. By January, a second Mustang fighter group had arrived, while a third, the already legendary 4th Fighter Group, was due to switch from Thunderbolts at the end of February. In March and April more had followed.

At the end of November, the height of the autumn crisis, a new directive, ARGUMENT, had been issued. This was an all-out concentrated offensive against the Luftwaffe and the enemy aircraft industry, but it was held back by the poor weather that descended over Britain and Europe like a shroud for much of the winter. For ARGUMENT to have any chance of success, a spell of high pressure was essential, but not until the third week of February 1944 was there any sign of such a break in the weather.

In what became known simply as 'Big Week', the Allies repeatedly bombed key Luftwaffe factories and did their best to draw the German fighter force into the air. It was the biggest air battle ever witnessed and, although damage to the German aircraft industry was not as great as had been originally hoped, the real victory of Big Week was the blow to German pilots. Losses of aircraft of all types amounted to a staggering 2,605 for February 1944 alone. Such attrition was totally unsustainable; experienced pilots were being chipped away while the new boys were arriving with decreasing amounts of training and were being slaughtered. Yet more were shot down in March and April. Germany was still churning out thousands of fighter aircraft each month, but the ability of its pilots to fly and fight effectively was diminishing further with every passing week. Like the rest of Nazi Germany, the Luftwaffe was in terminal decline.

Meanwhile, the Eighth Air Force was being protected by an increasingly large cadre of highly experienced pilots like Gabby Gabreski. From Oil City, Pennsylvania, he was the son of Polish immigrants and, after the invasion of Poland in September 1939, was determined to join what was then the Air Corps. He soon discovered, however, that he was far from being a natural pilot and very nearly flunked out. Given a reprieve, he scraped through and was posted to Pearl Harbor. He was still there when the Japanese attacked in December 1941, but later managed to get approval to transfer to England and the RAF, where he briefly joined 315 Polish Squadron flying Spitfires. Only once the Eighth began arriving in England in early 1942 did he switch back to the United States Army Air Forces, USAAF, and join the 56th Fighter Group. Since then, incredibly, he had become one of the Eighth's leading aces, developing into not only a fine fighter pilot but a natural leader too. It was around men such as Gabreski that VIII Fighter Command was rapidly growing in strength, confidence and skill.

With the end of Big Week, however, and the rapid approach of OVERLORD, there had been much discussion about, and even consternation over, exactly how the Eighth Air Force in England and RAF Bomber Command should be used in the weeks and months to come. Both were 'strategic' air forces – created, set up and trained to operate independently of any other force. Ever since Eisenhower had been appointed Supreme Allied Commander for OVERLORD in December 1943, however, it had been accepted that by April 1944 the strategic air forces would have to start operating in direct support of OVERLORD. This had prompted deep concerns from the strategic air force commanders, not least General Toey Spaatz, the C-in-C of US Strategic Air Forces, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, the C-in-C of Bomber Command. Both men were deeply committed to strategic bombing and were considerable personalities wielding equally considerable influence. Since taking over Bomber Command in early 1942, Harris had run his force with almost complete autonomy and did not appreciate being told what, where and

when to bomb by either his peers or his superiors. Rather, he preferred to listen to the suggestions of others and then make his own judgement on targets based on a series of considerations about which he felt he and his staff were best placed to decide.

Spaatz was second only to General Henry 'Hap' Arnold in the USAAF and was, by early 1944, hugely experienced, highly regarded and a deep thinker about air power. He carried about him an easy air of sagacity and authority, and commanded a great deal of respect after being the first senior American airman to visit Britain back in 1940, then taking command of the Eighth Air Force before being given key commands in the Mediterranean during the campaigns in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. He had returned to Britain in January as the most senior US airman in the European theatre, with overall command of the Eighth and the Fifteenth Air Forces.

Harris and Spaatz disagreed about how best to use the strategic air forces in support of OVERLORD. Harris believed his ongoing policy of hammering German cities was the most effective use of his force, while Spaatz thought that focusing on hitting German fuel sources was most likely to bring the German war effort to a standstill and so, in turn, help the invasion. With the so-called 'Oil Plan', Spaatz intended to target synthetic-fuel plants as well as Ploesti in Romania, the one real oil well to which the Germans had access. Spaatz reckoned this sustained attack would account for 80 per cent of production and 60 per cent of refining capacity. What was less clear was the time frame within which this might be achieved.

