



An aerial view across the La Fièvre Causeway from the Manoir towards Cauquigny.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE ALLIED 21ST ARMY GROUP D-DAY, 6 JUNE 1944

THE GREATEST SEABORNE INVASION THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN

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PART TEN – THE FIGHT FOR THE LA FIÈRE CAUSEWAY ON D-DAY

Introduction

Major General Joseph Lawton Collins' US VII Corps was assigned the task of assaulting and securing UTAH Beach to seize a lodgement area from which future operations to ensure the capture of the deep-water seaport of Cherbourg could occur. To aid in this the US VII Corps had two US Airborne divisions attached: the 82nd 'All American' Airborne Division and the 101st 'Screaming Eagles' Airborne Division. Their collective role was to secure the area inland of UTAH Beach, the important crossroads on Route National 13 [N13] at Sainte-Mère-Église, and the crossings over the River Merderet for the seaborne forces to come ashore, establish the beachhead and cut across the Cotentin Peninsula to seal off the port of Cherbourg.

The 82nd's mission was to secure the important crossroads on the N13 at Sainte-Mère-Église, seize and hold the two bridges over the River Merderet to the west of the town, and establish a bridgehead to the west of the river. I covered the seizing and holding of Sainte-Mère-Église in Part Nine. In this part, I look at the situation that developed along the River Merderet at La Fièvre on D-Day.

The La Fièvre Bridge and Causeway was a vitally important objective for the 82nd Airborne Division as it led eastwards across the River Merderet and its inundated flood plain. It was the gateway for the Germans into the UTAH Beach area and the gateway from which the American forces could punch across the base of the Cotentin Peninsula to seal off the deep-sea port of Cherbourg. Major Frederick C A Kellam's 1st Battalion the 505th had been assigned the task of capturing the bridge and causeway whilst Colonel George Millett Jr's 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment and Colonel Roy Lindquist's 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment had the job of jumping in on the far side of the river and establishing a defensive bridgehead.

On the night of 5 June 1944, a platoon of German infantrymen from Grenadier Regiment 1057 arrived at the group of buildings close to the bridge at the eastern end of the causeway. Their arrival woke up Monsieur Leroux, his wife and three daughters who were roused from their beds in the Manoir de La Fièvre at around 23:00. They were the first Germans to occupy the Manoir since the occupation of France in 1940. Their arrival set the stage for the clash that would last for three days between the American paratroopers and the defending Germans for control of the bridge and causeway.



The Manoir de La Fièvre.

The 82nd Divisional Headquarters and Major Kellam's 1/505 were the last of the 82nd elements to drop onto DZ-O. They too had a good drop and by 06:00 the Divisional Command Post was set up and running in an orchard 1,200 yards

west of Sainte-Mère-Église. By 09:30, 12 officers and 61 men of Divisional Headquarters had arrived at the Divisional CP.

The 507th and 508th were not so fortunate and the C-47 aircraft carrying them were scattered and dispersed by the low-lying blanket of clouds and German anti-aircraft fire as they crossed the coast of France. Several aircraft were shot down, some with their paratroopers still inside, whilst others were damaged and many of those left unscathed missed their intended drop zones. First Lieutenant Robert P Mathias of the 508th was standing in the door of his C-47 ready to jump when he was hit by the blast of a flak round exploding. Although fatally injured, he still managed to lead his stick out of the plane.

The American paratroopers of the 507th and 508th landed all over the countryside and their units found it impossible to gather any significant portion of their fighting strength. In small groups, they began to make their way forward to carry out their assigned missions. First Sergeant Ralph H Thomas of Company E 2/508 recalled:

“A few days before D-Day our regiment moved to an airfield near Nottingham, England (RAF Saltby) and went into quarantine until the order came for us to take off for the battle in Normandy. During those few days, we lived in the hangars or outside on the ground. Either way, it would be uncomfortable to a civilian, but we loved it.

In the hours prior to enplaning each man had time to review his own thoughts and make peace with himself and his God. For me, I had no doubt that I would live through the combat and return to England when the battle was over.

Yes, I saw some men suffer and struggle with their doubts and grow pensive. It was as if they knew they would die before the night was over. Yet, to my knowledge, I never saw a man that was not ready to go. Some 30,000 paratroopers in three divisions, two American and one British ... went to war.

In England the summer days are long, it is light until almost midnight, so by the time we boarded our planes with all our gear it was twilight as we took off for Normandy. We flew down the Cornwall coast and out over the Atlantic Ocean. I sat by the door looking out at the planes off our left wing and down at the ocean below.

My mind was filled with the wonder of it all, the ocean; all the aeroplanes, and the total number of men in both the 82nd and 101st Divisions along with the British Paratrooper Division who were on their way to war. The moon was bright and sparkled on the ocean surface. The beauty of the night enthralled me.

Our flight was routed over Lands’ End, England out into the Atlantic Ocean to a point where an American submarine was waiting on the surface. A light shone from the top of the sub's mast, which could be seen only from an aeroplane above the sub.

The lead plane turned to the left, east, when it reached the light on the sub and all the other planes turned as if they were one and flew between the islands of Guernsey and Jersey. The flight was calculated to fly between the flak from both islands so that not a plane was lost to the German fire. The tracers climbed up slowly into the sky from the flak and machine gun fire in deadly orange and yellow lights. From my seat at the door of the C-47, it was a beautiful sight to see, and I enjoyed it very much. Just before reaching the French coast, our planes rose from the deck of the ocean to a height that carried us up and over the high cliffs of the west coast of Normandy. The planes, all in tight formation, moved toward our drop zones. To this point, all went well.

But when the planes rose above the cliffs and flew into Normandy, they ran into low scattered cloud cover at places heavy, and heavy German flak. The Germans were welcoming us to Normandy. Most of the pilots of our troop transports, not having been in combat before, broke formation and took erratic evasive action. The planes lost formation and bounced around in the flak-filled sky. Some of the planes were hit and exploded in the air while others burst into flames and crashed into the ground.

A few collided with other C-47s in mid-air and burst into flames and fell to the ground like dying birds. Most of the planes flew on and dropped their load of paratroopers "somewhere" in Normandy while a few pilots placed their jumpers right on target."

Many of the paratroopers from the 82nd landed in the inundated area. Among them was Lieutenant John W Marr.



Lieutenant John W Marr, commander 1 Platoon Company G 3/507.

He recalled:

"It was back in Nottingham that we loaded up the aeroplane. We flew down across the Channel towards the Cotentin Peninsula heading in a south-easterly direction to our drop zone.

It was dark, it was about 2 o'clock in the morning when we hit landfall of the Cotentin Peninsula and we waited for the green light to come on because we knew when we hit landfall that it wasn't going to be very long until we got the green light to jump. We saw the terrain passing underneath us it just looked like a wet meadow, like freshly fallen rain was lying on the grassland.

When we hit landfall there was a low cloud formation that had formed over the peninsula that sometimes obscured our view of both the land and the formation that we were flying in. We noticed that sometimes we made sharp turns, not turns but sharp evasive action and we began to see the anti-aircraft guns firing from Montebourg to the north and Etienville on the south where the Douve River flowed.

