

CURRENCY FOR D-DAY

A successful numismatic operation preceded the Normandy landings of the Allied troops during World War II.

SEVENTY YEARS AGO, tens of thousands of men (and relatively few women) were in England preparing for “Operation Overlord,” the code name for the Battle of Normandy. At the time, the day of the planned invasion of German-occupied France was undisclosed. Of course, we know now that D-Day was June 6, 1944. In my opinion, it is the most fascinating—if not also the most important—day of the 20th century.

Preparing for Battle

The numismatics of D-Day are not entirely obscure, but neither are they well known. Shortly before the commencement of Operation Overlord, the numismatic enterprise “Operation Tom Cat” was completed. It involved the creation, shipment and disbursement of Allied *francs* for D-Day.

Preparations had started months earlier when Operation Overlord planners ordered Allied *francs* for the invasion. These specimens would supplement circulating *francs*—meaning they would not replace Bank of France issues. It was important that the Allied forces have a reliable and inexhaustible supply of Allied *francs*, as money was needed to pay the troops and buy materials and labor when they landed in Normandy.

Production & Delivery

The supplemental *francs* were known as Allied Military Currency (AMC). They were the second AMC issue; the first had been Allied military *lire* for use in Italy.

Operation Overlord planners sent the AMC *franc* requirements to the U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) for fulfillment.

The bureau gave the work to Forbes Lithograph Manufacturing Company in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and the printing was accomplished under Operation Tom Cat. We know nothing about the plans that established the quantities and characteristics of this currency.

The completed Forbes notes were sealed in wooden boxes marked “Tom Cat” for shipment to Europe. They made it to the pay tables in England in June and arrived on the continent itself a few days later.

Forbes was not a bank-note company, but previously

it had produced a large quantity of the Allied military *lire*, therefore making it a natural choice for the production of Allied *francs*. Forbes also printed all the Allied military *marks* and some of the Allied military *shillings*. *Franc* notes were printed in denominations of 2, 5, 10, 50, 100, 500, 1,000 and 5,000, although the latter were



▲ **GENERAL DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER** spoke with American paratroopers in England on the evening of June 5, 1944, as they prepared for the Battle of Normandy.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK/JOHNGOMEZPIX (HELMET) & LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The compact size was perfect for the thousands of servicemen who mailed the notes—sometimes with a handwritten message on them—to loved ones.

not issued in sufficient quantities for many examples to survive.

Allied Military Currency

The Allied franc notes are great collector items. The set includes several common notes and one real rarity, along with some interesting varieties.

The 2 franc is my absolute favorite note of all time. First and foremost, it represents the epitome of holding history in your hands—the very reason we collect. To see and touch one of these notes is to have a tangible connection to D-Day. I like it even more than the larger denominations and expensive notes because its small size and face value make me think of the common soldier, sailor, airman, marine and coast guardsman who fought on that day. Furthermore, the compact size was perfect for the thousands of servicemen who mailed the notes—sometimes with a handwritten message on them—to loved ones at home as souvenirs of that day.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, a thousand years from now people will honor and respect what happened on D-Day, and collectors will hold these notes in their hands as evidence of what occurred. It seems that Operation Tom Cat went well, although we have no way of knowing what



▲ **WORKERS FILLED WOODEN BOXES** (top) with Allied Military Currency and prepared them for shipment to Europe. A security guard watched the pallets of boxes labeled “Tom Cat.”

kind of problems were encountered along the way. The notes also seem to have performed admirably in circulation, but this does not mean there were no challenges or controversy.

Opposition

General Charles de Gaulle, the leader of the Free French Forces movement, hated the notes. He correctly pointed out that they lacked a signature and bore a most troubling (and I must say unusual) legend: ÉMIS EN (“Issued in France”). His position was that only Frenchmen could issue notes in France, in which case it would not be necessary to include such a legend. De Gaulle also thought the notes’ overall quality was poor. Winston Churchill agreed with him, but did not

intervene in the matter.

I must point out that contemporary counterfeits can be found in collections. It is tempting to say this proves the general was correct, but that is an oversimplification, because just about every form of currency gets counterfeited. In spite of de Gaulle’s objections, the public readily accepted the issues, which were, in most ways, quite successful.



► **THE 2 FRANC’S SMALL SIZE** made it a popular memento for servicemen. A printer’s mark, located in the lower left-hand corner, indicates the note was printed by Forbes.

Not Actual Size



German officials produced handbills and leaflets with messages meant to undermine the notes' credibility.



▲ **NUMBERED BLOCKS** went up to “10” on provisional issues, such as this 100-cent/franc note with the numeral “9.” The eight-digit serial number has no prefix or suffix letter.