The Deputy Supreme Commander, on the other hand, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, favoured the 'Transportation Plan', in which railways, marshalling yards and bridges would be hit. A lot of the work outlined in this plan would be left to the tactical air forces, who, with their smaller and faster medium twin-engine bombers and fighter-bombers, could fly in at lower levels and hit smaller targets. Where the heavies came in was in attacking the large marshalling yards in major cities in France

and Germany particularly. Harris protested that his bomber force could not be expected to hit targets with the kind of accuracy that would be needed. Even a year earlier this might have been the case, but by the spring of 1944 improved navigational technology and better marking tactics meant that it no longer was. In this, squadrons like 617, which had destroyed the German dams in May 1943, were taking a pioneering lead, using very fast Mosquitoes to drop target-marker flares at low level.

Much has been made of the dispute over how best to use the Allied heavy bomber forces, but in fact the differences of opinion over the priority of targets was secondary to the issues of the chain of command. Really, it was all about control, and more specifically the unwillingness of Harris and, especially, Spaatz to serve under the direct command of Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, a man whom neither liked very much and whom they respected as an air commander even less.

Leigh-Mallory had been one of the first of the key command appointments for OVERLORD the previous summer. Much had changed since then and a number of those singled out early on had been replaced, but Leigh-Mallory, the Commander-in-Chief, Allied Expeditionary Air Force (AEAF), was still very much in place. Younger brother of the famous George Mallory, lost heroically in his attempt to reach the summit of Everest in 1924, he was a career RAF officer, who at the end of the First World War had commanded 8 Squadron, then the first dedicated to army cooperation. In the interwar years he had also commanded the RAF's School of Army Co-operation.

In 1940, however, Leigh-Mallory was commanding 12 Group of RAF Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain, and then later held the all-important command of 11 Group, in the south-east of England, before being promoted to become C-in-C of Fighter Command itself. While in this role he began lobbying to take command of a unified Allied air force for the forthcoming invasion. In the spring of 1943, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, a member of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, believed that

the most important air aspect of D-Day and the subsequent establishment of the beachheads would be the maintenance of air superiority overhead. Both the British and Americans accepted that the air C-in-C should therefore be a fighter commander, so there was some logic, especially given his army cooperation background, in giving that role to Leigh-Mallory.

There is little doubt, however, that Leigh-Mallory's ego, ambition and ability to ingratiate himself with superiors also played a part in his appointment. As head of Fighter Command, with an HQ on the edge of London, he was a stone's throw from Downing Street, the Air Ministry and the War Office. What's more, Portal, who had been based in London ever since becoming chief of the Air Staff in October 1940, had less experience or understanding of how rapidly tactical air power had been developing in North Africa and the Mediterranean. Leigh-Mallory, the commander of the British-based fighter force, was on his doorstep, lobbying hard and saying all the right things.

At the time of his appointment, he had been cooperating with the Americans well enough and providing short-range fighter escorts for the Eighth's bombers. By early 1944, however, with Spaatz now in place in England as overall commander of US Strategic Air Forces, serious doubts were starting to emerge about Leigh-Mallory's abilities. He was perceived to be not much of a team player, had a somewhat aggressive temperament, especially to peers and subordinates, and was as stubborn as a mule. Close examination of his wartime career should also have raised some serious concerns. It was he who had introduced the 'Big Wing' theory of massing four or five fighter squadrons together towards the end of the Battle of Britain. Although they had some psychological value, they were tactically extremely questionable because it took them longer to form up than for the Luftwaffe to reach London and so the aim of intercepting the enemy before they reached their target was scuppered. He oversaw outrageous claims he knew to be false and repeatedly undermined the authority of Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, the first CO of Fighter

Command, and schemed against Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park, commander of the RAF's 11 Fighter Group. Both were sacked to Leigh-Mallory's career advancement. Subsequently, as 11 Group commander and then C-in-C of Fighter Command, he hoarded seventy-five fighter squadrons for ineffective fighter operations over France and north-west Europe. Only very reluctantly did he finally agree to release Spitfires to Malta and North Africa in the spring of 1942, where they swiftly proved decisive; they could quite conceivably have made a significant difference had they been sent in 1941. Even then, he still stubbornly refused to release new Typhoon and Tempest fighters overseas, so there were none operating in Italy, for example.

