



SR's Spotlight on World War II:

"The Invasion of France and Germany"

Author: Samuel Eliot Morison

The Author

By John Haverstick

AT SIXTY Samuel Eliot Morison, whose latest volume of his mammoth "History of United States Naval Operations in World War II" has just appeared, is well aware of the fact that scholarly fashions have their effect on historians. For example: thirty years ago the history writers were depicting the Pilgrims as grim, steeple-hatted fellows living in log cabins and planning witch hunts as holiday diversions. But today, according to Morison, things have gone to the opposite extreme. Now, he says, it is all a good historian can do to persuade his students that the Pilgrims were *not* exactly jolly fellows perennially sitting on artful early American furniture, with one arm around a pretty Priscilla and the other reaching for a jug of hard cider. Another example: fifty years ago the history books were unanimous in presenting the Federalist-Whig-Republican point of view in their interpretations of U. S. political history; today it would be hard, he says, to find a good general history of the U. S. that does not follow the Jefferson-Jackson-F. D. Roosevelt line (a line which Morison himself believes is the "best

line of actuality" but which he also believes has gone too far, tending to create what he terms "a sort of neo-liberal stereotype").

To Morison, the historian's professional duty is to set down the facts of what actually did happen—and why; and to accomplish this aim in his own work he has gone to unfashionable lengths unfamiliar to whole generations of historians. For a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Christopher Columbus he once retraced in small sailing vessels four routes that Columbus had followed to America. In 1942, shortly after the beginning of World War II, Morison, then a professor of history at Harvard (he is a Boston-bred patrician), reached right back to 431 B.C. for his historical methods—to an example set by Greek historian Thucydides, who went off to the Peloponnesian War, lived in the field in order to get the unvarnished facts, and then proceeded to write his famous first-hand (though incomplete) formal history of the entire encounter. Until World War II Thucydides's example had been largely ignored by successive generations of historians, most of whom preferred armchair comfort and mellifluous phrases to first-hand knowledge. But Professor Morison persuaded President Roosevelt to assign him as a modern Thucydides to

the U. S. Navy, thereby instigating a presidential directive which resulted in on-the-spot histories of each of the armed services (though none except the Navy's were channeled through the pen of one man). As a result of this direct historical approach he has come into sharp conflict with other past and present eminent historians. In an address before the American Historical Association, when Professor Morison (who was retired from the USNR as a Rear Admiral in 1951) was serving as president of that organization, he roundly criticized the methods of historian Charles A. Beard, whose philosophy of history was that no historian can escape his personal limitations as an interpreter of the past and that therefore the historian should select and arrange the facts of history so as to influence the present or the future in the direction that the historian considers socially desirable. Said Morison: "Beard's personal guess was that American history was moving forward to a collectivist democracy." The result, according to Morison: Beard interpreted the past to suit his own ideas of the future. Critics of Morison's "History of United States Naval Operations in World War II" have pointed out from time to time that Professor-Admiral Morison's interpretations, too, have been sometimes emotional and sometimes factually inaccurate. Nevertheless, with his passion for writing history to the best of his ability as it actually happened (and with commendable literary grace), there can be little doubt that historian Morison's history will prove valuable to future scholars long after that of many of his contemporaries has perished.

The Book

By S. L. A. Marshall, *chief U.S. Army historian in the European theatre during World War II.*

EVEN when rewriting a thrice-told tale, as he is doing in "The Invasion of France and Germany" (Little, Brown, \$6.50), Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison contrives to bring to it a fresh ring of authority and a crispness in expression which makes it as new as the next second.

This talent and his boundless prodigiousness set him apart from other American field historians of World War II. All others who did his kind of labor, no less ploddingly and sometimes with greater inspiration, while the fighting was on have long since tired of the grind and forsaken



—From the book.

Alpha Red beach, D-day—Operation Dragoon, August 1944.

it, thereby disrupting its continuity.

Old Man River Morison just keeps rolling along, to the enrichment of history, to the glory of the Navy, and to the delight of all who love good books when they provide enchanting reading. This is his eleventh volume in a series of fourteen which will wrap up the story of U.S. Navy operations in World War II. Any lingering doubt that the task would be completed has by now vanished.

How explain such fidelity? The even flow of his prose suggests that writing comes easy to Morison, but that is probably a deception. That he is moved by a great love of the Navy will be recognized by all who, reading, share his excitement and enthusiasms.

