

**★ GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY ACTIVITY 5**



## D-Day: Utah Beach

### TWO BEACHES

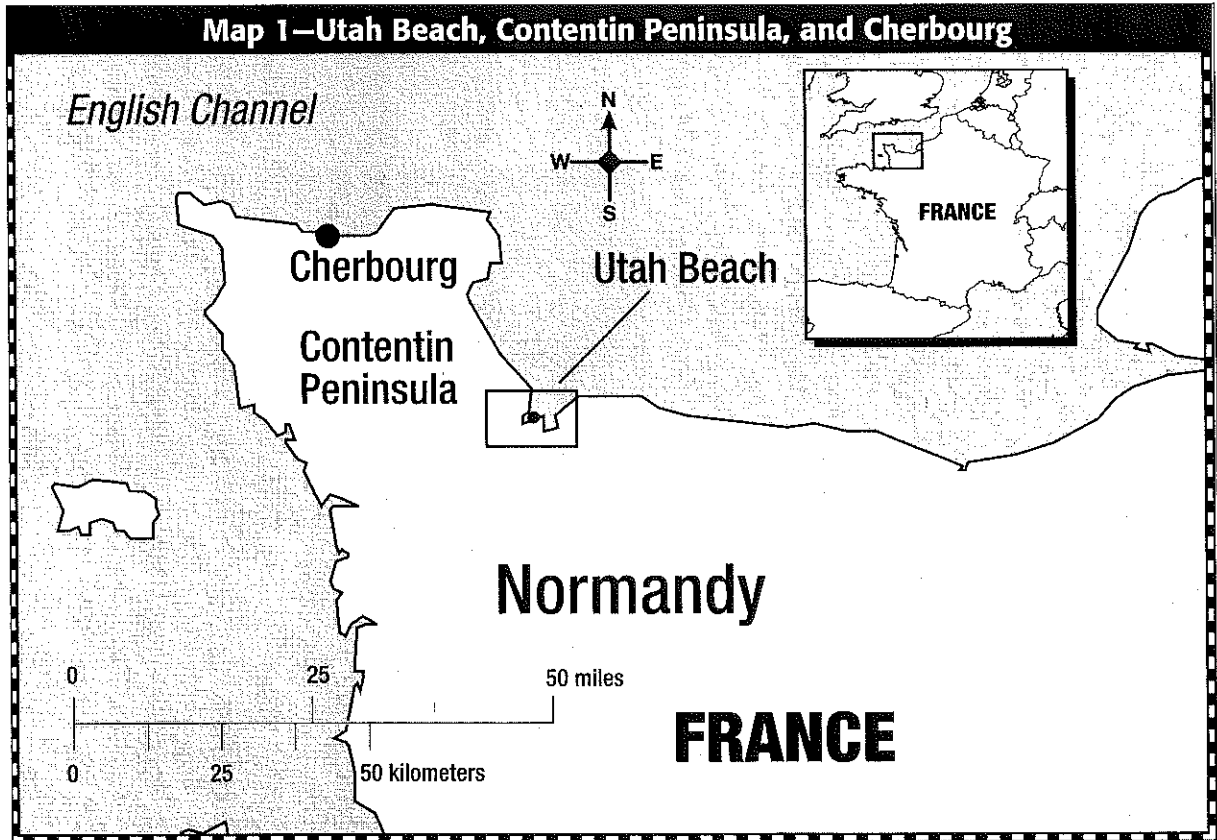
On June 6, 1944, or D-Day, Allied troops landed on five beaches in Normandy, France. The two beaches on which American troops landed were Omaha Beach and Utah Beach. These beaches differed in terrain and in the amount of German defenses in place. Landings at both were successful, but the invasion of Utah Beach was accomplished with fewer than 300 lives lost due in part to these differences. Furthermore, there was a surprising error in the landing on Utah Beach. The troops came ashore south of where the invasion had been planned.

### THE TERRAIN AT UTAH BEACH

Utah Beach is a nine-mile stretch on the eastern shore of the Cotentin Peninsula of France. (See Map 1.) It was the westernmost beach of the five Allied landing areas in the Normandy Invasion. Utah is similar to many beaches along the eastern coast of the United States. At low tide, a gentle slope of yellow sand is visible for about 350 yards out to sea. The Germans planted obstacles in it to make an invasion from sea difficult.

