



Pegasus Bridge by Gerald Auguste Charles Lacoste. [© Airborne Assault Museum]

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 EIGHT – THE CAPTURE OF THE CAEN CANAL AND  
RIVER ORNE BRIDGES AT BÉNOUVILLE

Major General Richard (Windy) Gale's 6th Airborne Division was responsible for securing the eastern end of the invasion area. One of its tasks was to seize intact the two bridges in line over the Caen Canal at Bénouville and the River Orne at Ranville between Caen and the coast at Ouistreham. To achieve this, a portion of their Air Landing Brigade was to land in gliders in the early hours of 6 June 1944.

In 1944, the bridge we now call Pegasus Bridge was known as the Bénouville Bridge or the Caen Canal Bridge at Bénouville, and the bridge over the river, which we now call Horsa Bridge, was known as the Orne River Bridge or Ranville Bridge. These two bridges were the only two spans between Caen and the English Channel that allowed direct

access into the invasion area from the east. There were, and are, other bridges across both the Caen Canal and River Orne between Caen and the coast, but none of these lined up and it required moving along the narrow strip of land between the canal and river to cross both. It was the alignment of the Bénouville Bridge and the Ranville Bridge that made these bridges tactically important.

The Allied Command were concerned that the German Panzer Divisions located to the east of the invasion area in the Pas de Calais could sweep down the coast and attack the troops landing on the Normandy beaches. These bridges also allowed the Allies to resupply and reinforce the British 6th Airborne Division who were deployed to the east of the River Orne to secure the left flank of the invasion area. They were tasked with preventing the Germans from sweeping down the coast and diverting them around Caen to counterattack against the invasion beaches.

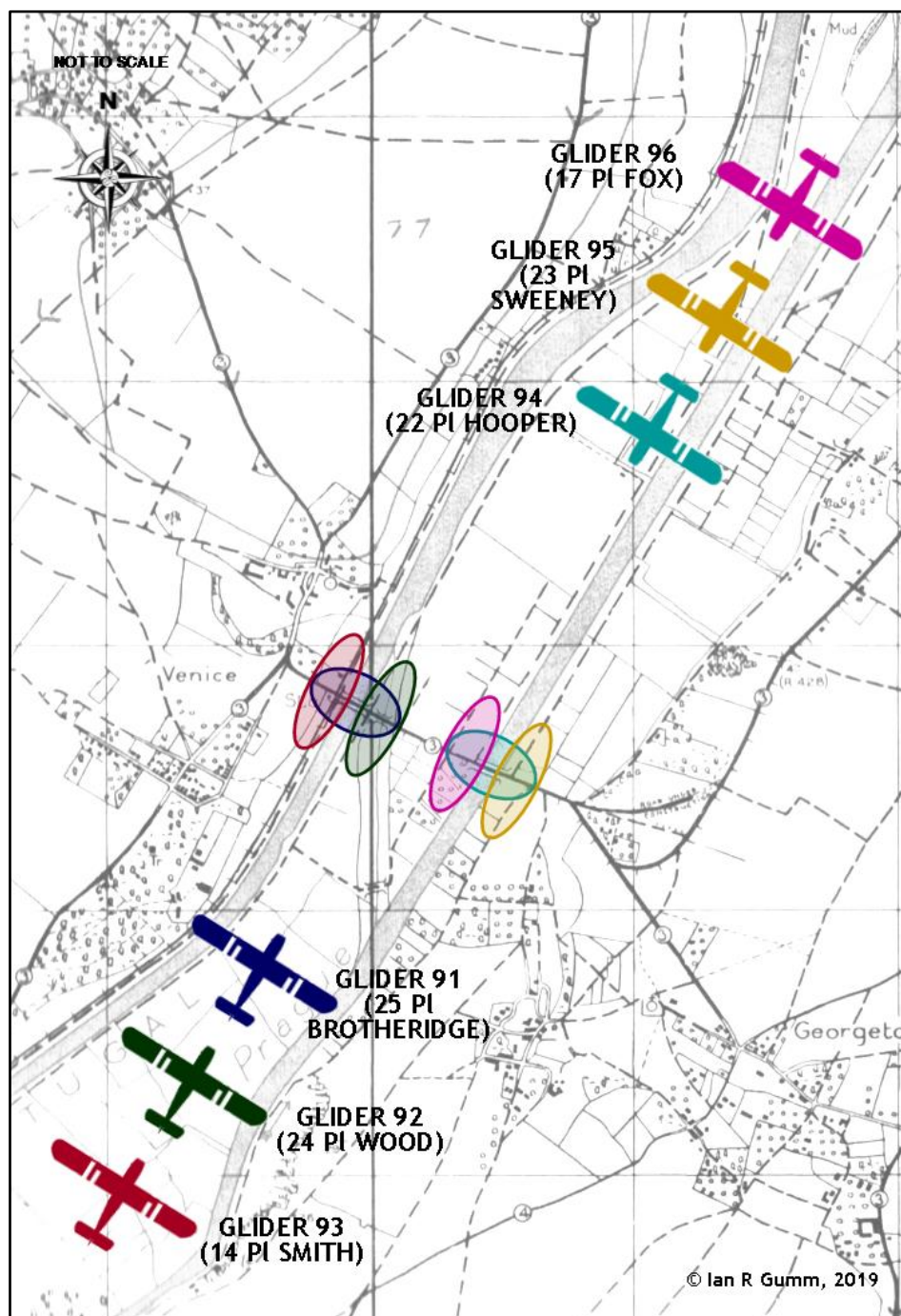
Because of this tactical importance, the Bénouville Bridge and Ranville Bridge were vital ground that the Allies had to seize intact and hold. It was determined that the best way to capture them before the Germans could destroy them was by a coup-de-main assault using a force that would land as close as possible to the bridges. The task of securing these bridges was given to a specially trained and reinforced gliderborne infantry company, Major John Howard's D Company, the 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. They were part of Brigadier The Honourable Hugh Kindersley's 6th Airlanding Brigade and had been selected because of their outstanding performance in pre-invasion exercises. In addition to D Company, a detachment from 249th Airborne Field Squadron the Royal Engineers, a Royal Army Medical Corps detachment and the pilots of the Glider Pilots Regiment took part in the action.

