Operation Cobra and the Battle to Liberate France

Normandy Beach Head
On June 6, 1944, Allied forces launched the largest amphibious assault in the history of mankind, Operation Overlord. This ambitious plan to break through German General Erwin Rommel's dreaded "Atlantic Wall" would require almost 7,000 vessels and 200,000 men to land on the beaches of Normandy, France. After one day of heavy fighting and nearly 5,000 Allied casualties, the beachhead of Normandy was secured, and American, British, and Canadian forces could begin the long push to liberate Europe from Nazi forces. The D-Day invasion was a success.

Supply Lines
Despite the initial success of Operation Overlord, Allied forces had to supply more than just manpower to accomplish their mission. Supporting materiel, ranging from food and water to armored vehicles and ammunition, had to be rapidly unloaded onto the beaches and organized and redistributed to troops who were advancing further into enemy territory. Without a deeper push into Normandy, supplies were clogging the beaches and creating chaos as soldiers desperately tried to unload ships with limited space.

Operation Goodwood
Under the direction of General Bernard Montgomery, British forces sought to take the valuable port city of Caen. This would allow Allied forces a deep-water harbor to unload material, speed up the dissemination of supplies, and hold the largest city close to the Seine River in northern France. The mission of Operation Goodwood was to take the city and secure the port and roads to the south while tying down German forces so American troops could navigate out of the bocage, ancient hedgerow "fences" between fields. British troops met surprising fierce German resistance and were unable to complete the entire mission. They were able to capture the city of Caen, but not before German forces destroyed the harbor infrastructure.
**Slow Going: Bocage**

A significant challenge to Allied forces was the Norman bocage, an ancient method of protecting and dividing farmland in the area using trees and shrubs. These thick and intimidating hedgerows were often difficult for vehicles to surmount and easily masked entrenched enemies. The American sector of Normandy was covered with bocage and this made progress dangerous and slow. Even a few well-hidden German snipers or guns could wreak substantial damage to Allied forces.

**Operation Cobra**

After the initial success of the D-Day invasion, Allied forces were met with stiff resistance. Seizing the pivotal city of Caen had proved difficult, and Operation Goodwood - the British plan to push south and isolate the German forces from reinforcements - was only partially successful. Seven weeks after D-Day, Allied forces were still trapped in Normandy.

Operation Cobra was designed to break the stalemate in Normandy by providing the Allies with the momentum to overcome the determined, but poorly organized, German resistance in Northern France. The push would begin in the American sector near Saint-Lô, while the British tied up the German panzers (tanks) as a smoke screen. The goal: liberate Brittany, capture the port, and break out of northern France.

**Leadership**

On the ground in France, American Generals Omar Bradley and George Patton, and British General Bernard Montgomery coordinated Allied troops. Although they often differed in their approaches to warfare, they agreed on the Operation Cobra plan after the failure of Operation Goodwood.
Carpet Bombing
To weaken the German lines and make a Nazi retreat difficult, close to 3,000 bombers targeted roads and railways in the Saint-Lô sector of Normandy. The speed of these attacks and a lack of adequate Allied communication resulted in close to 750 military deaths from friendly fire.

Timeline of Operation Cobra (1944)

- **July 20**
  Operation Goodwood is stopped after the capture of the city of Caen.

- **July 24**
  Operation Cobra is launched with a vast carpet-bombing campaign outside and to the south of Saint-Lô.

- **July 30**
  Allies take control of the coastal city of Avranches.

- **August 1**
  Allies push deeper into Brittany to recapture port cities.

- **August 8**
  Allies forces move to encircle German forces in the Falaise area.

- **August 20**
  German forces are trapped in the Falaise Gap.

- **August 22**
  Over 50,000 German soldiers are taken prisoner.

- **August 24**
  Paris is liberated by Allied forces.

- **August 7**
  Germans launch a determined counterattack, Operation Luttich, capturing the village of Mortain. Allied forces repel the attack before the Germans can reach Avranches and re-liberate Mortain.

- **August 16**
  Hitler authorizes German forces to retreat.
Sharing the War: Communicating

The lion's share of the combat in any war is the responsibility of the common infantry soldier. Many of these men were drafted into service by their governments, while others volunteered to end Axis tyranny. Letter writing was one of the few ways to communicate with loved ones at home, and American soldiers exchanged “V-Mail” communications that were censored and reliably delivered through microfiche.

Newspapers received stories from war correspondents, whose job was to keep the public informed while also protecting national morale. These stories varied from summaries of troop movements to special interest articles on life on the fronts. Some of the most popular war correspondents of World War II included Walter Cronkite, Daniel DeLuce, and Ernie Pyle.

The Infantry Presses On: First Lieutenant William Howard Sheller

First Lieutenant William “Howard” Sheller, a member of the 9th Infantry Division, 60th Infantry Regiment, Company B, participated in Operation Cobra. His service on the front lines started on November 11, 1942, when his division participated in the liberation of North Africa in Operation Torch. His division also traveled to Sicily in 1943 during Operation Husky before being sent to England in 1944 to prepare for D-Day. The 9th Infantry Division was an essential part of Operation Cobra and the liberation of France.