



THE NATIONAL  
WWII MUSEUM  
NEW ORLEANS

**A Picture's Worth 1,000 Words**  
"Reading" Photographs as a Primary Source

A Lesson from  
the Education Department

The National WWII Museum  
945 Magazine Street  
New Orleans, LA 70130  
(504) 528-1944

[www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education](http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education)

## **A Picture's Worth 1,000 Words** "Reading" Photographs as a Primary Source

Primary sources can be documents, pictures, or artifacts that were produced during a certain time. Because they are a primary source, photographs can be a very useful piece of information when analyzing historical events. They provide concrete, visual evidence that allow students to conceptualize events of the past when viewed with a critical eye. The following sets of photographs related to the D-Day invasion of Normandy give students an opportunity to examine and analyze the complexities of that operation's planning and engagement.

**OBJECTIVE:** Students will analyze the complexity of the D-Day operation by learning to "read" primary source photographs from the time period.

**GRADE LEVEL:** 7-12

**STANDARDS:** History Thinking Standard 2—the student comprehends a variety of historical sources and can draw upon photographs to clarify, illustrate, or elaborate upon information presented in historical narrative.

Content Era 8 (1929-1945), Standard 3B—the student understands World War II and how the Allies prevailed. Standard 3C—the student explains how the United States mobilized its economic and military resources during World War II.

**TIME REQUIREMENT:** One to two class periods.

### **DIRECTIONS:**

1. Introduce this activity as a "photograph-reading" exercise. Be sure to discuss how to "read" a photograph before students begin. A D-Day Fact Sheet is included if students need a brief overview of D-Day.
2. Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one set of photographs—A through E (5 photos in each set). Have each group choose a recorder and a presenter.
3. Give students 10-15 minutes to view and discuss their photos within each group. Students should study each picture carefully, examining them for information about their set of photographs specific part in the D-Day Invasion.
4. Copy and pass out one worksheet for each group to complete.
5. The groups will then present their results while showing their photographs to the class. *Make sure the photos in each group are presented in order.* Presentations should include group title, a brief description of each photograph, and the group's interpretation of how their photographs fit into the chronology of D-Day.
6. After all five presentations, the teacher will lead a review discussion on how these photographs fit into the D-Day chronology and how photographs can be used as primary sources when analyzing historical events.

**ASSESSMENT:** Components for assessment include the group worksheet and the presentation.

**ENRICHMENT:** Have students write descriptive paragraphs about any current event by "reading" photographs from newspapers and magazines.

**A Picture's Worth 1,000 Words**  
"Reading" Photographs as a Primary Source  
Student Worksheet

**Group Members:**

**Directions:** Photographs are important primary sources of historical information. They help us visualize events as they occurred, offering the careful viewer important clues for interpreting the past. Use your set of D-Day photographs to gain a better understanding about the events that unfolded during the Allied invasion of Normandy. Make sure to examine your photos for several minutes before you begin the worksheet.

1. Give a title that represents the content or theme of your set of photographs.
  
2. Present details from each photograph explaining how it fits into your set and relates to your title.
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.
  
3. Is there anything in your photographs that you do not understand, that you do not recognize, or that raised questions that would require further research?
  
4. How do you think your set of photographs fit into the timeline of D-Day?
  
5. What are the pluses and minuses of using photographs like these to analyze historical events?



A-1) A large coastal gun in a concrete bunker.