Major Howard's plan for the assault was to land three of his six platoons by glider to attack the Bénouville Bridge over the Caen Canal and his remaining three platoons by glider to attack the Ranville Bridge over the River Orne. The 7th (Light Infantry) Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, who would be dropped onto DZ 'NAN', would get to the bridge as quickly as possible to reinforce and consolidate the bridgehead gained.



A Halifax V with an Aircspeed Horsa taking off from RAF Tarrant Rushton.

Just before 23:00 hrs on 5 June 1944, the six gliders carrying the men of D Company 2nd Battalion the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and their six Halifax tug aircraft took off from RAF Tarrant Rushton in England.



Major Howard's plan. [© Ian R Gumm, 2019]

They crossed the English Channel coast and entered the airspace over France shortly after midnight. As they crossed the coast their tug aircraft released the gliders, and they began their silent approach to the bridges. Major John Howard recalled:

*"I then took my seat in the number 1 glider. This was Den Brotheridge's platoon. I was opposite the opened door and on my right were two other men and then the cockpit. I could look through to the cockpit and see Staff Sergeant Jim Wallwork, the pilot, quite clearly. We shut the doors, and my*

*glider was due to take off at 22:56, and it started onto the runway with a Halifax bomber towing it, and right on the dot at 22:56, it was airborne, and although I couldn't see them, I knew that the rest of the five were in line right behind us. Number 2 had David Wood's platoon; number 3, Sandy Smith's; number 4, Brian Priday and Tony Hooper's; number 5, Dennis Fox's; and number 6, Todd Sweeney's. We were cut off from the rest of the world except for Jim Wallwork's ability to talk to the Halifax.*

