



Two C-47s, "D-Day Doll" and "Virginia Ann", preparing for the 'Daks Over Normandy' commemoration during the 75th Anniversary.

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)

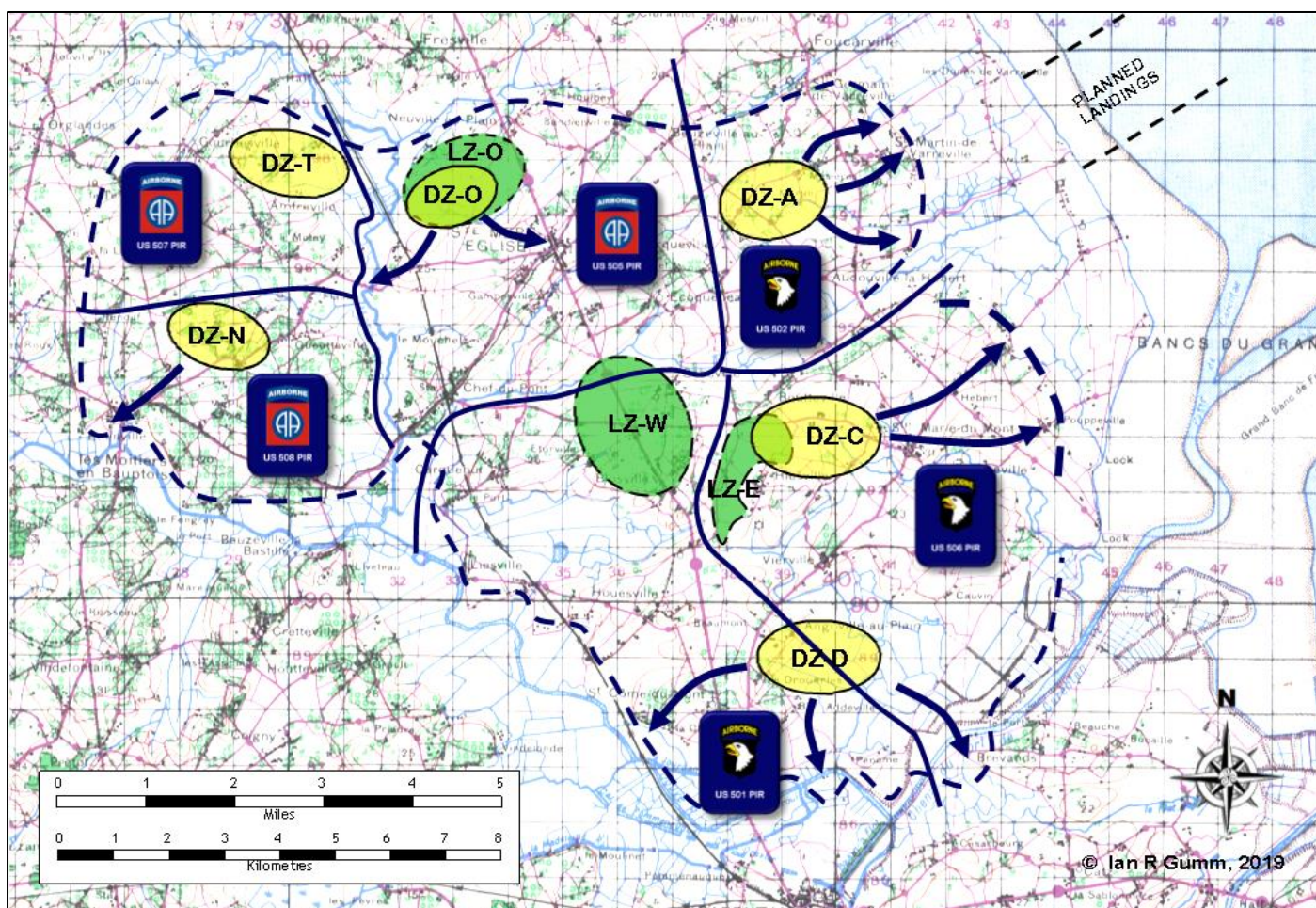
PART NINE – THE 505TH AT SAINTE-MÈRE-ÉGLISE

This article concentrates on the 82nd 'All American' Airborne Division at Sainte-Mère-Église.

Major General Joseph Lawton Collins' US VII Corps was assigned the task of assaulting and securing UTAH Beach and establishing a lodgement area from which future operations to capture 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 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 Route National 13 [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.

The 101st's mission was designed to block the approaches to UTAH Beach and prevent the Germans from interfering with the seaborne landings. They were to capture the inland ends of four causeway exits off UTAH Beach, destroy two bridges northwest of Carentan, seize and hold the lock at La Barquette, and establish crossings over the River Douve to assist in the merger of the two American beachheads at UTAH and OMAHA.



The American Airborne Plan. [© Ian R Gumm, 2023]

Major General Matthew B Ridgeway commanded the 82nd Airborne Division. The men of Colonel William E Ekman's 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment were tasked with securing Sainte-Mère-Église and the crossings over the River Merderet. Colonel George V Millett Jr's 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment and Colonel Roy E Lindquist's 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment were tasked with setting up a defensive bridgehead on the far side of the River Merderet and holding this until the seaborne forces arrived.

The night parachute assault by the 82nd was codenamed Mission BOSTON and consisted of 10 serials organised in three waves. The division's 6,420 paratroopers jumped from 369 C-47s Skytrains, of the US IX Troop Carrier Command.

Jumping onto DZ-O near Sainte-Mère-Église was Colonel Ekman's 505th. The 1/505 and a platoon from the 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion took off from RAF Spanhoe in the C-47s of Lieutenant Colonel Hamish McLelland's 315th Troop Carrier Group, and 2/505 and 3/505 took off from RAF Cottesmore in the C-47s of Lieutenant Colonel Harvey A Berger's 316 Troop Carrier Group.



Colonel William E Ekman, Commanding Officer of the 505th.

Jumping onto DZ-T near Amfreville was Colonel Millet's 507th. Headquarters 507th and 1/507 left from RAF Fullbeck in the C-47s of Lieutenant Colonel Charles M Smith's 442nd Troop Carrier Group, and 2/507 and 3/507 left from RAF Barkston Heath in Colonel Willis W Mitchell's 61st Troop Carrier Group.

