



Four 'stick' commanders of the 22nd Independent Parachute Company synchronising their watches. [IWM H 39070]

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF  
THE ALLIED 21ST ARMY GROUP  
D-DAY, 6 JUNE 1944, THE GREATEST SEABORNE INVASION THE  
WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN

BY IAN R GUMM MSTJ TD VR BSC (HONS)

PART TWENTY-ONE – THE BRITISH AIRBORNE LANDINGS ON D-DAY

Operations TONGA and MALLARD were the overarching codenames given to the British Airborne and Gliderborne landings on D-Day, 6 June 1944. Major General Richard 'Windy' Gale's British 6th Airborne Division was assigned to carry it out. The tasks assigned to the 6th Airborne Division were three-fold:

1. Seize and hold the Caen Canal and River Orne bridges east of Bénouville.
2. Destroy the five bridges over the River Dives.

### 3. Neutralise the Merville Battery.

I have already dealt with the coup-de-main operation to seize the two bridges over the Caen Canal and River Orne near Bénouville in Part Eight. In this part, I cover the actions of the remainder of the 6th Airborne Division on that day.



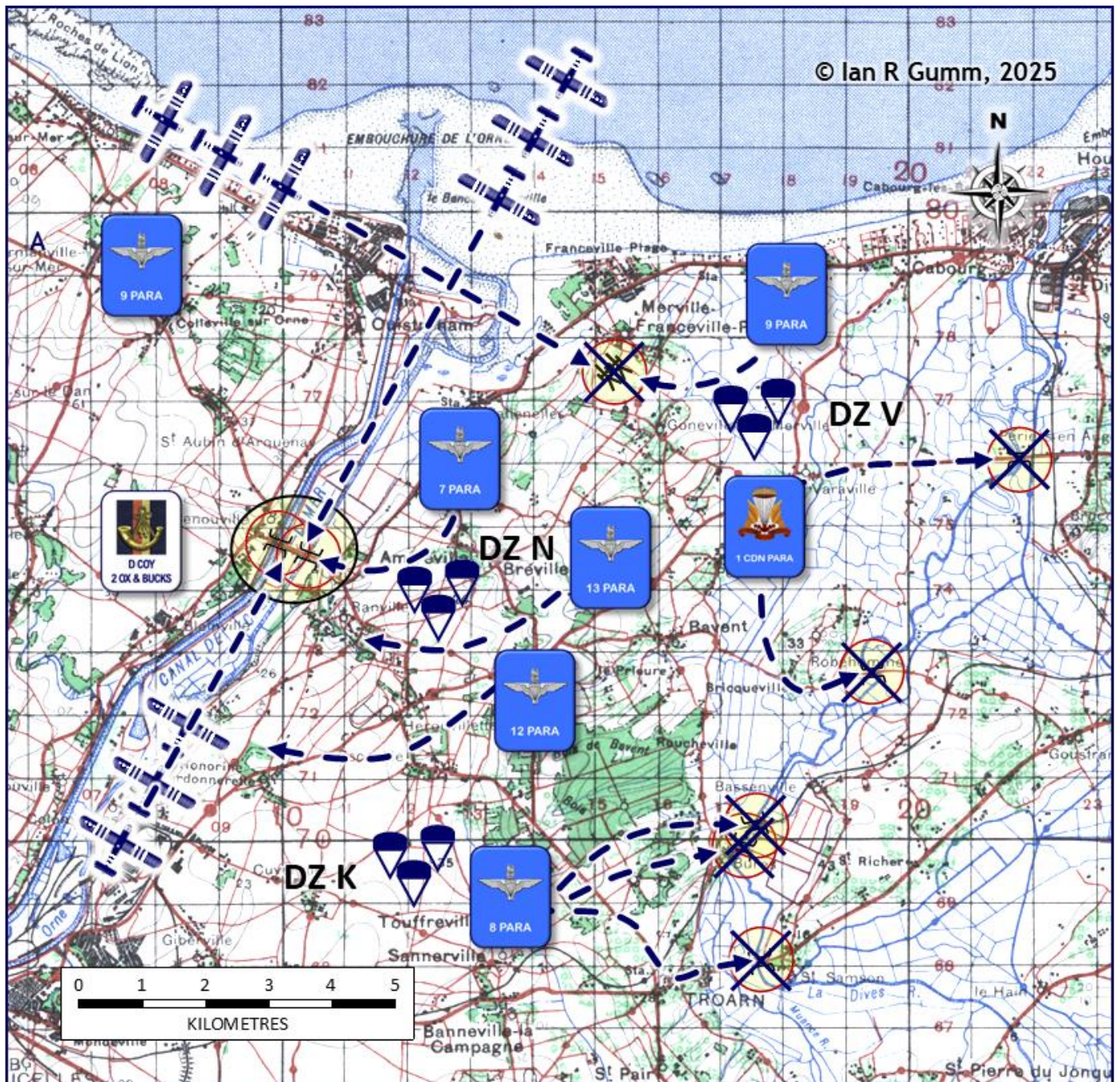
Major General Richard 'Windy' Gale.

## The Plan

**Phase One:** Mount a coup-de-main gliderborne assault to capture the bridges at Bénouville at 00:20 on D-Day, 6 June 1944, using Major John Howard's reinforced D Company of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. Simultaneously, drop pathfinders from Major Francis Lennox-Boyd's 22nd Independent Parachute Company onto Drop Zone [DZ] KING, DZ NAN, and DZ VICTOR to mark the drop zones for the main parachute drops thirty minutes later, and drop Brigadier Nigel Poett's 5th Parachute Brigade's tactical headquarters onto DZ NAN.

**Phase Two:** Drop the battalions of the 5th Parachute Brigade onto DZ NAN at 00:50. Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Pine-Coffin's 7th (Light Infantry) Parachute Battalion was to assemble and then reinforce the captured bridges at Bénouville. Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Johnson's 12th (Yorkshire) Parachute Battalion and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Luard's 13th (Lancashire) Parachute Battalion were to secure Ranville and the villages to the southwest. At the same time, the advance party of the Division's headquarters was to drop on DZ NAN.





Phases 1 to 3 of the 6th Airborne Division's plan. [© Ian R Gumm, 2025]

Also, at 00:50, Brigadier James Hill's 3rd Parachute Brigade's battalions were to drop onto DZ KING and DZ VICTOR. Lieutenant Colonel Alistair Pearson's 8th (Midland Counties) Parachute Battalion was to drop onto DZ KING to destroy the road and rail bridges over the River Dives at Bures and the road bridge at Troarn. Lieutenant Colonel George Bradbrooke's 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion was to drop onto DZ VICTOR to destroy the bridges over the River Dives at Varaville and Robehomme and protect the flank of the attack against the Merville Battery. Two Companies of Lieutenant Colonel Otway's 9th Parachute Battalion, B Company and C Company, were to drop onto DZ VICTOR to assault the Merville Battery.

**Phase Three:** At 03:30 on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Major General Gale's 6th Airborne Division headquarters, Major Peter Dixon MC's 4th Airlanding Anti-Tank Battery Royal Artillery, A Troop of Major Nick Cranmer's 3rd Airlanding Anti-Tank



Battery Royal Artillery, and Major Sandy Rutherford's 249th (Airborne) Field Company Royal Engineers would arrive by glider at DZ NAN. At 04:30, Major Stephen Terrell's A Company of the 9th Parachute Battalion was to land by glider on top of the Merville Battery as part of the assault to neutralise the guns.

**Phase Four:** At 21:00 on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Operation MALLARD, the final part of the 6th Airborne Division's planned landings, would begin when 220 Horsa and 30 Hamilcar gliders delivered their loads onto Landing Zone [LZ] NAN and WISKEY. Brigadier The Honourable Hugh Kindersley's 6th Airlanding Brigade headquarters, Lieutenant-Colonel Jack Carson's 1st Battalion The Royal Ulster Rifles and Lieutenant Colonel Godfrey Stewart's 6th Airborne Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment would land at LZ NAN, and the remainder of Lieutenant Colonel Michael Roberts's 2nd Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and Major Johnny Rogers's A Company of the 12th Battalion The Devonshire Regiment would land at LZ WISKEY. The remainder of Lieutenant Colonel Dick Stevens's 12th Battalion The Devonshire Regiment was to arrive by sea on 7 June as there was not enough capacity in the two glider lifts.