*Through the portholes, we could see lots of other bombers, and we knew they must have been going to bomb the invasion front. We knew that we would be just over an hour in the air crossing the Channel, and as soon as we got up to five or six thousand feet, the men started loosening their tongues, and a lot of singing went on, some good Cockney songs. As we crossed the Channel I couldn't help thinking of those poor devils down there in those thousands and thousands of craft, and that some of them must be bloody ill because we knew the sea was rough and here we were just over an hour from take-off and straight into battle, and it really did seem to me to be the way to go into battle without two or three days in some sort of craft on the sea.*

*At the last minute, I was wondering what the strength of the enemy would be when we pranged, because we had that trouble about Rommel's poles, and I was worried about the question of a machine gun pointing toward one glider wiping us all out altogether in one fell swoop before we could have a chance to fight back. I also was concerned about the explosives which we carried in the glider and whether they would explode on landing.*

*When we cut loose, we were on our way down and made our final turn, and you are supposed to come in at anything up to 90 mph when you first touchdown. As I could see old Jim holding that bloody great machine and driving it in at the last minute, I couldn't see his face, but I could see those damn great footballs of sweat across his forehead and all over his face, and I felt for him and was holding that damn thing myself as we came in."*

The lead glider, Glider 91, was piloted by Staff Sergeant Jim Wallwork and Staff Sergeant John Ainsworth of the Glider Pilots Regiment; Jim Wallwork was at the controls and John Ainsworth on the stopwatch and compass. Staff Sergeant Jim Wallwork recalled:

*"We had just hit the coast of France, and the tug pilot said, 'Weather's good, the clouds are at 600 ft, a couple of minutes before we cast off. And we all wish you the best of luck.' Alter course, airspeed right, John Ainsworth with the stopwatch, I'm checking the compass; he's checking the airspeed. We cruise along and then 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, bingo, right turn to starboard onto the course. Halfway down the crosswind leg, I could see it. I could see the river and the canal-like strips of silver and I could see the bridges; visibility was awfully good. So then, to hell with the course, I knew my height; I knew how far away I was, so it was a case of by guess and by God from then on. I didn't complete the crosswind leg, so I bowled down and landed rather quickly.*

*There was a feeling of the land rushing up and I landed probably at about 95 instead of at 85, and 10 miles per hour in the dark looks like a lot. I hit the field and caught the first bit of wire and so I called 'Stream', and by golly, it [the parachute] lifted the tail and forced the nose down. It drew us back and knocked the speed down tremendously. It was only on for two seconds, and 'jettison', and Ainsworth pressed the tit and jettisoned the parachute, and then we were going along only about 60, which was ample to take me right into the corner. We got right into the corner of the field, the nose wheel had gone, the cockpit collapsed, and Ainsworth and I went right through the cockpit. I went over headfirst and landed flat on my stomach. I was stunned, as was Ainsworth; I came around and he seemed to be in bad shape. I said, 'Can you crawl?' and he said, 'No,' and then I asked if I lifted, could he crawl out and he said, 'I'll try.' I lifted the thing and I felt that I lifted the whole bloody glider when probably all I lifted was a small spar, but I felt like 30 men when I picked this thing up and he did manage to crawl out."*

At 00:16 hrs on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Glider 91, which carried Major Howard, his signaller Corporal Tappenden, Lieutenant Den Brotheridge's 25 Platoon, and Corporal Watson's section of Royal Engineers, landed within 50 yards of the bridge. It hit the ground hard, bounced and came to a halt with its nose through the enemy's wire. Its passengers were all momentarily stunned, and the two pilots were thrown forward through the cockpit by the impact.

Regaining consciousness, Major Howard ran to a point close to the near end of the Bénouville Bridge to direct the assault. Lieutenant Den Brotheridge dismounted from the glider and led 25 Platoon onto the bridge to begin their coup-de-main attack as Corporal Watson's sappers headed under the bridge.

