

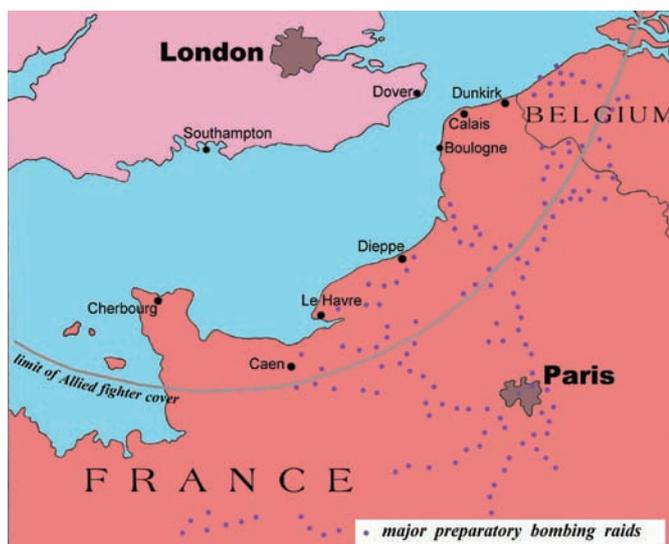
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AUSTRALIAN AIR CONTRIBUTION TO D-DAY OPERATIONS



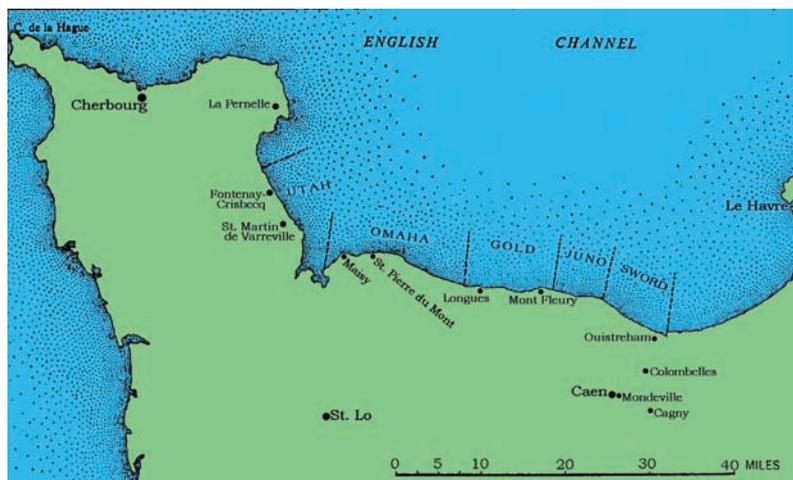
After two years of planning and preparation, the Allied invasion of northern France on 6 June 1944 returned ground forces to European soil from where they had been ignominiously ejected in 1940. 'Operation Overlord' involved the landing of five infantry divisions on the first day, at Normandy beaches adjacent to Varreville and Ouistreham codenamed (from west to east) *Utah*, *Omaha*, *Gold*, *Juno* and *Sword*. To ensure that the lodgement of these forces would not be seriously impaired by enemy reinforcements, a combined air campaign was launched to isolate the battlefield. Although no ships of the Royal Australian Navy or formed units of the Australian Army took part in the great invasion effort, the story was very different in the air.

During the early morning of 6 June, seven Australian 'Article-XV' squadrons contributed to the Bomber and Fighter Command attacks on various targets on the Normandy beaches and surrounding areas. Two formations of 13 Lancaster aircraft from 460 Squadron each attacked Fontenay-Crisbecq and St Martin de Varreville, while 463 and 467 Squadrons struck at gun emplacements at St Pierre du Mont that covered the *Omaha* beach. Thirteen Halifax bombers from 466 Squadron bombed

a German battery at Maisy. The Spitfire-equipped 453 Squadron undertook 43 sorties in support of the landing forces on the first day. The Mosquito night fighters of 456 Squadron flew 18 sorties on the night of 5/6 and 6/7 June, and shot down a German He-177. The other Mosquito squadron, 464, mounted 20 sorties on the night of 5/6 June that successfully interdicted enemy rail and road communication, bridges, and enemy troop convoys.

