

OPERATION OVERLORD:

Proving the Viability of the Army's Operating Concept

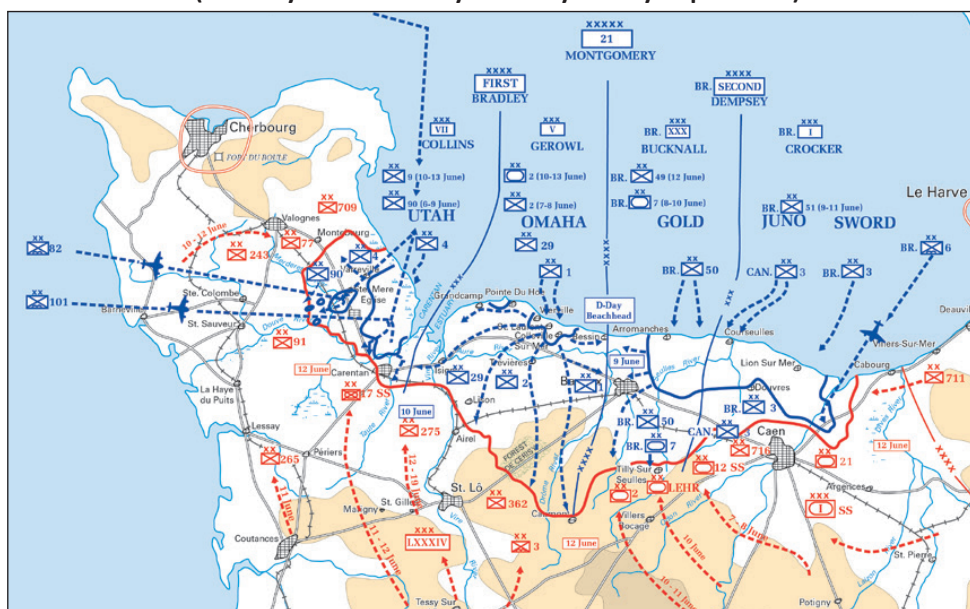
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On 6 June 1944, the Allied forces embarked on one of the greatest military feats in history. Operation Overlord, the code name for the Allied invasion of Normandy, France, was revolutionary in its scale, complexity, and integration of multinational air, land, and naval capabilities.¹ The lessons learned from this operation are evident in the U.S. Army's present-day warfighting doctrine. In October 2022, the U.S. Army updated its operating concept, transitioning from unified land operations to multidomain operations (MDO).² While the Army's MDO concept aims to ensure success against peer adversaries on current and future battlefields, it has received its share of vitriol from critics emphasizing its highly conceptual nature. In a 2020 article, LTC Amos Fox argued that MDO doctrine fails to adequately describe its concept and application of dominance.³ In addition, MAJ Jesse L. Skates identified that critics often argue that MDO pertains primarily to echelons above division and fails to define its application for the bulk of the Army's fighting formations.⁴ Regardless of these criticisms, the MDO principle of unified action, its tenets, and its imperatives enabled Operation Overlord's success as a joint, multinational, multidomain operation, proving the viability of the Army's MDO concept to achieving victory on future battlefields.

Unified Action

Unified action is foundational to success in MDO and involves synchronizing and integrating the activities of the collective force toward common objectives.⁵ Operation Overlord consisted of a conglomerate of forces operating under the command of the Supreme Allied Commander, GEN Dwight Eisenhower.⁶ Through his staff and subordinate commanders, GEN Eisenhower coordinated the activities of nine army divisions, and more than 5,000 ships and 13,000 aircraft in support of the largest amphibious assault in

Map — Normandy, 1944 — The Invasion and Operations, 6-12 June 1944
(Courtesy of U.S. Military Academy History Department)



history.⁷ While unified action enabled success, Operation Overlord also highlighted the role of joint and multinational operations in winning the multidomain fight.

Joint Operations

The U.S. Army could not have achieved success during Operation Overlord without the support of its sister services. The MDO concept acknowledges that joint operations, consisting of two or more services, provide a relative advantage by exploiting capabilities across multiple domains.⁸ For example, during Operation Overlord, an extensive air offensive that severely degraded the German Air Force and Army's logistical capabilities preceded the troop landings on the beaches of Normandy.⁹ Furthermore, Allied air forces enabled the insertion of three airborne divisions to secure the flanks of the beach landing sites, preventing German reinforcement and counterattacks.¹⁰ Finally, the beach landings required naval support to secure maritime lines of communication and to transport land forces across the English Channel.¹¹ In addition to unified action of the joint force, Operation Overlord required the combined efforts of the Allies' multinational force to achieve success.