Jumping onto DZ-N to the northwest of Picauville was Colonel Lindquist's 508th. 1/508 and 3/508 left from RAF Folkingham in the C-47s of Colonel James J Roberts Jr's 313th Troop Carrier Group, and 2/508 and Company B 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion left from RAF Saltby in the C-47s of Colonel Clayton Stiles' 314th Troop Carrier Group.



Paratroopers dropping from C-47s during the 75th Anniversary. [© Ian R Gumm, 2019]

The Liberation of Sainte-Mère-Église

The C-47s carrying Colonel Ekman's 505th did not experience the difficulties that plagued the other American Airborne's drops. Their Pathfinders had landed on DZ-O, turned on their Eureka beacons as the first serials crossed the coast and lit the Holophane markers. As a result, the 505th enjoyed the most accurate D-Day drop with half of the regiment dropping on or within a mile of DZ-O, and 75 per cent within 2 miles. The two other regiments of the 82nd, however, were significantly dispersed and the 508th experienced the worst drop of any of the Parachute Infantry Regiments.

The drop of Lieutenant Colonel Edward C Krause's 3/505 was better than most as the Pathfinders assigned to mark their DZ had done their job well. Consequently, the 3/505 gathered a significant portion of its strength soon after landing.

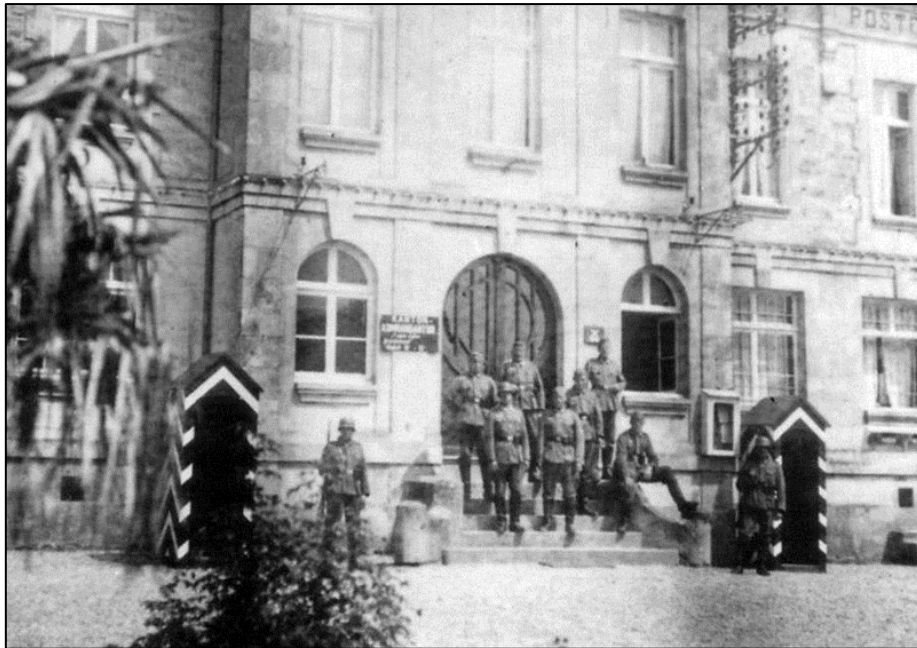


Lieutenant Colonel Edward C Krause, Commanding Officer of the 3/505.

Lieutenant Colonel Krause later recalled:

"The trip was very uneventful on the way over. As we crossed the coast of France, I talked to my pilot on the interphone; and said, "It looks like a good deal". I looked back and saw my ships behind me. Just about that time we hit the soup, fog, or cloud, and we started to see fires on the ground, a little ack-ack and we had some fighters come in on us and fire at us. An element of three ships was directly under us and not more than thirty feet below. One came up from under and passed miraculously between my ship and the left-wing ship. I would say that in the next three minutes, I came as close to being crashed in the air as I ever hoped to. We tried to keep our formation, but ships constantly overran each other. The pilot called for evasive action, and we split up. Some went high, some went lower, others right and left. This split our formation and we were well spread. Just about two or three minutes before drop time we saw this green T. It was a Godsend and I felt that I had

found the Holy Grail. I would say that I dropped from over 2,000 feet. It was the longest ride I have had in over fifty jumps, and while descending, four ships passed under me, and I really sweated that out. Just after I landed, a mine bundle hit about 80 yards away from me without a parachute and exploded. We tried to orient ourselves very quickly and ran upon a conical-shaped field, which I remembered as the conical-shaped field that we had studied during our pre-invasion briefing. Northeast of this should be the Battalion DZ Command Post which was to be in a wooded area on the southeast end of the DZ. Further investigation proved this to be true and then I knew exactly where we were, or thought I knew where we were, and I told the people all around me. Because we were so split up, we did not have too much organization of the units. We even had some men from the other divisions contacting us. I composed two groups, one under Captain DeLong and the other under Lieutenant Isaacs and we began to form, but not too rapidly. I sent out patrols to guide in assembling groups and about that time we saw the green flares. I could not find my original signal which I was supposed to use, and likewise, alternate signals were gone. We had absolutely no visual signals to assemble on. Our method of assembly was to roll up on our sticks. Our sticks formed up in good shape. The next problem was that of people running through our area wanting to know where they were. Major McGinity asked where we were, and I told him whereupon he put his map away and headed for the bridge with Captain Dolan and most of Company A. We were starting to get close to 200 men in about an hour and a half of assembling.”



German soldiers on the steps of the Hotel de Ville in Sainte-Mère-Église.

In Sainte-Mère-Église the townspeople, at first oblivious to the events that were unfolding, were fighting the fire that had been started by a stray incendiary bomb in the house of Julia Pommier at La Haule Park sometime around 23:00 hrs on 5 June 1944. Buckets of water were being passed from hand to hand from the water pump next to the church to fight the fire when the first wave of aircraft began to pass overhead.



German soldiers in front of l'église Notre-Dame in Sainte-Mère-Église.

The town's people and German soldiers in the chain looked skywards and suddenly, a stick of paratroopers from the 101st, 16-18 men, descended into the town lit up by the light of the fire burning below. This was by mistake as none of the drops were supposed to come down in Sainte-Mère-Église. Chaos ensued.

