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Eisenhower and D-Day

By Gleaves Whitney

On June 6, 1944, General Dwight D. Eisenhower was arguably the most powerful man in the world. He was the supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, the hand-picked leader of Operation Overlord, the largest amphibious assault in human history. The Allies' mission to retake western Europe from Hitler's Third Reich depended on the success of Operation Overlord.
In addition to being the largest amphibious assault in human history, Operation Overlord was the defining experience in the lives of millions of men and women. Eisenhower never forgot the human impact of D-day and the days that followed. In his wartime memoir, *Crusade in Europe*, Ike wrote of the hellish encounter with death: "I was conducted through [the battlefield] on foot, to encounter scenes that could be described only by Dante. It was literally possible to walk for hundreds of yards at a time, stepping on nothing but dead and decaying flesh."

To Eisenhower soldiers were no pawns. On the eve of the June 6 invasion, he left headquarters to inspect the 101st Airborn Division. Military planners were anticipating that the 101st would suffer 80 percent casualties. It says much about Ike's character that he wanted to go out to these men, say a few words, and look them in the eye before sending them into combat. When Americans elected Ike president in 1952, and reelected him in 1956, they knew they were choosing a man who was fully alive to the horrors of war.

Americans also knew that they were choosing a man with the skills to manage virtually any difficulty he would encounter. Ike, after all, was the man most responsible for launching the greatest amphibious invasion -- against the fiercest enemy -- in human history. Not an exercise for wimpy CEO's, this.

As Carl Shilleto and Mike Tolhurst write in *D-Day and the Battle for Normandy,* "During the first few months of 1944 the south of England was transformed into a giant military base. Over three million soldiers, sailors, and airmen were training to play their part in the invasion of Europe.... Headquarters staff officers carefully coordinated and recorded the movement of every unit to ensure that the planned movement and embarkation of the fighting troops and the transfer of their vital supplies would run with clockwork precision. With an initial assault force of over 170,000 men and 20,000 vehicles it was a logistical nightmare for the planners involved.... Over 1,000 supply vessels and 4,124 landing ships and craft would be used to transport the combat troops and their equipment across the English Channel. For the protection of the naval convoys, and to help soften up the German coastal defenses by naval bombardment, an additional 1,213 warships would sail with the armada."

D-Day required Eisenhower to develop another important skill in a commander in chief -- diplomacy. The Allies' coalition was the most complex alliance of nations ever attempted. It was often under stress of fracturing, and Ike had to marry up huge egos: Roosevelt, Churchill, De Gaulle, Montgomery, and Patton, to name a few of the more colorful. Less than a week before the invasion, Ike met with Churchill and De Gaulle in the Operation Overlord War Room. De Gaulle was so furious with the PR he was receiving that Ike led him out of the War Room and into the rain to give him "the elbow room ... to wave his arms." Ike did some arm waving, too. Nevertheless, the storm passed, and the coalition held. (Read an account of this scene in David Eisenhower's engaging biography of his grandfather, *Eisenhower: At War, 1943-1945,* pp. 246-47).

Eisenhower also had to learn to deal with the press before, during, and after D-Day, and he handled them truthfully but shrewdly. Not a bad skill for a future president of the U.S. to cultivate.

Ike possessed another essential element of good leadership -- the willingness to accept full responsibility for his decisions and actions. On the eve of major battles, he would write out a note explaining that he bore full responsibility for anything under his command that had gone wrong. On June 5, 1944, he wrote:
"Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone."[1]

Another leadership quality Eisenhower possessed was his common touch, his ability to make ordinary Americans feel at ease with him. Part of his easy charm was displayed in the famous "Ike grin," but his affinity for others went much deeper. As he said to those under his command, "I cannot let this day pass without telling the fighting men that my proudest boast shall always be: I was their fellow soldier."

Finally, Eisenhower exuded confidence. He never shrank from his duty or a tough challenge. The people around Ike found his can-do spirit contagious. They needed a leader who possessed the inner resources to get through ordeals that would make other men go wobbly in the knees. Ike's confidence expressed itself in the challenges he was willing to take on. Just as Ike sought to be the supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, so he wanted to be president of the United States. In both arenas, he believed he could do the job.

On June 6, 1944, Eisenhower was arguably the most powerful man in the world -- on his shoulders lay the burden of the greatest amphibious invasion ever. The war was a pressure cooker that required Ike to develop his leadership. He knew the gravity of combat; the importance of vision; the necessity of conceiving and executing a good plan. He understood the requirements of diplomacy; the importance of communicating with the press; and the need to inspire ordinary men and women to extraordinary feats. All these qualities served Eisenhower well during World War II, when he was supreme allied commander. They prepared him eight years later to be the commander in chief of the United States and the leader of the free world.

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[1] The original of Ike's handwritten note is in the Eisenhower Museum, Abilene, Kansas.