Not Actual Size

Identifying Marks

The notes themselves have several interesting characteristics. The Forbes examples all had a small “F” colophon (printer’s mark). Numismatists Ken Bressett and Neil Shafer identified the colophon and published the results of their research in the November 1968 issue of *Whitman Numismatic Journal*.

After the Allies landed in France and introduced the Allied francs, German officials produced handbills and leaflets with messages meant to undermine the notes’ credibility. Amazingly, the currency shown on the handbills is missing the colophon “F.” It is surprising enough that the Germans found this mark, but it is astounding they bothered to remove it from their propaganda. (Perhaps they believed it was a secret message of some type.)

Serial numbers are always interesting and important in paper-money collecting, and this is particularly true of Allied military francs. The entire system was very unusual. The numbers consisted of a rather routine eight digits, but no prefix

or suffix letter identified the block. When the 100-million capability of the eight digits was surpassed, a numeral “2” was added to the face to designate the second block. For the supplemental francs, “2” was as high as the blocks went, but for the provisional issues, the numbered blocks went as high as “10.”

As with most notes, there also was a replacement block. Even though this was quite different from most serial numbering systems, some similarities existed. Replacements are usually indicated by substituting a special symbol for a block letter. In this case, the block number was changed to the letter “X” to signify a replacement.

During the inspection process, bank notes with printing errors are removed. If the mistake is discovered after numbering, the note must be replaced to avoid disruptions in the numbering sequence. The obvious solution is to replace the flawed currency with a note that has the same serial number. The system of recreating an identical note is called the “make-up system,” but has been seldom used in the last 100 years. Instead, replacements are printed and numbered independently of the regular issue notes.

(U.S. paper-money replacements are called “star notes” because they have a star replacing one of the block letters in the serial number.) The Forbes method for the francs was a little different, because it did not have any block letters. Instead, blocks were indicated by numbers near the serial numbers. These numbers were replaced with the letter “X” to indicate replacement notes.

The replacements themselves found an unusual use beyond replacing spoiled notes at the printing plant—they also were used as specimen notes, which are examples of an issue produced for training, recording and counterfeit detection. They have no value in commerce (unlike those in circulation). Usually, the notes are permanently over stamped or perforated, and the serial numbers are zeroes or sometimes a contrived



▲ **WWII SOLDIERS RECEIVED** their pay in Allied Military Currency.



▲ **THIS 500-FRANC ISSUE** has an “X” block note that denotes it is a replacement.

Not Actual Size

PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS (500 FRANCES); FRED SCHWAN (100 FRANCES) & FORBES LITHOGRAPH MANUFACTURING COMPANY

The provisional notes were created on behalf of General de Gaulle, probably as a compromise to the controversial designs of the supplemental francs.



▲ **THE BACKS OF AMC NOTES** (top) depict the French flag. The word **FRANCE** replaces the flag in the design on the provisional “France back.”

Not Actual Size

number, such as 12345678. Forbes Lithograph Manufacturing Company followed these procedures, but added a twist. The printing company created specimen notes by perforating excess replacements. Therefore, its specimen notes bear an “X” block designation.

Provisional Notes

Another issue of franc notes printed by Forbes is almost always incorrectly identified by collectors as Allied Military Currency. These “provisional francs” resemble the AMC supplemental francs, but differ in a few important ways. The most important is that the “Issued in France” legend was removed. The other very noticeable change is that the French flag on the back was replaced with **FRANCE** and the nation’s motto, “**LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ.**” Among collectors, they are often described by their nicknames, “flag backs” or “France backs.”

The provisional notes were created on behalf of General de Gaulle, probably as a compromise to the controversial designs of the supplemental francs. (The “France back” notes were issued later and are not within the scope of this article.)

The Forbes Legacy

Finally, I want to report an important and excit-

ing discovery in Allied Military Currency research. In 1945, after the war, Forbes produced a 126-page book extolling its contributions to the war effort. Each handmade volume contains mammoth pages. The existence of the publication, titled *Now—It Can Be Told*, was unknown until collector Cuneyd Tolek obtained a copy on eBay. The accompanying pictures in this article of the Forbes plant and Operation Tom Cat came from this amazing book.

Unfortunately, in 1968 Forbes Lithograph Manufacturing Company went out of business after 100 years of operations. For most of that time, the firm was a leader in the commercial printing business, even though it only printed paper money during and shortly after World War II.

I hope I have convinced you that Allied military francs are very special. I also wish that when you see a newsreel or picture from World War II showing troops storming Normandy’s beaches, you will think, just as I do, about the Allied francs in their pockets.

SOURCES

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▲ **THE FORBES LITHOGRAPH MANUFACTURING COMPANY** in Chelsea, Massachusetts, printed currency for the Allied invasion of German-occupied France during World War II. The company also produced maps for the military.

PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS (FLAG BACK), FRED SCHWAN (FRANCE BACK) & FORBES LITHOGRAPH MANUFACTURING COMPANY