*Ullstein Bilderdienst, Berlin*



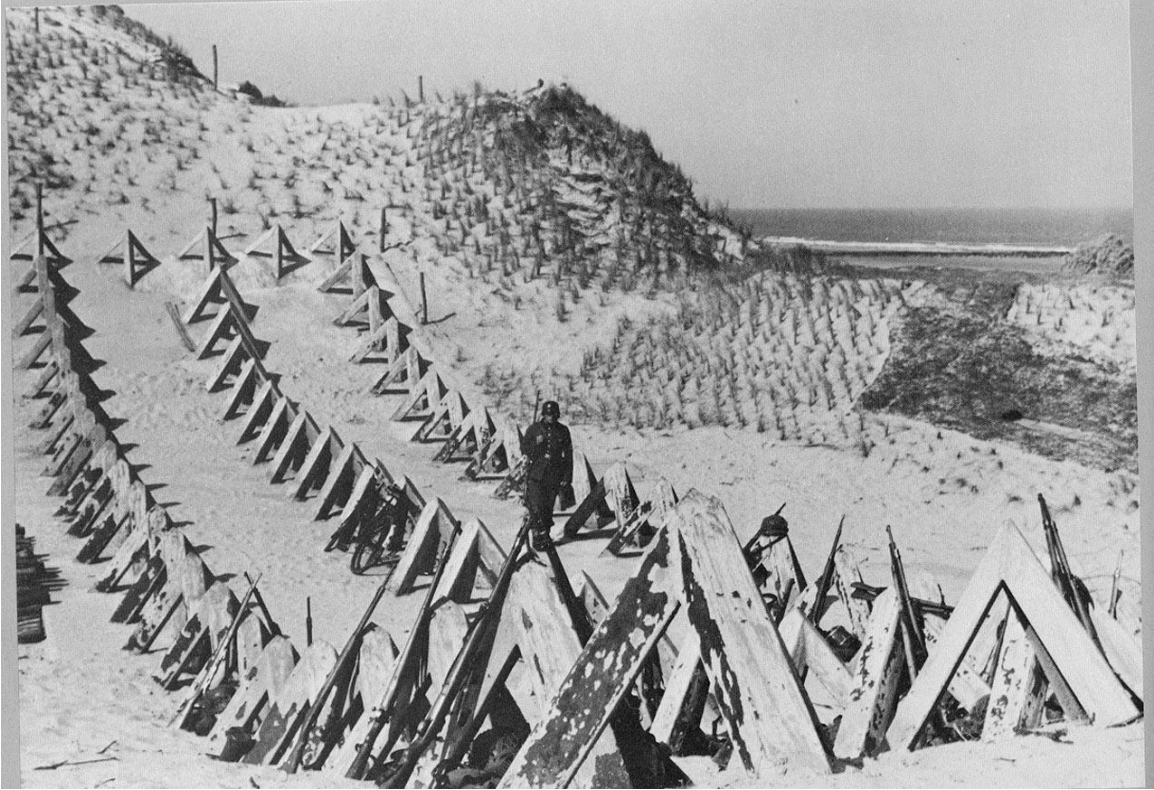
A-2) A German gun emplacement on the Atlantic Wall.

*Bundesarchiv, Koblenz*



A-3) Ramps, hedgehogs, mine-tipped poles, and tetrahedrons on a Normandy beach.

*US Air Force*



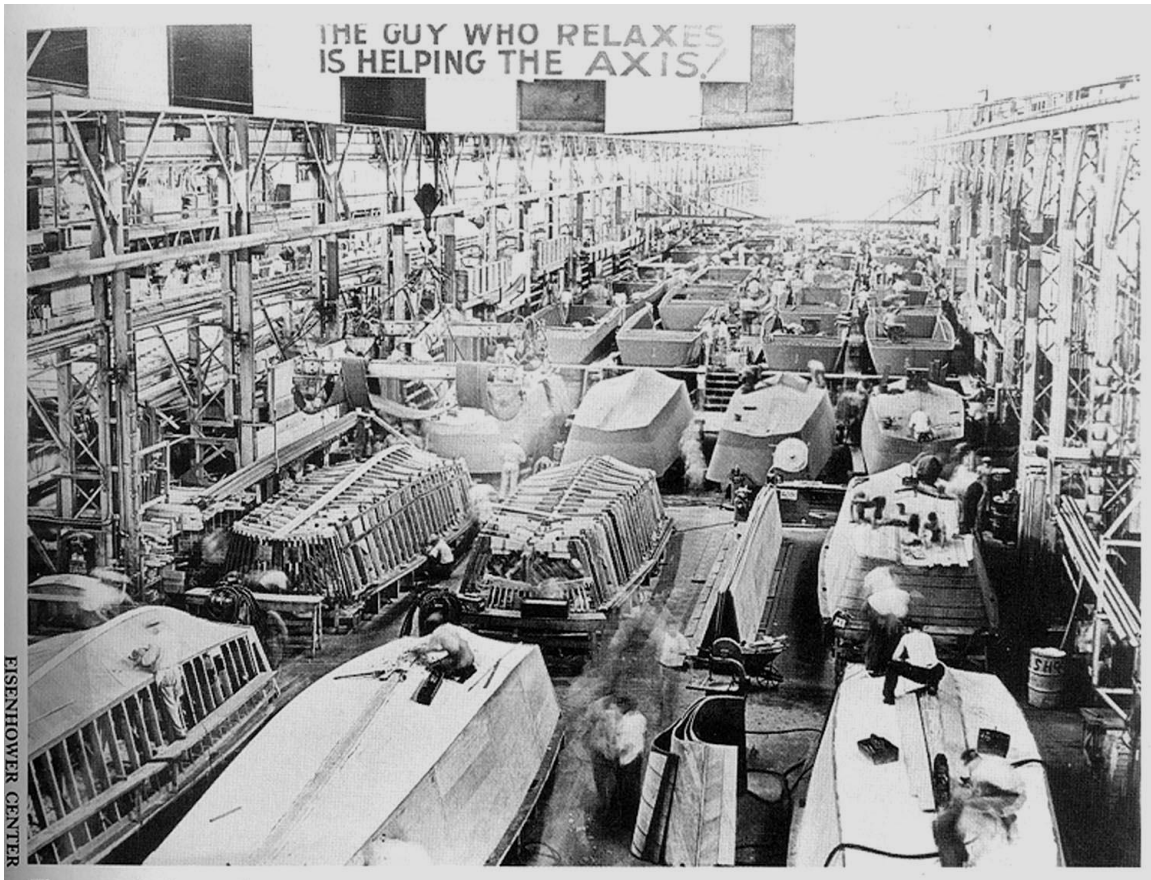
A-4) Anti-tank obstacles. *Budesarchiv, Koblenz*