## The 5th Parachute Brigade



Brigadier Nigel Poett, the commander of the 5th Parachute Brigade.

At 00:20 on the morning of 6 June 1944, pathfinders from the 22nd Independent Parachute Company dropped from their transport aircraft. At the same time, Brigadier Nigel Poett's small tactical headquarters dropped onto DZ NAN. The plan for the pathfinders to mark the drop zones immediately went awry. The two pathfinder teams intended for DZ NAN dropped some distance away and missed the drop zone altogether, and a team of pathfinders supposed to drop onto DZ KING came down on DZ NAN. The pathfinders intended for DZ KING, believing they were in the right place, set up their beacons and marked the DZ accordingly. Consequently, fourteen sticks from Headquarters 3rd Parachute Brigade and the 8th (Midland Counties) Parachute Battalion came down onto DZ NAN instead of DZ KING.

The pathfinders who should have dropped at DZ NAN arrived as the main parachute drops were commencing and erected the correct beacons.

Brigadier Poett was more fortunate than the pathfinders, as he landed on the drop zone as intended. On landing, he heard the distinctive sound of small arms fire and the crump of grenades going off from the direction of the bridges over the Caen Canal and River Orne near Bénouville. However, when Brigadier Poett tried to gather his small headquarters, he found just a single rifleman. Together, Brigadier Poett and the rifleman set off for the bridges to arrive as the first counterattack by the Germans took place at the 'T'-junction.

Of the aircraft allocated to the 5th Parachute Brigade, all but eight managed to reach Normandy. The flight conditions were not easy. The cloud layer was between 4,000 and 6,000 ft, reducing the average visibility to less than three miles. This, coupled with 10 to 20 mph winds, made navigation difficult. The aircraft carrying the 5th Parachute Brigade had an advantage, however, as they could use the Caen Canal and River Orne as navigation aids. The battle for the bridges also acted as landmarks, and the 5th Parachute Brigade's drop was fairly accurate.

The drop of Lieutenant Colonel Richard Geoffrey Pine-Coffin's 7th Parachute Battalion, whilst scattered, resulted in about forty percent of the Battalion reaching the bridges by 02:00. Lieutenant Colonel Pine-Coffin recalled:

*"The dropping was not too accurate and although the bulk of the battalion was dropped on the drop zone, there were many who were put down several miles wide. Speed in forming up was an essential part of the battalion plan; this was difficult for the following reasons: -*

*(1) The sticks were scattered (The large number of kitbags undoubtedly slowed up the exits and resulted in some sticks being unduly long), and the aircraft seemed to come in from all angles, which confused those who were using the lines of flight to get their bearings.*

*(2) The enemy had manned positions on the drop zone itself, and there was a good bit of machine-gun fire across the drop zone, which resulted in some casualties.*

*(3) The heavy kitbags containing the boating material slowed the men a lot. The normal drill of coming into the rendezvous at the double was impossible.*

*Despite these difficulties, however, the men came in pretty well, and by 01:03, I had about 50% of the riflemen and Bren gunners in. There were no mortars, medium machine guns or wireless sets in though I could hear Howard's success signal and knew that he had captured the bridges and that they were crossable so at 01:30 hours I set off with my initial attack force (A, B, C, Company's and the advance Battalion HQ). The plan was for Battalion HQ to follow up in its own time, so I left the second in-command (Steele-Baume), Lieutenant Rogers and 4 other ranks to collect in all he could and follow us up, choosing*

*his own time in starting”<sup>1</sup>*



Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Pine-Coffin talking to Brigadier Nigel Poett.

The drops of Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Percival Johnson’s 12th Parachute Battalion and Lieutenant Colonel Peter John Luard’s 13th Parachute Battalion were also scattered. Lieutenant Ellis “Dixie” Dean recalled:

*“My chute developed normally, and as my body swung into vertical, I looked around. To my front, but some distance away, numbers of red and orange balls were shooting up into the sky. This display, I reasoned, was the ack-ack defence of Caen. I stared at them for too long because when I finally looked down, much to my horror, it seemed I was destined to land in one of the orchards bordering the eastern side of the DZ. I prepared myself for a tree landing. I had never made such a landing, but I remembered what to do: head down on the chest, arms crossed in front of it, and knees raised to protect my marriage prospects. Down I came, crashing through branches and foliage, without so much as a scratch or bruise, but when I stopped falling and opened my eyes, I was completely surrounded by greenery. I felt around for a branch to get my feet on but found none. So I turned the quick release on the parachute harness, giving it a bang, the straps flew apart, and my sten, which was broken into three parts and threaded under them, fell to the ground. I slid out of the harness, keeping a tight grip on it, lowered myself to the end of the leg straps, and I hadn’t reached the ground and was still enclosed in foliage. I let go*

*of the webbing harness and dropped all of twelve inches to the soil of Normandy.”<sup>2</sup>*

Their missions were to seize and hold Ranville and its surrounding area; the 12th Parachute Battalion was to secure the area south of Ranville, including Le Bas de Ranville, and the 13th Parachute Battalion was to secure Ranville itself.

Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Johnson's 12th Parachute Battalion left the drop zone with barely fifty percent of its men and headed for Le Bas de Ranville. By 04:00, they were in position and ready to ward off any German attacks, the only delays they had encountered being due to the local Normandy population. Corporal R Dixon of 12th Parachute Battalion recalled:

*“We reached our objective, Le Bas de Ranville village, where a French lady came from her farmhouse, which was on the land where we were digging in. Not being able to understand the French language very well, I could only guess that she was asking who we were and what we were doing. In the little French I knew, I told her that we were British and that this was the invasion. She went back into her farmhouse and minutes later came out with a jug of milk and some bread. I had a block of chocolate in my camouflaged Denison smock which I gave to her.”<sup>3</sup>*

It was not long before the men of the 12th Parachute Battalion were engaged in battle with advancing German patrols. One such action was that of Captain John Sims, who, with twelve of his men, was entrenched in a hedgerow assisting a Naval Fire Control Officer to find suitable targets for the ships offshore.



Captain John Sims.

A German patrol spotted Captain Sims's group and attacked them, supported by two self-propelled guns. A fierce firefight ensued, and Captain Sims knocked out one of the self-propelled guns. The other self-propelled gun, however,

was killing his men one by one, and he was forced to withdraw with the three men still fit to fight. The position was retaken later that day, and the remaining self-propelled gun was knocked out by artillery fire. Captain Sims later collected his eight men who had been killed and took them to Ranville, where they were buried in the grass bank in front of the church.

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Captain John Sims was awarded the Military Cross. His citation reads:

*“He continued to fight until all but 3 of his men were killed. By his personal example of conspicuous gallantry, he held together his force and warded off the attack for 2 vital hours, this enabled a redistribution of troops to meet the armoured threat, ensuring the safety of the vital bridgehead held by the airborne troops.”<sup>4</sup>*

Sixty percent of the 13th Parachute Battalion reached their rendezvous before B and C Companies moved towards their objective in Ranville. Major John Cramphorn's A Company remained on the drop zone to provide cover and help for the Sappers of Major Andy Wood's 591st (Antrim) Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers with the clearance of glider anti-landing poles that covered the area.

At 03:30, in the early morning of D-Day, 6 June 1944, the first glider landings took place at LZ NAN. Major General Gale was in one of those gliders, and after landing, he gathered his staff and set off for the area of Le Bas de Ranville, where he set up his headquarters in the Château de Heaume. Throughout D-Day, Major Wood's 591st Parachute Squadron RE and Major Cramphorn's A Company continued to clear the glider-landing areas in preparation for the massive airlift scheduled to land at 21:00.

At 10:45, the Germans attacked the 12th and 13th Parachute Battalions defences supported by tanks and self-propelled guns. This attack managed to penetrate Ranville but was beaten off by the 12th Parachute Battalion aided by Major Dixon's 4th Airlanding Anti-Tank Battery RA that had landed by glider at 03:30. Major Dixon's anti-tank guns accounted for three self-propelled guns and one tank during the engagement.

