

## TIMELINE OF...

# D-DAY: THE AIRBORNE INVASION

Allied paratroopers jump into Normandy in audacious operations on 6 June 1944, before fighting fierce battles to secure the landing beaches



### EXERCISE MUSH

“Mush” is an enormous British airborne training exercise, which is spread over three days across Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. The vast majority of the paratroopers are unaware that this is the preparation for Operation Overlord.

April 1944

12.20am, 6 June 1944

12.20am, 6 June 1944

12.25am, 6 June 1944

### 1. OPERATION TONGA

“Tonga” is the codename for the airborne operation undertaken by the British 6th Airborne Division. Paratroopers land on the eastern flank of the invasion area near Caen. Objectives include the capture of two bridges as well as destroying the Merville Gun Battery.



Four lieutenants of 22nd Independent Parachute Company synchronise their watches at 11pm, 5 June 1944 at RAF Harwell, Oxfordshire

### 2. MISSION ALBANY

Albany is a night combat assault by US 101st Airborne Division. It sees 6,928 paratroopers jump from 443 C-47 Skytrain aircraft over 39 square kilometres of the southeast corner of the Contentin Peninsula. The operation occurs hours ahead of the beach landings but the paratroopers are scattered by bad weather and German ground fire. Nevertheless, 101st achieves most of its objectives.



General Dwight D. Eisenhower speaks to men of 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment at Greenham Common Airfield, 8.30pm, 5 June 1944

The crossing over the Caen Canal is better known as “Pegasus Bridge”. This pictured bascule bridge is a 1994 replica of the original, which is housed in the Pegasus Museum



### 3. OPERATION DEADSTICK

British paratroopers must capture two strategically important bridges over the Caen Canal and Orne River. Both bridges are captured in a successful operation. 6th Airborne Division can now rejoin the landing Allied armies while German armoured units are hampered in attacking the beaches.



British paratroopers are finally told about the invasion of France after "Mush". In this picture Major General Richard Gale addresses his men, 4 June 1944



American paratroopers attached to the static line just prior to jumping over Normandy

### MISSION DETROIT

Detroit is a glider airlift for 82nd Airborne that includes equipment reinforcements including artillery, light vehicles, weapons and explosives. 52 Waco gliders are used but only half of the equipment is operational upon arrival. One exception is the delivered 57mm guns that are an added bonus for the paratroopers.

1.20am, 6 June 1944

1.20am, 6 June 1944

2.50am, 6 June 1944



Before Operation Market Garden, the American airdrops into Normandy were the largest airborne assault in the history of warfare

### 4. MISSION BOSTON

Like Albany, Boston is a night assault before the landings but conducted by US 82nd Airborne Division. 6,420 paratroopers in almost 370 Skytrains jump over ten square kilometres on either side of the Merderet River. Some parachute regiments entirely miss their drop zones but 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment captures Sainte-Mère-Église, which is essential to 82nd's success.



### 5. BATTLE OF MERVILLE GUN BATTERY

This German battery threatens the British landings at Sword Beach. 9th Parachute Battalion is assigned to destroy it but their descent is dispersed over a large area. Only 150 paratroopers out of 600 are able to attack but the battery is captured. Attempts to disable the guns are only partially successful and when the British withdraw the Germans put two of the guns back into action.

An aerial view of the battery that shows the damage caused by an Allied bombing raid in May 1944



**US 1ST ARMY**  
BRADLEY

**VII CORPS**  
COLLINS

**V CORPS**  
GEROW

**4TH INFANTRY DIVISION**

**1ST INFANTRY DIVISION**

**29TH INFANTRY DIVISION**

**UTAH**

**OMAHA**

**709TH INFANTRY DIVISION**

**352ND INFANTRY DIVISION**

**LXXXIV CORPS**

**SAINT-LÔ**

**CAUMONT**

- Ground captured and held by midnight, June 6 1944
  - Areas flooded by German defenders
  - German strongpoints
  - Allied warships
- 0 2 10  
KILOMETRES