The town's people took cover as best they could. The German soldiers grabbed their weapons and began firing at the descending American paratroopers. Most of the paratroopers in that first stick were killed and a few were taken prisoner.

The fight for Sainte-Mère-Église had begun.

It was not long before a second stick of paratroopers dropped into the town, this time from the 82nd. They were from the 2nd Platoon Mortar Squad Company F, 505th that had overshot their DZ. One of the paratroopers descended towards the burning house, the heat of the fire drew his parachute in as he descended. Unable to steer clear of the flames he screamed as he entered the inferno.

Another of the paratroopers, PFC John Steele, hit the tower of the church, slid down the roof and his chute snagged on one of the pinnacles. John Steele attempted to cut the rigging on his chute so he could get off the tower but dropped his knife which rattled on the roof of the transept as it fell. This alerted a German soldier who turned and looked up to see the helpless paratrooper hanging from the tower above.

As this was happening Sergeant John Ray just missed the church tower but hit the front of the church to land in a heap on the ground. As he tried to free himself from his parachute a German soldier came around the side of the church and shot him. As the German then raised his rifle to fire at John Steele, the wounded John Ray drew his Colt .45 revolver and killed the German soldier before he could squeeze the trigger.



PFC John Steele.



Sergeant John P Ray.

PFC John Steele then played dead as he hung helplessly from the church tower and watched, through half-closed eyes, as more of his comrades died as they landed. After the fighting died down, two German soldiers stationed in the church tower, Corporal Rudolf May and Rudi Escher, realised that John Steele was still alive. Corporal Rudolf May recalled:

"We spent the evening of June 5 racing our bicycles around the church grounds, feeling happy and enjoying ourselves. At about 11 o'clock in the evening, I went on guard on the side of the bell tower that faced the churchyard. Also located in the tower was the telephone that connected us to our combat element (through the central telephone). Everything was quiet and still.

At about midnight, some planes flew over us. I noticed that they dropped some objects. Our anti-aircraft defence shot at the planes. I reported this to our combat elements, and their answer was: "Go on watching!" Then the fire bell was rung because a shop or home on the edge of the village had caught fire. People ran over to it, and the ringing of the bell awakened my comrades.

More and more planes flew across Sainte-Mère-Église, dropping containers with supplies that we found the next morning. The building was still burning, men were running around, and our air defence positions became active too. I saw my comrades standing in the churchyard. The firelight illuminated the whole scene.

And then they came, waves of planes with parachutists jumping out of them, darkening the moonlit sky. They glided down and landed on the roofs, in the streets, and on the chestnut trees on the church grounds. I had already reported to my troop what was happening, but the answer was always: "Stay where you are and go on watching!" The guard who had been on the opposite side of the tower had already come over to mine. He was a very young soldier without any experience in war.

In the meantime, I had gone downstairs to discuss with my comrades what we should do. Our NCO told me to call our combat element again to get their orders. While standing there, we came under fire and one young comrade was shot to death. I went back into the church and climbed to the tower. I could not establish a connection to the combat element again; the central telephone was disconnected. I also noticed that the heavy vehicles had gone.

More and more paratroopers jumped out of the planes. My young comrade and I kneeled down in the gutter on the tower and watched the scene. Suddenly it became dark, and someone flew past us. Then we spotted strings straining across the balustrade. There was a man hanging there, suspended. He hung there like he was dead – but after a while, he started moving. Then we also heard him sighing. My comrade took his gun in order to shoot him, which would have been understandable in our situation.

But I took the gun away from him and said: "Don't be crazy! If someone discovers us here, we will never be able to leave this place!" I had my jack-knife with me, and I started to cut through the strings of the parachute. But it wasn't easy because my knife was not very sharp. After I had cut through several strings and thrown them down onto the churchyard, I thought: "So, no you (the American soldier hanging in front of me) will not do me any harm and will not be able to climb up here!" The paratrooper, John Steele, could rope himself down the side of the church."

Seven members of the 2nd Platoon Mortar Squad were killed and later buried by the town's people in Sainte-Mère-Église Communal Cemetery, they were: Lieutenant Harold O Caddish, Privates H T Bryant Jr and Private Ladislav Tlapa, all of whom were shot while hanging from telegraph poles, PFC Charles P Blankenship who was shot while hanging in a tree, PFC Penrose D Shearer, PFC Alfred J Van Helsbeck and PFC William Hale all of whom were killed in the town.

Sergeant John P Ray, who had saved the life of PFC John Steele, was evacuated to an aid station but died of his wounds at 10:00 hrs on 13 June 1944, eight days later. He had sustained gunshot wounds in the hip and buttock as he landed in Sainte-Mère-Église. His was an agonising death, the result of his wounds becoming infected and turning gangrenous.

PFC John Steele, once he was on the ground, was taken prisoner. He had been wounded in his left foot during the descent, possibly by a jagged piece of shrapnel or a bullet. Following his capture, he was put into a truck and taken to Cherbourg with six other American paratroopers. There he was treated for his wounds and was subsequently liberated when Cherbourg was captured on 29 June 1944.

PFC John Steele was then evacuated to the United Kingdom to receive further treatment for the wounded foot he sustained during his descent onto the church in Sainte-Mère-Église. He would recover from his wounds and rejoin the 505th later in the war. For his actions on D-Day PFC John Steele was awarded the Bronze Star, he also received the Purple Heart for the wound he sustained in his left foot.

Lieutenant Colonel Krause and the men of 3/505 assembled at their Rendezvous Point on their DZ. When about a quarter of their strength had mustered Lieutenant Colonel Krause organised them into two Company-sized groups and

set off for Sainte-Mère-Église. He had planned to surround the town before dawn and establish roadblocks, but the intelligence gained from a local inhabitant indicated that the Germans had set up positions outside Sainte-Mère-Église along the roads. In the light of this intelligence, Lieutenant Colonel Krause ordered his men to move directly into Sainte-Mère-Église. He recalled:

“One of my officers landed in the town of Sainte-Mère-Église. On his way out he saw a group of Germans and witnessed several parachutists taken prisoner and others killed, so he headed northeast to join us.