By 13:00, the German attacks had increased, and the positions of the 12th and 13th Parachute Battalions became critical. Consequently, No. 3 Commando, the leading Commando of Lord Lovat's 1st Special Service Brigade, was diverted to the area to assist the Battalions.

As dusk fell on D-Day, 6 June 1944, the troops on the ground, both British and German, witnessed the landing of one of the largest air armadas in the history of warfare as aircraft pulling 250 gliders heading for LZ NAN and LZ WILLIAM came into view. They carried the 3,000 troops and heavy equipment of the 6th Airlanding Brigade. These reinforcements for the 6th Airborne Division's bridgehead were delivered to the landing zones in 220 Horsa and 30 Hamilcar gliders. They included: the 6th Airlanding Brigade's Headquarters; the 6th Airborne Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment RAC; the remainder of the 2nd Battalion The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry; the 1st Battalion The Royal Ulster Regiment; A Company of the 12th Battalion The Devonshire Regiment; the 211th Airlanding Light Battery RA from the 53rd (Worcester Yeomanry) Airlanding Light Regiment Royal Artillery; the 249th Field Company Royal Engineers



(Airborne); the 716th (Airborne) Light Composite Company Royal Army Service Corps; and 2 companies of the 195th (Airlanding) Field Ambulance Royal Army Medical Corps.

The Mark VII A17 Tetrarch light tanks of the 6th Airborne Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment RAC and the 75mm pack howitzers of 211th Airlanding Light Battery RA were delivered to Normandy in the Hamilcar gliders and wrote military history, becoming the first British units ever to land tanks and artillery into battle by air.



Hamilcar gliders carrying the Tetrarch tanks of the 6th Airborne Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment RAC arriving on LZ NAN on 6 June 1944. [IWM B 5198]

On landing, the two Infantry Battalions of 6th Airlanding Brigade moved to their objectives, the 1st Battalion The Royal Ulster Regiment to Longueval and the 2nd Battalion The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry to the nearby village of Hérouvillette. During the move, the 2nd Battalion The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry crossed over the bridges at Bénouville and were reunited with Major John Howard's D Company. They then secured Hérouvillette and made several attempts to seize and hold Escoville over the next few days. The 1st Battalion The Royal Ulster Regiment occupied Longueval and tried, on several occasions, to capture the nearby village of Sainte-Honorine la Chardonnerette.

By the afternoon of 7 June 1944, the remainder of the 12th Battalion The Devonshire Regiment, that had been landed on SWORD Beach, had arrived at Le Bas de Ranville to reinforce the beleaguered 12th Parachute Battalion, and No. 3 Commando was released to rejoin the 1st Special Service Brigade. These battalions were engaged in a to-and-fro battle with the enemy for several days, and this culminated in a concerted attack by the Germans in the south of the 6th

Airborne Division's operational area during the evening of 9 June 1944, which the Airborne troops successfully drove off.

On the 12 June, after spending several days in the Divisional Reserve, Lieutenant Colonel Johnson was ordered to prepare the Battalion for an attack on Bréville that night by Major General Gale. Out of necessity, it was a hastily organised operation, as Lieutenant Colonel Johnson was given just two hours to brief his men and lead them to the start line at Amfreville. Attached to the depleted 12th Parachute Battalion was Major John Bampfylde's D Company the 12th Devonshire Regiment. By the time they arrived at the start line, there were only moments to spare before the Allied artillery barrage was scheduled to begin. D Company the 12th Devonshire Regiment, had yet to arrive, and Lieutenant Colonel Johnson had not been able to talk with Major Bampfylde about the plan. Lieutenant Colonel Johnson decided to attack along a single company front, with Major Clarence Stephens's C Company leading the way to secure the crossroads and the southern area of Bréville. Captain P C Bernard's A Company was then to pass through them and secure the south-eastern sector before Major Bampfylde's Devons were to follow and capture the north-east. Finally, Major Harold Rogers's B Company would advance and deal with the western area.

The attack was a success, but the two leading companies of the 12th Parachute Battalion and the Devons suffered particularly badly due to enemy small arms and artillery fire. Amongst the dead was Lieutenant-Colonel Johnson, who was a victim of friendly fire. An artillery shell, believed to have been fired from a gun of the 51st Highland Division, fell short of Bréville just as the attack began and killed him. He had been standing with a group of senior officers who had gathered to witness the assault, and the explosion that killed him also seriously wounded Brigadier The Lord Lovat and Brigadier Hugh Kindersley.

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944 and in the days leading up to his death, Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Percival Johnson was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Order. His citation reads:

*“Lieutenant Colonel Johnson landed with his Battalion by parachute behind the enemy lines on the 6th June 1944. His Battalion held the Eastern approaches to the Benouville bridgehead throughout the 6th June in the face of repeated attacks by enemy self-propelled guns and infantry in superior strength. His courage, leadership and skill were an inspiration to the remainder of his Battalion, and his task was successfully accomplished.”<sup>5</sup>*

## The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion

The village of Varaville sits at the extreme northeastern end of the 6th Airborne Division's area of operations for the night of 5/6 June 1944. To the west of the village was DZ VICTOR, the designated drop zone for Lieutenant Colonel Otway's 9th Parachute Battalion and Lieutenant Colonel George Bradbrooke's 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion landings. Before taking up defensive positions on the Bois de Bavent ridge, the 9th Parachute Battalion was tasked with neutralising the German Battery at Merville and the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion with destroying the bridges over

the River Dives at Varaville and Robehomme.

Major Donald Wilkins's A Company of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion was to protect the left flank of the 9th Parachute Battalion during their assault on the Merville Battery. The remaining two companies, Major C E Fuller's B Company and Major Murray McLeod's C Company, were tasked with destroying the Robehomme and Varaville bridges, respectively. The Battalion's War Diary records:

*"The initial stages of operation OVERLORD insofar as the 1st. Canadian Parachute Battalion was concerned were divided into three tasks.*

*The protection of the left flank of the 9th Parachute Battalion in its approach march and attack on the MERVILLE battery 1577 was assigned to "A" Company.*

*The blowing of two bridges over the RIVER DIVES at 1872 and 1972 and the holding of feature ROBEHOMME 1873 was assigned to "B" Company with under command one section of 3rd Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers.*

*The destruction of a German Signal Exchange 1675 and the destruction of bridge 186759, plus neutralisation of enemy positions at VARRAVILLE 1875, was assigned to "C" Company." <sup>6</sup>*

#### Major Hugh McLeod's C Company at Varaville

Major Hugh McLeod's C Company of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion was one of the first units to drop into France on D-Day, 6 June 1944. They came in at 00:20 with the pathfinders, half an hour before the main drops, as they had an initial task to carry out before heading to Varaville to destroy the bridge over the River Dives to the east of the village. This initial task was to neutralise the German strong point at the Chateau de Varaville that controlled the nearby road intersection.

As with many of the drops of the 6th Airborne Division on the night of 5/6 June 1944, the drop of Major McLeod's C Company was scattered across a wide area. The pilot of the C-47 transporting Lieutenant Madden and half of his platoon mistook the River Orne for the River Dives, and when they landed, they found themselves on the wrong side of the river and less than a mile from SWORD Beach.

At 00:30, ten minutes after landing, Major McLeod could muster just fifteen men at their rendezvous, just fifteen percent of their established strength.

As Major McLeod was about to move his men towards their initial objective, the drone of RAF bombers could be heard passing overhead. This was the group of one hundred bombers that had just bombed the Merville Battery, and several of them, who had failed to drop their payloads on the target, jettisoned their bombs. These fell onto the drop zone, a terrifying introduction to their first combat mission that left many of Major McLeod's men in a temporary state of



shock.

Major McLeod collected several stragglers from his company and other units as he moved from the drop zone. With this small force, he reached the gatehouse of the Chateau de Varaville without raising the alarm. The gatehouse overlooked the German defensive position, consisting of a long trench protected by earth and concrete, with machine gun bays at fixed intervals. At each end of the trench was a bunker and, unknown to Major MacLeod at the time, a short distance behind the trench was a 75mm anti-tank gun.