The plan called for the soldiers to cross that section of the beach where they would come to a few yards of dry sand with

**UNIT 5**



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The map shows the location of Utah Beach on the Cotentin Peninsula, and Cherbourg on the northern tip of the peninsula.

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# ★ GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY ACTIVITY 5 (continued)

**UNIT 5**

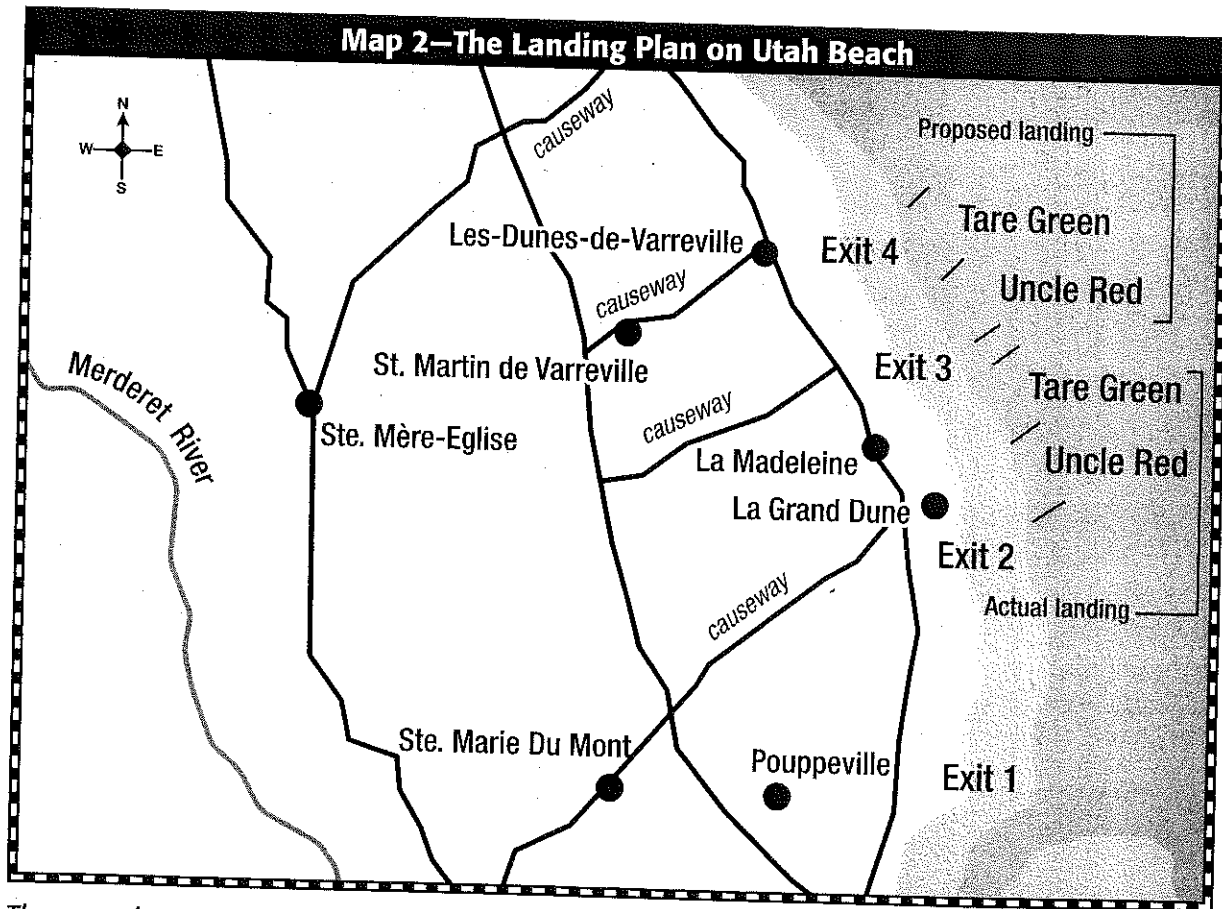
driftwood, seaweed, and shells. A wide belt of sand dunes then faced the soldiers for another 100 yards. Most of the dunes were 10 to 20 feet high and partially covered with beach grass. The Germans had built a low concrete wall on the seaward side of the dunes. German artillery, along with miles of barbed wire and thousands of mines, were dug into the dunes.