On his way, he picked up a slightly inebriated Frenchman, who stated that this was Sainte-Mère-Église, and we knew then exactly where we were. It was just before four when I made the decision to move out to Sainte-Mère-Église. We moved in from the northwest on the road that the man had said the troops had departed from. It was mostly transportation and service units that had remained in the town when the bulk of the forces moved into field bivouacs several days prior to D-Day because of the bombing. Captain DeLong and I went in toward the northwest section of town. The civilian in a white coat was carrying an American mine while guiding the way. We made him go out first so that he would not lead us into any gun position. We met no opposition, but we did meet some members of the other units, and they were all heading for their missions. I would say that we arrived in town just before light and had no opposition at all, mainly due to the covered route the civilian took us by, but in the centre of the town, there were spasmodic shots that became ever-increasing. My instructions to my men were not to fight with any other unit but to fight with me in the town. This proved worthy because all my men concentrated on getting to the town and the bulk of my Battalion was with me by mid-morning. The remaining enemy troops in the town were apparently scared out of the town. The force which we had was just a jumbled group and in order to secure the town as quickly as possible we endeavoured to establish roadblocks around the town as hastily as possible, which we did. One important thing we were going to do was to cut the communication lines. We thought we found it and severed the main cable from the town. As more troops came in, we put up roadblocks around the whole town. We had about one-fourth of the force we expected at about five o'clock. A message was sent to the Regimental Command Post. This message was dispatched at about five o'clock.”

The drop of Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin H Vandervoort's 2/505 was also better than most. He had jumped and landed about a quarter of a mile from his intended DZ. He had a hard landing and broke his left leg just above the foot.

Captain Lyle Putnam, the 2/505's surgeon recalled:

“Luckily it was a simple rather than compound fracture. He insisted on replacing his jump boot, laced it tightly, formed a very makeshift crutch from a stick, and moved with the outfit as an equal and a leader without complaint. ... The man did not lose two hours of active duty in our thirty-three days in Normandy. He thoroughly convinced every man of his battalion of his merits and qualities.”



Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin H Vandervoort, Commanding Officer of the 2/505.

Lieutenant Colonel Ben Vandervoort recalled:

“The flight until we hit the French coast was quite uneventful for my battalion. We reached France intact and in formation. As we came in across the coast, we saw a little ack-ack from the ground and I thought that there were some planes from the 101st Division shot down. As we approached our DZ the pilot informed me that he could see our T. The Pathfinder group had been dropped essentially where they should have been, a little further inland, and they only displayed two T's. One was lighted when we dropped. The pilot I had was extremely reluctant to come down to the correct jumping altitude. We came in at 1,400 feet, and our speed was excessive. I talked to the crew chief and asked him to slow down. We went through a bit of scud as we came in and it caused the formation to break slightly. At the time I thought the Germans had smoked the area. I lost two platoons from Company E. The green light was turned on about 45 seconds before we reached the Douve River. I told them to turn it off. We dropped pretty well on our DZ. I, myself, was a quarter of a mile from the DZ, and I had a little hard luck on the landing and banged up my foot. I watched the battalion come in and they were all spread out, the ships being too high and too fast. Within fifteen minutes after I got on the ground, I started putting up some green flares that worked out well. We encountered no resistance from the enemy at night, only some fire from ack-ack around our DZ. Some members of the battalion were dropped in Sainte-Mère-Église and were engaged in a firefight at

once. There was the movement of vehicles on the road, one of the first things I heard being vehicles moving on a road to the south. I went north to the nearest hedgerow. I think it was about 04:10 in the morning when I felt I completed the assembly sufficiently so that I could move out on our mission and take the town of Neuville-au-Plain.”

Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort gathered the paratroopers of his battalion, but it was after 04:00 hrs before he felt he had enough men to set off to carry out his mission. News of 3/505's progress at Sainte-Mère-Église was, however, still very sketchy and Colonel Ekman told him to hold his battalion where it was until released.

Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort recalled:

“In the meantime, the regiment had told me to stand by. The news from Sainte-Mère-Église was so vague to the Regimental commander that he had me stand by. General Ridgway happened to be in my CP during that period and he also directed me not to move without consulting him. It was not until daylight that I received orders to move. We actually started moving at 06:00. Later my mission was changed to Sainte-Mère-Église, and from there on it was essentially a ground operation. The 2nd Battalion met no resistance as we went into the town. A small group of Germans attacked our left flank, but one platoon from D Company was enough to drive them off, and as I said, it was a ground operation thereafter. It was 01:41 when I landed.”

At 06:00 hrs Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort's 2/505 set off for Neuville-au-Plain to set up a defensive cordon to the north of Sainte-Mère-Église. Colonel Ekman moved with them, but as they headed towards Neuville-au-Plain he became increasingly concerned about whether Sainte-Mère-Église had been seized.



Colonel William E Ekman (left, facing the camera).

With no word about the progress 3/505 in Sainte-Mère-Église, Colonel Ekman decided to divert the bulk of Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort's 2/505 to the town as this was his main effort. Before turning south towards the town Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort detached Lieutenant Turner B Turnbull's 3rd Platoon, Company D, 2/505. He ordered Lieutenant Turnbull to take his platoon and set up the defensive screen to the north in the vicinity of Neuville-au-Plain. To aid them, the 3rd Platoon was reinforced with additional Browning Automatic Rifles, Bazookas and a 57mm anti-tank gun.