# BRITISH 2ND ARMY DEMPSEY

  
**XXX CORPS**  
BUCKNALL

   
**I CORPS**  
CROCKER

**50TH INFRANTRY DIVISION**

**3RD CDN. INFRANTRY DIVISION**

**3RD INFRANTRY DIVISION**

**WESTERN TASK FORCE**

**EASTERN TASK FORCE**

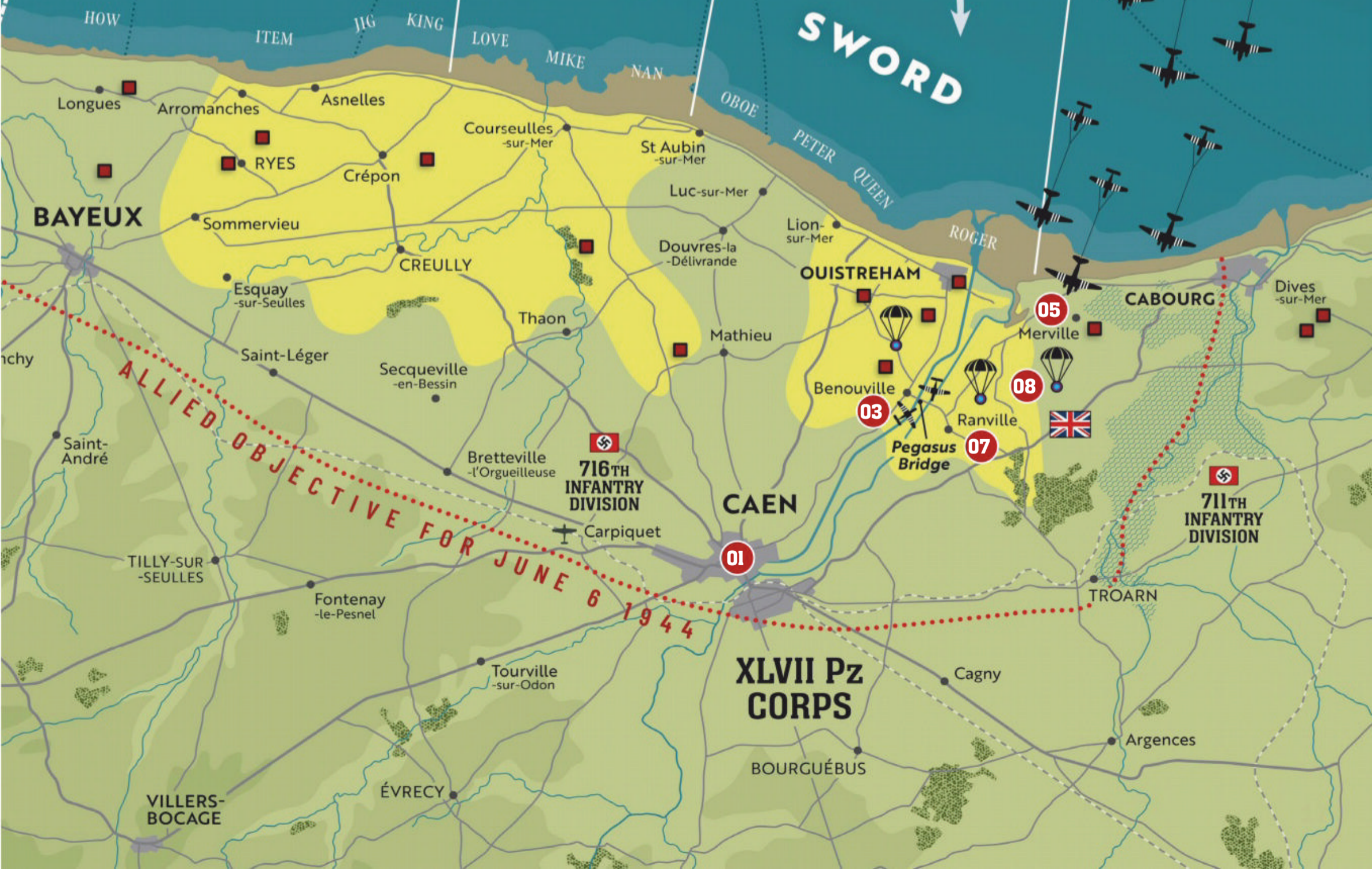
SHIPPING LANES CLEARED OF ENEMY MINES

RANGE OF GERMAN COASTAL ARTILLERY

**GOLD**

**JUNO**

**SWORD**



**BAYEUX**

**CAEN**

**CABOURG**

**XLVII Pz CORPS**

**716TH INFRANTRY DIVISION**

**711TH INFRANTRY DIVISION**

**OUISTREHAM**

**Pegasus Bridge**

**ROGER**

**TILLY-SUR-SEULLES**

**VILLERS-BOCAGE**

**Fontenay-le-Pesnel**

**Tourville-sur-Odon**

**BOURGUÉBUS**

**Cagny**

**Argences**

**TROARN**

**Dives-sur-Mer**

**St Aubin-sur-Mer**

**Luc-sur-Mer**

**Douvres-la-Délivrande**

**Mathieu**

**Thaon**

**Secqueville-en-Bessin**

**Saint-Léger**

**Esquay-sur-Seulles**

**CREULLY**

**Sommervieu**

**RYES**

**Arromanches**

**Longues**

**Courseulles-sur-Mer**

**Asnelles**

**ITEM**

**JIG**

**LOVE**

**HOW**

**NAN**

**MIKE**

**LOVE**

**KING**

**JIG**

**ITEM**

**EMERALD**

**AJAX**

**ORION**

**ARROMAND**

**ANCON**

**LARGS**

**SCYLLA**

**DANAE**

**FROBISHER**

**DRAGON**

**WASPITE**

**RAMILLES**

**ROBERTS**

**MAURITIUS**

**ARETHUSA**

**05**

**08**

**07**

**03**

**01**

**JUGUSTA**

Brigadier General Anthony C. McAuliffe, artillery commander of the 101st Airborne Division, gives his glider pilots last minute instructions before the take-off on D minus 1



**“UNDER THE DIRECTION OF FIRST LIEUTENANT RICHARD WINTERS, 23 PARATROOPERS OVERCOME 60 GERMAN SOLDIERS WITH FOUR MACHINE GUNS”**

4.00am, 6 June 1944