Multinational Operations

Similarly, to the concept of joint operations, Operation Overlord would not have been successful if executed unilaterally. The MDO concept identifies that while multinational operations may present challenges due to cultural, language, and procedural differences, they also provide additional capabilities, strength, and international legitimacy.¹² The Allied air power supporting Operation Overlord utilized the U.S. Eighth, Ninth, and 15th Air Forces; the British Air Force's Bomber Command, and the Canadian Second Air Force to establish air superiority and degrade the German military's capabilities.¹³ The Allied maritime force consisted of vessels from six different nations (Great Britain, United States, France, Holland, Norway, and Poland), whose combined efforts provided the capabilities necessary to securely transport the massive land force across the English Channel and onto Normandy's beaches.¹⁴ Finally, the Allied land component for Operation Overlord consisted of five American divisions (the 4th, 1st, and 29th Infantry Divisions along with the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions), three British divisions (the 3rd and 50th Infantry Divisions along with the 6th Airborne Division), and the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division.¹⁵ Although no single nation's military had the capabilities and strength necessary for success, the combined might of the multinational Allied force did. Moreover, the employment of the Allied force, congruent with the tenets of MDO, enabled mission success.

Tenets of MDO

According to Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, the tenets of MDO describe critical elements that leaders must incorporate into operational planning and execution; these are agility, convergence, endurance, and depth. These tenets create opportunities for the friendly force to capitalize on and improve the likelihood of success. During Operation Overlord, the Allies' superior agility, along with their achievement of convergence, greatly influenced mission accomplishment.

Agility

Agility is essential to victory in rapidly evolving battlefields. Agility refers to the ability to shift forces, operations, and activities quicker than the opposition; it allows the friendly force to capitalize on opportunities, conditions, and advantages to improve the likelihood of success.¹⁶ During Operation Overlord, the U.S. 4th Infantry Division exploited conditions to quickly overwhelm the defending German forces and secure the beachhead on Utah Beach, while Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division had parachuted in during the previous period of darkness and caused mass confusion among the German defenders.¹⁷ The 101st secured the Allies' western flank as well as disrupted and dislodged enemy forces, creating favorable conditions for the 4th Infantry Division to capitalize on.¹⁸ In addition to agility, convergence also influenced the Allies' success.



Navy landing ships unload reinforcements, heavy weapons, and additional supplies on Omaha Beach in Normandy, France, in June 1944. (National Archives photo)

Convergence

The tenet of convergence is fundamental to the Army's MDO concept. Convergence occurs when capabilities across multiple domains create desired effects, providing windows of opportunity for the friendly force to utilize.¹⁹ Operation Overlord's success was dependent on the convergence of effects across the air, land, and maritime domains. The Allied air campaign established air superiority, degraded enemy logistical capabilities, inserted airborne forces, collected intelligence, and provided air-to-ground attacks.²⁰ On land, the airborne divisions inserted behind enemy lines, disrupted enemy defenses, and destroyed artillery systems in support of the assault force.²¹ In the maritime domain, the Allied naval forces eliminated enemy maritime threats; transported personnel, equipment, and supplies; provided long-range supporting fires; and provided critical logistical support to sustain operations.²² The Allies' ability to achieve convergence facilitated the liberation of France and Germany's subsequent defeat. Although the MDO tenets created conditions for success, its imperatives were equally important to victory.

Imperatives of MDO

The imperatives of MDO describe the critical actions that the friendly force must take to ensure operational success; these are based upon conditions within the operational environment and significant threat capabilities.²³ The Army's operational concept includes nine different imperatives to successful operations. The Allies' adherence to the MDO imperatives to "make initial contact with the smallest element possible" and "impose multiple dilemmas on the enemy" created the conditions necessary for success during Operation Overlord.²⁴

Make Initial Contact with the Smallest Element Possible

Leaders preserve combat power by making enemy contact with the smallest element. This imperative enables commanders to develop and assess the situation along with the composition and disposition of the enemy force. Developing this understanding then enables employment of the friendly force in its most advantageous manner.²⁵ During Operation Overlord, the Allies' employment of airborne forces shaped conditions for the main body's success. For example, 1LT Richard Winters and 12 other paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division destroyed four enemy 105mm guns and more than 50 enemy personnel manning the German defensive position overlooking Utah Beach; this enabled the 4th Infantry Division

to quickly secure the Utah beachhead.²⁶ Likewise, the Allies' ability to create dilemmas for the enemy enabled them to exploit advantages.