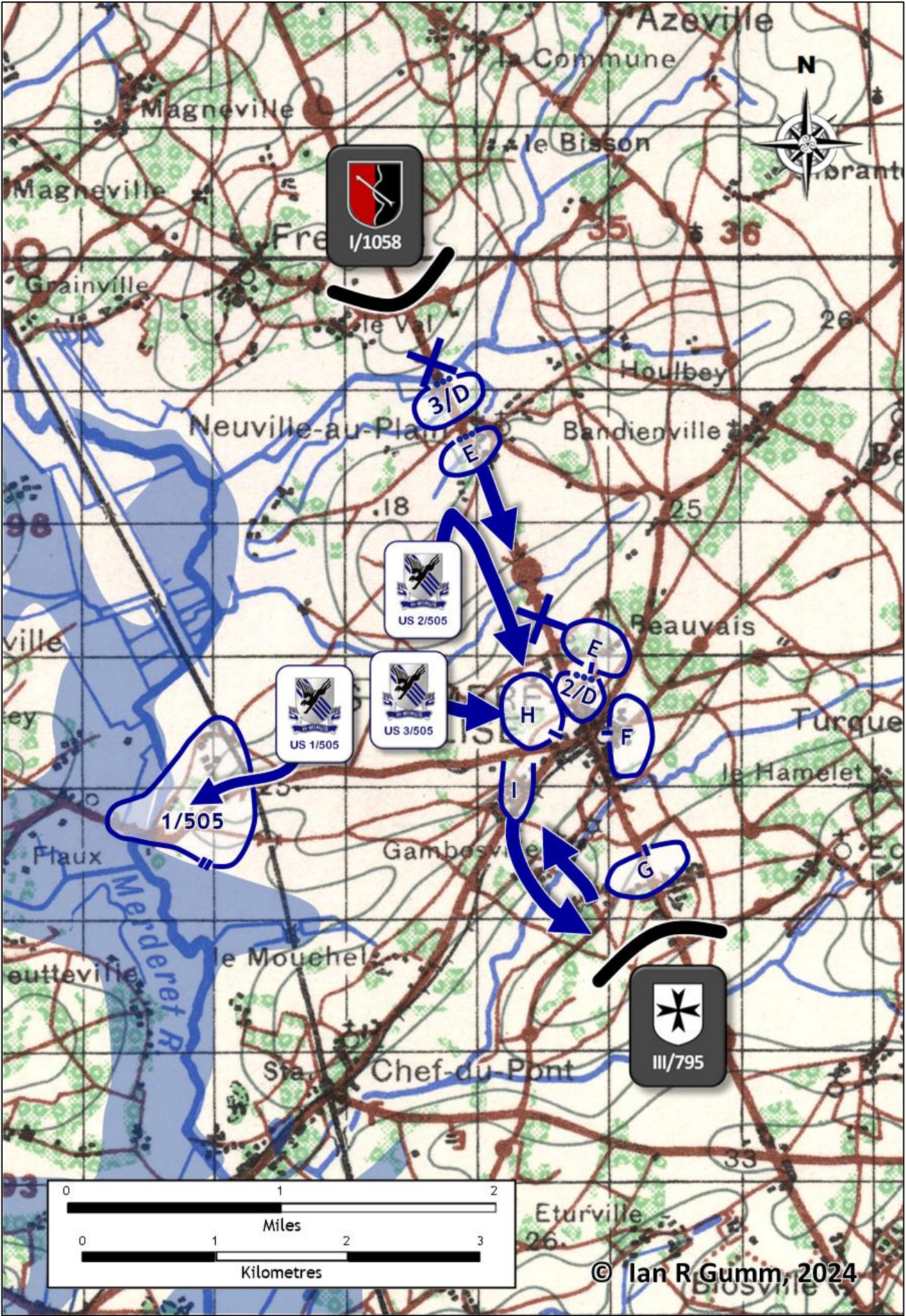
As Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort headed south, Lieutenant Colonel Krause's 3/505 was occupying Sainte-Mère-Église. They found the town to be lightly held, as the bulk of the defending German troops had left to gather at the nearby Château de Fauville about a mile to the south. Soon the Stars and Stripes, which had been raised over Naples during the Italian campaign, was hoisted to signify that Sainte-Mère-Église was in their hands. This act made Sainte-Mère-Église the first town to be liberated as part of the Invasion.

By 09:30 hrs Sainte-Mère-Église had been cleared of the enemy with thirty prisoners taken and ten enemy killed in the process. By that time Lieutenant Colonel Krause's force amounted to around 360 men and these he deployed to defend the town. He kept Captain Harold H Swingler's Company I in reserve so that he had a quick reaction force with which he could respond to an enemy counterattack from any direction. He placed his other two rifle companies, Captain Robert Follmer's Company G and Captain Walter C DeLong's Company H, around the town manning roadblocks and a thin perimeter to prepare to resist the German counterattack that would surely come. On receiving news that Sainte-Mère-Église had been taken Colonel Ekman halted Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort's 2/505.

At approximately 10:00 hrs the 3rd Battalion of Infanterie Regiment 795, which was a mile south of Sainte-Mère-Église in a wood on the high ground near Fauville, began advancing up the N13 from the south intent on mounting a counterattack against the American paratroopers in Sainte-Mère-Église. Their attacking force consisted of two infantry companies supported by several Self-Propelled Guns. On receiving news of this counterattack Colonel Ekman ordered Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort's 2/505 to Sainte-Mère-Église with all haste to assist in its defence.

PFC Dominick DiTullio had led a Communications Officer and his party forward to establish communication with a forward unit. They had searched the immediate countryside but could not find the unit and had decided to withdraw back to Sainte-Mère-Église when the enemy counterattack had begun. PFC DiTullio came across two German trucks full of German soldiers while heading back into Sainte-Mère-Église, without a moment's hesitation he opened fire on the enemy forcing them to take cover. After killing one German and forcing two more to surrender, he advanced across the road to make sure that all the enemy had withdrawn. There he remained to cover the withdrawal of the Communications Officer and his party.

Captain Follmer's Company G 3/505 stood by on the outskirts of Sainte-Mère-Église to withstand the German counterattack. A 57mm anti-tank gun of the 80th Airborne Anti-Aircraft Battalion, which was collocated with the Company G roadblock, managed to halt the SPGs with well-aimed fire. While their mortars and artillery shelled the G/505 positions, the two companies of the Infanterie Regiment 795 withdrew a short distance to regroup and reorganise.



505th dispositions at Sainte-Mère-Église during the morning of D-Day. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

Lieutenant Colonel Krause sent Captain Swingler's Company I to strike at the enemy's western flank and drive them off. They moved along a hedgerow-lined track that was parallel to the N13 with Captain Swingler and three men out as point. The point turned towards the road too soon and emerged onto the road directly in front of where the 3rd Battalion of Infanterie Regiment 795 was reorganising. Captain Swingler's point group reacted quickly and knocked out several German trucks using Gammon grenades but were themselves hit hard in the flank by the enemy. Captain Swingler and two others were killed, the fourth man, PFC Edwin Jones, managed to crawl back to the main body and reported that the Captain was dead.

Company I 505th took cover in a ditch at one side of the road as the enemy opened fire upon them from the other. The enemy then set up a machine gun close to where the dirt road intersected the N13 to fire straight down the road. The Company's Executive Officer had remained in England and so Lieutenant Joseph W Vandevest took over command. Staff Sergeant Clarence Prager screamed at the men to keep their heads down. Company I was pinned down and in a precarious situation.