We had the red light after we hit landfall. Then we were waiting for the green light, and we saw the pastureland passing underneath us and we waited until the green light came on. It appeared like a very peaceful, pastoral area below us. Little did we know that the land that we were approaching was absolutely underwater and had been made so by the opening of the sluice gates of which we had no knowledge until the arrival there.

I, personally, was standing in the door from the time we hit landfall until we got to the drop zone area watching this rather peaceful-looking countryside pass below us. When we got the green light, we went out. We were flying at a very low level, at least my plane was, and I went out and got about one full oscillation after opening of my parachute, hit the water and went under. Then I straightened up in the water and was about armpit deep in a swamp. This was a great surprise to me because I thought I was going to be landing in a pastureland.

Coming up out of the water, which was armpit deep, the first thing I had to do was unbuckle my parachute harness and get out of my parachute. That was not all that easy because we had never really practised doing that in the water and we had old-type style harness buckles on our chute, we didn't have quick disconnects to get out of the harness quickly, so it took a little time to get out of the harness. To get our bearings, looking around the railroad embankment that went across this swamp area was a very significant landmark. Most people, as I did, headed toward the railroad."

Those who landed in the inundated area near La Fièvre tended to congregate along the Carentan to Cherbourg Railway as that was the obvious high ground rising above the flood waters. Along this railway, the groups of paratroopers who landed in the Marais, the inundated area, headed towards the bridge and causeway at La Fièvre. When Lieutenant John Marr landed in the inundated area, he was alone; he had been separated from the rest of his stick, and so he too headed towards the railway embankment. He recalled:

"The assembly on D-Day could hardly be called an assembly because the Pathfinder operation was not wholly successful. The assembly plan that we had went out the window when we dropped in the swamp. Because it was then how do I get out of the swamp and to a place that I could recognise, and the railroad embankment was that place. Because we were headed for the railroad, we were

going to cross that railroad embankment as we went across the inundated area and that was the direction of flight. That was the direction that I think most people looked after they hit down. They sort of looked in the direction they had been flying and they saw the railroad embankment. So, they just headed for the embankment, that was the assembly. All the units got mixed, there were people from other regiments who mingled with our regiment and members of our regiment mingled with others on the railroad embankment.”

Brigadier-General James M Gavin, the Assistant Divisional Commander of the 82nd, landed close to the inundated area of the Marais. He recalled:

“The green light went on at about the instance several of the ships appeared out of the fog, closing in on us. After about a 3-second delay we went out, small-arms fire was coming up from the ground when the chute opened – just general shooting all over the area. Off to the right of the line of flight, there was considerable apparent gunfire and flak. I figured that it probably was in the vicinity of Etienneville, where there was supposed to be located the only known heavy AA installations in the area. A lot of firing was seen straight in the line of flight - tracers going into the air - several miles away.

I landed in an orchard, joined my aide who landed nearby (Lieutenant Olson) and proceeded to "roll up the stick" as per plan, arriving on the edge of a wide swamp where I found the remaining men of my stick who were endeavouring to retrieve equipment bundles from the deep mud and marsh. At this time parachutists were seen descending, landing in the swamp and on the banks. After collecting my stick, I found that several men had been injured during the landing, and two hit during descent.

About 20 minutes after reaching the marsh, a red assembly light showed on the far bank. A few minutes thereafter a blue assembly light showed to the south of the red light several hundred yards. I sent Lieutenant Olson at once to direct all the men that he could contact to report to me in my location. As it happened, the blue light was the 508th light – the red one, was the 507th light. Close-in security was posted. The Germans took no aggressive action, despite the fact that they were obviously in the area since there had been considerable firing during the descent. The riverbank was well dug with slit trenches and prepared gun positions. Men from the 507th began arriving.

Within two hours, about 150 men were assembled – all 507th except my own stick, and about one plane load of the 508th. Lieutenant Olson reported that there was a railroad embankment on the far side of the swamp, and that it was passable for foot troops. We decided that we were on the Merderet River since it was the only river with marshes and with a railroad running north and south alongside of it. Prior to this point, I had estimated that we must be on the Douve because of the depth and width of the water. Our pre-operational photo interpretation had rather clearly established the fact that the Merderet was a narrow stream, about 20 yards wide and several feet deep. The value of

the Merderet River as an anti-tank obstacle had been carefully studied. The riverbank was surrounded by marshland, covered with grass which on the fringes was used for grazing. Actually, it developed that the grass was swamp grass several feet long, which showed above the water and concealed the wide expanse of flooded area from the photo interpreter. Heavy firing was seen in the direction of what was thought to be Sainte-Mère-Église.”



Brigadier-General James M Gavin, Assistant Divisional Commander of the 82nd.

Once on the railway embankment, the paratroopers began heading southeast in the direction of La Fièvre bridge and causeway. Those of the 507th and 508th were intent on getting across the river to join up with their units to carry on with their D-Day missions. Lieutenant John Marr was intent on doing this and he recalled:

“I began to wade, and I found in the wading that the depth of the water varied greatly from perhaps ankle-deep to over one’s head. I skirted the deep areas as best I could, and I took under visual sighting the railroad embankment. I had remembered from briefings that it was the most prominent landmark, and I began to know something about where I was.

As I continued onwards, I saw this small blue light, which was an assembly light used by the Pathfinders for assistance in assembling people after dropping on the drop zone. I waded toward it and found Lieutenant Prickett, who was the S-2 of the 3rd Battalion, and one other soldier was manning this light. Lieutenant Prickett was in the act of trying to direct people toward the railroad because it was not clear if going the other way was the proper way to go to our objective.

So, I decided to go on toward the railroad. I climbed the embankment. Of course, I had noted from the night sky in profile troops marching down that railroad in large numbers. So, I climbed the embankment and made contact with somebody, who I have long since forgot, and finally came upon a 507th individual who had told me that Captain Schwartzwalder was on the railroad leading a small group of individuals.

The main body on the railroad was the 508th which was supposed to take up an area in the airhead line south of the 507th sector of the airhead line. They were going down the railroad, a huge number under the control of their regimental commander Colonel Roy Lindquist.

As I continued on other members of the 507th were also headed toward a forward area in the column marching down the railroad and we eventually linked up with the small group of people that Schwartzwalder had been able to collect in that movement down the railroad. And so, the word was out in the group to assemble on Schwartzwalder so as people made their way, as I did, they were able to join the group. We collected somewhere in the region of 70 – 75 people of G Company. Some were in my platoon, but very few were in my platoon because we had dropped late on the drop zone and many of our people had dropped beyond the railroad toward UTAH Beach and several of them were captured by the beach defence forces.

As we moved down the railroad Schwartzwalder said to me several time "John we've got to get on to Amfreville that's on the other side of that swamp out there." He said, "The first opportunity we get I want you to get up off of this railroad and head toward Amfreville and the rest of us will follow." So I took up the lead of our group within the larger group and when we came to the overpass of the Sainte-Mère-Église – Amfreville road I saw the opportunity to get up on that road, which was about 30 feet above the rail bed, and so I appointed two individuals to start scrambling up the bank to the road. I followed and then the rest of the group followed behind. It was coming very close to dawn at that time."