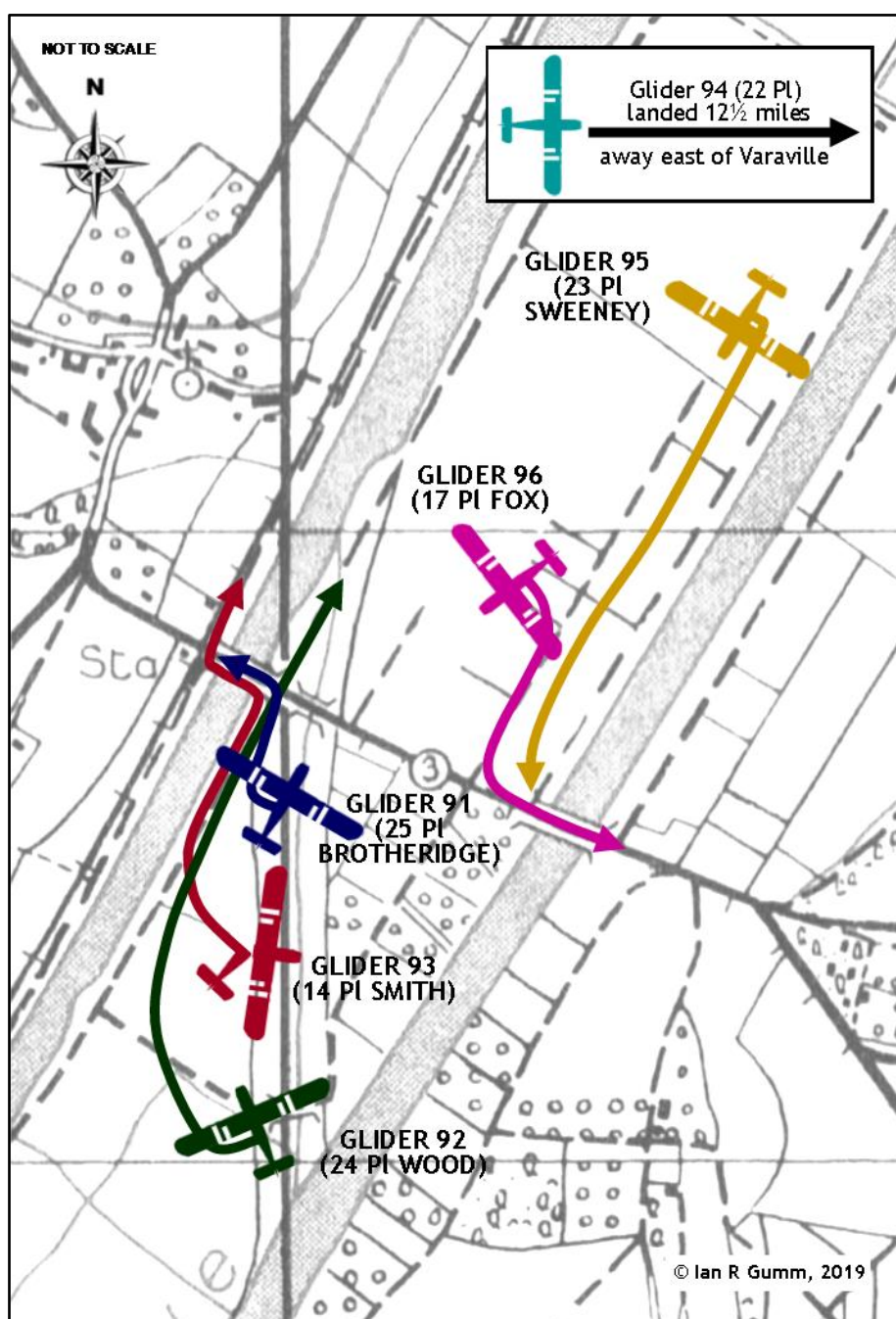
On the bridge, the German sentry saw them and shouted "*Fallschirmjäger*" (paratrooper). The German NCO reached for his Very pistol.