First Sergeant Harold Melvin covered the left flank as Company I 505th moved backwards down the ditch to extricate themselves. Just at the edge of the town they made a mad dash across the road into a sunken orchard where they set up a hasty defence position. Company I's assault, however, seemed to convince the Germans that the force in Sainte-Mère-Église was much larger than it was, and the 3rd Battalion, Infanterie Regiment 795 withdrew.

For his actions on D-Day, 6 June 1944, PFC Dominick DiTullio was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. He was not to know, however, that he had been awarded for his courageous actions as he was killed the following day. His citation reads:

"The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pride in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross (Posthumously) to PFC Dominick DiTullio (ASN: 33037230), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving with Company G, 2d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in action against enemy forces on 6 June 1944, in France. PFC DiTullio, while a member of a wire section which had advanced three hundred yards beyond the front lines in attempting to establish contact with a forward unit, volunteered to lead the Communications Officer forward for further information and immediately set out in the lead of the party. After covering considerable territory in advance of the front line under heavy firing from friendly and enemy troops, they determined that the company they were seeking had withdrawn and, while returning, came upon two trucks loaded with Germans. PFC DiTullio, without a moment's hesitation, opened fire on the enemy and forced them to take cover, thereby preventing their discovering the weakness of the party. After killing one German and forcing two to surrender, he advanced with a fixed bayonet across the open road to make sure that all the enemy had withdrawn and then remained behind to cover the continued withdrawal of his own party. When the Germans drove cattle down the road in an attempt to detonate a mined roadblock, PFC DiTullio came out of

his cover, turned the cattle back and hand-grenaded the Germans behind him. He then reached the Battalion Aid Station which was under hostile fire so severe as to prevent aid men from securing necessary water. Without thought of his own safety, he crossed the fire-swept area to a pump and was killed in the act of pumping water for the assistance of his comrades. The high courage and absolute contempt for danger shown by PFC DiTullio made him an inspiring example of fortitude and heroism for his entire unit. His intrepid actions, personal bravery, and zealous devotion to duty at the cost of his life 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.”

On entering Sainte-Mère-Église Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort and his men were met by the scenes of battle. There were American paratroopers still hanging from their parachutes where they had been caught in the trees and killed before they could release themselves. Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort's first command was *'Cut them down!'*

The two Battalion Commanding Officers soon met and jointly decided on how the town should be defended; Lieutenant Colonel Krause's 3/505 took responsibility for the perimeter to the south and east of the N13 whilst Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort's 2/505 took over responsibility for the north and west of the perimeter.

Both Battalion Commanding Officers had by this time been injured, Lieutenant Colonel Krause had sustained shrapnel wounds to his leg and Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort broke his leg on landing. By mutual consent Lieutenant Colonel Krause, being the fitter of the two, assumed overall command. Colonel Ekman satisfied that the situation in Sainte-Mère-Église was now sufficiently stable, headed off toward La Fièvre to check on the progress of Major Frederick C A Kellam's 1st Battalion.

The 3rd Battalion of Infanterie Regiment 795's counterattack was not the only attempt made by the Germans to recapture Sainte-Mère-Église on D-Day, 6 June 1944; elements of Infanterie Regiment 1058 tried to attack the town from the north where Lieutenant Turner Turnbull's reinforced 3rd Platoon Company D 505th was deployed at Neuville-au-Plain.

Around 13:00 hrs on 6 June 1944 Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort visited Lieutenant Turnbull's position in a jeep he had commandeered, along with its driver and two radio operators. A second jeep towed one of the 57mm anti-tank guns that had been delivered by glider that morning. Up to this point, all had been quiet at Neuville-au-Plain.

At around the time of Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort's visit, a Frenchman cycled past the American positions and told them that a column of German prisoners under the guard of a few American paratroopers was heading towards them down the road from the north. Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort recalled:

“As Turnbull and I walked over to his position and talked, we kept watching the highway from the north. Shortly, a long column of troops appeared in the distance with vehicles scattered at intervals through their ranks. If these were prisoners, there was more than a battalion of them. We could make out the field grey of German uniforms. On their flanks were individuals in paratrooper uniforms

waving orange panels. Somehow it looked just too good to be true. I told our 57mm anti-tank gun crew to go into position on the right of the road where a house offered some concealment. When the advancing column had closed to within 1,000 yards, I told Turnbull to have his machine gun that was covering the road to fire a burst into the field on the left of the column. That did it. The alleged German “prisoners” deployed instantly on both sides of the road, and the leading vehicle, a self-propelled gun, opened fire on our position.”

The 57mm anti-tank crew opened fire and hit the leading self-propelled gun setting it on fire. The German infantrymen deployed to both sides of the road and began to advance. A second German self-propelled gun moved around the first only to be hit by the 57mm anti-tank gun and put out of action.



A knocked-out Sturmgeschütz IV just outside Sainte-Mère-Église.

Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort told Lieutenant Turnbull to hold the enemy off as long as he could, and then withdraw to Sainte-Mère-Église. He then climbed back into his commandeered jeep to return to warn his men defending the northern fringes of the town that the enemy would soon be making an appearance.

The precise size of the German force remains unknown, but it certainly outnumbered Lieutenant Turnbull's forty-three by more than ten to one. It seemed impossible that the American paratroopers could gain more than a few minutes for their compatriots holding Sainte-Mère-Église. Lieutenant Turnbull had, however, positioned his men well and the enemy had to advance across a shallow valley that had no cover under the guns of the Americans. Armed with their additional BARs, bazookas and 57mm anti-tank gun they initially managed to hold the enemy back by the sheer weight of the firepower that they were able to bring to bear. Gradually, however, the Germans began to work their way around the flanks of Lieutenant Turnbull's small force.



The Sturmgeschütz III self-propelled gun which was knocked out during the attack along the road towards Sainte-Mère-Eglise by Lieutenant Turnbull's men.

On returning to Sainte-Mère-Église, Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort ordered Lieutenant Theodore Peterson's platoon from Captain Clyde Russell's Company E 505th to move north to support Lieutenant Turnbull's men and cover their withdrawal. Lieutenant Peterson recalled:

"We moved quickly and cautiously on the west side of the road to Neuville. Turnbull had a guard posted at the position we entered, who seemed to be expecting us. Turnbull was very calm and had the situation well in hand for the rough position he was in."