Nor had he pushed to give Spitfires long-range capabilities, something that could and should have been easily resolved and provided, had he had the inclination and foresight. Instead, masses of Spitfires were flying short-range missions to France and achieving very little as, for the most part, the Luftwaffe quite sensibly refused to play ball. Both Britain and America were blessed with some truly talented and dynamic air commanders, men who had repeatedly proved themselves to be tactically acute, charismatic and wonderful coalition players. Sadly, Leigh-Mallory did not fall into that category.

Over the summer of 1943, Leigh-Mallory had gradually begun to assume the role of Allied Air Commander for OVERLORD and, in August, was the first of the key appointments to be formally approved. It was proving to have been a premature appointment to say the very least. In December, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder had been made Deputy Supreme Allied Commander directly under Eisenhower. This was a smart move and, of course, reflected the vital importance air power was to play in the invasion. Tedder had been Allied Air Forces C-in-C in the Mediterranean, where he had repeatedly proved his skill, vision, operational competence and astuteness. What's more, he worked effectively with Eisenhower and the two got on well; OVERLORD was not the time to be forging new relationships but rather to be building on those

already established. It was also accepted that since Eisenhower was an American, his deputy should be British. No one quibbled over Tedder's appointment.

There were now two tactical air forces for the invasion and they were, on paper at any rate, now directly under Leigh-Mallory's control. The first was the USAAF Ninth Air Force under Lieutenant-General Lewis Brereton, who also had experience of command in the Mediterranean. There were question marks about his overall competence, but none over Brigadier-General Elwood 'Pete' Quesada, the young, dynamic commander of IX Fighter Command. The second was the RAF's newly formed Second Tactical Air Force, and it made perfect sense to give this command to Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, a tough and equally charismatic New Zealander nicknamed 'Mary', supposedly a derivation of 'Maori'. It is hard to imagine a more macho figure with a less appropriate name, but Coningham rather liked it; certainly, it was the name by which he was known to most.

Coningham had played a huge part in the Allies' development of tactical air power. Taking command of the RAF's Desert Air Force in North Africa in the autumn of 1941, he had – with the active support of Tedder, then C-in-C RAF Middle East – spent much time and effort developing concepts of close air support for Eighth Army as they battled back and forth across the desert below, arguing that his forces should support ground operations but should never come under the direct control of the army. He suggested his HQ and the Tactical Headquarters of Eighth Army should be side by side and they should work in the closest of harmony, but while the army could put in specific requests for targets, ultimately such decisions should remain with the air force commanders. In this he had the backing of both Tedder and Churchill.

In partnership with his right-hand man and administrative chief, Air Commodore Tommy Elmhirst, Coningham also honed the operational performance of the Desert Air Force with incredibly effective results. Maintenance was streamlined, while his

squadrons were able to move forward or backwards to operate from different airfields with astonishing efficiency and flexibility. Arguably, it was the Desert Air Force that saved Eighth Army from annihilation after the terrible defeat at Gazala and the loss of Tobruk on 21 June 1942. As the battered remnants of Eighth Army streamed back into Egypt and the Alamein Line, the Desert Air Force never let up on their pursuers, Rommel's Panzerarmee Afrika. Round-the-clock attacks checked the Germans' progress, not only allowing Eighth Army to escape but buying them time to shore up defences at Alamein.

Techniques were further honed during the ground victories at Alam Halfa and Alamein and as Eighth Army chased Rommel's forces in turn all the way to Tunisia. There Coningham was made commander of the newly created North African Tactical Air Force, with the American Brigadier-General Larry Kuter as his deputy. Together, and in perfect harmony, Coningham and Kuter began to establish the tactical air doctrine that holds for close air support even to this day. Training pilots and aircrew in low-level and dive-bombing techniques was part of it, but most important was the method of communication between air and ground forces, which, in essence, involved army forward observers operating in a vehicle on the ground alongside an RAF ground controller and radio operators.