When Brigadier-General Gavin had collected a sizable force, he too set off in the direction of the railway to get to La Fièvre. He recalled:

"At about 04:30, Colonel Maloney and Colonel Ostberg, of the 507th, with about 150 men, had reported to me, and I decided to move as soon as possible to seize the west end of the La Fièvre bridge. I considered it necessary to accomplish this before daylight because of the impracticability of fighting through the swamps, of which there were several, in the face of any German automatic weapons. Steps were taken to get the force organized for movement, but in a few minutes, two gliders landed about 400 yards west of our position. By this time, I had definitely decided that we were on the west bank of the Merderet River several miles north of La Fièvre. It had been reported to me that Colonel Lindquist had moved down the railroad with about 100 men towards La Fièvre. Some individuals were still coming in. Everyone who was not on security was working at retrieving bundles from the swamp. I managed to get one bazooka and a few rounds of ammunition. All other heavy equipment and radios were then in the swamp water or impossible to get to. The glider landings appeared most fortuitous, and steps were taken to get the equipment out of them. With luck it would be a 57mm anti-tank gun, which would come in very handy. At this time gliders were going overhead moving in the direction of Sainte-Mère-Église. All indications tended to more clearly establish our estimated location as being correct. In order to retrieve the contents of the gliders, the move south

was temporarily delayed while patrols were sent to the gliders. Lieutenant Graham was placed in charge of those patrols. Lieutenant Graham returned in about a half hour stating that he needed at least 30 men. One glider contained a "57", and one a jeep. They had landed in a marsh and it was very difficult to extricate the gun and vehicle. Some German small-arms fire was being received in the vicinity of the gliders at this time. Lieutenant Colonel Maloney was instructed to make the men available to Lieutenant Graham. About a half hour later Lieutenant Graham returned and stated that he couldn't get the men, couldn't get out the equipment with the men he had, and that the German fire was increasing. I accompanied him to the hedge along the field containing the gliders where the fire was building up with considerable intensity. With some difficulty, additional men were obtained and finally either the gun or jeep, I forget which now, was removed only to become impossibly bogged in the swampy bottom. At my direction, Lieutenant Graham destroyed the jeep and removed part of the breach mechanism of the 57mm. It was just barely possible to do this, since the German force was becoming increasingly aggressive. It was now broad daylight. It was about 06:00 or 06:30 am. The degree of enemy build-up and his attitude made the possibility of moving down the west bank at this time appear impracticable, and I decided to move to the railroad embankment and move in the direction of La Fièvre, and there pick up all who could be found from the 508th, contact the 505th, and attack the bridge from the east side. Orders were issued, and the movement started across the marsh. The movement started and contact was established with the 1st Battalion, 505th, under the command of Major Kellam, at La Fièvre."

Major Kellam's 1/505 began landing on DZ-O northwest of Sainte-Mère-Église at 02:03. They assembled in relatively good order and two hours after their drop Lieutenant John (Red Dog) Dolan's Company A 1/505, whose job it was to get to the bridge and seize the eastern end of the causeway, led the battalion off in the direction of the Manoir La Fièvre.

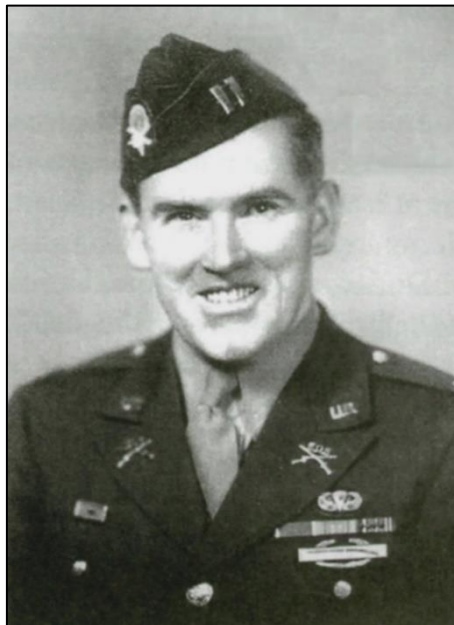


Major Frederick Caesar Augustus Kellam, commanding officer of 1/505.

Sergeant Robert Murphy, who was one of Company A's Pathfinders, recalled:

"The main target was to stop the Germans from getting down to UTAH Beach. We jumped behind UTAH Beach behind Sainte-Mère-Église, which is probably four or five miles from UTAH Beach, and there was only these two causeways, because of the Merderet River, that the Germans could get over and my company's sole mission on D-Day was to take that little La Fièvre bridge."

Lieutenant Dolan's Company A, by this time 11 officers and 132 men, crossed the railway bridge west of Sainte-Mère-Église heading towards La Fièvre. As they approached the Manoir La Fièvre, Lieutenant Dolan's men came under effective enemy fire from snipers and machine guns. They hit the ground and returned fire. As the fighting for possession of the Manoir began, Monsieur Leroux gathered his family, his wife and their three daughters, and took refuge in the wine cellar. The Germans occupying the Manoir began their stubborn defence holding off Lieutenant Dolan and his men. Lieutenant George Presnell, the platoon leader of 2nd Platoon, led a squad of men to try and outflank the enemy, but as they approached the Manoir they were engaged by an enemy machine gun and forced to withdraw.



Lieutenant (later Captain) John 'Red Dog' Dolan, officer commanding Company A 1/505.

Following close behind Lieutenant Dolan's Company A was the group of men from the 507th led by Captain Floyd Benjamin (Ben) Schwartzwalder, the commander of Company G 3/507. They had followed the Carentan to Cherbourg Railway to the road bridge over which Lieutenant Dolan's men had passed and there scrambled up the embankment onto the road. Captain Schwartzwalder was intent on getting across the causeway to join up with his battalion at Amfreville. They too came under effective enemy fire as they approached the Manoir La Fièvre. Lieutenant John Marr recalled:

"As we got up on the road, we decided to cross the road and continue on the south side of it in the westerly direction toward the farmstead, which was called the Manoir La Fièvre, which was adjacent to the bridge across the Merderet River."

The Manoir was then under attack by Company A of the 505th whose job it was to capture, seize and hold the eastern approach to the causeway across the Merderet River to the churchyard on the western side of the crossing. They were then fighting to seize the Manoir. They had landed north of it fairly intact, in fact, the 1st Battalion had landed there, and Company A's job was to lead the attack on the Manoir and seize the eastern end of the causeway.

We proceeded down through this rather large field that was east of the Manoir and as we moved down through that field Schwartzwalder told me to take up the advance party of our group and move along to skirt the Manoir to the south. We moved our little party, there were five of us in that party, moved down the hedgerow which led to the southern hedgerow along the Manoir beyond which was more inundated area and the river which ran under the bridge proceeding on south toward Chef-du-Pont.

As we approached a cattle gate, which is to say three logs across an open area to the south-east corner of the Manoir a machine gun opened up. We all hit the ground and reached for a grenade at the same time. We were perhaps 30 yards away from the machine gun and how come he didn't kill us all is hard to explain. We all got out grenades and threw the grenades at this gun emplacement by the cattle gate and two Germans came up out of there. The opening blast of their machine gun had hit two of our people, Private Escobar, and Corporal Lawton, and as these two Germans jumped up Escobar mistook them for wanting to continue the attack and he rolled over with his Tommy gun and killed the two Germans, and that was the end of the machine gun emplacement at the southeast corner of the Manoir.