Lieutenant Peterson's men set up a thinly held line of fire in the hedgerow to the left of Lieutenant Turnbull's position. Not too long thereafter, all hell seemed to break loose as the enemy advancing down the west side of the road walked right into the field of fire of Corporal Thomas Burke's section. They held their fire until the enemy was within a few feet and then hit them with everything they had. The Germans were caught completely by surprise and scattered in all directions as the rest of Lieutenant Peterson's men joined in the firefight. Sergeant Otis Sampson was in command of the mortar section, and he recalled:

"We moved the mortar continuously so as not to give Jerry a target. The rifle squads were doing a good job – Jerry's fire was falling off. A mortar round landed in the tree over our CP, but there was no damage. A lane ran from the dirt road up over the hill. A paratrooper lay as he had fallen exposed on its crest. The Jerries were trying to move some men from the left of the lane to the right. One man at a time would cross at timed intervals. I judged when another would cross and put a round in the tube. The timing was perfect."

As the American paratroopers began their fighting withdrawal back on Sainte-Mère-Église the Germans yelled after them to come back and fight. Technical Sergeant Robert Niland and two other paratroopers volunteered to stay behind to cover the withdrawal with his machine gun while Lieutenant Turnbull's men withdrew from Neuville-au-Plain. He

was killed while manning his machine gun, the two other paratroopers survived. Robert Niland was one of the four brothers on whom the Saving Private Ryan story was based.



Technical Sergeant Robert Niland.

Of the forty-three men of Lieutenant Turner Turnbull's force that had entered Neuville-au-Plain, only sixteen withdrew into Sainte-Mère-Église late in the afternoon of D-Day. The remainder were either dead or too badly wounded to move. Corporal James Kelly, Company D 505th's medic, remained with them. They were soon taken prisoner but subsequently set free when VII Corps captured Cherbourg on 26 June 1944.

The actions of Lieutenant Turner Turnbull's 3rd Platoon Company D 505th had given the defenders of Sainte-Mère-Église enough time to establish themselves.



Lieutenant Turner Brashears Turnbull.

Lieutenant Turnbull, a half-Native American of the Choctaw Tribe, enlisted in the Oklahoma National Guard in 1939. He subsequently volunteered to join the airborne and, in the invasion of Sicily he survived when his plane crashed and, later, sustained a life-threatening gunshot wound to the abdomen. This alone could have earned him his ticket home,

but Lieutenant Turnbull instead chose to rejoin his men for the D-Day invasion. Unfortunately, Lieutenant Turnbull was killed by indirect fire in Sainte-Mère-Église on the morning of 7 June 1944.

First Lieutenant Turner Brashears Turnbull was awarded the Silver Star for his actions on D-Day. His citation reads:

“The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress July 9, 1918, takes pride in presenting the Silver Star (Posthumously) to First Lieutenant (Infantry) Turner B Turnbull (ASN: 0-1291728), United States Army, for gallantry in action while serving with Company D, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in action against the enemy at Normandy, France, on 7 June 1944.”

By nightfall on D-Day, the position at Sainte-Mère-Église was more stable and although a few snipers had to be dealt with and a few German patrols delayed the free movement of messengers and supplies around the town they did not constitute any significant threat. However, no communication had been established with the 4th Infantry Division and Major General Ridgeway remained out of touch with US VII Corps headquarters.

With D-Day ending Major General Ridgeway reported the situation of the 82nd and their need for reinforcements and combat supplies to the US VII Corps headquarters. But these communications were one way, and he had no means of knowing whether his messages got through. Determined to hold on until reinforcements arrived, the 82nd consolidated their positions in Sainte-Mère-Église. Late in the evening of D-Day, Major General Ridgeway sent Lieutenant Colonel Walter F Winton, assistant G-3 of the 82nd Airborne Division, on patrol in the direction of Beuzeville-au-Plain to establish liaison with the 4th Infantry Division who by now should have been in that area.

As the sun rose on the morning of D+1, 7 June 1944, there was still no communication with higher formation headquarters, nor any sign of the imminent arrival of reinforcements. Although Sainte-Mère-Église had been taken and was being held by the 82nd, a large German force from Infanterie Regiment 795 was holding the ridge south of the town between Fauville and Turqueville. This enemy force was between the 82nd and the 8th Infantry Regiment blocking the N13 south of Sainte-Mère-Église and preventing reinforcements from arriving from the south.

Elements from Infanterie Regiment 1058 had assembled north of Sainte-Mère-Église, and this second German force was threatening the 82nd from that direction.

At 08:00 hrs on D+1, 7 June 1944, Lieutenant Colonel Winton returned to the 82nd command post bringing assurance of relief by the 8th Infantry Regiment. Colonel Edson D Raff with the advance elements of Task Force HOWELL, a seaborne contingent attached to the 82nd, was with Lieutenant Colonel Winton when he returned to the command post. Plans were made to eliminate the two German forces threatening Sainte-Mère-Église and secure the town on D+1. This became the main task occupying the 505th and 8th Infantry Regiment for the rest of that day.

During the morning, the 8th Infantry Regiment attacked the Germans on the high ground between Fauville and Turqueville, intent on establishing liaison with the 82nd at Sainte-Mère-Église. The 1st Battalion 8th Infantry was the initial battalion to get underway and succeeded in seizing the eastern tip of the German-held ridge. Enemy resistance

within Turqueville itself was initially strong and the 1/8 failed to secure the village with their first assault. However, when their second assault went in the German defenders surrendered and the battalion took 174 prisoners.



The situation at Sainte-Mère-Église on D+1, 7 June 1944. [© Ian R Gumm, 2024]

The surrender of the Germans in Turqueville can be viewed as a quirk of fate and was largely due to Lieutenant Colonel Gorlan A Bryant, the Deputy Chief of Staff 4th Infantry Division, and Sergeant John Svoncheck. They had left their Divisional headquarters on the morning of 7 June 1944 intending to visit the 22nd Infantry Regiment near Saint Germain-de-Varreville. At Audouville they had made a wrong turn and drove west instead of north into the enemy positions at Ecoqueneauville, a small village about 1,000 yards to the southwest of Turqueville. Here they were taken prisoner and subsequently moved to a house south of Turqueville where they were held with 23 American Airborne troops who had been captured on D-Day. Sergeant Svoncheck, who spoke Russian, discovered that the Germans defending the area were the Georgians of Infanterie Regiment 795 and he persuaded some of them to surrender, and about 75 gave up. The German officer commanding at Turqueville realising his position was now untenable ordered the remainder to surrender to the 1/8 as they closed on Turqueville a second time.