## MISSION CHICAGO

Elements of 101st Airborne conduct a pre-dawn glider assault to reinforce Mission Albany. Dense cloud and fog means that successfully descending onto landing zones is difficult. Nevertheless, most equipment transported by glider is delivered to the rest of the division.



Paratroopers landing in France, 1944

8.30am, 6 June 1944

## 6. BRÉCOURT MANOR ASSAULT

“Easy Company” of 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne disable a battery of four German howitzers. Under the direction of First Lieutenant Richard Winters, 23 paratroopers overcome 60 German soldiers with four machine guns. 20 Germans are killed and 12 are captured while the Americans suffer losses of four killed and two wounded.



The memorial at Brécourt Manor. This engagement has since been lauded as a classic example of small-unit tactics that can overcome a larger enemy force

9.00pm, 6 June 1944

## 7. OPERATION MALLARD

Glider infantry and divisional troops are airlifted to reinforce 6th Airborne Division on the left flank of the British invasion beaches. Two landing zones ‘N’ and ‘W’ are used and 246 out of 256 gliders arrive safely.



Horsa gliders litter Landing Zone ‘N’ close to the Ranville-Salanelles road, 7 June 1944

## BATTLE OF CHERBOURG

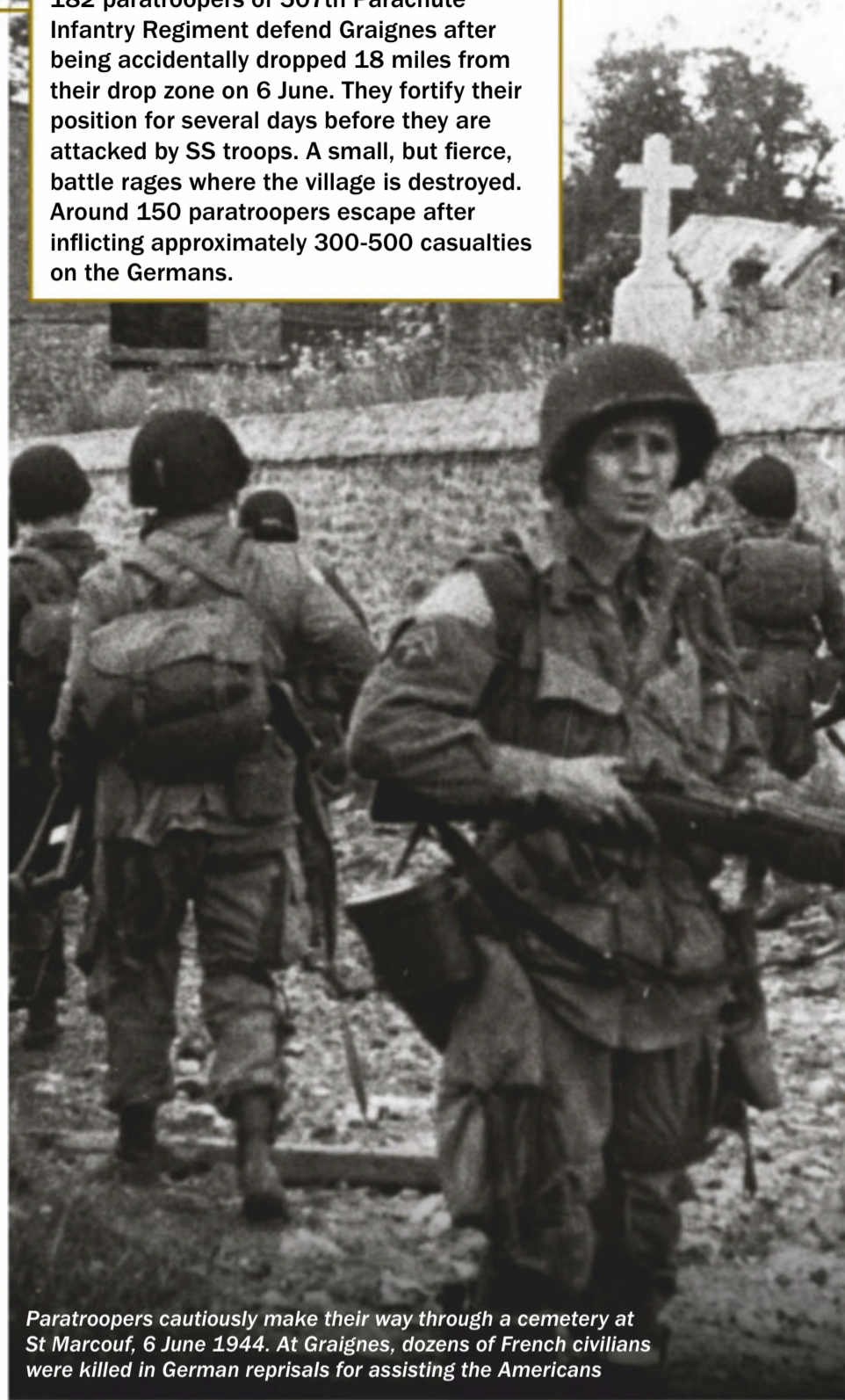
The landing of 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions enables US infantrymen to isolate the fortified port from Utah Beach. Starting from 6 June, the paratroopers are able to secure most of the routes on the Contentin Peninsula although Cherbourg is not captured until 30 June.



