MI5 never had a clue about the D-Day crosswords puzzle

By Val Gilbert
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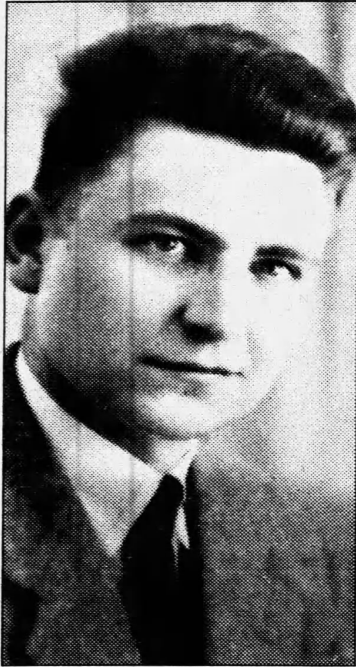
SIXTY years ago today, a four-letter word appeared as a solution in *The Daily Telegraph*'s crossword that was to have repercussions that have reverberated down the years until now.

The four-letter word was Utah, innocent enough you might think, but in May 1944 a word pregnant with meaning. Utah was the codename for the D-Day beach assigned to the 4th US Assault Division. A coincidence, surely?

Admittedly, in previous months the solution words Juno, Gold and Sword (all codenames for beaches assigned to the British) had appeared but they are common words in crosswords.

But then on May 22, 1944 came the clue "Red Indian on the Missouri (5)" Solution: Omaha – codename for the D-Day beach to be taken by the 1st US Assault Division.

On Saturday, May 27 it was Overlord – codename for the whole D-Day operation. On May 30 Mulberry (codename for the floating harbours used in the landings); and finally, on June 1, the solution to 15

Ronald French: confession

Leonard Dawe: clue creator

British troops landing in Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944

Down was Neptune – codeword for the naval assault phase.

With the landings five days away, alarm bells rang at MI5, particularly as *The Daily Telegraph* crossword had been drawn to its attention two years earlier. Lord Tweeds-muir (son of the novelist John Buchan) had been called in to investigate the appearance of Dieppe as an answer to a *Telegraph* crossword clue on Aug 17.

The answer was published on Aug 18 and the raid on Dieppe took place the next day. At that time Tweedsmuir was a senior intelligence officer attached to the Canadian Army, which made up the main assault force for the disastrous Dieppe venture.

Later he commented: "We noticed the crossword contained the word Dieppe and there was an immediate and exhaustive inquiry which also involved MI5. But in the end it was concluded that it was just a remarkable coincidence – a complete fluke."

But Juno, Gold, Sword, Utah, Omaha, Overlord, Mulberry and Neptune seemed a coincidence too far. Two men from MI5 called on Leonard Dawe, *Telegraph* crossword compiler and creator of the puzzles in question, at his home in Leatherhead.

The scene was set for a story worthy of Buchan's Richard Hannay. Dawe was headmaster of Strand School, which had been evacuated from Tulse Hill in south London to Effingham in Surrey. Years later, during a BBC television interview in 1958, Dawe referred to the incident, saying: "They turned me inside out.

"They went to Bury St Edmunds where my senior colleague Melville Jones [the paper's other crossword compiler] was living and put him through the works. But they eventually decided not to shoot us after all."

An explanation of how the codewords came to appear in the paper emerged only in 1984. Following a re-telling of the "D-Day Crosswords" in the *Telegraph*, Ronald French, a property manager in Wolverhampton, came forward with further information. He said that, as a 14-year-old at the school in 1944, he inserted the names into the puzzles.

According to French, Dawe occasionally invited pupils into his study, where, as a mental discipline, he would encourage them to help fill in the blank crossword patterns. Later, Dawe would create clues for their solution words.

French claimed that during the weeks before D-Day he had learned of the codewords from Canadian and American soldiers camped close by the school, awaiting the invasion.

He was adamant that, in the final days before the landings, the words were well known and the only thing secret was the where and when.

Undoubtedly, wartime and the proximity of Allied soldiery was exciting for the schoolboys. French claimed to have kept notebooks of information he gleaned.

"I was totally obsessed about the whole thing. I would play truant from school to visit the camp and I used to spend evenings with them and even whole weekends there, dressed in my Army cadet uniform. I became a sort of dogsbody about the place, running errands and even, once, driving a tank.

"Everyone knew the outline invasion plan and they knew the various codewords. Omaha and Utah were the beaches they were going to. They knew the names but not the locations. We all knew the operation was called Overlord."

The soldiers talked freely in front of him "because I was obviously not a German spy. Hundreds of kids must have known what I knew."

French did not remember writing the codenames into the puzzle grids but recalled the consequence. "Soon after D-Day, Dawe sent for me and asked me point blank where I had got the words from.

"I told him all I knew and he asked to see my notebooks. He was horrified and said the books must be burned at once. He made me swear on the Bible I would tell no one about it. I have kept that oath until now."

That was not quite the end of the affair. In 1995, I received a letter from another Strang old boy, Ken Russell, from Havant, who also spent time filling in grids for Dawe.

He recalls reading a letter in *The Times* in 1980 – four years before French's confession – in which yet another old boy owned up to being the perpetrator of the codenames. Russell wrote: "I was surprised to see a letter from an old boy, who confessed to being the perpetrator of the codenames in the crossword, but kept quiet. He would certainly have received six of the best."