Whilst the 1/8 was busy at Turqueville, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions 8th Infantry attacked further to the west along the ridge. The 2/8 moved on Ecoqueneauville whilst the 3/8 advanced astride the N13. Both battalions were checked by heavy machine guns and artillery fire during their initial assaults when they reached the line of a stream in front of the German positions on the ridge. The 3/8 was held up at Fauville and became embroiled in one of the fiercest battles on D+1, while the 2/8 pushed on with their assault at Ecoqueneauville. The push by the 2/8 resulted in the capture of Ecoqueneauville, and once it was taken the resistance to the assault of the 3/8 at Fauville collapsed and both battalions continued their advance towards Sainte-Mère-Église. Enemy interdiction of the road south of the town made the 2/8 circle to the east; they subsequently approached Sainte-Mère-Église from the northeast to finally meet up with the defending American paratroopers.

While the attacks by the 8th Infantry Regiment were taking place, an American tank force was despatched by Major General Collins to augment the light forces holding Sainte-Mère-Église. These tanks came from Lieutenant Colonel Clarence G Hupfer's 746th Tank Battalion, which was in reserve at Reuville.

As the tanks of the 746th Tank Battalion approached Sainte-Mère-Église they turned north to counter the armoured threat from Infanterie Regiment 1058. Within a few hundred yards of doing so, they were engaged by a German armoured column of five tanks plus a few other vehicles. The two opposing forces were about 300 yards apart and with both being in columns only the lead vehicle of each unit could effectively engage the other.

Lieutenant Houston Payne commanded the lead tank of the American column and scored the first hit, knocking out the lead tank of the German column and setting it on fire. He swiftly despatched an anti-tank gun located on the side of the road and then destroyed a second enemy tank before his ammunition ran out. With his ammunition expended Lieutenant Payne got his tank out of the way to permit the second tank of the American column to come forward.

With his lead tanks being engaged by the enemy, Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer reconnoitred a route to attack the German armoured column from its flank. He found a trail that led straight north for a mile to the right of the N13 before joining a secondary road that led to Neuville-au-Plain from the east. He sent part of his tank force along this route, and they

entered Neuville-au-Plain capturing 60 Germans and liberating 19 American paratroopers that had been captured the previous day. The 746th Tank Battalion destroyed two German tanks on route, for two of their own.



A Sherman of Company A, 746th Tank Battalion later in the Battle of Normandy.

This flanking movement by the 746th Tank Battalion's Shermans and the capture of Neuville-au-Plain caused the German armoured column to withdraw northwards as their position became untenable. The tanks of the 746th Tank Battalion stayed in the area until 21:00 hrs before withdrawing to Sainte-Mère-Église as they lacked the necessary infantry support to hold the Neuville-au-Plain throughout the night.

While this tank battle was going on east of the N13, the Germans located north of Sainte-Mère-Église advanced against the 2/8 and 2/505 who had just established liaison. These enemy forces were also from Infanterie Regiment 1058 and their main position was to the west of the N13 about halfway between Sainte-Mère-Église and Neuville-au-Plain.

On being engaged by the enemy Lieutenant Colonel Carlton O MacNeely and Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort quickly planned a coordinated attack against the German position. The 2/505 moved northwards astride the N13 with tanks

in close support, whilst the 2/8 crossed the road behind the 2/505 to attack on its left. By the end of D+1, 7 June 1944, these two battalions had killed or captured some 300 Germans and cleared the enemy from the position to the west of the N13.



A Marder III from Panzerjäger Kompany 243 knocked out in Neuville-au-Plain.

For their actions at Sainte-Mère-Église on 6 June 1944 Lieutenant Colonel Edward Krause and Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Vandervoort were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Lieutenant Colonel Krause's citation reads:

“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 Lieutenant Colonel Edward C. Krause (ASN: 0-375296), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving as Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in action against enemy forces on 6 and 7 June 1944, in France. Lieutenant Colonel Krause shortly after landing on "D" Day, assembled a composite group of parachutists and led a night assault on the town of Sainte-Mère-Église, France, and successfully destroyed the immediate enemy resistance. However, the enemy immediately counter-attacked with numerically superior numbers supported by tanks and artillery. In these early counterattacks, Lieutenant Colonel Krause received a shrapnel wound and a bullet wound but refused to be evacuated. During these heavy enemy attacks, Lieutenant Colonel Krause, continually disregarding his own safety, moved about from point to point directing the defence. He later received a severe wound in the leg but again insisted on remaining with his troops and continued to direct the defence through his subordinate officers. Lieutenant Colonel Krause's inspiring leadership, 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.”

Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort's citation reads:

“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 Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin H Vandervoort (ASN: 0-22715), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving as Commanding Officer of the 2d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, in action against enemy forces on 6 June 1944, near Sainte-Mère-Église, France. Though he sustained a broken foot in his jump, Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort refused to be evacuated. He immediately, despite his painful injury, assembled and organized all the available troops from his battalion and personally led it through enemy-held territory to the initial objective. With only first-aid treatment for his broken foot, he remained with his unit and directed the defence of its newly won position against a vastly superior enemy. With complete disregard for his own safety, he continually moved about the foremost elements, subjecting himself to intense enemy rifle, machine gun and artillery fire. Inspired by his presence, his men successfully withstood repeated enemy counterattacks. Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort's outstanding leadership, 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.”

It is not clear if the German armoured column was meant to be supporting the German positions west of the N13; what is clear is that when they were attacked their actions appeared to be uncoordinated. Whatever their intentions, the actions of the American forces effectively neutralised their threat and relieved the pressure on Sainte-Mère-Église from the north. By the evening of 7 June 1944, Sainte-Mère-Église was secure and Major General Ridgeway could now concentrate the efforts of the 82nd Airborne Division on the situation along the River Merderet.

Look Forward

In Part Ten of D-Day, 6 June 1944 – The Greatest Seaborne Invasion The World Has Ever Known, I look at the situation that developed along the River Merderet on D-Day.

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