Major McLeod sent men to search the gatehouse. They discovered it was being used as a barracks, with six double-deck bunks in each of the eight rooms. The building was empty, but the beds had been recently slept in, and it looked like the occupants had left in haste, probably when the bombing started. Major MacLeod translated 96 bunks into 96 men; the German force defending the strong point was a lot bigger than expected.

He swiftly deployed his men into position around the gatehouse. Lieutenant Hugh Walker positioned 12 men in a shallow ditch where the 'covering group' would have set up their machine guns had things gone according to plan. He placed the rest of the men around the building.

Major MacLeod and Private G Thompson went up to the second floor of the gatehouse to observe the enemy position, leaving Private B Swim and Private F Rudko to guard the doors. Minutes later, there was a thunderous crash and Privates Swim and Rudko were sprayed with flying pieces of brick and plaster. The lower part of the building was filled with a cloud of choking plaster dust, and the two men stumbled to the door and out into the yard for air. The German gunners manning the 75mm anti-tank gun had spotted Major MacLeod's men and opened fire. This was the first that Major MacLeod knew of the gun, and he realised that his men were not only facing a superior enemy force but a heavy gun as well.

Their only way of dealing with the German anti-tank gun was their one remaining PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank), and Major McLeod sent for Corporal Winslow Oikle, who had the anti-tank weapon. When Corporal Oikle arrived, Major McLeod asked him to try for the German gun. Taking careful aim, Corporal Oikle fired. The PIAT round flew towards the German gun and landed a few feet short. It exploded with a loud bang ineffectively in front of the concrete gun emplacement. As Corporal Oikle reloaded for a second shot, the German gunners fired. Their high explosive shell tore through the wall of the gatehouse and hit Corporal Oikle's supply of PIAT bombs. Corporal Oikle and Lieutenant Walker were killed instantly, and Major McLeod was mortally wounded. Private Peter Bismutka, who had just entered the room to report that he had brought in another fifteen men and a machine gun, was also fatally wounded. Private Thompson, the other occupant of the room, was left standing with a broken rifle in his arms; the part of his hand that had been wrapped around the stock of the rifle had been blown away. Private William Ducker, the C Company medic, could do nothing for Major McLeod, and he died in Captain John Hanson's lap a few minutes later. Private Ducker took Private Thompson and Private Bismutka to the aid post, where Private Bismutka died soon thereafter. Private Cliff Douglas recalled what happened:

*“Normandy was my twelfth jump. Our objective was the village of Varaville, with a big pillbox over there. I was with the platoon that attacked; Sergeant Wright led the platoon. The pillbox was between us and the town of Varaville. We moved in and there was a big house there, and from upstairs you could look down onto the pillbox. There was a German behind us with a Schmeisser, and he started to spray our troops, so we had to take cover wherever we could. I was trying to spot where this fire was coming from, but I couldn't. I could hear him behind the house, and four or five men went inside. They were very green troops, never having been in action before, and they stuffed their PIAT bombs in the house below the window, and the Bren gunner started to spray the area around a slit trench. Nobody was shooting back at us, when suddenly the muzzle of the big 88 came up and fired one shot and hit that roof, and boy, everything went off. All the PIAT bombs went off. I went up there, and I recognized my Bren gunner friend by his holster.”<sup>7</sup>*

Captain John Hanson, C Company's second-in-command, took over the Company and assessed his options. He now had 30 men: four Sergeants, four Corporals, twenty-one Privates, and himself. On the equipment side, he was no better off. They had a machine gun, which had arrived just before the gatehouse had been hit, but the PIAT was inoperable. There were four sub-machine guns, twenty rifles, and an assortment of grenades and gammon bombs. The officers each had a pistol. Captain Hansen sent two men to report on their progress to Battalion Headquarters at Le Mesnil and asked for a 17-pounder field gun, that he hoped had arrived, to be sent to assist him. In the meantime, there was little more that he could do other than use his snipers to keep the Germans in their bunkers.

A short time later, Corporal Daniel Hartigan and Private W C Mallon approached the gatehouse from Varaville, believing the fight to be over. Sergeant D F Wright saw their approach and shouted at them to get into cover. As they dropped down, the German machine guns raked the roadway with fire. Corporal Hartigan had a 2-inch mortar, which, while it augmented their meagre firepower, was no match for the enemy's 75mm anti-tank gun.

At 08:30, the Germans sent an emissary under a white flag to talk to Captain Hanson. They wanted to send their wounded over to the Canadians as they did not have medical personnel in their bunker. Captain Hanson agreed, and a cart containing three wounded pushed by two German soldiers and three walking wounded soon appeared walking down the roadway to the Chateau. When the five German soldiers reached the point in the road where Corporal Hartigan and Private Mallon had made their headlong dive into a ditch, a German machine gun crew opened fire on their own men, riddling the cart and the wounded with bullets. The two German soldiers pushing the cart were not hit and, after recovering their wits, raced down the roadway to the Chateau and the Canadian aid post.

At around 10:00, Corporal Hartigan moved out along a shallow drainage ditch which ran at right angles from the depression in which the main body of paratroopers were concealed. This shallow ditch got him close enough to fire his 2-inch mortar on a relatively flat trajectory into the gun emplacements. Holding the mortar almost horizontally against the base of a small tree, he fired four HE bombs in quick succession into the German positions, quickly followed by several smoke bombs. Expecting the enemy gun to return fire, Corporal Hartigan swiftly crawled back to a deeper ditch,

but no enemy shells came. A few minutes later, the Germans raised the white flag again, and Corporal Hall, the only remaining medical man at the aid station, accepted the surrender of the remaining 43 German soldiers in the defensive position. Shortly after 10:00, Corporal John Ross, the radio operator, sent the codeword 'Blood' to the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion's headquarters, signifying success at Varaville. The battle for the village was over. Private Cliff Douglas recalled what happened:

*“After they fired the shot, the Germans lowered the muzzle of the 88 again, and Corporal Hall, who could speak German, went into the area of the 88, and they told him that they wanted to surrender. A few minutes later Corporal Hall came out, and all the Germans came over with their hands up behind their heads, and they helped take both our wounded and their wounded away and got everything out of the house. These troops were really kind of a home guard; some of them were kids fifteen or sixteen, and there was one old man who must have been seventy. They had some real oddball rifles, some were old single-shot American rifles, others Russian rifles and machine guns, and when they were being grouped together, the kids were like they were on a picnic. They were just so happy to get out of the shooting.”<sup>8</sup>*

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Captain John Philip Hanson was awarded the Military Cross.



Captain John Hanson receiving his Military Cross from General Sir Bernard Montgomery on 16 July 1944. [Library and Archives of Canada No. 3527074]

His citation reads:

*“At Varaville on 6th June 1944 in an attack on a strongly fortified position this officer's*



*company commander was killed. Captain Hanson immediately took over Command, showing exceptional leadership and courage attacked the position inflicting casualties and taking 40 prisoners. He immediately consolidated this position and held it under enemy mortar fire until relieved. Captain Hanson was wounded in this action but continued to command his company.*"<sup>9</sup>

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Private William Skirving Ducker was awarded the Military Medal. His citation reads:

*"This soldier was a medical orderly attached to C Company during the action at Varaville on 6th June 1944. The Company Commander, a Platoon Commander and 2 Other Ranks were in a building being heavily engaged by an anti-tank gun and mortar. A direct hit caused all four to become casualties. Private Ducker with absolute disregard for his own safety under heavy Machine Gun and mortar fire went to this building which was still under heavy fire gave medical attention to the Company Commander and ascertained that the others were dead or beyond medical aid before removing the Company Commander to a place of safety which was also under heavy fire."*<sup>10</sup>

Captain Hanson's C Company held Varaville until the afternoon of 6 June 1944, when they were relieved by No. 6 Commando and withdrew to the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion's rendezvous at Le Mesnil crossroads on Bois de Bavent Ridge.