In Tunisia, over Sicily and in Italy, tactical air power became an integral part of offensive ground operations, taken forward not only by Coningham, Elmhirst and Kuter but by other enlightened air commanders such as Jimmy Doolittle, Pete Quesada and more. Operationally and tactically, close air support was constantly being honed, principally by improving the speed with which impromptu requests for strikes from ground troops could be passed on to air forces in the skies above.

It therefore made perfect sense that Mary Coningham should take over command of Second Tactical Air Force with his pioneering understanding, experience and his long collaboration with Tedder. 'Mary Coningham was the logical person,' said General

Pete Quesada, 'and his was the easiest selection of all the selections that had to be made.' General Brereton, too, was well known to Tedder and had enough experience in the Middle East to warrant retaining his position in charge of the Ninth Air Force, especially with Quesada in charge of the Ninth's fighters, which, with their speed, agility and increased fire-power, were by 1944 a crucial part of the ground-attack support role and of keeping any potential enemy fighters – the primary defensive aircraft – at bay.

While that meant the tactical air forces had firm and strong leadership, there remained a massive question mark over the role and chain of command of the strategic air forces, and precisely what role they would play in support. Matters had come to a head on 25 March at a bombing policy conference in which it was agreed that Tedder would coordinate the operations of the strategic forces, while Leigh-Mallory would coordinate the tactical plan, both under the 'direction' of Eisenhower – wording that was eventually ratified by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 7 April.

Eisenhower had been so fed up with the to-ing and fro-ing and differing arguments about both the role of the strategic bombers and the chain of air command that he had privately threatened to resign if a solution could not be found. That day, 25 March, both issues were finally resolved, albeit subject to final approval from the Chiefs of Staff. Eisenhower came down in favour of the Transportation Plan over Spaatz's Oil Plan, because it quite clearly offered more immediate help to his invasion forces. Spaatz had admitted that attacking synthetic-fuel plants would require longer to show results, and in any case there was no reason why, within the broader POINTBLANK directive which still demanded the continued hammering of the Luftwaffe, Spaatz could not order his daylight bombing force to attack such targets as well as marshalling yards. In other words, the Oil Plan could, to a certain extent, sit alongside the Transportation Plan. In fact, Spaatz was delighted by the outcome. Lieutenant-General Ira Eaker, C-in-C of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, who dined with him after the 25 March conference, reckoned he had never seen his old

friend and colleague so jubilant. ‘The strategic British and American Air Forces were not to be put under Leigh-Mallory,’ Eaker reported to Hap Arnold. ‘The communication plan had won out over the oil plan, but Tooey was not too displeased about this, since all had firmly agreed that the German Air Force was to be an all-consuming first priority.’

However, while there now seemed to be a way forward for the strategic air forces, strong concerns remained, because although sound reasons could be found for using heavies against marshalling yards, their proximity to city centres meant that civilians – including French citizens whom the Allies were planning to liberate – would inevitably be killed and wounded in the process. Bombing had become considerably more accurate in recent months, but it was still not precise enough to avoid collateral damage. Bombing Frenchmen did not sit easily with a number of Allied war leaders, especially not Churchill and his Cabinet, who took a very grave view of the plan. ‘Considering that they are all our friends,’ the prime minister wrote to Eisenhower on 3 April, ‘this might be held to be an act of very great severity, bringing much hatred on the Allied Air Forces.’