In January, Ronald French's son, Simon, took up the narrative after Roger Squires (The *Telegraph's* current Monday crossword compiler) had repeated the story in the Wolverhampton *Express & Star.*

Simon French remembers: "I know the headmaster was close to losing his job as a result. Intelligence officers interrogated my father but in the end, decided it was an innocent matter."

So, is that the end of the story? Somehow I doubt it. Somewhere, someone will clear out an attic and come across more papers relating to "The Crossword D-Day Codenames". I hope they will contact *The Daily Telegraph* when they do.

No 5,775

ACROSS

1 A cause of postscripts (13)
10 Very attentive commonly (two words –3, 4)
11 A fool's weapon (7)
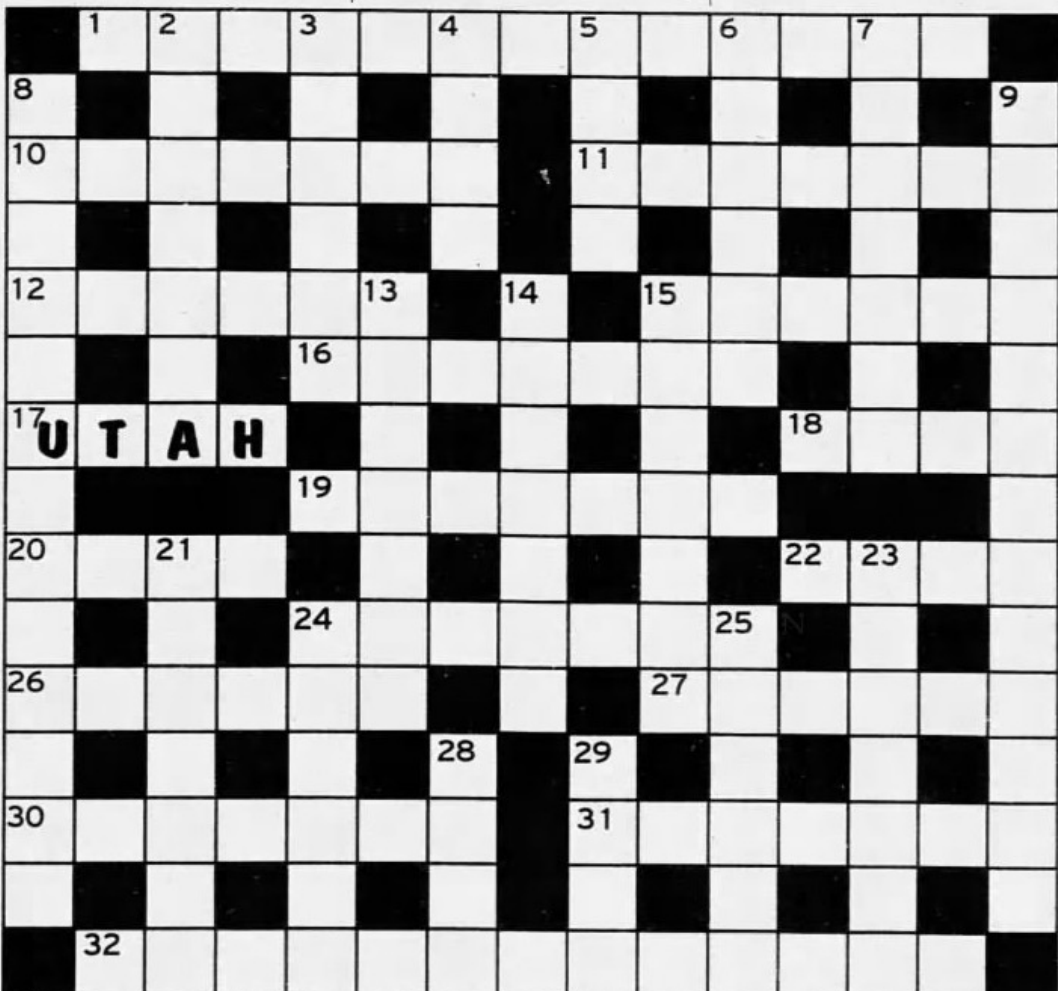12 But this isn't to be bought at this shop (6)
15 Foils start thus (two words–3,3)
16 Definite (7)
17 One of the U.S. (4)
18 Achievement that the guardians of the Tower always have at heart (4)
19 Proper behaviour (7)
20 But cook has a practical use for this old weapon (4)
22 Part of one's last will and testament (4)
24 This knight of old had a fair start (7)
26 Little Samuel has got something from the pantry to make a boat (6)
27 The ceremonious tart (6)
30 Fifty fifty (7)
31 White wine (7)
32 "Intense matter"

DOWN

2 This probably has a lateen sail (7)
3 What all will be when the cease fire sounds (6)
4 Try the clue for 22 across (4)
5 Derby winner or preposition (4)
6 Systematically sorted (6)
7 When this loses its tail it doesn't grow another (7)
8 He rations the port among those who want it (13)
9 The ups and downs of business (three words –6, 3, 4)
13 Conference centre lately (7)
14 "Sleep rough" (7)
15 Lay (7)
21 Assess (7)
23 "Having drink taken" (7)
24 Many an oak-tree has this measurement (6)
25 This might make mad, sir (6)
28 This German Island sounds of alluvial origin (4)
29 The last Alice saw of the White Rabbit (4)

The crossword that started the puzzle. If you start it and get stuck the answers are below