Lieutenant Sam McGowan's Platoon was dropped some distance from the drop zone. He gathered several of his men and moved towards Varaville. As they approached the village, they encountered two German infantry sections and opened fire on them. In the ensuing firefight, Lieutenant McGowan's men denied the enemy entry to the village, and several German infantrymen eventually surrendered. He set up a temporary command post in the churchyard and used the church tower as an observation post. It was not long before the observer reported an enemy section advancing through a bomb crater, and a section was detailed to pin them down before they reached the churchyard. The enemy section was eventually driven off, leaving behind three of their dead in the bomb crater.

Heavy enemy mortar and artillery fire on Lieutenant McGowan's positions in Varaville followed, and his platoon was subjected to sniping from the woods and buildings in the area. The French civilians greatly assisted Lieutenant McGowan's platoon, the women dressing wounds and the men offering to help drive out the enemy. One Frenchman, who had been given a maroon beret and a rifle, killed three enemy snipers. Despite the heavy enemy fire, Lieutenant McGowan maintained his position in the village until his platoon was eventually relieved on the afternoon of D-Day by No. 6 Commando. He then proceeded to the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion's rendezvous at the Le Mesnil Crossroads.

## The Bridges over the River Dives at Robehomme and Varaville



An aerial reconnaissance photo of the Robehomme bridge, taken March 1944.

Captain Geoffry Smith's No. 3 Troop 3rd Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers was attached to Lieutenant Colonel Bradbrooke's 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion to blow the bridges at Robehomme and Varaville. Their drop missed the drop zone and landed about 1 kilometre east in the flooded area outside the village. They, too, were dispersed in the drop, and, as the whole area was flooded and intersected with ditches, their sticks couldn't rendezvous at their containers of explosives. Lieutenant Jack Inman gathered a group of twelve Sappers, and they salvaged three containers before making their way to Varaville. The going was tough, and they had to abandon some stores. Lieutenant Edward Baillie had found himself alone, and he, too, headed for the village. The two officers met in the village, and five of the Sappers and 200lbs of explosives plus accessories were placed under Lieutenant Baillie's command. Lieutenant Inman left immediately for the Robehomme bridge with the seven remaining Sappers and one trolley.

Lieutenant Baillie's group set off for the bridge over the River Dives east of Varaville. Arriving at the bridge, they placed their explosive charges. At 04:40, the charges were detonated, and a 15-foot gap was created; the bridge at Varaville had been destroyed.

Major C E Fuller's B Company were tasked with destroying the bridge at Robehomme, and like C Company, they too

were scattered when they dropped at 00:50. Two of their three platoons landed in the flooded area two miles east of the drop zone to the south and west of the village. Their first concern was not the attack on the bridge but avoiding drowning and reaching dry land. Lieutenant N Toseland's No. 5 Platoon was luckier than most, and they dropped onto solid ground where they regrouped and set off for the bridge. Scattered elements of the other platoons gathered under Sergeant R Outhwaite, and they too headed toward the Company objective. These two groups met, and Lieutenant Toseland had thirty men at his disposal. While making their way to their objective, Lieutenant Toseland's men met a French girl who agreed to act as their guide. John Kemp, a member of No. 5 Platoon, recalled:

*"When I jumped, I looked down to get my bearings, and I could see water. I could then make out the Dives River and Germans heading to it at pretty tremendous speed, and I managed to pull down on my risers and slip my head so that I just cleared the river and landed on the riverbank. Everybody got together pretty quickly, and on our way to the bridge, we heard a bicycle bell ringing. We had some French Canadians in our battalion, and we managed to bring down this bicycle rider who turned out to be a girl, and we found out from her where the Robehomme Bridge was. As a matter of fact, she led us to the bridge. I don't know if she was with the Resistance, or what".<sup>11</sup>*

On route, they collected more men from various units of the 3rd Parachute Brigade, including some from the 8th Parachute Battalion, who should have landed several miles to the south at DZ KING. When Lieutenant Toseland's men arrived at the bridge, they found Major Fuller and Sergeant Poole from the 3rd Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers already there. However, there were no explosives. Sergeant Poole gathered all the gammon grenades available, and, from these, he scraped together about 30 lbs of high explosive. With this improvised charge, he attempted to blow up the Robehomme Bridge, and although it caused considerable damage to the superstructure, it did not destroy it.

At about 06:00, Lieutenant Inman and his seven Sappers arrived at the bridge with their trolley containing 200lbs of explosives. With this, he prepared the bridge for demolition. When all was ready, B Company withdrew to the western bank, and the charges were detonated. The bridge over the River Dives at Robehomme was destroyed.

Major Fuller's B Company was ordered to hold their position at Robehomme to disrupt the German activities within the area and did not withdraw immediately the bridge was destroyed as planned. They set up a Vickers medium machine gun overlooking the wreckage of the bridge and used this to great effect against the Germans later that day when they came to investigate the damage. Throughout the day, both B Company and the Germans sent out several patrols, and these often clashed, resulting in brief engagements. B Company finally withdrew as darkness fell on 7 June 1944.

On reaching the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion's rendezvous at Le Mesnil crossroads, Lieutenant Colonel Bradbrooke found a mixed bag waiting for him. Not only were there men from his Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company, but also stragglers from the 8th and 9th Parachute Battalions, several medics from the 224th Parachute Field Ambulance, and an anti-tank section of the 2nd Battalion The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. After a



brief encounter with the enemy in the nearby village, Lieutenant Colonel Bradbrooke set up his headquarters in the nearby pottery, the Poterie de Bavent, which was known as the brickworks. The mixed bag set up defensive positions in the surrounding area to await the arrival of the rifle companies.

A Company and C Company came in from their tasks during the afternoon, but B Company remained at Robehomme. A Company and C Company set up their defensive positions to hold the vital ridge and protect the eastern flank of the seaborne invasion.

On 8 June 1944, the Germans attacked the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion with a battalion-sized force of Panzer Grenadiers supported by tanks. The Canadians beat off the enemy, who withdrew to a nearby farm. The Canadians followed up the withdrawal with a counterattack and pushed the Germans further back to the village of Bavent.

In the days that followed, the Germans mounted several more attacks, but none were successful in moving the Canadians off the vital ground and by the end of June, the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion had suffered over 150 casualties.