Lieutenant Brotheridge charged across the bridge and, as he ran, the German NCO raised his Very pistol to raise the alarm. Lieutenant Brotheridge fired a burst from his Sten gun killing the German NCO, but not before the warning signal soared skywards.

As Lieutenant Brotheridge reached the far end of the bridge, a German soldier who was in front of the Café Gondrée fired and shot him in the neck. Den Brotheridge fell mortally wounded to the ground, thereby becoming the first Allied soldier to be killed on French soil during D-Day.

The second glider, Glider 92 piloted by Staff Sergeants Bowland and Hobbs, followed closely behind the first and touched down just one minute later at 00:17 hrs. It came to rest within 25 yards of the first and carried Lieutenant David Wood's 24 Platoon, D Company's medic Lance Corporal Harris and Captain Jock Nielson's Royal Engineers. David Wood's platoon got out of their glider and rushed to the bridge to seize the home bank. Jock Nielson's engineers immediately deployed under the bridge to clear any charges and Lance Corporal Harris moved to the Company headquarters position ready to render medical assistance. Lieutenant David Wood recalled:

“We were seated, arms locked, facing each other in silence, lest the enemy below were alerted by our voices. Not a sound, except for the swishing of the air rushing past the open door of the Horsa glider, through the night at 90 mph over Normandy just after midnight on the morning of D-Day. Without warning, the pilot shouted, ‘Christ there’s the bridge!’ The glider’s nose tilted sharply down and sparks, which we thought were enemy tracer, flew from the skids as they struck the ground. A series of violent bumps and the sound of splintering wood followed by being ejected through the side of the aircraft. Relieved to find I was still in one piece, still holding the Sten with its bayonet fixed and gratified that none of the extra grenades, which I was carrying in my camp kit canvas bucket, had gone off. Pulled myself together, collected my platoon and doubled off to report to my Company Commander.”



D Company, 2nd Battalion the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry assault on Pegasus Bridge. [© Ian R Gumm, 2019]

The third glider, Glider 93 piloted by Staff Sergeants Barkway and Boyle, followed just as quickly and touched down at 00:18 hrs. This glider came to a halt in between the other two within feet of the first glider. The third glider carried Lieutenant Richard (Sandy) Smith's 14 Platoon, Captain John Vaughan and Lance Corporal Albert Gregory of the Royal Army Medical Corps detachment, and the remainder of Captain Nielson's sappers. On coming to a halt, the third glider broke its back and threw many of its passengers out of its broken fuselage. One of those thrown clear was Lance Corporal Fred Greenhalgh. Fred Greenhalgh landed face down unconscious in the pond at the edge of the glider-landing zone where he drowned and became D Company's second fatality of the assault on Pegasus Bridge.



Gliders No 93 and 91 at the Orne River (Pegasus) Bridge shortly after D-Day.

