

Collins

INVASION



Alan Gibbons and Robbie Gibbons

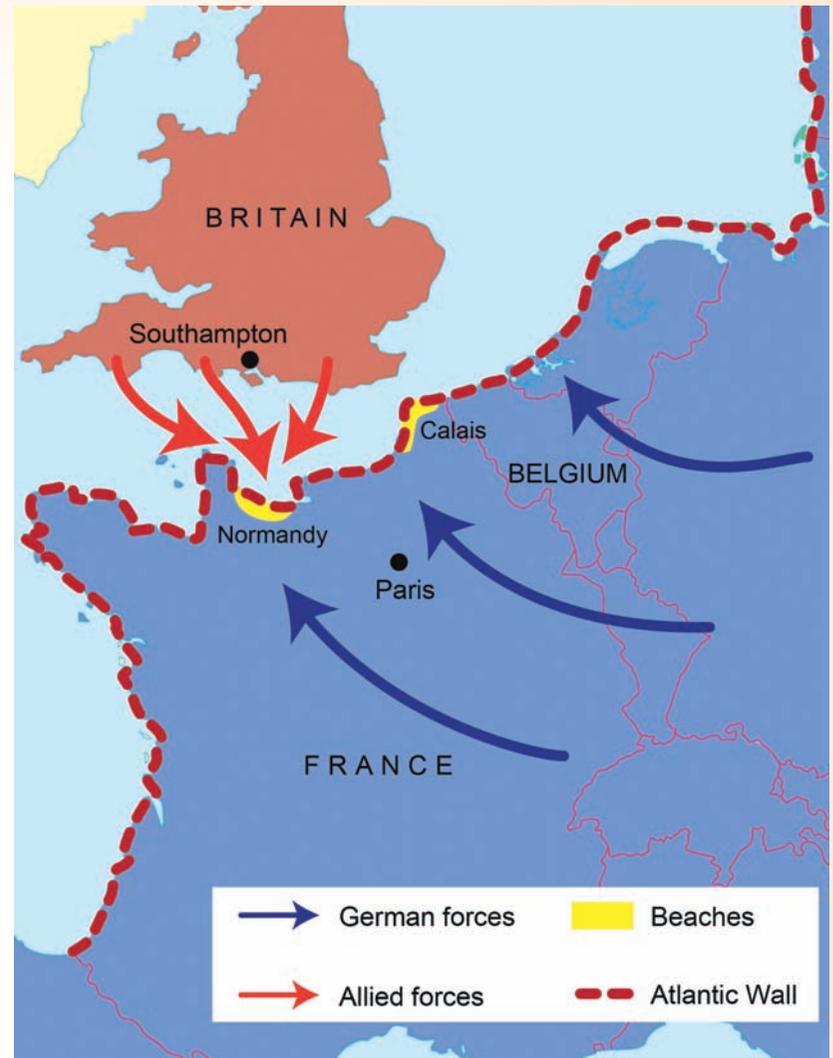
INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered what it is like to go into battle? For most of us it is hard to imagine how it must feel to get up one morning and know that you may not come back that night. Somewhere out there people are waiting to try and kill you. When you step onto enemy ground, you will be walking into the jaws of death.

That is how it was for the soldiers who crossed the English Channel on 6th June, 1944. Hitler's armies had conquered most of Europe. Germany ruled countries including France, Holland, Belgium and Poland. Now, forces from the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and others were waiting to land on the beaches of Normandy in France to free Europe from Hitler. These forces were known as the Allies.

Men were about to embark on the greatest and most terrifying journey of their lives. This is the story I am about to tell. This is D-Day.

Alan Gibbons



In 1944, the German forces were in control of many parts of Europe. They were expecting their enemies to fight back, and they had built huge defences along most of the coast of western Europe. This was known as the Atlantic Wall.

WEDNESDAY 31ST MAY, 1944, 7PM

HEADING FOR THE COAST

“Do you think this is it?”

It’s Joe’s voice. I can see him staring at me in the dark. We’ve been passing convoys of trucks for hours. The roads are full of them.

