

Call of Duty: Vanguard video game will take players back to World War II and the birth of special forces

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Call of Duty is parachuting back into World War II.

Call of Duty: Vanguard, the next entry in Activision's multibillion-selling video [game](#) franchise, inserts players into many pivotal battles including the Battle of Stalingrad, the Battle of Midway, and Operation Tonga on the eve of the D-Day invasion.

In the game (out Nov. 5 for Microsoft Xbox Series X/S and Xbox One, Sony PlayStation 5 and PS4, and PCs on Battle.net), you get to know—and fight as—four different characters who eventually team up as the first special forces squad for a mission against the Nazis in Berlin.

Special operations forces such as SEAL Team Six grew out of Allied experiments with small squads chosen for specialized missions in World War II. In developing the single-player story campaign, Sledgehammer's creative team worked with historians including Marty Morgan, author of "D-Day: A Photographic History of the Normandy Invasion" who served as technical director on the studio's 2017 game Call of Duty WWII.

"We were really inspired by these first special forces operators and they seemed like such interesting characters that we wanted to explore," said David Swenson, creative director of the game's single-player story campaign for development studio Sledgehammer Games.

Call of Duty: Vanguard's story is fiction, but "even though we are not beholden to history, we are rooted in history," Swenson said. "It feels realistic and authentic."

After Sledgehammer finished Call of Duty WWII—the top-selling game of 2017, generating more than \$1 billion in revenue by the year's end—the studio wanted to create another game set in that period. "We kind of came out of that just scratching the surface, where we felt there was all these new stories," said Vanguard director Josh Bridge.

Call of Duty: Vanguard has a new story with no connection to the 2017 game and "feels like a different take on World War 2," Bridge said during a recent online presentation about the new game's development.

Addressing harassment allegations

The game's reveal comes amid internal conflict at parent company Activision Blizzard, which faces a lawsuit filed last month by the state of California over sexual harassment and equal pay violations. The suit alleges the video game publisher paid women less than men, and fired or forced women to quit at higher frequencies than men. Women of color were "particularly impacted," the suit charges, and women employees were subject to constant [sexual harassment](#) including groping, comments and advances.

Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick apologized after the company's initial response to the lawsuit led to an employee walkout. "It is imperative that we acknowledge all perspectives and experiences and respect the feelings of those who have been mistreated in any way," he said in a note to employees. "I am sorry that we did not provide the right empathy and understanding."

J. Allen Brack, the head of Blizzard Entertainment, has also subsequently stepped down and was replaced by Jen Oneal and Mike Ybarra as co-leaders of the studio.

"The stories and the pain that have been shared are simply devastating," said Sledgehammer studio head Aaron Halon last week before previewing Call of Duty: Vanguard. "Harassment of any kind goes against everything we stand for as a studio. ... While we cannot comment on the lawsuit ... as a team we are committed to making sure all [team members](#) feel safe, welcome and respected."

The cast of Call of Duty characters

The Sledgehammer team showed part of a mission from the game involving one of the main characters, Sgt. Arthur Kingsley, a British paratrooper attempting to land behind enemy lines in German-occupied France on the night before D-Day.

You get a cinematic first-person panorama as Kingsley parachutes out of a plane after it takes a hit and now has an engine afire. Explosions and smoke pepper the sky as bombers drop payloads and fighters try to shoot them down. Kingsley hits the ground landing in an eerie dramatically-lit battlefield scene with German troops aiming their flashlights as they search for downed paratroopers.

Kingsley is based on a real-world paratrooper, Sgt. Sidney Cornell, known as the first Black paratrooper to land on D-Day.

The other members of the squad are inspired by real-world soldiers, too. The character Lt. Polina Petrova, is a Russian sniper who defends the city during the Battle of Stalingrad. She is based on Lyudmila Pavlichenko, who earned the title "Lady Death" of the Red Army and is the most successful woman sniper in history, credited with 309 kills.

Navy Capt. Vernon "Mike" Micheel, who damaged two Japanese carriers during the Battle of Midway, is the inspiration for fighter pilot Captain Wade Jackson. And Second Lieutenant Lucas Riggs, an infantryman in the North African theater of operations where the Allies faced off with Rommel, is inspired by Charles Upham, a New Zealander and Captain in the Commonwealth of Nation forces, a two-time awardee of the Victoria Cross.

Eventually these four soldiers are brought together as a squad to thwart Project Phoenix, a Nazi initiative aimed at ensuring the Third Reich

after the imminent fall of Hitler and Berlin.

"There's lots of cool opportunities to play as these different characters in these different locations," Swenson said. "They are all brought together into Berlin at the end of the war on their first special forces mission."

Will lawsuit hamper Call of Duty?

The Call of Duty franchise has produced the top-selling game of the year 10 of the last 12 years, according to The NPD Group.

It's uncertain whether the lawsuit over employment practices and harassment will have any effect on the game's success, but "investors will still be closely watching for potential impacts to productivity at Blizzard, which is slated to have critically important upcoming game releases for ATVI including Diablo 4 and Overwatch 2," said Evercore ISI analyst Benjamin Black in a note to investors earlier this month.

Beyond the single-player game, Call of Duty: Vanguard content will be coming to the free-to-play online multiplayer game Call of Duty: Warzone. And Vanguard will have its own Zombies adventure, which crosses over with the Zombies game from last year's Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War. A new multiplayer Champion Hill mode was described as a mix of battle royale and the Gunfight mode from 2019's Call of Duty: Modern Warfare.

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