

What does the “D” in D-Day mean?

This is the most frequently asked question by visitors to The National WWII Museum. Many people think they know the answer: *designated day*, *decision day*, *doomsday*, or even *death day*.

Our answer, like many answers in the field of history, is not so simple. Disagreements between military historians and etymologists about the meaning of D-Day abound. Here are just two explanations:

In Stephen Ambrose’s D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II, he writes,

Time magazine reported on June 12 [1944] that “as far as the U.S. Army can determine, the first use of D for Day, H for Hour was in Field Order No. 8, of the First Army, A.E.F., issued on Sept. 20, 1918, which read, ‘The First Army will attack at H-Hour on D-Day with the object of forcing the evacuation of the St. Mihiel salient.’” (p. 491)

In other words, the D in D-Day merely stands for *Day*. This coded designation was used for the day of any important invasion or military operation. For military planners (and later historians), the days before and after a D-Day were indicated using plus and minus signs: D-4 meant four days before a D-Day, while D+7 meant seven days after a D-Day.

In Paul Dickson’s War Slang, he quotes Robert Hendrickson’s Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins,

Many explanations have been given for the meaning of D-Day, June 6, 1944, the day the Allies invaded Normandy from England during World War II. The Army has said that it is “simply an alliteration, as in H-Hour.” Others say the first D in the word also stands for “day,” the term a code designation. The French maintain the D means “disembarkation,” still others say “debarkation,” and the more poetic insist D-Day is short for “day of decision.” When someone wrote to General Eisenhower in 1964 asking for an explanation, his executive assistant Brigadier General Robert Schultz answered: “General Eisenhower asked me to respond to your letter. Be advised that any amphibious operation has a ‘departed date’; therefore the shortened term ‘D-Day’ is used.” (p.146)

Brigadier General Schultz reminds us that the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944 was not the only D-Day of World War II. Every amphibious assault—including those in the Pacific, in North Africa, and in Sicily and Italy—had its own D-Day.

The National WWII Museum’s exhibitions explore the history of the D-Day invasion of Normandy and the D-Day invasions in the Pacific. Expansion plans are currently underway to triple the size of the Museum in the coming years.