Other Australian airmen serving in RAF squadrons are known to have played a part in the various operations that supported the landing. Some were involved in deceptions undertaken as part of the aerial 'cover' plan, while others jammed enemy early-warning radar. At least one Australian pilot from 139 Squadron was involved in Mosquito 'Intruder' operations to secure the eastern flank of the landing operation from enemy air interference. Many more transport crews with Nos 38 and 46 Groups, RAF, took part in the large-scale airdrops that also occurred on 5-6 June. Still others were in RAF squadrons of Bomber Command flying alongside the nominally 'Australian' units in the attack on Maisy, and against similar targets at La Pernelle, Longues and Mont Fleury.

Even after the Allied beachhead was secured, 453 Squadron was intimately involved in follow-on operations. From 11 June the squadron staged through an advanced landing ground in newly captured territory,



before occupying another known as ALG B.11 a fortnight later. On 25 June the Spitfires flew 35 sorties. The next day, two patrols engaged in combat with German FW-190 fighters, resulting in the squadron claiming two FW-190s probably destroyed and five damaged. When not preventing incursions by German fighters, the unit flew armed reconnaissance missions and attacked enemy motor transport. During June, 453 Squadron flew 720 operational sorties in which it destroyed three, probably destroyed three and damaged five enemy aircraft. As a result of ground strafing operations it claimed the destruction of one tank, one armoured car, and 16 enemy motor vehicles. It also had some success against maritime targets—a merchantman and a flak ship were damaged.



453 Squadron transfers its operational base to Normandy, 25 June 1944.

Air operations continued at a similar tempo during July. In support of both 'Operation Goodwood' (the failed British attempt on 18 July to advance from Caen) and 'Operation Cobra' (the American Army break-out from the lodgement area at St. Lo scheduled for 20 July), the Allied strategic bombing force attacked enemy tactical positions. The Australian squadrons with Bomber Command participated in this effort. Twenty 460 Squadron Lancaster and 14 Halifax aircraft from 466 Squadron attacked Caen on 7 July. From 18 July, 463, 466 and 467 crews were included in the formation of over 200 aircraft that each bombed Colombelles, Mondeville and Cagny during 'Goodwood'.

The Australian Spitfire squadron remained based in the continent until 29 September, when it departed from Deurne, near Antwerp, bound for Coltishall. The squadron had operated from various landing grounds in support of the northern thrust of the Allied armies, which had forced the German forces to retreat to the Dutch-Belgian border, where a combination of logistic deficiencies and discussion on strategy halted the advance. The bold attempt to break the strategic impasse—the landing of the American 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions at Eindhoven and Nijmegen and the British 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem, to seize and hold bridges over the Rhine and establish an axis of advance that the British 30 Corps could exploit to cross into Germany—was supported by the Tactical Air Force squadrons.

Australian Squadrons based in Great Britain were also involved after the D-Day landing. The two Coastal Command anti-submarine squadrons, 10 and 461, operated to prevent any interference by the German Navy. The anti-ship strike squadron, 455, attacked German E and R boats that were a threat to the naval force deployed off the beachhead, as well as enemy convoys. In addition, the Mosquito intruders of 464 Squadron targeted German rail traffic and communication facilities.

Official figures indicate that, all told, there were 986 Australian aircrew in the ten RAAF squadrons operational on D-Day, while a further 1816 Australian aircrew were assigned to RAF squadrons involved in the invasion campaign. Even if not all of these 2800 Australians flew in operations on 6 June or immediately after, most would have participated in the campaign in some way. Although not numerically large, Australian airmen nonetheless made a significant contribution to the success of D-Day and subsequent operations.

Although it can be surgically precise when precision is called for, air power is, at bottom, a blunt instrument designed to break things and kill people in pursuit of clear and military achievable objectives.

Dr Benjamin D. Lambeth, 2001



Air Power Development Centre
Level 3, 205 Anketell Street
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041
Email: airpower@defence.gov.au
Web: www.raaf.gov.au/airpower