### The 9th Parachute Battalion at the Merville Battery

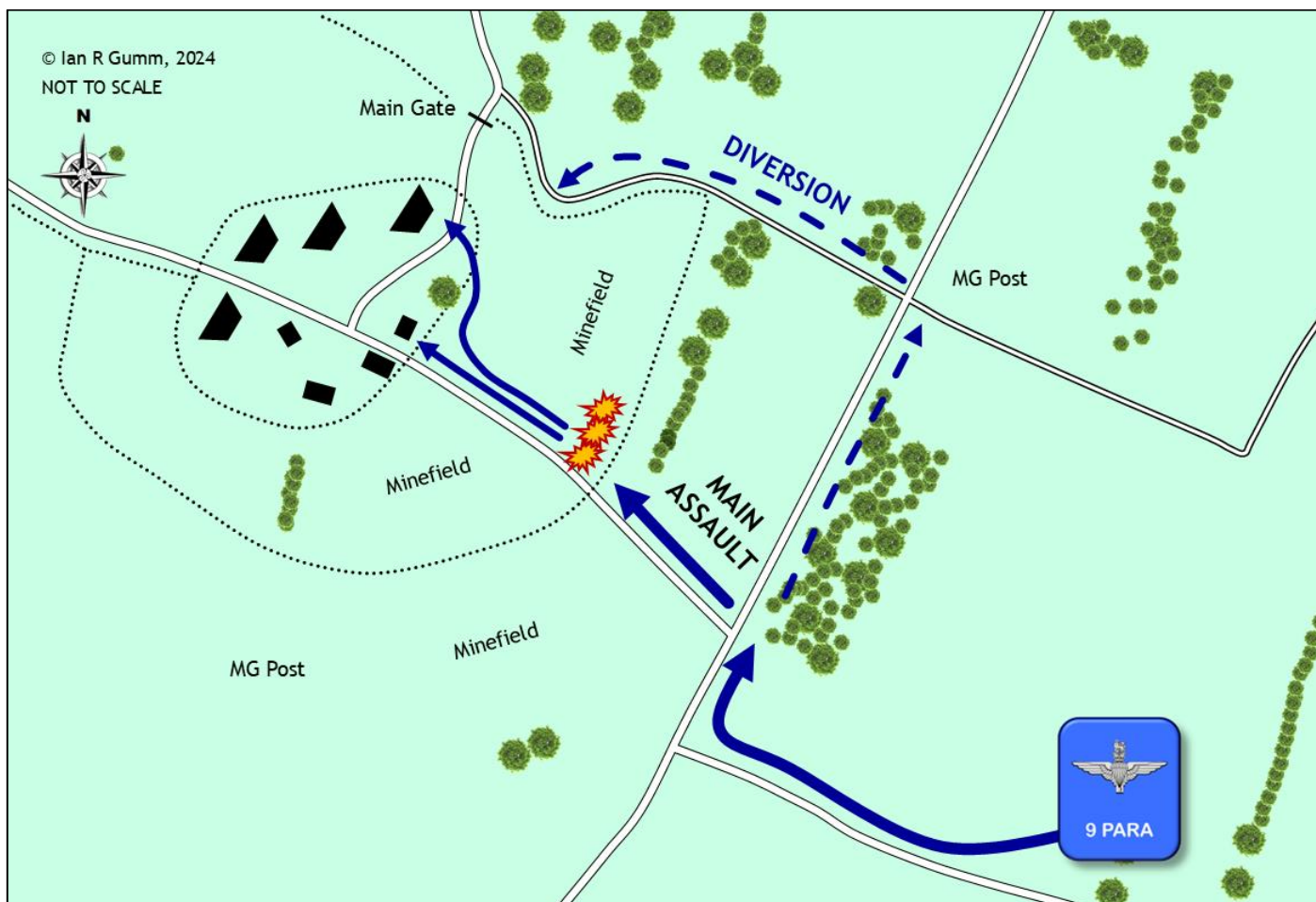
The Battery at Merville was thought to contain at least four 150mm guns that could fire directly onto the beaches around Ouistreham and thus threatened the British landings on SWORD beach. The neutralising of this battery was, therefore, considered necessary for the success of the landings at SWORD beach and the saving of many lives amongst the soldiers that were to land there. This task was assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Otway's 9th Parachute Battalion.



Lieutenant Colonel Terence Otway.

The defences at Merville Battery were quite formidable, consisting of a 400-yard anti-tank ditch that was 15 feet wide

by 10 feet deep, two belts of barbed wire entanglements, minefields, anti-aircraft and machine-gun weapon pits, and garrisoned by approximately 130 German soldiers.



The 9th Parachute Battalion's assault on the Merville Battery. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

The plan for the attack was to drop an advance party onto DZ VICTOR at 00:20 with the pathfinders from the 22nd Independent Parachute Company. These were to split into three groups, the first to prepare, organise and control the assembly of the Battalion on their landing, the second to form a reconnaissance party that was to move directly to the Battery to determine the position of any Germans on the route in and condition of the Battery itself, and a third that was to move with the reconnaissance party to reconnoitre, clear, and mark gaps in the minefield defences up to the inner perimeter fence. At 00:30, before the reconnaissance party would reach the Battery, 100 Lancaster and Halifax heavy bombers were to bomb the Battery in the hope of destroying it altogether or at least soften up the position. The main body of the 9th Parachute Battalion would drop at 00:50, move to their rendezvous point, reorganise and be ready to move off for the assault by 02:35. They were to be in a prearranged position about 500 yards from the Battery formed up and ready to assault by 04:20, and the assault was to go in at 04:30 when 3 Horsa gliders carrying most of Major Allen Parry's A Company, minus the company commander, and sappers from 591st (Antrim) Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers would land on the Battery itself. Major Harold Bestley's B Company was to blow gaps in the inner wire, and Major Ian Dyer's C Company was to carry out the assault. Success of the assault was to be signalled before 05:30, or the Royal Navy would commence bombardment of the Battery using the Warship HMS Arethusa.

Having exercised extensively on a model of the battery specially constructed in the countryside of Berkshire before the invasion, the 9th Parachute Battalion took off on the night of 5/6 June 1944 as prepared as they could have been. On arrival in Normandy, however, the plan went completely astray.

The drop of the 9th Parachute Battalion was scattered over a wide area, partly due to the aircraft transporting them having to take evasive action as a result of the heavy anti-aircraft fire put up by the Germans and partly due to the cloud of dust that formed as a result of the bombing raid. Major Allen Parry, who commanded the rendezvous party, dropped onto the drop zone at 00:20, located the battalion's rendezvous and set up his marker. Following the drop of the main body, men began to arrive in dribs and drabs, Lieutenant Colonel Otway arrived around 01:30, he recalled:

*"We arrived at the rendezvous at 01.30 ... There was desultory fire going on but otherwise everything was quiet except for the moans of a sapper with a broken leg".<sup>12</sup>*

Major Eddie Charlton, the battalion's second-in-command, was delighted to see him and quickly updated him on the situation. Lieutenant Colonel Otway learnt he had no heavy equipment, as the gliders carrying 9th Parachute Battalion's mortars, anti-tank guns, mine detectors, etc., had not arrived. Of the Machine-gun Platoon, there was only one Vickers Machine-gun and, by the appointed time for the Battalion to move off from the drop zone, there were only 110 men. Lieutenant Colonel Otway was troubled by the size of his force and agonised over what to do. He hid these concerns from everyone other than his batman, Lieutenant Colonel Otway recalled:

*"I said, 'What the hell am I going to do, Wilson?' 'Only one thing you can do, Sir, no need to ask me.' And he was right. What else could I do?"*

*I had no radio sets working, I had no engineers, I had no medicals. Damn all really. It did occur to me, yes, do I go ahead or do I not. And I'm not line-cheating on this; the first thought that went through my head was how on earth could I face my friends if we did not go ahead. So we went ahead. I was committed. I felt, well, if it goes wrong, it goes wrong, there's nothing I can do about it now. So I suppose it would be true to say I went on and put all thoughts of failure out of my mind. It was a question of move off or give up. In the Parachute Regiment, giving up is not an option".<sup>13</sup>*

Knowing he had a 15-minute window in the plan for any problems, Lieutenant Colonel Otway waited until 02:50 before setting off and, by that time, his force had grown to 150.

Progress to the Battery was slow due to the shell craters made by the bombing, and at one stage they had to take cover as a group of 20 or so Germans marched right passed them, oblivious to their presence. Major George Smith, the reconnaissance party commander, met them as they approached the battery, and he reported that they had cut the outer wire, crossed the minefield and lain by the inner wire for half-an-hour but found nothing to concern them. Due to the absence of mine detectors and the loss of the marking tape, they had cleared a path through the minefield by hand and marked the cleared path by dragging their feet to create two lines in the earth. He also reported that the



attack by the heavy bombers had missed the Battery altogether.

When the 9th Parachute Battalion arrived at their pre-designated position 500 yards short of the battery, Lieutenant Colonel Otway called an impromptu orders group to explain his revised plan for the assault. Major George Smith recalled:

*“The Commanding Officer was calm and unperturbed. He gave his orders concisely and clearly, as though he were standing giving orders on a training demonstration. Looking back, it seems incredible that everything was arranged and organised on the spot, amidst what seemed the most awful chaos. It took only a few minutes. The CO’s calm set a fine example, which was followed by all ranks. His thoroughness in training paid a dividend, the troops were on their toes and ready for the job”.*<sup>14</sup>

The new plan was for the men available to be organised into four assault teams under the command of Major Parry, as Major Dyer, who should have commanded the assault, was still absent. These four assault teams were to go in through the two gaps cut in the minefield. The remainder of the men would be held back in reserve to deal with any resistance that hampered the assault teams.