We stopped our movement at that point to get our wounded back to where Schwartzwalder had the main body of our group. It was at that time, as we were moving back towards Schwartzwalder, that I ran into 'Red' Dolan, who was commander of Company A of the 505th. That's where I learned that McGinty, whom I had known, Major McGinty of the 1st Battalion 505th had been killed just prior to our movement up there.

We got on back to Schwartzwalder's group, got the two wounded people taken care of, and got them evacuated back to safety."

Lieutenant Dolan had sent Lieutenant Donald Coxton's platoon straight down the road to get closer to the Manoir and attack the German defenders, and a patrol under Lieutenant William Oakley to the far-left flank with orders to get down to the river and work up to the enemy position from the south. Major James McGinty, 1/505's executive officer, had crawled forward with Lieutenant Donald Coxton's platoon. They had gone about 100 yards when the lead scout was killed, and Lieutenant Coxton was mortally wounded. Second Lieutenant Robert McLaughlin took over the platoon but as he moved forward his radio operator, Corporal Busa, was hit and in going to his aid, Lieutenant McLaughlin was struck by bullets in the leg and stomach; a moment later Major McGinty was shot through the head.

By now it was after 11:00, and the Germans in the Manoir had delayed the American paratroopers from taking the bridge and causeway. Major General Mathew B Ridgeway and Colonel Roy Lindquist arrived at the bridge and Major General Ridgeway ordered Colonel Lindquist to take control. He quickly assessed the situation at La Fièvre, called in the commanders of the three regimental groups, and issued quick battle orders.



Colonel Roy E Lindquist, commanding officer of the 508th.

Lieutenant John Marr continued:

“Colonel Lindquist showed up in the field behind us. It had been our understanding, or at least this was the prevailing thought, that Lindquist was going down the railroad with a whole host of his regiment headed to Chef-du-Pont.

Red Dolan had come up from Company A thinking that the Manoir was pretty much under control. So, we had a representative of the 505th, and Schwartzwalder representing the 507th and Lindquist himself representing the 508th. He turned and gave one of the shortest field orders I’ve experienced in my life. He said “The 505th you go down the right, 507th you go down the left and the 508th gon’na go down the centre. Move out.” ... and that was how the attack was formulated for the Manoir.”

Colonel Lindquist’s plan entailed Captain Schwartzwalder’s men from the 507th attacking the Manoir from the left of the road, while Lieutenant Dolan’s Company A advanced on the right. Both movements were to begin at noon. By this time, Lieutenant Oakley’s patrol from Company A 1/505, which had been working around from the south along the riverbank, had reached the back of the Manoir’s farm buildings. As Captain Schwartzwalder’s men charged in from the eastern side, Lieutenant Oakley’s patrol rushed into the opposite side from the back of the farm buildings. Lieutenant John Marr recalled:

“We had to go back around where we had knocked that machine gun out and Schwartzwalder

placed me in the advance party again. So, I put two scouts out and we went around the south side of the Manoir. We had knocked out the only resistance on the south side of the Manoir already. We went around the south side while the Manoir was under fire by the 505th and 508th. It was a very short and noisy battle, and they took the Manoir, there weren't that many Germans in there. We moved on around to the road that ran across the bridge and the Manoir became silent.

Schwartzwalder halted our group at the highway, the road that went across the bridge there. The wall around the Manoir was very close to the bridge so we had come around there and come to the road at the junction of a small wall that ran around the southwest corner of the Manoir.”



Captain Ben Schwartzwalder, officer commanding
Company G 3/507.



Lieutenant William Oakley, Company A 1/505.

The American paratroopers discovered they had been held up by just 28 German infantry soldiers from Grenadier Regiment 1057 of the 91st Luftlande Division. This German platoon had resisted stoutly for the entire morning of D-Day against over 300 American paratroopers, losing 20 of its number, dead and wounded, in the process. The Manoir La Fièrè had finally been taken along with the bridge and the eastern end of the causeway. Colonel Lindquist subsequently sent Captain Schwartzwalder's men across the causeway to secure the western end.

While the fight for the Manoir La Fièrè had been going on, Captain Anthony M Stefanich's Company C 1/505 was also making its way towards La Fièrè by a different route. Their route took them past a wood overlooking the River Merderet on the edge of a slight ridge. Sergeant Elmo Bell of C/505 recalled:

“After we assembled, we immediately started towards Sainte-Mère-Église and then we reached the river and realised that the river was flooded. The Company commander decided that we needed to go and reinforce Company A to defend that bridge and we started to move in that direction. Short of the bridge there was a German strongpoint on the ridge in the edge of the woods. The woods that

we were in were separated from the German strongpoint by 500 or 600 yards of flat bare ground and the Germans had that covered by automatic weapons. We were held up there. Everyone that showed himself out of the woods was picked off. My Company commander went forward to see what the problem was, and he was hit by machine gun fire. He was shot through the middle of the chest and the bullet came out between his shoulder blades in the back and we didn't think he would live out the hour, but we found a little farm cart, a little two-wheeled cart, and loaded him aboard this farm cart and five men headed toward the beach, and at this time we had no idea what was happening at the beach. We didn't know if anyone had gotten ashore, but we did know that Captain Stefanich's survival depended upon adequate medical treatment and the only source was on the hospital ships out in the bay. I didn't know until many months later that these five men succeeded in getting to the beach and they succeeded in getting him aboard a shuttle run that was running back and forth between the vessels and he did indeed get on a hospital ship, he survived to make the drop in Holland for Operation MARKET GARDEN."

After a short fight, Company C cleared the enemy from the woods and continued towards La Fièvre.



Captain Anthony M Stefanich, officer commanding Company C 1/505.

Just after the Manoir had been taken, Colonel William Ekman, the commander of the 505th, arrived at the bridge followed shortly afterwards by Brigadier-General Gavin. Brigadier-General Gavin and Colonel Ekman met with Major Kellam who assured them everything was under control. Sergeant Robert M Murphy recalled:

"General Gavin talked to Colonel Ekman and also Major Kellam who had parachuted and had combat experience in Sicily and Italy, and he was the 1st Battalion commander and Kellam told General Gavin "Everything's okay, I've got it under control here. Go where you want to go over to the Chef-du-Pont bridge take your 508th men over there, your 507th men over there because I've got everything under control." This is during the battle for the La Fièvre Manoir. General Gavin who was

the former 505th commander and knew when Kellam said that he could rely on him, he felt good that he had no problems here with Major Kellam here. As a result, General Gavin went over to Chef-du-Pont.”



Colonel William Ekman, commanding officer of the 505th.

It was now around 13:45, and, seeing that Major Kellam's men were dealing with the situation at La Fièvre, Brigadier-General Gavin decided to send Lieutenant Colonel Arthur A Maloney with 75 men of his group south to seize the second crossing at Chef-du-Pont. He later led the remainder of his group heading southwards along the riverbank towards Chef-du-Pont.

On the far side of the River Merderet, Lieutenant Colonel Charles J Timmes, the commanding officer of 2/507 had gathered a group of 20 men after he landed and had moved southwards toward the small hamlet of Cauquigny situated at the western end of the La Fièvre Causeway. He picked up a further 30 or so men from Company D 2/507 and arriving at Cauquigny, he heard firing from the vicinity of Amfreville. Thinking that the remainder of his battalion was attacking their objective, he set off with his men towards Amfreville moving along the hedgerows to close with the enemy from the east.