Impose Multiple Dilemmas on the Enemy

Imposing dilemmas on the enemy creates advantageous opportunities for the friendly force. Dilemmas disrupt the enemy's decision-making processes, forcing them to prioritize resources against competing requirements.²⁷ The Allies utilized a robust deception plan in support of operations across multiple domains to create dilemmas for the German forces. Deception operations led the Germans to believe that the Allies' intended landing location was further north and east than the Normandy beaches.²⁸ The Allies' deception operation was so effective that even as landings were occurring at Normandy, the German High Command remained convinced that a greater invasion would still be attacking to the northeast at Pas de Calais.²⁹ This dilemma resulted in the failure of the German Army to commit its reserve Panzer divisions to Normandy in time to stop the Allies from securing their objectives and their subsequent breakout eastward.³⁰ The Allies' successful imposition of dilemmas on the Germans created exploitable opportunities that opened a western front in Europe and heralded the fall of Nazi Germany.

Conclusion

Although untested in the contemporary operational environment, Operation Overlord provides a historical example that supports the Army's shift in operating concept. The operation's overwhelming success as a joint, multinational, multidomain operation proves the viability of the Army's MDO concept to achieving victory on future battlefields. The MDO principle of unified action is essential to synchronizing and integrating the efforts and capabilities of the joint and multinational force. Joint operations provide a relative advantage for the friendly force by enabling the exploitation of capabilities across multiple domains, and multinational operations provide the capabilities, resources, and international legitimacy required to defeat peer adversaries.³¹ The tenets of MDO, such as agility and convergence, improve the likelihood of success by creating opportunities for the friendly force to exploit. Finally, the MDO imperatives outline critical actions that ensure operational success.³² Ultimately, the Allies' success on the beaches of Normandy provides a blueprint for victory in MDO against peer adversaries.

Notes

¹ James R. Webb, "How Operation Overlord Set the Tone for 8 Decades of Warfighting," *Coffee or Die Magazine*, 4 June 2021, <https://coffeeordie.com/overlord-warfighting-precedent>.

² Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, October 2022, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN36290-FM_3-0-000-WEB-2.pdf.

³ LTC Amos C. Fox, "Getting Multi-Domain Operations Right: Two Critical Flaws in the U.S. Army's Multi-Domain Operations Concept, AUSA, 16 June 2020, <https://www.ausa.org/publications/getting-multi-domain-operations-right-two-critical-flaws-us-armys-multi-domain>.

⁴ MAJ Jesse L. Skates, "Multi-Domain Operations at Division and Below," *Military Review* (January-February 2021): 68-75, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/JF-21/Skates-Multi-Domain-Ops-1.pdf>.

⁵ FM 3-0.

⁶ Williamson Murray, "D-Day: Operation Overlord," *Military History*, Suppl. America's Great Battles, 1775-2002, 2002, 58-67, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/d-day-operation-overlord/docview/212664036/se-2>.

⁷ U.S. European Command, "D-Day: The Beaches, n.d., <https://www.eucom.mil/document/40471/operation-overlord-june-6-1944>.

⁸ FM 3-0.

⁹ Murray, "D-Day: Operation Overlord."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² FM 3-0.

¹³ National Park Service, "A United Force: Eisenhower and AAF Strategy for Operation Overlord," n.d., <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/a-united-force-eisenhower-and-aaf-strategy-for-operation-overlord.htm>.

¹⁴ U.S. European Command, "D-Day: The Beaches."

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ FM 3-0.

¹⁷ Murray, "D-Day: Operation Overlord."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ FM 3-0.

²⁰ Murray, "D-Day: Operation Overlord."

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ FM 3-0.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Murray, "D-Day: Operation Overlord."

²⁷ FM 3-0.

²⁸ Bryon Greenwald, "Why Normandy Still Matters: Seventy-Five Years On, Operation Overlord Inspires, Instructs, and Invites Us to Be Better Joint Warfighters," *Joint Force Quarterly* 95 (18 November 2019): 58-69, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2018929/why-normandy-still-matters-seventy-five-years-on-operation-overlord-inspires-in/>.

²⁹ Murray, "D-Day: Operation Overlord."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ FM 3-0.

³² Ibid.

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