A-5) Barbed wire/ Normandy beach. *US Army*



B-1) LCVP's/ PT boats/ LCSs on Bayou St. John awaiting shipment. *Graham Haddock*



B-2) A Higgins Industries factory producing LCVPs.

*Eisenhower Center*



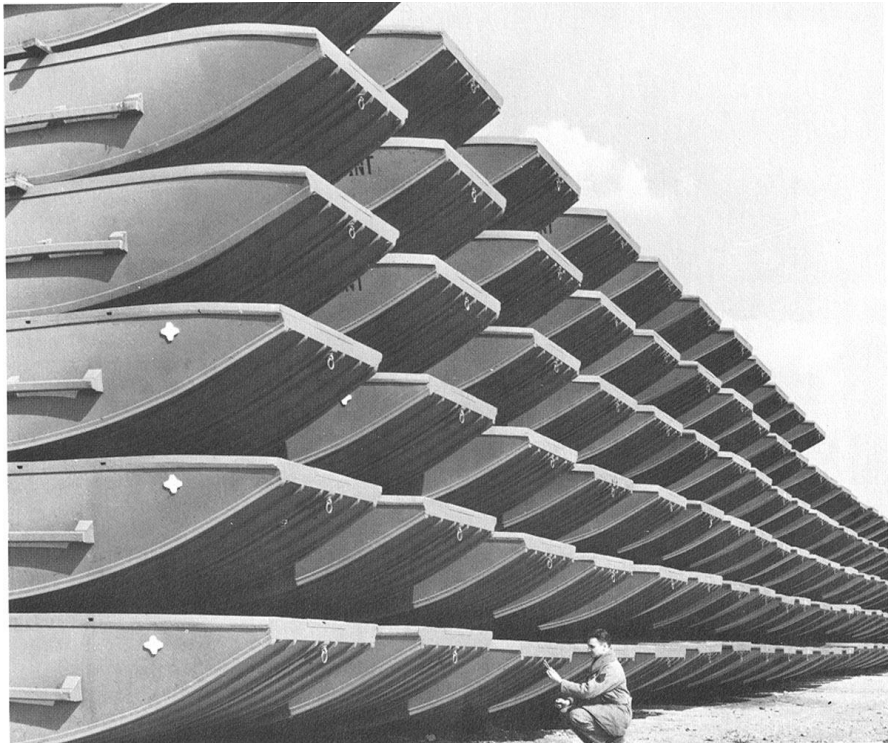
B-3) American fighter planes and bombers awaiting preflight servicing.

*Imperial War Museum, London*





B-4) Everything needed was stockpiled. *Imperial War Museum, London*



B-5) Pontoons for temporary bridges to span France's rivers.  
*Imperial War Museum, London*



C-1) Pre-invasion bombing of Pointe-du-Hoc .

