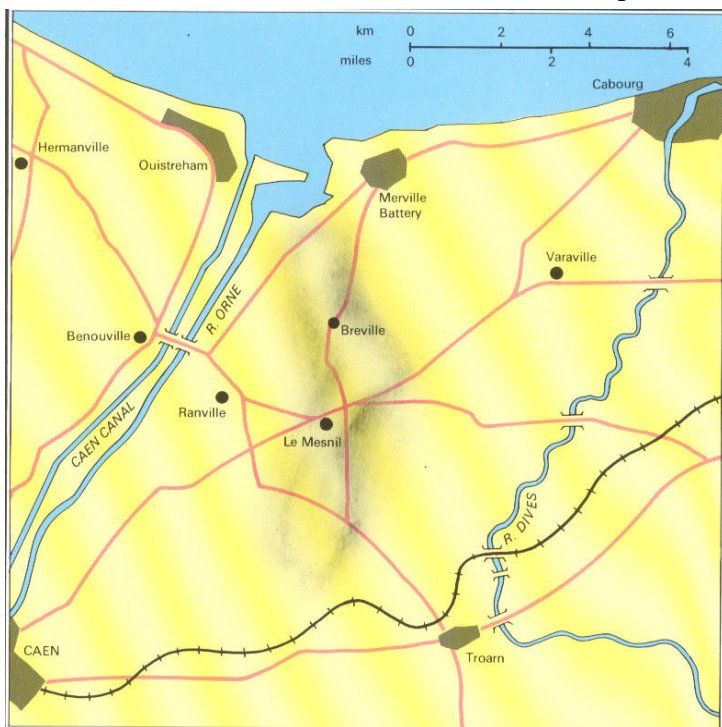


6TH AIRBORNE DIVISION'S EPIC BATTLE TO PROTECT THE SEABORNE INVASION

SEVENTY years on and the 6th Airborne Division's assault into Normandy on D-Day, to protect the Allied seaborne invasion, will be commemorated on 6 June as one of the most successful and momentous airborne operations of the Second World War.

The achievements and exploits in seizing and sealing off the critical eastern flank of the invasion, and in the weeks that followed, are legendary. Despite many difficulties, all the Division's objectives were secured by midday on D-Day. The two-month-long gruelling battle that followed the landings, to hold a key bridgehead for the development of British Second Army operations, stands in military history as a lesson in resolution and endurance. The bridgehead eventually formed a hinge on which the Allied armies swung in their advance to the Seine, in the final push for the liberation of France.

The airborne assault started with the capture of bridges over the Caen Canal and River Orne by



gliderborne troops just after midnight on 5/6 June, followed 30 minutes later by the landing of over 4000 paratroops to establish a bridgehead covering 15 square miles to the east of the waterways. Another key objective was Merville coastal battery which had to be silenced before the seaborne 1st British Corps landings took place on "Sword Beach" west of the waterways and Ouireham. Bridges along the flooded River Dives valley fronting the bridgehead were blown while the 3rd and 5th Parachute Brigades took up blocking positions on the eastern and southern flanks against counter attacks by crack mechanised German divisions.

Division Headquarters arrived in gliders at 0330hrs, bringing anti-tank guns, engineering equipment, ammunition and vehicles. Later in the day 4000 more troops with support weapons arrived in gliders, and 2600 commandos by sea,

to reinforce the bridgehead. Other combat and support units with vehicles and equipment came by sea in succeeding days, landing at the artificial "Mulberry Harbour" at Arromanches.

The Division's lodgement was not only to protect the seaborne invasion from counter attacks from the east, where the 15th German Army was massed, but also to provide a firm base for the launching of operations by armoured divisions to the east and south of the city of Caen. The battle to hold the bridgehead saw some of the fiercest fighting of WW2, often in hand-to-hand combat. Casualties, including those of the commandos, totalled nearly 5000 killed, wounded and missing in action.

After the war, General Sir John Crocker, who had commanded the seaborne 1st British Corps, wrote of the 6th Airborne Division: "Few can have had a task demanding greater skill, courage and determination than that of holding, for those long critical weeks, that grimly contested area upon which the whole British Second Army landing was hinged. Failure here was fraught with dire consequences which would have affected the outcome of the entire vast enterprise. At best, failure would have meant delay and grave loss. Conceivably, it would have brought widespread disaster. The story of the success of 6th Airborne Division... is one of individual bravery and devotion welded into a great battle-winning team by inspiring leadership.It is an unsurpassed military epic."