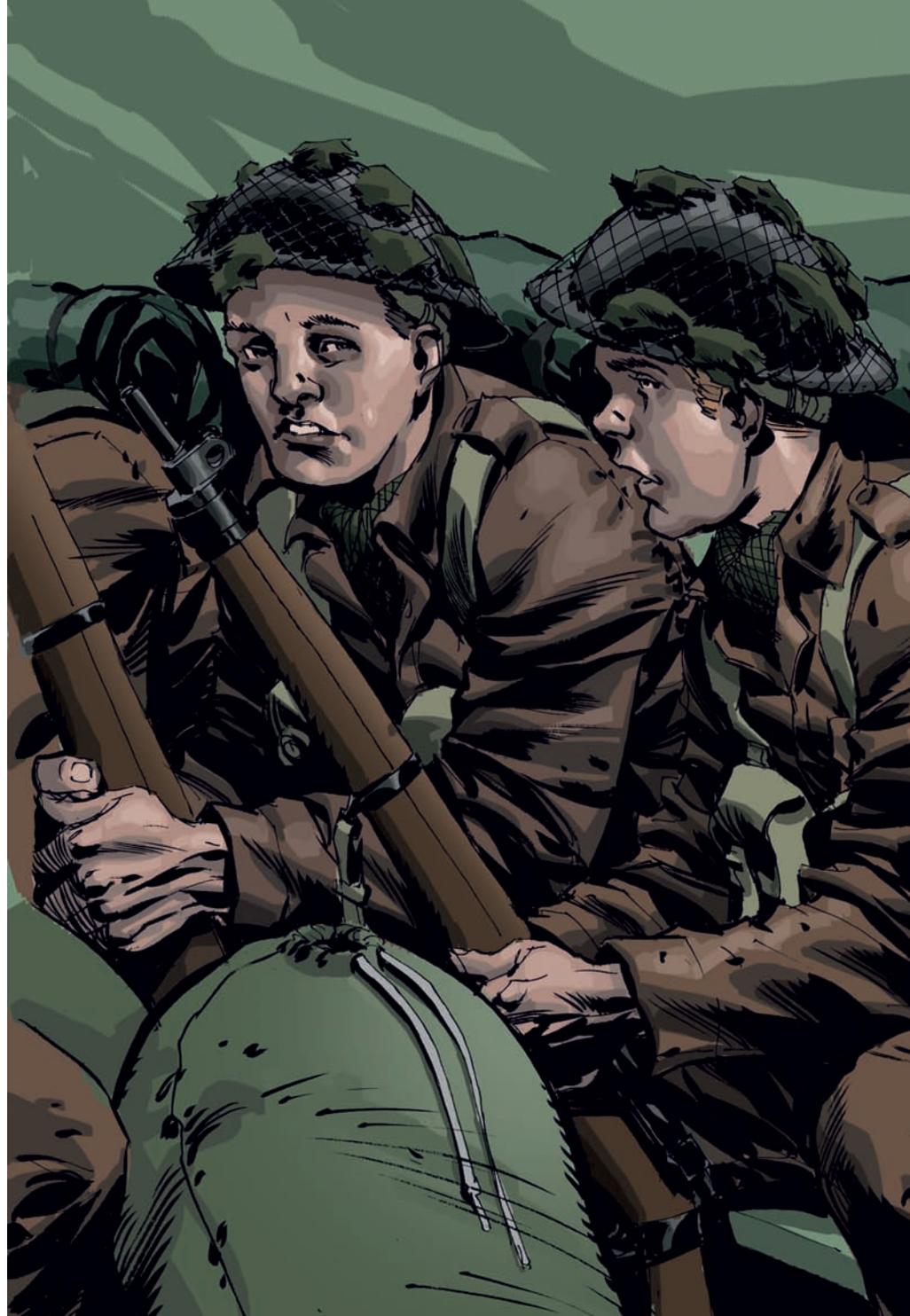
Our lorry goes over a bump and throws everybody together. We all moan. We’ve been travelling for hours and we’re fed up. Helmets fall over eyes. Equipment clatters to the floor.

Behind us, the canvas slaps in the wind. It is a wet, squally night. I shove my helmet back. I remember what Joe asked before the bump and I give him my answer.

“The invasion, you mean?”

He nods. “That’s right.”

“Yes, this is it.”



Joe and I have been mates right through training. I know all about him. He lives with his mum, dad and sister. He's got a girlfriend called Ann. He knows all about my family, too. We tell each other everything. Back home, we only live a mile or so apart. Funny thing is, we didn't know each other at all before the war. Now we're best friends.

Joe's a thinker. He reads a lot. He helps the other lads with their letters home. He's better at spelling than any of us and he knows tons of long words.

He lowers his voice.

"Do you get scared, Robbo?"

This time I don't get the chance to answer. Sarge hears what Joe's saying.

"Only idiots say they don't get scared," he says. "You're meant to be scared when somebody's shooting at you. It keeps you sharp."