After discussions with Tedder, Eisenhower replied two days later, pointing out that one of the prime factors in the decision to launch the invasion was the use of overwhelming air power. ‘I and my military advisors have become convinced that the bombing of these centers will increase our chances for success in the critical battle,’ he wrote, adding that he believed estimates of civilian casualties, some as high as 160,000, had been massively exaggerated. ‘The French people are now slaves,’ he told Churchill. ‘Only a successful OVERLORD can free them. No one has a greater stake in the success of that operation than have the French.’ Everything would be done to avoid loss of life, but he felt very strongly that it would be ‘sheer folly’ to overlook any operation that would dramatically improve the chances of the invasion’s success. And at the beginning of April 1944, despite the huge materiel superiority of the Allies, the cross-Channel invasion, all the way from

southern England to Normandy, still looked an immensely difficult and fraught operation. For Eisenhower, the most senior military officer for the entire operation, OVERLORD was in no regard a foregone conclusion. It is hard to imagine the oppressive burden of responsibility resting on his shoulders.

On 19 April, Eisenhower gave Spaatz direct authority to bomb oil targets, while bombers from the Eighth and Bomber Command struck at marshalling yards and even bridges over the Seine and Meuse rivers. At the same time, bombers and fighters from the tactical air forces continued to destroy further bridges, railway lines and any sign of enemy movement all across France and the Low Countries. Any targets in this large swathe of western Europe were potentially useful to OVERLORD, while at the same time helping to keep the enemy guessing where the invasion would actually come.

Eisenhower had also agreed on 19 April to give greater priority to targeting V-1 flying bomb and V-2 rocket sites. These were so-called *Vergeltungswaffen* – ‘vengeance’ weapons – that had been developed by Nazi scientists. The Allies had been aware of them for some time and had targeted Peenemünde, the testing site on the Baltic coast, for precisely that reason. Since the previous May they had also been monitoring the launch sites being built in northern France for both V-1 bombs and V-2 rockets. Operation CROSSBOW had begun that November specifically to target these sites, which appeared to be being built with the aim of directly attacking Britain. That was potentially bad enough, but the concern, of course, was that once the invasion began they would be turned towards Normandy too. The British had been sufficiently worried about the devastation they might cause to ask Eisenhower to give their destruction priority over all other air attacks apart from those urgent requirements for OVERLORD. This he had now agreed to do.

Meanwhile, Bomber Command were also doing a very good job of disproving Harris’s earlier concerns about a lack of accuracy.

On the night of 19/20 May, for example, Bomber Command simultaneously hit the railway yards at Boulogne, Orléans, Amiens, Tours and Le Mans with considerable success. Orly, Reims, Liège and Brussels were all plastered by the Eighth on the 20th. On the 21st, the first day of CHATTANOOGA CHOO CHOO, the Eighth claimed ninety-one locomotives destroyed. Le Mans and Orléans were hit again by Bomber Command on 22/23 May. The Eighth struck at bridges along the Seine and enemy airfields in France on 25 May. Aachen was hit heavily by Bomber Command on 27/28 May, its marshalling yards severely damaged and all traffic through this major thoroughfare halted. So it had gone on, night after night, day after day.

For the Luftwaffe, these were dark days indeed. Once the spearhead of the dazzling Blitzkrieg victories, it had become a depository for huge numbers of increasingly under-par fighter aircraft for which there was no longer enough fuel nor sufficiently trained pilots. Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring was still commander-in-chief, but his star had long been on the wane and his influence over Hitler had plummeted. He had always been a far better businessman and Machiavellian politician than air commander in any case; like Hitler, he chopped and changed his plans and tactics continually.

For the most part, the Luftwaffe was run by Göring's number two, Feldmarschall Erhard Milch, and the Luftwaffe General Staff, although day-to-day operations were left in the hands of a number of much younger and highly capable commanders desperately trying to salvage some kind of order from the mounting mayhem and increasingly impossible demands from Hitler. At a meeting about supply and procurement on 21 April, General der Flieger Adolf Galland, still only thirty-two and a highly decorated fighter ace in his own right, warned that the Allies had already gained not only superiority but almost supremacy. 'The ratio in which we fight today is about one to seven. The standard of the Americans is extraordinarily high,' he reported. 'During each enemy raid we lose about fifty fighters. Things have gone so far that

the danger of a collapse of our arm exists.' Something had to be done, and he urged Milch and the procurement teams to hurry up and bring the exciting Messerschmitt 262 jet fighter into service at the earliest available opportunity. Only this miracle weapon, he suggested, could turn the tide in the air war.