As the Battalion formed up, they were spotted and engaged by machine guns from both flanks. Sergeant Sidney Knight, who was tasked to mount a diversionary attack on the main gate, led his small force against those on the right flank and despatched the machine gun crews with grenades and bayonets. The Battalion’s one remaining Vickers machine gun dealt with those on the left flank. Once Sergeant Knight had accomplished this, he set off for the main gate, Lieutenant Colonel Otway recalled:

*“They loosed off everything they could, not towards the casements, but in a north/north-westerly direction to stop hitting us in the side. They threw grenades and made a hell of a row. It made the Germans go and find out what was happening. They didn’t seem to know where we were, didn’t concentrate their fire. They didn’t send anyone out to the wire to find out”.*<sup>15</sup>

The assault teams and Lieutenant Colonel Otway’s reserves now waited for the imminent arrival of the gliders, and one was seen going over the Battery to crash-land outside the wire 500 yards away. Not waiting any longer, Lieutenant Colonel Otway shouted: *“Get in, get in”*. Major Parry blew his whistle, the Bangalore torpedoes were detonated, and the four assault teams charged forward. Lieutenant Colonel Otway recalled:

*“The garrison concentrated everything waist-high on the gaps in the wire, booby traps and mines were going off all over the place, the battle in our rear was going full tilt and fierce hand-to-hand fighting was taking place inside the Battery”.*<sup>16</sup>

As the assault went in, three German machine-guns opened fire, but these were quickly suppressed by the Battalion’s Bren guns and snipers. The men of the assault teams charged on towards the casements, firing from the hip and

throwing grenades at any strong points they came across. Recovering, the Germans fired flares into the sky to illuminate the Battery and, realising the position they were in, the Germans even called down artillery fire onto the Battery from another position at Cabourg. The assault teams were closing on the casements, and Lieutenant Colonel Otway sent in his reserves to mop up the German defenders outside. One by one, the guns were destroyed, and the fighting began to die down.

Lieutenant Mike Dowling came up to Lieutenant Colonel Otway and reported, *'Battery taken as ordered, Sir.'* Lieutenant Colonel Otway asked if the guns had been destroyed and received the reply of *'I think so'* to which he promptly retorted *'Bloody well get back in there and make sure those guns are out of action'*. On his way back to one of the casements to check, a mortar round landed close to Lieutenant Dowling and his batman, killing them both.

Lieutenant Colonel Otway began to go around the position to assess the situation as the fighting began to die down. During his rounds, he thought he saw a dog tied up outside one of the pillboxes and went to investigate. Lieutenant Jefferson, who was wounded and lying on the ground nearby, recalled:

*"I was lying on the ground with a shattered leg when I saw one of our men bend down to pick up what looked like a dog. I shouted 'Don't touch that you bloody fool, it's a booby trap' to receive the reply 'Don't bloody shout at your commanding officer'".<sup>17</sup>*

Captain Havelock Hudson, also wounded, was in the process of receiving medical treatment from Corporal Tottle, the medic, when Lieutenant Colonel Otway approached. He recalled:

*"At this point, Terence Otway came running down the pathway through the mines. He stopped beside me and said, 'Are you alright?' 'I think so,' I said. 'He's been hit in the stomach,' said Cpl Tottle. 'Oh, bad luck,' said the CO. 'We've got the Battery, Hal.' I take it as eternal credit that I did not say what he could do with the Battery".<sup>18</sup>*

Inside and around the Battery, the scene was one of utter carnage, with the dead from both sides lying everywhere. At the end of the action at Merville, only six of the German garrison of 130 were left unscathed, and of the 150 men of the 9th Parachute Battalion who took part in the assault, 65 had been killed or wounded. The guns that would have been such a threat to the invasion beaches, even though they were discovered to be much lighter than the 150 mm guns expected, had been neutralised, and many hundreds, if not thousands of lives amongst the soldiers who were to come ashore later that day were saved.

In the afternoon of 7 June 1944, a report was received at the 6th Airborne Division's headquarters that the guns at Merville were back in action and shelling the landings at SWORD beach. Major General Gale sent No. 3 Commando, who had been held back from 1st Special Service Brigade as a Divisional Reserve, back to Lord Lovat with orders to attack the battery. Lord Lovat tasked two of the Troops of No. 3 Commando, under the command of Major Pooley, with the task of taking Merville Battery a second time. When the commandos arrived, they found that the Germans had

indeed reoccupied the position, but in a swift assault, these were soon overcome. On taking the position, the commandos found that the 9th Parachute Battalion had done their job well and that the guns of Merville Battery had not been fired. The Germans swiftly counterattacked Major Pooley's men with infantry supported by self-propelled guns. In the ensuing action, Major Pooley was killed, and half of his men were either killed or became casualties before they could withdraw back to the 1st Special Service Brigade's lines.

For his actions on D-Day and the days that followed, Lieutenant Colonel Terence Otway was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. His citation reads:

*“For conspicuous bravery and outstanding leadership. This officer led 150 men of his bn on the successful attack of the Sallenelles battery. He personally directed the attack and organised the successful cleaning up of the enemy strong points under heavy enemy mortar and machine gun fire. He led the attack on and successfully held Le Plein until relieved by another formation. On arrival in the Le Mesnil area, he succeeded in beating off two major enemy attacks of several hours duration by his magnificent leadership of his numerically very weak and tired bn. His utter disregard of personal danger has been an inspiration for all his men.”*<sup>19</sup>

For his part in the assault on the Merville Battery, Sergeant Sidney Knight was awarded the Military Medal. His citation reads:

*“For outstanding and continuous devotion to duty. Throughout the campaign, this N.C.O. has been a shining example to the men in his coy. His enthusiasm and great desire on every possible opportunity to join battle with the enemy, coupled with a complete and continuous contempt of danger, has marked him out as a splendid leader whom every man would willingly follow under all circumstances. This N.C.O.'s action in the early hours of D-Day is quoted as an example.*

*During the assault on the Sallenelles Battery in the early morning of D-Day, the assault parties became pinned down by Machine Gun fire from the right flank. Sergeant Knight immediately took three men, assaulted the Machine Gun position with grenade and bayonet killing the crew. He then engaged a further position in the same manner and with equal success. His immediate and audacious action under heavy fire had a considerable bearing on the success of the operation.”*<sup>20</sup>

The action by Lieutenant Colonel Otway's 9th Parachute Battalion in neutralising the Merville Battery is regarded as one of the outstanding achievements in the history of the Parachute Regiment.

## The bridges over the River Dives at Bures and Troarn

The destruction of the bridges over the River Dives at Bures-sur-Dives and Troarn was the task of Lieutenant Colonel

Alistair Pearson's 8th Parachute Battalion supported by Major John C A (Tim) Roseveare's 3rd Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers. The 8th Parachute Battalion was scattered in the drop onto DZ KING and could only muster 11 officers and 130 men to complete their initial tasks. Considering that they were not strong enough to attempt the planned Battalion assault on their main objective, Lieutenant Colonel Pearson sent forward reconnaissance groups to scout Troarn and set up a defensive position in the area of the Manoir du Bois. This was the most southerly of the defensive positions taken up by the 3rd Parachute Brigade on the vital ground of the ridge to secure the eastern flank of the seaborne invasion area.



Lieutenant Colonel Alistair Pearson.

In the days that followed, the 8th Parachute Battalion was isolated from the remainder of the 6th Airborne Division and was effectively fighting its own war. Conditions in the dense wood were not good. The wet weather and lack of sunlight in the woods meant their clothing never dried out, and they were also plagued by swarms of mosquitoes and flies that infested the area.

In the first few days, the Germans shelled the area, causing casualties from tree splinters rather than shrapnel, but this was reduced as the battalion had established and dug in their positions properly. To maintain the initiative, Lieutenant Colonel Pearson sent out fighting patrols that ranged far and wide throughout their tactical area of responsibility. These fighting patrols sometimes went as far as Troarn and Bures-Sur-Dives and, by employing these techniques, Lieutenant Colonel Pearson succeeded in disrupting the German activity at the southeastern end of the 6th Airborne Division's



area.

A significant amount of mine laying was carried out by both sides, which meant that any heavy counterattack by the Germans on the 8th Parachute Battalion was impracticable. Consequently, the actions that took place were largely confined to fighting off enemy patrols and dealing with snipers.

