



A mediation lesson from D-Day

It isn't widely known that the invasion forces in 1944 included exiled Free French troops who had evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940 with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). They then spent four years training and preparing to return to help liberate their country.

Although there were many of these troops, they were only a tiny minority of the entire invasion force, so their military impact on its outcome must have been negligible.

However, their moral contribution to the venture was immense, particularly as some historians have pointed out that by May 1945 a significant number of Frenchmen were defending Berlin in Waffen SS uniforms.

The Nazis used their foreign troops for propaganda purposes to try and show that it was they who were defending European values.

As for the Free French, they were apparently a prickly bunch, led by the somewhat Anglophobe Charles de Gaulle.

They had arrived in England in 1940 after a notably brave and sacrificial rearguard action had been fought by their comrades, but they had arrived effectively without arms and equipment.

Therefore, they had to wear British army uniforms and carry British weapons.

Their salaries and allowances were paid by the British.

The leave they took between Dunkirk and D-Day was spent in Britain (the U Boats saw to that) and they could not visit, or even communicate with their families.

They had to eat British food, which cannot have been easy for them, and drink beer rather than wine.

They were ultimately under the command of British and American officers, who imposed British and American tactics and strategic values on them.



For proud people, this must have been almost impossible to bear: Frenchmen are nothing if not proud.

At least one allied commander saw that this might seriously undermine the invasion performance of his division.

He needed his Free French battalions to fight well, not only because he needed their combat power, but also because of the long-term moral dimension and propaganda implications.

The solution?

He invited them to fire the first shots at the enemy defending the Juno Beach.

This gesture cost nothing, it added nothing to the strength of his division and contributed nothing militarily to the operation. Yet, by allowing his Free French troops the honour of opening hostilities, it cannot have failed to have pleased them, and perhaps help them forget the indignity of all those tasteless meals and the weak, warm beer. And it would have reminded the world that this was a battle of liberation for the French, by the French.

In mediation, we should remember that the unique strength of the process is that, unlike litigation, it is not all about money, damages and strict performance of contractual obligations.

It is also about feelings. Pride, shame and anger all play a part, sometimes inhibiting agreement. Yet there are important things that both parties can do and say that cost nothing and that can assuage those feelings. These statements, gestures and actions can contribute powerfully to the parties being able to put their feelings aside and reach agreement. Negotiators should be alert to them, like that far-sighted D-Day commander.