CAPTURE OF THE CANAL AND ORNE BRIDGES

The bridges over the Caen Canal and River Orne were the first objectives of the entire Normandy invasion. Situated in parallel 400 yards apart, they were strategically important being the only crossings of the waterways stretching eight miles between Caen and the sea. They were gateways for German armoured counter-attacks into the flanks of the Allied beach landings. Their capture was achieved brilliantly by coup-de-main gliderborne assault 20 minutes after midnight on 5/6 June by D Company Group, 2nd Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, commanded by Major John Howard.

Six Horsa gliders carrying the troops were cast off from Halifax tug aircraft over the coast, six miles from their targets. Three gliders landed with great precision very close to the Canal Bridge. The pilots of the Glider Pilot Regiment were later said to have performed one of the finest feats of airmanship of the war. Troops in two of the other gliders captured the Orne Bridge, but the sixth glider was cast off at the wrong point and ended up on the banks of the River Dives.

The coup-de-main troops were soon hard-pressed by counter attacks from the west, but managed to hold them off until taken under command by the 7th (Light Infantry) Parachute Battalion as planned. The paratroops, delayed by a widely scattered drop in the Ranville area and further afield, arrived by 0300hrs and dug in around Bénouville and Le Port to defend the bridges.

The battalion was under continuous armoured and infantry attacks for 20 hours, and suffered heavy casualties before being relieved after midnight on 6/7 June by leading elements of the seaborne British 3rd Infantry Division.

Earlier on D-Day, the 1st Special Service Commando Brigade, led by Brigadier Lord Lovat, which had landed on Sword Beach, linked up with the 7th Battalion to come under command of the Airborne Division. They crossed the bridges at 1300hrs under sniper fire on their way to operate in the northern part of the bridgehead.

The Canal Bridge was later named “Pegasus”, and the Orne Bridge “Horsa”.

MERVILLE BATTERY

The fortified Merville coastal battery was part of Field Marshal Rommel’s “Atlantic Wall” defences, which he had personally inspected. Its guns, which threatened Sword Beach, had to be neutralised before the landings of the 3rd Infantry Division took place at 0730hrs.

The attack on the battery by the 9th Parachute Battalion, commanded by Lt Colonel Terence Otway, was achieved with outstanding bravery in the face of great difficulties. The assault by parachute and glider had been carefully planned and rehearsed in England for a force of 700 men. But in the event, the battalion group was scattered over many miles when dropped at 0050hrs. The gliders did not arrive on target, and only 150 troops were available for the assault at 0430hrs.

With only one medium machine gun, no mortars, no mine detectors, and with only a minimum of explosives, the paratroops breached the extensive defensive works and over-ran the German garrison in a fierce firefight. Many Germans were killed or wounded, and 22 were taken prisoner. Of the paratroops, only 70 were able to move on to their next task, the rest having been killed or wounded.

Merville Battery is one of the battle honours of The Parachute Regiment, and today’s 16 Air Assault Brigade’s barracks in Colchester are named after it.

SOUTHERN FLANK BATTLES

Like other units of the 5th Parachute Brigade, the 13th (Lancashire) Battalion was widely dispersed on being dropped at 0050hrs, but by 0230hrs had captured Ranville, the first village to be liberated in France.

The 13th Battalion and the 12th (Yorkshire) Battalion prepared defensive positions along the line Ranville - Bas de Ranville. "A" Company of the 13th Battalion, with engineers, endured heavy mortar fire while clearing poles ("Rommel's Asparagus") from the Ranville landing zone in preparation for the arrival of gliders. For several hours the two battalions fought off determined counter attacks by 125 Panzer Grenadier Regiment with self-propelled guns. By the end of the day casualties among the paratroops were 50 killed and 420 wounded, the 12th Battalion, bearing the brunt of the attacks, losing half its strength.

During the evening of 6 June the 6th Airlanding Brigade's 1st Battalion Royal Ulster Rifles, the 2nd Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire LI and a company of the 12th Devons, arrived in 350 gliders along with 211 Light Battery RA and the Division's Armoured Recce Regiment, to reinforce the Southern Flank. They were joined on 7 June by the main elements of 12th Battalion Devonshire Regiment, which had landed by sea.