No war historian may keep his work in perspective unless he knows that zestful love for tactical operations, and their attendant staff problems, which pervades the good leader of battle forces. Morison does. Anyone who dealt closely with this powerful, yet sympathetic personality during World War II must have felt that he would have made a great commander of fighting men and ships. The ablest specialists serving the armed establishment, for example, Colonel Frank Capra, have this dual capacity.

Then there is another thing. Covering land battle is ever dirty, grubbing business, whereas, doing the story of the fleet and its attendant administration has more the nature of a wholesaling enterprise. The Army researchers and writers did their work early. Deprived of their findings, the Navy story would still remain at sea, with no anchor holding to anything solid.

Their work, of necessity, was given maximum latitude. They had to investigate the effects of naval gunfire on Omaha Beachhead and in support of airborne forces behind Utah Beach. They had to determine where Navy small craft came ashore. Wherein Navy decisions and attitudes shaped the course of policy and of action in European Theatre from the first "predecessor command" until past V-E day became also, quite properly, a field for Army research, not all of it done, alas, with painstaking and scholarly exactitude, but still done.

For example, the research on predecessor command had ultimately to be synopsisized through oral interviews with the main actors because a mountain of documents, left unorganized, had been shipped to Antwerp where no one knew their location.

It is part of Admiral Morison's towering strength as a narrator of the over-all story of how German-enthralled Western Europe was invaded

and liberated that he can lean on the completed reports published by the Army. Not having authored any of the finished writing, but having done much of the field research amid the landed infantry from which the published conclusions were drawn, I must perforce add that this reliance on the accuracy of secondary and tertiary material introduces an element of weakness, also.

If the earlier chroniclers erred in shading, emphasis, or interpretation, repetition but serves to confirm either a myth or a blurring of the operational reality. The ordeal of the Omaha landing has not yet been adequately described nor has anyone yet traced the direct connection between the deviations from course of practically the whole wave of Navy small boats and the subsequent demoralization and stagnation of the infantry assault force, set ashore where absolutely nothing looked familiar.

Morison portrays vividly and candidly how close that mighty effort came to total failure. He puts the beginning of recovery too early in the day and, in my judgment, underestimates the decisive impact of the U.S. airborne on the over-all Normandy operation. But he has been honest with his sources and when he

writes of battle what comes forth is all fire and movement. I simply comment that there are greater depths to the Omaha story than have yet been told.

One other point is more disturbing. A generous writer in his attitude toward his fellow men, Morison likes to give personal credit wherever due. So in analyzing the origins of a plan, such as the broadening of the front for the Normandy invasion, or the refinement of this general concept whereby the airborne drop behind Utah Beach was affirmed, he specifies the why, the when, and the who. What puzzles me is why, after dealing earlier with the same data and the same witnesses, I find we quite often come out with quite different answers. Maybe Clio, the Muse, is a five-letter word.

Maybe a review is no place to raise such captious points as these. It would be far more fun to talk it out with Morison, as happened on other questions during the war, always to my benefit. But I would want his legion of friends to know he has written another lusty, thrilling tale, worthy of his great service. None but sheep thieves, suckers of eggs, and enemies of home cooking could fail to relish it.



An Invasion That Didn't Occur

"Operation Sea Lion," by **Peter Fleming** (Simon & Schuster. 323 pp. \$5), is an account of what happened during the summer of 1940, when the Nazis were poised to invade Britain. Our reviewer, Telford Taylor, a member of the New York bar, was U.S. chief of counsel at the Nuremberg trials.

By Telford Taylor

PETER Fleming's "Operation Sea Lion," is a lucid and readable account of a few months in the summer of 1940 that were a turning-point of world history. "Sealion" was the Germans' code word for their projected invasion of England.

Despite its martial subject-matter, many parts of the story are even gay. Mr. Fleming writes with relish of the days when Britons knew that they

were in dire peril, and yet could not quite bring themselves to believe that there ever could be so unheard of a thing as an invasion. He writes, too, as an informed eyewitness, for he was then an officer of the Grenadier Guards on detached service for the War Office, and his special task was to organize light guerilla forces to harass the Germans behind their lines, in the event of their penetration from the beaches into the countryside.

This and many other fascinating details of the British defensive plans are likely to come as fresh if not surprising information to many of Mr. Fleming's readers. The interval between the Fall of France and the Battle of Britain was short, and the course of events on British soil was obscured by those more sensational episodes. For obvious reasons the British were not eager to publicize the nature and scope of their prepara-