Galland's fighter pilots were simply being swamped by the growing number of American day-fighters: Thunderbolts with drop tanks flying over north-west Europe and Mustangs penetrating deep into the Reich. One of those battling against the massed formations of the enemy was twenty-two-year-old Leutnant Wolfgang Fischer, a Focke-Wulf 190 fighter pilot of 3./Jagdgeschwader 2 (JG2). From the tiny town of Waldthurn in the ancient Upper Palatinate Forest in Bavaria, he had joined the Luftwaffe in late 1939 although he had not initially been chosen for flying training, instead becoming an 'airmen/general duties', which to Fischer had meant the lowest of the low. In fact, he had worked in the *Wetterzentrale* – the meteorological office – deciphering Allied weather reports, but continued to try to get posted for pilot training, a dream that had finally come true in February 1942. It was not until more than two years later, however, that he had at last been posted to a front-line fighter squadron, having first retrained as a night-fighter and then been assigned as a temporary instructor. 'It had been a long and at times incomprehensible road,' he wrote. 'But now that road was finally behind me.' No matter how frustrating it had been, however, such a long apprenticeship would certainly give him a much greater chance than the vast majority of fighter pilots being newly sent to the front. Very few now had a blind-flying certificate or anything like the number of hours in their logbooks that Fischer had.

Initially, he had joined 4./JG2 in Italy, where the last few Luftwaffe units were still based. Flying a Messerschmitt 109G-6, he and his fellows had almost immediately been told to fly to southern France, but en route they had run into some American P-39 Aircobras and Fischer had been shot down. Bailing out safely, he had then been forced to complete the journey to Aix-en-Provence

by train. There he had been reassigned to 3./JG2, which flew Focke-Wulfs rather than 109s, and on 1 May the I. Gruppe had been posted up to Cormeilles, north-west of Paris. With this as their new base, they would operate daily from forward airfields further to the west, usually flying two or three sorties each a day, mostly against marauding fighter-bombers, or 'Jabos' as the Germans called them, from *Jagdbomber*.

After a week, 2. and 3. Staffeln had been moved again, this time to Boissy-le-Bois, near Beauvais to the north-west of Paris, and were quartered in a luxurious small chateau. Fischer might have enjoyed it had it not been for the permanent air of tension and fear. Every morning on the bus taking them to the airfield, he could not help wondering who might still be there the following day. The only time the dead weight of apprehension left him was the moment the airfield loudspeakers ordered them to scramble. Then the ground crew would hurriedly pull back the camouflage netting, push them clear of the trees, and Fischer would clamber up and into the cockpit and get moving. Only then, focusing solely on flying, did his mind start to clear.

Thursday, 25 May, was typical of the daily missions he and his comrades were now flying. Scrambled to intercept a formation of enemy bombers approaching, they climbed until ahead of them they spotted some 120 B-24 Liberators, flying in four distinct boxes and surrounded by at least fifty P-38 Lightnings. There were just five in Fischer's *Staffel*. They pressed on and, still in formation, made a headlong pass over the outer box of B-24s, claiming a *Herausschuss* in the process – a bomber that was damaged and so began falling out of formation. The German fighter pilots flew on, however, before turning to attack some P-38s that seemed not to have noticed them. Leutnant Walterscheid, the *Staffelkapitän*, shot down two and Fischer hit a third. 'Its pilot,' noted Fischer, 'immediately bailed out and tumbled past beneath my wings like a badly wrapped parcel.'

One of Fischer's colleagues was in trouble, however. 'Start travelling!' Fischer yelled at him over the radio. 'Start travelling!' But

it made no difference. By now, more P-38s were swarming around them and, with tracers hurtling past his cockpit, he pushed the stick forward and dived, almost vertically. To his great relief, none of the American pilots followed. Heading for home, he safely touched back down, but was joined by only two others; two more dead pilots were found in the burning wreckage of their Focke-Wulfs a couple of hours later.

Recognizing that operating in such small formations could achieve very little, General Galland and Generalmajor 'Beppo' Schmid, commander of I. Jagddivision, had begun, by the second half of May, sending up massed formations of 50–150 of their fighters to intercept the bombers. It meant they could attack only one formation at a time, but it was the only way to confront the hordes of American fighters; VIII Fighter Command was now regularly sending out as many as 600 fighters with every bomber raid.