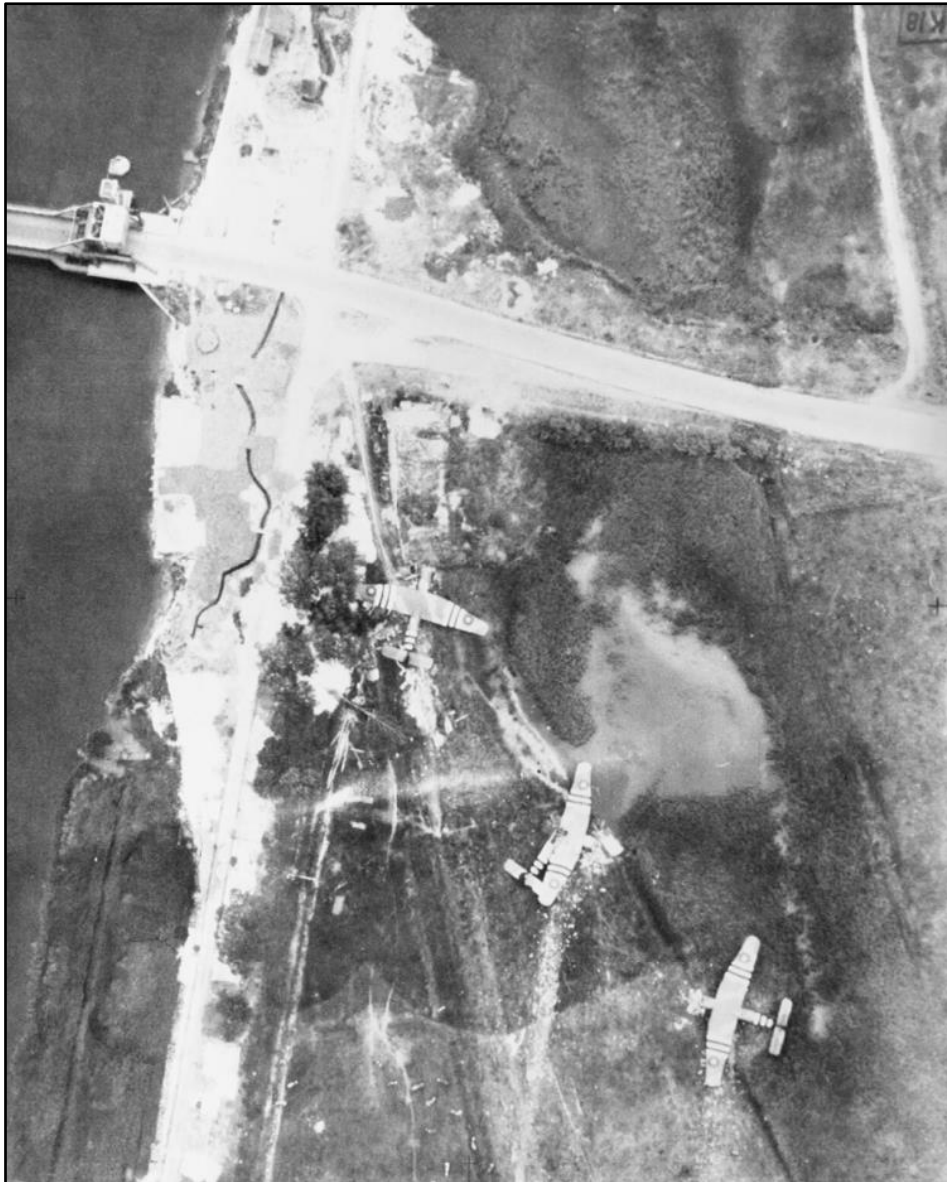
The other two platoons were quick to support 25 Platoon's attack, 24 Platoon taking the home bank, the eastern bank of the canal, and 14 Platoon crossing the bridge to tackle the Germans on the far bank, the western bank.

14 Platoon charged across the bridge and their platoon commander Lieutenant Sandy Smith hobbled after them, as he had wrenched his knee during the landing. As Sandy Smith reached the western end of the bridge, he saw a German soldier about to throw a stick grenade. With a burst from his Sten Lieutenant Smith shot the German, who fell dead onto the low wall in front of the café. It was too late however, as the grenade had already left the enemy soldier's hand, it landed next to Sandy Smith and the explosion tore his smock and trousers and lacerated the wrist on his right hand. Despite his injuries, Lieutenant Sandy Smith continued to lead his platoon as they cleared the machine gun nests and trenches along the western bank and finished off the resistance from the German defenders.

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944 Lieutenant Richard (Sandy) Smith was awarded the Military Cross. His citation reads:

*“Although injured in the hand during a crash landing of a glider in the airborne operation at Bénouville Bridge on 6th June 1944, Lieutenant Smith brilliantly led his platoon onto the bridge and*

*successfully cleared several houses and co-ordinated the defence of his platoon. It was only when their duties were finished that he allowed himself to be attended to and was finally evacuated to the Main Dressing Station.”*



The three gliders at the Caen Canal (Pegasus) Bridge.

On the eastern side, 24 Platoon cleared the machine gun nests and trenches in their area of responsibility. When he thought all was secure, Lieutenant David Wood was making his way to report the completion of the task to Major Howard when a German, who had been missed when the trenches were being cleared, opened fire with a Schmeisser submachine gun and Lieutenant Wood took three bullets in the leg.

