

ISMS XIV Conference (6-8 November 2023)
Defence Alliances and Partnerships

PROPOSAL

Managing Coalition Tensions in the 'Field': Working Inside the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force during the 1944 Normandy Campaign

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[Preferred Working Group: Military History]

The Second World War provides numerous examples of multinational groupings delivering military effect to achieve decisive outcomes. It also offers considerable evidence of the challenges that exist in planning and conducting coalition and alliance operations. It was a conflict conducted on a vast global scale requiring the complete mobilization of national resources along with active cooperation not just at the political/grand strategic but across the full range of levels of war.

Following the Japanese attack, and the subsequent decision by Adolf Hitler to also declare war, the United States was now forcibly aligned with the British Commonwealth, the also recently attacked Soviet Union and the series of smaller governments-in-exile which had continued to resist. The following month, in January 1942, a formal coalition was established around the idea of the United Nations to which 22 national representatives signed its founding document. With the United States agreeing to focus efforts against the Axis European powers, the grand strategic objective became Germany's defeat. Whilst military operations continued in North Africa and the Mediterranean, political discussions held at Casablanca in January 1943 resulted in an agreement to invade occupied Europe and, by the year's end, the agreed target was the northern French region of Normandy.

These decisions were informed by dedicated planning bodies. The first headed by General Sir Frederick Morgan, the Chief of Staff Supreme Allied Command (COSSAC), was absorbed in February 1944 into the newly created Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF). Both COSSAC and SHAEF were integrated U.S.-British organizations tasked with bringing together military forces for operations on the Continent. As the plans moved towards implementation, SHAEF provided the means to direct the operations of several subordinate inter-allied headquarters, including separate commands for the land, air and maritime domains.

The planning stage of what subsequently became Operation NEPTUNE (the initial assault which aimed to secure a lodgement along the French Normandy coast) and its associated Operation OVERLORD (the breakout and exploitation which would culminate in the liberation of Paris) saw generally good relations within the headquarters. Following the invasion on 6 June 1944 and the transition to the actual warfighting phase, greater tensions began to emerge and as the campaign continued through the summer these carried the potential to critically undermine the coalition's cohesion. There were a variety of reasons for this such as diverging political outlooks and competing national agendas, constraints

resulting from competition for resources, issues relating to interoperability, a lack of shared doctrine and differences in military and strategic culture and even the personalities of those involved. Whilst campaign success was ultimately achieved and the operation's objectives were met slightly ahead of schedule, the Allied coalition was left more susceptible to external media and political pressures. These became ever more visible throughout the remainder of the year as offensive operations struggled to maintain momentum, first in the Low Countries and then following the final Axis counter-attack in the West, later referred to as the Battle of the Bulge.

This paper will examine the challenges which faced the coalition headquarters staff operating in what were termed as SHAEF Main and SHAEF Forward, both of which until 1 September 1944 remained at distance from the combat operations taking place in France. It will draw on first-hand accounts from archival material held at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives and the Imperial War Museum in Britain and from the Eisenhower Presidential Library and U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center in the United States supplemented by relevant secondary sources. Drawing on the accounts provided by a number of key participants, this will create a sense of how the multinational headquarters functioned during this period, the tensions which emerged (and why this was the case) and the operational constraints this created, both in terms of the Normandy campaign and subsequent activities. Whilst the scale and scope of SHAEF's activity are unlikely to be repeated, the complexity of experiences encountered during NEPTUNE/OVERLORD provides valuable lessons which have an enduring utility for contemporary planning and military operations.