As Lieutenant Colonel Timmes' small force approached the village, they began to take casualties and he realised that things were not as he had thought. The Germans were indeed in Amfreville, but the enemy was not under attack by his battalion. The Germans were well-sited in the buildings overlooking the road and fields towards the La Fièvre causeway. They had seen Lieutenant Colonel Timmes's small group of men approaching and opened fire upon them. Realising that the odds were heavily stacked against him, Lieutenant Colonel Timmes decided to disengage and withdraw back towards the river. Lieutenant Colonel Timmes's small group successfully broke contact, headed towards the River Merderet, and set up a defensive position about a mile north of Cauquigny near the Ferme Jules Jean, now known as 'Timmes Orchard'. Belatedly realising the importance of the Cauquigny position, Lieutenant Colonel Timmes sent Lieutenant Lewis Levy of Company D 2/507 and 10 men back to the western end of the causeway.



Lieutenant Colonel Charles J Timmes, commanding officer of the 2/507.

In addition to Lieutenant Colonel Timmes' men, another group of the 507th assembled under its commander, Colonel George Millett Jr. He established another defensive position to the west of the River Merderet to the northwest of Amfreville and close to DZ-T.



Colonel George V Millett Jr, commanding officer of the 507th.

Over the next three days, he gathered some 400 men, but these took little part in the fighting to secure the crossings over the river. During the night of the 8th, Colonel Millett's group was ordered to move eastwards to join up with the rest of the 507th, but it ran into heavy enemy fire from positions near Amfreville. The column broke up, Colonel Millett was captured, and only 155 rejoined the division on 9 June.

Lieutenant Levy's small group was armed with a Browning Automatic Rifle [BAR], a Thompson submachine gun, their rifles, Gammon bombs and a bazooka. On the way to the western end of the La Fièrè causeway, they met Lieutenant Kormylo from Company D 2/507 with 20 men and another BAR. Lieutenant Kormylo sent his 20 men on towards Lieutenant Colonel Timmes' position and attached himself to Lieutenant Levy's group. He kept the BAR with him.

On their way to Cauquigny, they were fired upon by American paratroopers on the opposite bank but reached the church unscathed. They set up Lieutenant Kormylo's BAR to cover the bridge and dug defensive positions around the churchyard. Not long afterwards, two officers and 37 men from the 508th arrived. They had a BAR and Bazooka with them and were used to augment the defence. The BAR was set up to cover the fork in the road and the bazooka was used to strengthen the roadblock set up by the church. In their defensive position, they could hear the battle raging on the far end of the causeway and, after about three-quarters of an hour, that fighting died down.

With the Manoir La Fièrè taken, Colonel Lindquist told Captain Schwartzwalder to get his men across to the other end of the causeway. Once again Captain Schwartzwalder put Lieutenant Marr in charge of the point section. Several of the enemy were still lurking between Le Manoir and Cauquigny. Private James Mattingly, one of Lieutenant Marr's scouts, was fired on by a German in a slit trench near the bridge. He fired back with his M1 rifle, dived into the roadside and threw a grenade; nine Germans got up out of their weapon pits, leaving one dead and two wounded, and surrendered. Lieutenant Kormylo, seeing this, promptly threw a yellow smoke grenade into the road to show that Americans held the churchyard. Lieutenant John W Marr recalled:

"We were waiting for further direction and Schwartzwalder had been called to go and see Lindquist who was then on the grounds of the Manoir. He came back and he indicated to me that he wanted me to go on across the bridge and go to the other side. He indicated to me also that the 508th people under Lindquist's command was going to follow up."

I put out two scouts and off we started westward across the causeway. I had two scouts; one was John Ward and the other Jim Mattingly. Ward was in the lead and he crossed over the bridge and was about one hundred yards down the roadway along the causeway. Mattingly crossed the bridge and I had gotten to the bridge behind Mattingly when a German rose up out of a machine gun emplacement on the north side of the causeway and took aim at Mattingly who saw the movement out of the corner of his eye, and whirled and fire his M1 rifle. Emptied the clip, fired about eight rounds, I believe a clip was eight rounds, and he emptied that clip at the German who fell back into the gun emplacement. Mattingly then dropped his rifle, empty rifle to the roadway, and reached for a grenade and tossed it over into the emplacement. Whereupon four Germans rose up and threw their hands up. One of them was severely injured, severely wounded, and the others had minor wounds from I presume the grenade explosion. And then Mattingly picked up his empty rifle stood up and covered these individuals and ordered them out of the emplacement. All of this happened perhaps in the space of fifteen seconds, twenty at the most.

As Mattingly was motioning the Germans to come forward out of the gun emplacement on the north

side of the road five Germans rose up out of a concealed gun emplacement on the south side of the road behind him. And here he had captured nine Germans and two machine guns in the space of about, as I say, fifteen to twenty seconds. I was absolutely amazed at how he conducted himself it was almost as if he was a robot.”

After their short fight, the prisoners were sent to the Manoir La Fièvre, and Lieutenant Levy, Lieutenant Kormylo and Captain Schwartzwalder met on the road and shook hands. Captain Schwartzwalder was delighted to find his objective already taken. Lieutenant John Marr recalled:

“After he had collected these Germans and we had sent them back under control, Schwartzwalder had taken over and sent them back into the Manoir, we continued on across the causeway. As we were about halfway across the causeway, we witnessed a smoke explosion, a smoke bomb – a smoke grenade actually, was set off in the churchyard at Cauquigny church. That signified to us that there were friendly troops up there because that was one of the signals that we had yellow smoke meant friendly troops. So we continued quickly across there, Schwartzwalder bringing up the main body of our group which as I say was probably about 70 – 75 people and we got to the crossroads, actually, it was more of a Y in the road, where the main road from Sainte-Mère-Église turned south-westward to go to Picauville and another road went straight by the churchyard to Amfreville.”

A German ambulance came up the road from the south, turned towards Amfreville at the Y-junction, and then halted. After a minute or two, it shot off along the Amfreville road. Lieutenant John Marr recalled:

“A German ambulance came up from Picauville made a turn to the west and they had the rear doors of the ambulance open. We could see that there were some American uniforms, and casualties, aboard that ambulance and also German casualties, and uniforms, lying on the floor of the ambulance. The ambulance made the turn towards Amfreville and halted for maybe about two or three minutes. Of course, we did not bother the ambulance because it was headed for an aid station and had American soldiers in it, American uniformed bodies in it.

As we were deliberating on what our next move was going to be, we heard the rumble of tanks and we also began to receive artillery at this Picauville – Amfreville junction, which was just across the road from the churchyard. We had met up, when we approached the churchyard, we had meet up with Lieutenant Levy of the 2nd Battalion who was out posting the churchyard under the control of Colonel Timmes, who had out posted that and it was his mission and the 2nd Battalion 507 to take and hold the approach to the La Fièvre crossing.

We heard the rumble of tanks as I say and artillery began to fall on the road junction. The ambulance moved on out of sight and we concluded that why the ambulance had halted there was to send a message to the German force coming up from Picauville.

So, what we did was evade to the north and went across to coves of the inundated area and came to Timmes Orchard, which is where he come to rest with his folks after having tried to attack Amfreville.”