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944, and the days that followed, Lieutenant Colonel Alistair Pearson was awarded a third bar to the Distinguished Service Order. His citation reads:

*“Lieutenant-Colonel Pearson dropped at 00:50 hrs on D-Day, 6th June 1944. He was immediately wounded by rifle fire in the left hand. Disregarding his wound, he organised his depleted Battalion, some 180 strong, into two company groups and successfully engaged the enemy at Bures and Troarn, enabling the bridge blowing parties to carry out their tasks with complete success. On the evening of D-Day, he was forced to undergo an operation for the removal of the bullet from his hand but immediately resumed command of the Battalion on its conclusion.*

*On the night of D plus 1, he personally led a patrol of 40 men some 4 miles behind the enemy lines to evacuate wounded reported at the village of Bassenville. This necessitated the double crossing of the River Dives by dinghy. The patrol, as a result of his skilful leadership, was entirely successful, and eight wounded men were rescued. On D plus 2 he personally supervised the operation of a strong fighting patrol which inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy in Troarn. On the night of D plus 6, he personally led a patrol of some 70 men to the village of Roucheville and engaged the enemy position to the North of the village while his RE detachment successfully cratered the only remaining road for lateral communication left to the enemy in the district. On D plus 9, the enemy attacked the Le Mesnil position in strength. Lieutenant-Colonel Pearson conducted the battle personally through the whole attack and was tireless in his visits to the forward companies. When the enemy, supported by self-propelled guns, started to penetrate between the forward positions, he moved forward with the counterattack force, handling his own men and 17-pounder self-propelled gun with such success that the enemy infantry and self-propelled guns were forced to withdraw in some disorder. Throughout the day, he moved amongst his troops under artillery, heavy mortar and machine-gun fire, and his conduct was an inspiration to the whole Battalion. By his brilliant handling of the Battalion during the first week of the operation, he was able to hold off a numerically superior enemy from the vital high ground at the South end of the Bois de Bavent.”<sup>21</sup>*

Major Tim Roseveare landed in completely the wrong area. He commandeered a jeep and trailer into which his handful of men packed their explosives and set off in the early morning mist towards Troarn. Arriving at the town, they crashed through a roadblock and sped into the town centre. There, they shot and killed a German sentry who was unfortunate

enough to cross their path. The sound of the shot alerted the German garrison of the town who 'stood-to' and spilled out from various buildings. Speeding through Troarn, Major Roseveare's men fired at the enemy with everything they had. Reaching the downhill road to the causeway, their badly overloaded jeep gathered the speed it needed to get clear, having sustained just one casualty. Major Roseveare recalled:

*"The fun started, as there seemed to be a Boche in every doorway shooting like mad. However, the boys got to work with their stens, and Sapper Peachey did good work as rear gunner with the Bren. What saved the day was the steep hill down the main street. As the speed rose rapidly and we careered from side to side of the road, as the heavy trailer was swinging violently, we were chased out of the town by an MG34 which fired tracer over our heads".* <sup>22</sup>

The jeep was stopped in the middle of the bridge, and Major Roseveare set a fuse in the explosives as his party took cover. The jeep, trailer and bridge went up, destroying the bridge's centre span and making it impassable to vehicles. Leaving the bridge behind them, Major Roseveare's party then circled back to their own lines, where he reported the destruction of the bridge to Lieutenant Colonel Pearson.

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Major Tim Roseveare was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. His citation reads:

*"For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. On the night of the 5th/6th June 1944, Major J. C. A. Roseveare was given the task of blowing up an important bridge at Troarn. He was dropped some five miles from his covering force, but he immediately gathered together a small force of Royal Engineers and some transport and made for his objective. Troarn was held by the enemy, but, showing total disregard for his own safety and magnificent leadership, he pushed his way through under heavy enemy fire and captured the bridge, which he then successfully blew."* <sup>23</sup>

At the same time as Major Roseveare was carrying out his action at the Troarn Bridge, Captain Thomas Jukes's No. 2 Troop the 3rd Parachute Squadron RE made their way to the bridges over the River Dives at Bures-Sur-Dives. They arrived at the bridges without encountering any Germans, and Captain Jukes's men set about the task of destroying the road and rail bridges over the River Dives at Bures.

On completion of this task, Captain Jukes's men returned to the 8th Parachute Battalion's rendezvous point where Lieutenant Colonel Pearson, unsure of what was happening at Troarn, sent them with Lieutenant Colin Brown's 9 Platoon to ensure that Troarn Bridge was destroyed. On arriving at the bridge over the River Dives at Troarn, they found Major Roseveare had been there before him. To ensure that the maximum damage was done to the bridge and its use was denied to the enemy, Captain Jukes laid additional charges and doubled the damage to the bridge's structure.

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Captain Thomas Jukes was awarded the Military Cross. His citation reads:

*“From the time he was dropped near Ranville on the night 5th/6th June until 1800 hours 8th June when his Troop was relieved in their defensive position, this officer has displayed the very highest powers of leadership, initiative and personal courage. He has been continually engaged in the execution of RE tasks in the face of the enemy and has led his Troop in an infantry role in a most aggressive fashion.*

*After completing the demolition of two bridges at Bures, he led a party including a platoon of 8th Para Battalion and forced a passage through Troarn, killing a number of Germans and taking prisoners and carried out further demolitions on the partially demolished Troarn bridge.*

*On withdrawing to the Brigade area at Le Mesnil, his Troop occupied defensive positions for 30 hours, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. During this time, he supervised the laying of an anti-tank minefield under fire. Throughout the whole of this time, he lost no opportunity in harassing the enemy.*

*This officer set a magnificent example to his junior officers and men by his tireless energy, enthusiasm and offensive eagerness.”<sup>24</sup>*

## Look Forward

In Part Twenty-Two of D-Day, 6 June 1944 — The Greatest Seaborne Invasion the World Has Ever Known, I look at the seaborne landings of Major General Tom Rennie’s 3rd Division at SWORD Beach.

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- <sup>1</sup> *7th Parachute Battalion War Diary, 6 June 1944, by Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Pine-Coffin.*
- <sup>2</sup> *Pegasus Bridge & Merville Battery by Carl Shilleto, published by Pen & Sword Books Ltd 1998.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Pegasus Bridge & Merville Battery by Carl Shilleto, published by Pen & Sword Books Ltd 1998.*
- <sup>4</sup> [www.paradata.org.uk](http://www.paradata.org.uk).
- <sup>5</sup> [www.pegasusarchive.org](http://www.pegasusarchive.org).
- <sup>6</sup> *War Diary, 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, WO 179/2950.*
- <sup>7</sup> *The Voices of D-Day: The story of the Allied Invasion told by those who were there, edited by Ronald J. Drez, Louisiana State University Press, 1994.*
- <sup>8</sup> *The Voices of D-Day: The story of the Allied Invasion told by those who were there, edited by Ronald J. Drez, Louisiana State University Press, 1994.*
- <sup>9</sup> [www.pegasusarchive.org](http://www.pegasusarchive.org).
- <sup>10</sup> [www.pegasusarchive.org](http://www.pegasusarchive.org).
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- <sup>12</sup> [www.ornebridgehead.org](http://www.ornebridgehead.org).
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- <sup>15</sup> [www.ornebridgehead.org](http://www.ornebridgehead.org).
- <sup>16</sup> [www.ornebridgehead.org](http://www.ornebridgehead.org).
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- <sup>19</sup> [www.pegasusarchive.org](http://www.pegasusarchive.org).
- <sup>20</sup> [www.pegasusarchive.org](http://www.pegasusarchive.org).
- <sup>21</sup> *Normandy Landing Beaches, Major and Mrs Holt's Battlefield Guide, Toni and Valmai Holt, 2004.*
- <sup>22</sup> *Normandy Landing Beaches, Major and Mrs Holt's Battlefield Guide, Toni and Valmai Holt, 2004.*
- <sup>23</sup> [www.tracesofwar.com](http://www.tracesofwar.com).
- <sup>24</sup> [www.tracesofwar.com](http://www.tracesofwar.com).