His voice is gruff. He doesn't expect us to reply.

"We've been waiting to go back to France since Dunkirk," he says. "Jerry gave us a kicking that time. We're going to pay him back."

I say what everybody is thinking.

"What's it like, Sarge?"

“Noisy.”

Then he goes quiet. I can see the look on his face. In his mind, he is back on the beach, facing the German guns. “It was hell, son. It was hell.”

I see that faraway look again. I wonder what goes through his mind when he is lying awake.

Joe waits until the men are snoring, then he nudges me.

“I wish I was as sure of things as Sarge,” he says.

“He’s a veteran,” I tell him. “He’s seen it all before.”

“I keep wondering how I’m going to act,” he says. “I don’t want to let anybody down.”

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “You won’t.”

“I wish I was as sure as you are.”

THE SAME DAY, 8.30PM

READY TO GO

We reach a checkpoint. We can see the shapes of tents in the rain. There are guards in red caps. They’ve got dogs on leads. Joe stares, then gives a low whistle.

“This is it, all right,” he says.

As we pile out of the lorry, fighter planes roar overhead. Sarge squints up through the rain at the aircraft.

“They’re to stop Jerry snooping around,” he grunts.

He spots the colonel making his way down and orders us to form up.

Colonel Allen gives a short speech: "This is the assembly area for the invasion of France. Nobody takes a single step out of this area. The penalty for desertion is death. We have trained long and hard for this moment. In a few hours we will cross the Channel and attack the beaches. Good luck, men."



We drift off to our tents and bed down.

Joe is quiet for a few minutes. Finally, he pulls out an envelope. It's a letter from his mother. He taps one part. "Read that."

You tell those lads in your platoon they've got to bring my boy home.

"I'll get you home in one piece," I tell him. "You watch my back and I'll watch yours."

I stick out a hand and we shake on it. I will be asleep in five minutes. I could sleep on a washing line. I know Joe will lie awake for hours listening to the tap of the rain on the roof of the tent. He's like that. He thinks too much.

SATURDAY 3RD JUNE, 2PM

SOUTHAMPTON

The wait is over. We are moving out.
Sarge seems even more grumpy than usual.

“Filthy weather,” he says.

The wind is driving the rain in sheets. We climb aboard our lorry and set off for Southampton. The air is full of dust and fumes. It gets in our eyes and lungs. We crawl all the way. It is as if the whole Army is on the move.

This is it. We are on our way to France to sort out Mr Hitler.

I’ve never seen Joe so quiet.

“Cheer up, mate,” I say. “It might never happen.”

He pulls a face.

“I think it’s just about to.”

We board ship and lean on the rails. The wind is even stronger down here on the coast. The rain dances on the dock.



“Look at those waves,” I say. “I can say goodbye to my dinner.”

There is no answer from Joe. His mind is already in France.

Soon the ship’s engines pound and we are on our way. Rain and spray sweep the deck.

The weather drives us down into the belly of the ship. It is hot and sweaty below decks. My uniform sticks to my back.

We drop anchor just off shore.

“What now?” I grumble.

“We wait,” Sarge says. “That’s what soldiers do. We wait for orders.”

The rocking of the ship tells us a gale is blowing outside. If anything, it is worse than when we came on board.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Joe asks.

“Normandy,” Sarge replies.

Joe frowns. “Normandy? Surely Calais is a quicker crossing.”

Sarge taps his nose. “That’s what Hitler and his pals are thinking.” He nods in the direction of the officers looking at their maps. “It’s Normandy all right.”

Some of the men are playing cards or Bingo. Others are reading. Joe just sits, thinking. I wonder whether to say something. Maybe I should get him to snap out of it.

I decide against it. My nerves are jangling, so his must be too.

NORMANDY OR CALAIS?

Over 130,000 Allied soldiers took part in the invasion. There were more than 190,000 sailors, and over 11,000 aircraft were involved.

The invasion forces gathered in southern England while all kinds of tricks were used to fool the German army, so that Hitler thought the Allies would land at Calais. Instead, the Allies chose the much longer crossing to Normandy.



Giant ships carry tanks and trucks across the Channel to Normandy.



Allied troops preparing to leave England

Once on the beaches, the Allied forces had to cross the Atlantic Wall. This was a huge line of defence, armed with pill boxes, artillery, machine guns and barbed wire. It stretched from the north of Norway to the border between France and Spain.

By the time of the invasion, the Germans had laid nearly six million mines in northern France.



A surviving pill box in northern France