The Airlanding Brigade, in forward positions with anti-tank guns, covered a large crescent of open "killing" ground between Longueval and Herouvillette. It fought off counter attacks by regiments of the 21st Panzer Division over several days. Artillery of the 3rd Infantry Division, positioned on the western side of the Caen Canal, gave supporting fire to help defeat this German offensive. During the night 13/14 June the Brigade was relieved by the 51st Highland Division in preparation for the British Second Army's operations to the east of Caen.

EASTERN FLANK BATTLES

The Eastern Flank of the airborne perimeter was the Division's "vital ground", as it overlooked the whole bridgehead. It was a five-mile wooded ridge, running north to south from Le Plein to near Troarn, very vulnerable to attack and had to be held securely. If its defences broke, the entire Left Flank of the Allied invasion would be opened up. To the east lay the 15th German Army with its threatening panzer divisions.

The 3rd Parachute Brigade held the southern sector of the ridge, and the 1st Special Service Commando Brigade the northern sector. Both brigades were engaged in heavy fighting over many days. .

Just before D-Day, the 3rd Brigade's officers were told by their Commander, Brigadier James Hill: "Do not be daunted if chaos reigns, because it undoubtedly will!"

His words were prophetic. The brigade was widely scattered in the night drop, and less than 30% was in the right place at the start of ground operations.

In the first eight days of fighting the 3rd Brigade suffered very heavy casualties. Key actions were fought by the remnants of the 9th Parachute Battalion at Chateau St Côme; by the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion at Le Mesnil crossroads; and by the 8th Parachute Battalion in the Bois de Bavent.

LE MESNIL CROSSROADS

The 1st Canadian Battalion parachuted onto DZ "V" near Varaville, firstly to destroy two bridges in the northern part of the Dives and then to hold the centre of the 3rd Brigade's ridge defence line in the area of the Le Mesnil crossroads.

Fighting in this area was continuous over many days. On 8 June the enemy launched a determined attack with elements of the 346 Panzer Grenadier Division, supported by self-propelled guns. The Canadians broke up the leading attacks with mortar fire. There were heavy losses on both sides. Although out-numbered, the Canadians launched counter attacks, some with bayonet charges, and won the battle.

THE BOIS DE BAVENT

The 8th Battalion parachuted onto DZ “K” near Trouffreville, tasked with engineers to destroy two bridges over the River Dives and then to hold the southern-most part of the Eastern Flank in the Bavent forest area. Not all went smoothly.



A detachment of 3 Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers, led by Major Tim Roseveare, was dropped on the wrong DZ, and had to commandeer a vehicle, load it with explosives, and race to Troarn to blow the town's bridge over the Dives. In the legendary race, since famously depicted by a military artist, the detachment sped down the town's high street, under fire, to reach its objective. The bridge was blown successfully, and the whole of the River Dives then became an obstacle to German mechanised advances.

In the first few days, the 8th Battalion was under heavy pressure and fought off attacks by panzer grenadier units. Throughout the critical weeks of fighting, the battalion dominated the whole of the Bois de Bavent area by aggressive patrolling by night and day, stopping any incursions. Its commanding officer, Lt Colonel Alastair Pearson, personally led some of these fighting patrols.

Section battle drills using hand grenades became a standard, and favourite, method of clearing enemy infantry incursions through the forests.

BATTLE OF BRÉVILLE

For the first six days there was a gap in the centre of the ridge defences, at Bréville, between the Commando Brigade and the 3rd Parachute Brigade. The Germans occupied the area in force, with a commanding view of most of the airborne bridgehead. From here they were able to direct artillery fire and launch attacks into the bridgehead. One such attack, into and through the landing zone covered in gliders near Ranville, was repulsed at close range by the 13th Parachute Battalion, with the Germans suffering 400 casualties. The 7th Parachute Battalion, supported by tanks of the 13th/18th Hussars, counter-attacked to clear out remaining pockets of the Germans.

The 5th Black Watch was sent to the Division as reinforcements, but their gallant daylight assault to capture Bréville on 11 June met with very heavy mortar fire and failed, with devastating casualties. Bréville, occupying strategically important ground, had to be taken. The Division's only reserve, the 12th Parachute Battalion, at only half strength, was reinforced by a company of the 12th Devons and attacked at 2230hrs on 12 June. They were supported by a tank squadron of 13th/18th Hussars and artillery of the 51st Highland Division. Bréville was captured in a horrendous battle, which set the village on fire, lighting up the night sky, seen for miles around. The paratroops and the Devons together lost 9 officers and 168 troops killed or wounded.