Lieutenant Levy told Captain Schwartzwalder that Lieutenant Colonel Timmes and 200 men were only a mile away to the north and, believing that Cauquigny was secure as the 508th were to follow his men, Captain Schwartzwalder decided to join Lieutenant Colonel Timmes. He took the 40 men of the 508th with him and once more Lieutenant Levy and Lieutenant Kormylo were left with just 8 men to hold the western end of the La Fièvre causeway.

For whatever reason, Captain Schwartzwalder's men were not immediately followed across the causeway by the 508th and a few minutes later Colonel Lindquist came over the bridge. When he saw the small size of Lieutenant Levy's garrison, he immediately returned across the causeway to order Company B 1/508, his only reserve, to reinforce Lieutenant Levy's small force.

In the intervening period, the Germans attacked Lieutenant Levy's small group at Cauquigny. As Colonel Lindquist left to return across the causeway, the sound of small arms fire west of the church, then the unmistakable rumble of tank engines and tracks approaching could be heard. Three minutes later German shells began falling on Lieutenant Levy's small group lining the churchyard wall.

Lieutenant Levy and two men ran to the sunken lane leading off the Amfreville road. As the pre-war French H-39 Hotchkiss tanks and infantrymen passed the end of the lane they opened fire. Lieutenant Kormylo and the remainder of the paratroopers at Cauquigny also opened fire. Lieutenant Levy jumped up from his hiding place and threw a grenade at a German machine gun crew who were deploying for action. The grenade exploded wounding the three-man crew as Lieutenant Levy shot them with his rifle. He then loosed off the rest of his magazine at the leading tank just a few yards away. Minus his helmet, his jacket torn and bleeding from a shoulder wound, Lieutenant Levy made a mad dash back to his men, who laid down covering fire. He then doubled back to throw more grenades at the German tanks.

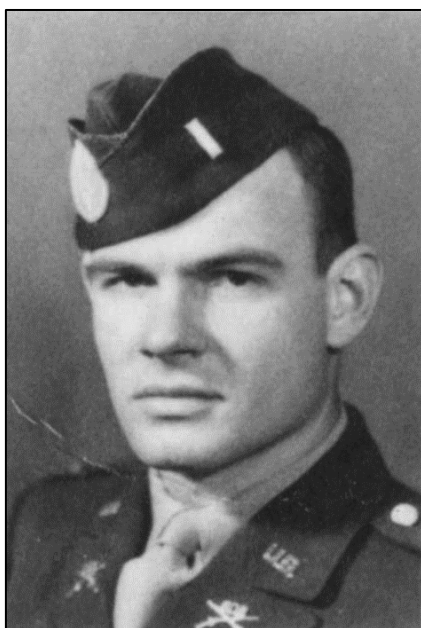
In this initial clash with Panzer Ersatz-und-Ausbildungsabteilung 100 [Panzer-Ersatz-und-Ausbildungsabteilung 100] and infantrymen from Grenadier Regiment 1057, Lieutenant Levy's small group knocked out three tanks with gammon grenades but lost two of their men. Lieutenant Levy's men fought tenaciously but in danger of being overwhelmed by the superior numbers, the survivors beat a hasty retreat from the churchyard and withdrew north along the river to join Lieutenant Colonel Timmes's group in the orchard.

Captain Royal R Taylor, Company B 1/508's commander, was wounded in the parachute drop. Lieutenant Homer H Jones assumed command and led them across the causeway to defend the western bridgehead. As they advanced, the fight for control of the causeway and its western end at Cauquigny raged. Company B 1/508 walked into intense machine gun fire and managed to reach the church just after Lieutenant Levy's group had left. They were, however, unable to establish a defensive position and forced to withdraw. Some of the men broke and ran back along the causeway towards La Fièvre only to be mown down by the machine guns of the German tanks. Others tried to get out

of trouble to the left, away from the road and the high ground, and others across the Marais back to the east; but everywhere the fleeing American paratroopers were seen and shot at. Very few survived.

Lieutenant Homer Jones was one of them and he received the Silver Star for his actions. His citation reads:

*“The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to First Lieutenant (Infantry) Homer H. Jones (ASN: 0-461025), United States Army, for gallantry in action while serving with Company B, 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in action on 6 June 1944, near ****, France. First Lieutenant Jones, Platoon Leader, assumed command of a small provisional company of paratroopers near ****. He was called upon to clear a strongpoint controlling the approaches to a causeway over the Merderet River. Leading his men, First Lieutenant Jones' group under his aggressive leadership, killed eight Germans, captured seventeen prisoners, and succeeded in eliminating the strongpoint. He then led an assault which seized the bridge and established a foothold on the opposite bank until forced to withdraw in the face of overwhelming odds. His gallant actions were instrumental in confining the enemy west of the Merderet River. His gallant actions and dedicated devotion to duty, without regard for his own life, were in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Army.”*



First Lieutenant Homer H Jones's Company B 1/508.

At the eastern end of the causeway, on the left bank of the River Merderet, Lieutenant Dolan's Company A 1/505 was quite unaware of the struggle being played out at the western end of the causeway at Cauquigny. They had seen Captain Swartzwalder's group go across and Lieutenant Jones's Company B 1/508 follow but were unaware that Captain Swartzwalder's group had continued onwards. They could hear the sounds of battle but did not know that Lieutenant Jones's men were fighting for their lives against a superior German force.

The remainder of Major Kellam's 1/505 came up and Colonel Lindquist withdrew to the railway with the men of the other two regiments to form a reserve. Lieutenant Dolan had Company A dig in along the eastern bank and Major Kellam had his other elements dig in to support them from the higher ground. A 57mm anti-tank gun was positioned, about 150 metres behind Company A near the curve in the road close to the Manoir, to fire down the causeway. A roadblock was set up using an old truck with four anti-tank mines laid on the road, and two bazooka teams were placed at the bridge. The Bazooka teams were PFC John Bolderson with PFC Gordon Pryne, and PFC Lenold Peterson with Private Marcus Heim. Private Heim recalled:

"When we arrived at the bridge, men were placed down the pathway to the right and to the left of the Manor House and outbuildings. The four bazooka men included: Lenold Peterson, and myself, John Bolderson and Gordon Pryne. Peterson and I took up positions on the Manor House side facing Cauquigny, below the driveway. There was a concrete telephone pole just in front of us and we dug in behind it. We knew that when the Germans started the attack with their tanks, we would have to get out of our foxhole and reveal our position to get a better view of the tanks. Bolderson and Pryne were on the right side of the road just below the pathway. I do not remember how many paratroopers were around us, all I saw was a machine gun set up in the Manor House yard. On the right side down the pathway, a few riflemen took up positions. There was a 57mm cannon up the road in back of us along with another machine gun. We carried anti-tank mines and bazooka rockets from the landing area. These mines were placed across the causeway about 50 or 60 feet on the other side of the bridge. There was a broken-down German truck by the Manor House, which we pushed and dragged across the bridge and placed it across the causeway. All that afternoon the Germans kept shelling our position, and the rumour was that the Germans were going to counterattack."

Not long after taking the western end of the causeway, the Germans began shelling and mortaring the forward positions of 1/505. The rumble of tanks at Cauquigny and the build-up of enemy infantrymen indicated to the American paratroopers that they could soon be facing an assault against their defences at the Manoir La Fièvre and bridge. The men of the 1/505 prepared themselves for the onslaught. Sergeant Elmo Bell recalled:

"We set up along the river there, Company A had already arrived, and they had occupied positions right along the riverbank, so later arrivals occupied the river in greater depth, further back from the river bridge. Sometimes, I don't recall the time, I'd say it was noon or maybe a little after."