Glider 94 piloted by Staff Sergeants Lawrence and Shorter and carrying Captain Brian Priday and Lieutenant Tony Hopper's 22 Platoon was released in the wrong place and landed close to the River Dives bridge near Varaville, rather than its intended landing site at the Ranville Bridge.



At 00:20 hrs, Glider 96 piloted by Staff Sergeants Howard and Baacke and carrying Lieutenant Dennis Fox's 17 Platoon touched down on DZ "YANKIE". 17 Platoon exited their glider and shook out into their attack formation but did not immediately move off. Lieutenant Dennis Fox crawled forward to his lead section commander to find out why and he pointed to the Ranville Bridge. On the bridge was a German soldier manning an MG42 machine gun. Realising that he needed to get his men moving, Dennis Fox stood up to lead the way forward. As he did so there was a 'plop', the sound of a mortar being fired. His Sergeant, Sergeant Charles 'Wagger' Thornton, had sent a round towards the bridge from the Platoon's mortar. It landed smack-bang on target killing the German soldier and putting the machine gun out of action. Lieutenant Dennis Fox charged across the LZ and onto the bridge.



Glider No 96 near the Orne River (Horsa) Bridge.

About 700 yards away, Glider 95 piloted by Staff Sergeants Pearson and Guthrie and carrying Lieutenant Henry (Todd) Sweeney's 23 Platoon landed at 00:22 hrs. They too exited their glider and made their way to the Ranville Bridge. Arriving at the bridge all was quiet. Leaving a section on the home bank, Lieutenant Sweeney led his men forward onto the bridge. At the far end of the bridge, he saw a shadowy figure and as he raised his Sten gun he heard *"By God Todd, you took your time, I can't find the umpires!"* Relieved, Lieutenant Sweeney's men joined those of Lieutenant Wood and began to consolidate their gains. Lieutenant Sweeney recalled:

*"I hadn't cottoned on to the fact that the bridge had been seized at all. As I was beginning to go across, I thought that someone was in fact there before me, but you still had that awful feeling as*

*you went over the bridge that it might go up under your feet. I went racing across with my heart in my mouth, eventually coming to a halt, a bit disappointed, because we were all worked up to kill the enemy, bayonet the enemy, be blown up or something, and then there on the other side of the bridge was nothing more than the unmistakable figure of Dennis Fox.”*

After a series of quick and vicious actions Major Howard’s men had made short work of the German defenders and within 5 minutes the Bénouville Bridge was secure. Within ten minutes word was received that the Ranville Bridge was secure and one of the most spectacular operations of D-Day had gone off largely as planned.

Major Howard’s radio operator, Corporal Tappenden, was soon transmitting the code words ‘HAM’ and ‘JAM’ to signify that the bridges had been captured. The total casualties in the coup-de-main force during this action were two killed and fourteen wounded, included within these casualties were all three of the platoon commanders who had assaulted Pegasus Bridge.



The Caen Canal (Pegasus) Bridge shortly after D-Day.

The two bridges were in the hands of the Allies and the Germans would never re-take them. With both bridges under their control, D Company dug in to face the inevitable German counterattacks and Major Howard established his headquarters in a German dugout just north of the bridge on the eastern bank.

When one considers that the gliders were released from their tug aircraft at 5,000 ft and their pilots had to get to their landing sites using only a compass and stopwatch, it is understandable that the landings at the Caen Canal and Orne River Bridges were described by Air Marshall Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory as *“the finest piece of airmanship of the war.”*

The bridges had been held and the Allies had secured the left flank of the invasion force in what was one of the most brilliant and heroic actions of the Second World War.

## Look Forward

In Part Nine of D-Day, 6 June 1944 – The Greatest Seaborne Invasion The World Has Ever Known, I switch attention to the western end of the landing area to look at the American Airborne and the liberation of Sainte-Mère-Église.

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