On Sunday, 28 May, a little over a week before D-Day, more than 850 of Eighth Air Force's bombers were sent out on two separate raids against mainly oil targets, principally around Magdeburg and Leuna in eastern Germany. Among the 697 fighter aircraft dispatched to escort them were fifty-six P-51 Mustangs of the 354th Fighter Group. The 354th, although flying with the Eighth, were actually only on loan from the Ninth Air Force and were due to rejoin IX Fighter Command once the invasion got under way. For the past few months, however, they had been racking up scores against the Luftwaffe and making aces out of an increasing number of their pilots.

Among them was twenty-four-year-old Dick Turner, commander of the 356th Fighter Squadron, newly promoted to major and now leading the entire group. Adopting a similar approach to Colonel Zemke, Turner split his three squadrons as they escorted the 3rd Bomb Division's Flying Fortresses on their mission to bomb the Brabag synthetic-fuel complex at Magdeburg-Rothensee, so that two were covering the north of the bomber formation while his squadron was to the south. It was now around 2 p.m., and Turner took his own Red Section up to 30,000 feet flying top cover, while

the other three sections remained lower down at about 22,000 feet. Glancing out, Turner could see the bomber formation glinting in the afternoon sun below, stretching across the sky, their contrails following.

Of the enemy there was no sign, but then suddenly he heard excited chatter over his radio as a large number of German fighters attacked from the north directly into the other two squadrons of the 354th. Knowing he and his own squadron could not abandon their southern sector, on they flew, listening as one after another of their colleagues excitedly made their claims over the airwaves. 'There is no torture,' he noted later, 'comparable to that suffered by a fighter pilot forced to listen to a nearby aerial action which he cannot join.'

Eventually the battle died away and the bombers hit their target, but then, just as Turner was about to turn for home, his wingman spotted a 'bogier' – an enemy aircraft heading towards them. Turner now ordered his squadron to try to intercept. As they got closer, he wondered at its odd shape – it was certainly unlike any fighter plane he had seen before. It was probably one of the Luftwaffe's new jet or rocket planes, and possibly the Me262 jet, which was entering service that April. At any rate, his four different flights were converging on this peculiar aircraft when it suddenly dived at incredible speed, then pulled away, disappearing before they had a chance to pursue and despite the Mustangs flying at a true airspeed of over 400 m.p.h. themselves.

Back safely on the ground in England, and still wondering what he had seen up there in the skies over Magdeburg, Turner discovered that not only the 354th but the Eighth as a whole had had a very successful day. For the loss of just nine aircraft, the Americans had shot down and heavily damaged seventy-eight enemy planes, with eighteen German pilots killed or missing. What's more, the last week of flying had shown that every aircraft shot up on the ground had been at least 500 miles from the Normandy beaches. This meant the majority of the Luftwaffe's fighter force had been successfully pushed back into the Reich – from

where they could not interfere with the D-Day landings. The battle in the air was very much a part of the wider battle that was about to begin on the beaches and in the hedgerows of Normandy. A vital stepping stone to Allied victory had already been achieved.

For the Luftwaffe, 28 May had been a dark day. Those losses were devastating. Then came even more shattering news. Fighter leaders like Galland and Schmid knew they were losing, and understood they were reaching a stage where losses in pilots could no longer be made up. Their one hope lay in the development of dazzling new aircraft, and especially the Me262 jet. Even this, it seemed, was now being taken away from them. At a meeting on 23 May at the Berghof, the Führer had discovered that Milch had been developing the Me262 as a jet fighter. Hitler had earlier demanded it be a bomber. When he learned he had been duped, he was apoplectic. So too was Milch, but he wasn't the Führer. The news reached Galland and Schmid that evening of Sunday, 28 May: the Me262, on which so much of their future hopes had been resting, was being taken away from their jurisdiction. 'The fighter arm and the defence of the Reich, which had seen in the jet fighter the saviour from an untenable situation,' noted Galland, 'now had to bury all hopes.'