"This floodplain we could see across the river, water on both sides of the causeway, extended about 600 yards and then the road gradually turned back to the left and disappeared around a curve and some timber. We could hear the sound of vehicles, both track and wheeled vehicles, back around the curve so we knew they were assembling for an attack."

It was around 17:30 when the Germans began to cross the causeway from Cauquigny with infantry from Grenadier-Regiment 1057 supported by four tanks of the Panzer-Ersatz-und-Ausbildungsabteilung 100. Some accounts of the action at La Fièvre mention just three tanks, but photographs taken after the capture of the causeway confirm that there

were four tanks: a Panzerkampfwagen III and three French-built tanks – two Renault R35 and one Hotchkiss H39. Sergeant Elmo Bell recalled:

“Three tanks pulled in sight followed by about a battalion of infantry. They came on towards the bridge and they had about 10 or 12 American paratroopers that had been captured that were marching ahead of the tanks with their hands behind their heads. The tank commander of the lead tank carried a submachine gun, and he was directing the paratroopers to pick up the mines and throw them off the road.

As they approached, they got closer and closer, but still no shot had been fired. I was apprehensive. I had a mortar laid on the foot of the bridge there and I had a shell in my hand in the tube just waiting for the command to fire, to drop that shell in the tube, and the command didn’t come.

When the lead tank got to the bridge, I was afraid that no one had assumed command, that no one was going to give the command to fire, and I was ready to start the show by dropping that mortar round.”



French H-39 Hotchkiss tanks, the same type used by the Panzer-Ersatz-und-Ausbildungsabteilung 100.

When they felt the lead tank was close enough, the two bazooka teams stationed on either side of the bridge climbed out of their foxholes and fired. At the same time, the 57mm anti-tank gun opened fire and the battle to hold on to the bridge and causeway began. Private Heim recalled:

“Two tanks with infantry on each side and in the rear following them was a third tank with more infantry following it. As the lead tank started around the curve in the road the tank commander stood up in the turret to take a look and from our left, the machine gun let loose a burst and killed the commander. At the same time the bazookas, 57mm and everything else we had, were firing at the

Germans and they in turn were shooting at us with cannons, mortars, machine guns and rifle fire.

Lenold Peterson and I (the loader), in the forward position, got out of the foxhole and stood behind the telephone pole so we could get a better shot at the tanks. We had to hold our fire until the last minute because some of the tree branches along the causeway were blocking our view. The first tank was hit and started to turn sideways and at the same time was swinging the turret around and firing at us. We had just moved forward around the cement telephone pole when a German shell hit it and we had to jump out of the way to avoid being hit as it was falling. I was hoping that Bolderson and Pryne were also firing at the tanks for with all that was happening in front of us there was not time to look around to see what others were doing. We kept firing at the first tank until it was put out of action and on fire. The second tank came up and pushed the first tank out of the way. We moved forward toward the second tank and fired at it as fast as I could load the rockets in the bazooka. We kept firing at the second tank, and we hit it in the turret where it is connected to the body, also in the track and with another hit it also went up in flames.”

Sergeant Elmo Bell’s account differs slightly but tells the same story. He recalled:

“About this time, there was a little 57mm anti-tank gun back down the road about 150 – 200 yards, I didn’t even know it was there. This little anti-tank gun had been recovered from a wrecked glider by some engineer troops and it was in position, and they fired a shot. Whether it was by design or accident I don’t know, but it knocked the tread off of the tank and the tank immediately turned clockwise across the bridge. The second tank was following close behind the first using the first as a shield and it was following so close it climbed upon the rear of the tank that had the tread knocked off. The bazooka gunners were dug in down on the riverbank under the bridge they fired into the belly of the tank that was climbed up onto the other and it caught fire.”

With their bazooka damaged in the fight, John Bolderson and Gordon Pryne withdrew from their exposed position. The third tank continued to trundle across the causeway and Lenold Peterson and Marcus Heim were out of ammunition. They shouted for a resupply and in desperation Major Kellam and Captain Dale Roysden, his S-3, ran to the bridge to deliver the urgently needed bazooka ammunition. As they approached the bridge a mortar round landed next to them, Major Kellam was killed, and Captain Roysden was mortally wounded. Marcus Heim scrambled out of his position and dashed across the road to where PFC Bolderson and Private Pryne had been to retrieve some of the ammunition. Returning to Lenold Peterson, Marcus Heim loaded the bazooka, and they recommenced firing. Several more bazooka rounds flew down the causeway and the third tank was also knocked out. Private Heim recalled:

“Peterson and I were almost out of rockets, and the third tank was still moving. Peterson asked me to go back across the road and see if Bolderson had any extra rockets. I ran across the road and with all the crossfire I still find it hard to believe I made it to the other side in one piece. When I got to the other side, I found one dead soldier and Bolderson and Pryne were gone. Their bazooka was lying on the ground, and it was damaged by what I thought were bullet holes. Not finding Bolderson

or Pryne I presumed that either one or both were injured. I found the rockets they left and then had to return across the road to where I left Peterson. The Germans were still firing at us and I was lucky again, I returned without being hit. Peterson and I put the newfound rockets to use on the third tank. After that one was put out of action the Germans pulled back to Cauquigny and continued shelling us for the rest of the night. They also tried two other counterattacks on our position, which also failed. During the battles, one does not have time to look around to see how others are doing. We were told that when we took up our position by the bridge that we have to hold it at all cost until the men from the beach arrived, for if the Germans broke through, they would have a good chance of going all the way to the beach. Our job was to be in the forward position by the La Fièvre Bridge with our bazooka to stop any German tanks from advancing over the bridge and onto Sainte Mère-Église and the beaches. This we accomplished all the while the Germans were continuously firing everything, they had at us. After I went across the road and found more rockets for the bazooka and returned, the third tank was put out of action and the Germans retreated. When the Germans pulled back, we looked around did not see anyone, we then moved back to our foxhole. Looking back up the road toward Sainte Mère-Église, we saw that the 57-millimeter cannon and the machine gun were destroyed. Looking down the pathway across from the Manor House we could not see any of our men. We were thinking that we were all alone and that maybe we should move from here, then someone came and told us to hold our position and he would find more men to place around us for the Germans may try again to breach our lines. We found out later, of the few that were holding the bridge at this time, most were either killed or wounded. Why we were not injured or killed only the good Lord knows.”



The knocked-out tanks on the La Fièvre Causeway.

Lieutenant John Dolan also later recalled the event:

“(The Bazooka Teams) were under the heaviest small arms fire from the other side of the causeway, and from the cannon and machine gun fire from the tanks. To this day I’ll never be able to explain why all four of them were not killed. They fired and loaded with the precision of well-oiled machinery. Watching them made it hard to believe this was nothing but a routine drill. ... (Later, they) called for more ammunition. Major Kellam ran up to the bridge with a bag of rockets followed by Captain Roysden. When they were within 15 or 20 yards of the bridge, the Germans opened up with mortar fire. Major Kellam was killed, and Captain Roysden was rendered unconscious from concussion. He died later that day.”