The terrain beyond the beach was also important to the troops' ability to move inland quickly. Behind the dunes, a road ran parallel to the beach. Four exit roads called "causeways" ran inland perpendicular to the beach. The causeways crossed fields that the Germans had flooded by damming rivers. Behind the flooded fields,

German troops were stationed at every village with artillery aimed at the causeways.

### THE PLAN

The invasion of Utah Beach was to take place in the Tare Green and Uncle Red sectors, with Exit 3 the approximate middle of the landing area. (See Map 2.) Four waves of troops would land at the beach. The troops would cross the beach, seize control of the roads, link up with the airborne troops dropped inland earlier, and move toward the port town of Cherbourg, France, at the northern tip of the peninsula. The first landing was to be opposite Les-Dunes-de-Varreville. Although that was the plan, it is not exactly what happened.



The map shows where the American troops intended to land on Utah Beach, where they actually landed, the four exits from the beach, the roads or "causeways," and the nearby towns.

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## ★ GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY ACTIVITY 5 (continued)

### WHERE ARE WE?

Some of the landing craft of the first wave hit sandbars and the troops jumped into waist-deep water about 200 feet from shore. They made their way to shore, and some crossed the beach and went up the dunes. Before the invasion, the officers had carefully studied the terrain on maps. After looking at their surroundings from the dunes, they knew they were in the wrong area of the beach.

The troops had actually landed near Exit 2, about 2,000 yards south of the proposed landing area. The water was shallower at Exit 2 than at Exit 3, which is why some of the landing craft ran onto sandbars. The deeper water at Exit 3 was one reason it was the targeted landing site. The officers faced the important decision of whether to move the whole operation north to Exits 3 and 4 where they had planned to land, or to stay where they were. General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., made the decision with the famous quote, "We'll start the war from right here."

### HOW IT HAPPENED

An important factor in the miscalculation was that exploding mines at sea destroyed three of the four landing control crafts (LCC). The LCC were 36-foot boats equipped with small radios and radar equipment for guiding the landing crafts to the shore. That left only one LCC to guide the landing.

There were also physical features of the land and water that contributed to the error. The current in the English Channel was a significant factor. The North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean meet in the Channel, resulting in very strong currents and rough seas. The English Channel was also still whipped up from previous storms.

In addition, the terrain of the beach and smoke from the battle contributed to the

soldiers' confusion. The entire stretch of beach looked the same. Radar was not helpful for distinguishing one area from another. There were no church spires, buildings, or outstanding landforms with which to visually judge location. At the same time, air force planes were dropping bombs, naval support ships at sea were firing away, mines were exploding, and German artillery was returning fire. All of this created a tremendous amount of smoke, so even if there had been beach landmarks, they would not have been visible.

### A GOOD DECISION

It was a good decision to stay where they landed. The Germans had more heavily defended the proposed landing site and the troops would have had more difficulty breaking through. By the end of the day, Exits 1, 2, and 3 were secured, contact was made with the paratroopers, and the United States troops were pushing inland.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- ▷ Utah Beach was a late addition to the areas scheduled for invasion. It was added to ensure capture of the port town of Cherbourg on the northern tip of the Cotentin Peninsula.
- ▷ Rope nets were dropped over the side of the large ships and the men climbed down into the landing crafts that would take them to shore. The rough waters in the English Channel made this process more difficult than anticipated.
- ▷ Today Utah Beach holds monuments to D-Day and is the site of the Utah Beach Museum, built in 1962. You can also find tourists enjoying a leisurely day at the beach.

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**★ GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY ACTIVITY 5 (continued)**

**UNIT 5**

**APPLYING GEOGRAPHY TO HISTORY**

**Directions:** Write the answer to each question in the space provided.

**Recalling Information**

- 1. List the types of defenses the Germans had in place on and around Utah Beach.

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- 2. What was one reason the proposed landing site on Utah Beach was farther north than the actual landing site?

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- 3. When the officers looked at their surroundings from the dunes, they knew they were in the wrong location. Why did they not realize this earlier?

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**Critical Thinking**

- 4. **Determining Cause and Effect** Why would the Germans purposefully flood the fields near the beaches?

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- 5. **Analyzing Information Strategically**, why would control of Cherbourg be important?

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- 6. **Synthesizing Information** On a separate sheet of paper, describe a beach you have seen either at an ocean or lake, or in a picture. Begin the description at the water's edge and continue moving away from the water until a street or road is reached. Decide whether your beach would be easier or more difficult to invade than Utah Beach and explain why.