*US Air Force*



C-2) Paratroopers of the US 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. *US Air Force*



C-3) U.S. gliders and paratroopers. *US Army Signal Corps*



C-4) Glider landing field in Normandy. *US Army Signal Corps*



C-5) Wrecked 30-man Horsa glider in Normandy field. *US Army Signal Corps*



D-1) Allied soldiers on troop transports in the English Channel. US Navy



D-2) U.S. troops loading onto an LCVP (Higgins boat). US Navy



D-3) U.S. soldiers head toward the beach in an LCVP. *US Army Signal Corps*



D-4) U.S. soldiers waded to shore through Nazi gun and mortar fire. *US Coast Guard*



D-5) The end of the day on Omaha Beach. *US Army Signal Corps*



E-1) Robert Capa, photographer for Life magazine, went ashore at Omaha Beach with Company E, 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division





E-2) Survivors from a destroyed Higgins Boat at Omaha Beach.

*US Army Signal Corps*



E-3) U.S. medics tend to the wounded on Utah Beach.

*US Army Signal Corps*



E-4) Wounded men from the 1<sup>st</sup> Division on Omaha Beach. *US Army Signal Corps*



E-5) Wounded soldiers on an LCT being taken to hospital ships.  
*US Coast Guard*

## D-DAY (JUNE 6, 1944)

Since Nazi Germany forced the Allies out of France to Great Britain in the spring of 1940, the Allies had been planning a cross-Channel assault to retake the continent and defeat Hitler's Third Reich. By the spring of 1944 an elaborate plan—code-named Operation *Overlord*—was secretly in place. The Allies, led by American General Dwight Eisenhower, faced an enemy determined to keep them from landing successfully anywhere along the western European coastline. To ensure against such a landing, Hitler ordered Field Marshal Erwin Rommel to complete the Atlantic Wall—a 2,400-mile fortification made up of concrete bunkers, barbed wire, tank ditches, landmines, fixed gun emplacements, and beach and underwater obstacles. Many of these obstacles were specially designed to rip out the bottoms of landing craft or blow them up before they reached the shore. Others were made to trap soldiers on the beach where they would be exposed to intense gunfire from fortified positions.

On the eve of June 5, 1944, 175,000 men, a fleet of 5,000 ships and landing craft, 50,000 vehicles, and 11,000 planes sat in southern England, poised to attack secretly across the English Channel along a 50-mile stretch of the Normandy coast of France. This force, one of the largest armadas in history, represented years of rigorous training, planning, and supplying. It also represented a previously unknown level of cooperation between allied nations, all struggling for a common goal—the defeat of Nazi Germany. Because of highly intricate deception plans, Hitler and most of his staff believed that the Allies would be attacking at the Pas-de-Calais, the narrowest point between Great Britain and France.



In the early morning darkness of June 6, thousands of Allied paratroopers and glider troops landed silently behind enemy lines, securing key roads and bridges on the flanks of the invasion zone. As dawn lit the Normandy coastline the Allies began their amphibious landings, traveling to the beaches in small landing craft lowered from the decks of larger ships anchored in the Channel. They assaulted five beaches, code-named *Utah*, *Omaha*, *Gold*, *Juno*, and *Sword*. The bloodiest fighting occurred at *Omaha*, where the Americans suffered more than 2,000 casualties. By nightfall nearly all the Allied soldiers were ashore at a cost

of 10,000 American, British, and Canadian casualties. Hitler's vaunted Atlantic Wall had been breached in less than one day. The beaches were secure, but it would take many weeks before the Allies could fight their way out of the heavily defended Normandy countryside and almost a full year to reach and defeat Germany in the spring of 1945.

Operation *Overlord* was not just another great battle, but the true turning point of WWII in Western Europe. While the U.S. and Great Britain had earlier engaged the Axis powers on the periphery of the Europe (North Africa, Sicily, Italy), it was not until the invasion at Normandy that they brought on the beginning of the end for Hitler and his Nazis. Had the invasion failed (*Eisenhower was prepared to read a statement over the radio taking full responsibility if Allied troops were driven from the beaches*), Hitler would have been able to pull troops out of France to strengthen his Eastern Front against the encroaching Soviets. A second Allied invasion into France would have taken more than a year to mount. Hitler, meanwhile, would have further strengthened his Atlantic Wall, his newly developed V-1 flying bombs would have continued to rain down on England from launching pads across the Channel, and the Nazis' *Final Solution* against European Jews might well have succeeded completely.