The four bazooka men were each awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for holding their position and repelling the Germans on 6 June 1944. Their citations read:

PFC John Bolderson

“The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Private First Class John D. Bolderson (ASN: 37083951), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving with Company A, 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in action against enemy forces on 6 June 1944, in France. Private First Class Bolderson was stationed at the end of a bridge over the Merderet River as a rocketeer to repel attacks by enemy troops who controlled the other end of the bridge. This position was subject to incessant enemy rifle, machine gun, mortar and artillery fire. After an artillery preparation, the enemy sent an assault force supported by three tanks over the bridge. Though part of the troops withdrew, Private First Class Bolderson remained at his position until the enemy tanks approached within thirty yards. In spite of the intense fire, Private First Class Bolderson rose from his position and, aided by the assistant gunner, fired rockets into the three tanks. Private First class Bolderson remained with his gun and fired it until it was pierced by enemy machine gun fire and put out of action. Private First Class Bolderson's intrepid actions, personal bravery and zealous devotion to duty exemplify the highest traditions of the military forces of the United States and reflect great credit upon himself, the 82d Airborne Division, and the United States Army.”

PFC Gordon Pryne

“The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Private First Class Gordon Pryne (ASN: 39291525), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving with Company A, 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in action against enemy forces on 6 June 1944, in France. Private First Class Pryne was stationed at the end of a bridge over the Merderet River as a rocketeer to repel attacks by enemy troops who controlled the other end of the bridge. This position was subject to

incessant enemy rifle, machine gun, mortar and artillery fire. After an artillery preparation, the enemy sent an assault force supported by three tanks over the bridge. Though part of the troops withdrew, Private First Class Pryne remained at his position until the enemy tanks approached within thirty yards. In spite of the intense fire, Private First Class Pryne rose from his position and fired rockets into the three tanks. His intrepid actions, personal bravery and zealous devotion to duty exemplify the highest traditions of the military forces of the United States and reflect great credit upon himself, the 82d Airborne Division, and the United States Army.”

PFC Lenold Peterson

“The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Private First Class Lenold C. Peterson (ASN: 37092874), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving with Company A, 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in action against enemy forces on 6 June 1944, in France. Private First Class Peterson was stationed at the end of a bridge over the Merderet River as a rocketeer to repel attacks by enemy troops who controlled the other end of the bridge. This position was subject to incessant enemy rifle, machine gun, mortar and artillery fire. After an artillery preparation, the enemy sent an assault force supported by three tanks over the bridge. Though part of the troops withdrew, Private First Class Peterson remained at his position until the enemy tanks approached within thirty yards. In spite of the intense fire, Private First Class Peterson rose from his position and fired rockets into the three tanks. The courage and devotion to duty and daring displayed by Private First Class Peterson exemplify the highest traditions of the military forces of the United States and reflect great credit upon himself, the 82d Airborne Division, and the United States Army.”

Private Marcus Heim

“The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Private Marcus Heim (ASN: 32931497), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving with Company A, 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in action against enemy forces on 6 June 1944, in France. Private Heim, Assistant Gunner, was stationed at the end of a bridge over the Merderet River as a rocketeer to repel attacks by enemy troops who controlled the other end of the bridge. This position was subject to incessant enemy rifle, machine gun, mortar and artillery fire. After an artillery preparation, the enemy sent an assault force supported by three tanks over the bridge. Though part of the troops withdrew, Private Heim remained at his position until the enemy tanks approached within thirty yards. In spite of the intense fire, Private Heim rose from his position and with the gunner, fired rockets into the three tanks. Private Heim remained with his gun and fired it until it was pierced by enemy machine gun fire and put out of action. Private Heim's intrepid actions, personal bravery and zealous devotion to

duty exemplify the highest traditions of the military forces of the United States and reflect great credit upon himself, the 82d Airborne Division, and the United States Army.”

The heavy fire from the defending paratroopers dug in around the Manoir de La Fièvre and bridge at the eastern end of the causeway drove the enemy back to Cauquigny. Sergeant Elmo Bell recalled what happened next:

“Sometime after the German forces had withdrawn out of sight a motorcycle with a sidecar and an officer with a white flag came on and he came down near the bridge and he had a megaphone and he asked for a truce for 30 or 40 minutes, I don’t remember how long, to recover the dead and wounded. That truce was granted, and he called back on the radio and a number of cargo trucks then rode down the causeway and they started loading up the dead and wounded, and we were surprised because there was no ambulance, there was nothing but cargo trucks. We couldn’t tell, they seemed to handle them all the same, they seemed to pick up a soldier by the feet and the arms and toss him over into the back of a truck. Several people were trying to count the number they picked up and the count sort of ran to around 200. If they were all dead that would account for their handling because they didn’t handle any of them as though they were wounded, they just threw them in the back of a cargo truck and hauled them away. That was the end of the first counterattack”.

While this was going on, Brigadier-General Gavin arrived back at La Fièvre from Chef-du-Pont to find the situation tenuous with ammunition low and medical aid scarce. They had been unable to establish radio communications with the other American divisions and had no news of the seaborne landings. No one seemed to know what had happened to Captain Schwartzwalder and his 80 men or how the Germans had got into Cauquigny, and they had no news of what was going on to the west of the River Merderet. With the situation at La Fièvre precarious, Brigadier-General Gavin sent word to Lieutenant Colonel Maloney to bring all, but a platoon of his men, currently at Chef-du-Pont to reinforce La Fièvre. Lieutenant Colonel Maloney’s force arrived back at La Fièvre around 20:00 and was immediately sent to boost the positions of 1/505.

By nightfall on D-Day 6 June 1944, the situation of the 82nd along the River Merderet was not good. The American paratroopers of the 82nd held the eastern bank whilst Grenadier Regiment 1057 held the west. At Chef-du-Pont Captain Roy Creek’s men had established a defensive position at the bridge and eastern end of the causeway but the western end was in the hands of the enemy. The three-day struggle to control the crossings over the River Merderet was about to begin.

Look Forward

In Part Eleven of D-Day, 6 June 1944 – The Greatest Seaborne Invasion The World Has Ever Known, I look at the struggle to control the crossing over the River Merderet at Chef-du-Pont.

This year is the 80th Anniversary of the D-Day Landings and In The Footsteps is running two tours commemorating this momentous event. These are:

D-Day 80th Anniversary Small Group Tour - A 6-day 5-night tour beginning on 4 and ending on 9 June 2024. For details, please visit <https://www.inthefootsteps.com/d-day-80th-anniversary-small-group-tour.html>.

D-Day 80th Anniversary Coach Tour - A 6-day 5-night tour beginning on 4 and ending on 9 June 2024. For details, please visit <https://www.inthefootsteps.com/d-day-80th-anniversary-coach-tour.html>.

If you are interested in a tour following in the footsteps of The Allied 21st Army Group on D-Day at any other time, please visit <https://www.inthefootsteps.com/d-day-tour.html>.

If you are interested in a tour following in the footsteps of The Allied 21st Army Group, or indeed any specific Allied formation or unit, in the Battle of Normandy that followed, contact us via our Tailor-made Tours page, <https://www.inthefootsteps.com/tailor-made-tour-service.html>, telling us where you want to go, when, for how long, and the standard of hotel you would like and we will put together a proposal for your consideration.

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