Bréville is now among the battle honours of The Parachute Regiment.

BATTLE OF CHATEAU ST. CÔME

Chateau St. Côme occupied a commanding position on the ridge. After their assault on Merville Battery, the remnants of the 9th Parachute Battalion stubbornly held the Chateau position for six days against attacks and constant shelling.

Because of casualties, and despite being rejoined by troops dropped miles away on D-Day, the battalion was never much more than 270 in strength. On 12 June this small garrison, aided by remnants of the Black Watch from their assault on Bréville the previous day, withstood determined attacks by three infantry battalions supported by tanks and artillery.

At a critical stage in the battle, Brigadier James Hill, although wounded, personally led a company of Canadian paratroops in a counter attack which saved the ridge defence line from being broken.

The following day, the 2nd Battalion Ox and Bucks relieved the 9th Battalion at the Chateau. Other units of the Airlanding Brigade, having been relieved on the embattled Southern Flank, also reinforced the ridge, as did units of the 5th Parachute Brigade over succeeding weeks.

SUPPORT AND RE-SUPPLY

Throughout the whole of operations, the Division's artillery, armoured recce and engineer units, along with the service units, worked ceaselessly in support of the battalions. The collection of casualties, their treatment in main dressing stations and their evacuation to field hospitals in the 3rd Infantry Division area, was a constant activity for the parachute and airlanding field ambulances. Re-supply was conducted by road, and by air in the early days.

The RAF's 38 and 46 Groups, which had dropped the parachute brigades on D-Day and towed the gliders to their LZs, carried out sorties to drop combat supplies on DZ "N" at Ranville. Five planes, their crews and teams of despatchers, were lost to anti-aircraft fire in the approaches.

BREAK OUT AND ADVANCE

After two months of holding the bridgehead, the 6th Airborne Division broke out on 17 August and conducted a fighting advance on foot to the Seine, as the left flank guard of the advancing Allied armies. As the ground to be covered included marshland and rivers, the operation was named "Paddle".

The Airborne Reconnaissance Regiment was of great assistance in providing information on enemy positions and maintaining links with the advancing 49th British Infantry Division to the south. The Germans were prepared and fought aggressive delaying actions. Roads were blocked, bridges destroyed, culverts demolished and mines were on the routes of march. Key actions took place in crossing the Dives and again at Putôt-en-Auge, Touques, Pont l'Evêque, Beuzeville and Pont Audemer. It was a tough slog, the enemy having to be dislodged and literally pushed back to the Seine.

The Division, setting a cracking pace for the Allies, completed the advance in 10 days, liberating more than 400 square miles of Normandy and capturing over 1000 prisoners.

The Division sailed for England from the Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches in September.

CASUALTIES

	Killed	Missing in Action	Wounded	Total
6 th (ABN) Armoured Regt, RAC	13	1	32	46
Royal Artillery	52	6	110	168
Royal Engineers	40	4	92	136
22 Indep Parachute Company	10	-	14	24
Royal Corps of Signals	21	4	78	103
Royal Army Medical Corps	23	1	49	73
Royal Army Ordnance Corps	1	-	-	1
Royal Army Service Corps	34	10	69	113
Royal Electrical & Mechanical Engineers	4	1	11	16
Corps of Royal Military Police	6	-	4	10
Servicemen of different attachments	19	-	27	46
Glider Pilot Regiment	34	5	10	49
 3rd PARACHUTE BRIGADE				
8 th Parachute Battalion	110	7	236	353
9 th Parachute Battalion	77	17	167	261
1 st Canadian Parachute Battalion	77	6	162	245
Brigade Headquarters	-	5	26	31
Brigade Total	264	35	591	890
 5th PARACHUTE BRIGADE				
7 th Parachute Battalion	119	9	246	374
12 th Parachute Battalion	110	5	410	525
13 th Parachute Battalion	85	12	236	333
Brigade Headquarters	1	-	22	23
Brigade Total	315	26	914	1255
 6^H AIRLANDING BRIGADE				
12 th Battalion, Devonshire Regt.	65	1	236	302
2 nd Battalion, Oxf & Bucks LI	80	2	257	339
1 st Battalion, Royal Ulster Rifles	75	6	235	316
Brigade Headquarters	-	-	14	14
Brigade Total	220	9	742	971
DIVISIONAL TOTAL	1056	102	2743	3901
1ST SPECIAL SERVICE BRIGADE			Total Casualties	967