American soldiers march away German prisoners following the fall of Cherbourg

## 9. BATTLE OF GRAIGNES

182 paratroopers of 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment defend Graignes after being accidentally dropped 18 miles from their drop zone on 6 June. They fortify their position for several days before they are attacked by SS troops. A small, but fierce, battle rages where the village is destroyed. Around 150 paratroopers escape after inflicting approximately 300-500 casualties on the Germans.



Paratroopers cautiously make their way through a cemetery at St Marcouf, 6 June 1944. At Graignes, dozens of French civilians were killed in German reprisals for assisting the Americans

Images: Alamy, Battlefield Design, Getty

9.10pm, 6 June 1944      6 June 1944      7-13 June 1944      10-12 June 1944      10-14 June 1944

## MISSION ELMIRA

Elmira is the final glider assault of 82nd Airborne on D-Day. Reinforcements are flown in to isolated paratroopers south of Sainte-Mère-Église but the landing zones are compartmentalised in orchards and fields with trees and high hedges. Ground fighting is visible from the air and 183 paratroopers and pilots are killed. Despite the problems, the American air superiority saps German morale.



C-47 Skytrains cut loose their Waco CG-4 gliders during Mission Elmira

## 8. BATTLE OF BRÉVILLE

Elements of 6th Airborne Division attack German positions in order to secure the Allied beachheads. During a battle that lasts several days, the paratroopers commit their only reserves and are supported by tanks. Bréville is finally captured and the Germans never seriously attempt to break through British airborne lines again.



6th Airborne paratroopers and commandos pictured after a link up between the two forces. At Bréville, all British officers or sergeant majors become casualties

## 10. BATTLE OF CARENTAN

Carentan is located in a pivotal position between Omaha and Utah. It takes 101st Airborne two days to reach the town from 8 June because of limited approaches. The battle begins on 10 June with the Germans abandoning Carentan two days later. 101st and American tanks then repulse a counterattack before the position is secured along with the beaches.



Paratroopers move through a field at Carentan while passing members of their own unit who have been killed by German snipers, 14 June 1944

# ALLIED AIRBORNE HEROES

Allied airborne forces were amply manned on D-Day by energetic, visionary and courageous commanders as well as a future film star

## SIR RICHARD GALE

THE "BLUFF" BUT SUCCESSFUL COMMANDER OF 6TH AIRBORNE DIVISION  
1896-1982 MAJOR GENERAL UNITED KINGDOM

Gale joined the British Army at the outbreak of WWI and was commissioned as an officer in 1915. He saw heavy action the Western Front in machine gun companies during the battles of the Somme and Passchendaele and was awarded the Military Cross in early 1918. Gale remained in the army throughout the interwar period but, despite his heroic war record, he was only a major by December 1938.

Nevertheless, Gale was known as a "strong personality and leader with plenty of ambition" and he was promoted at the direction of Winston Churchill to command 1st Parachute Brigade in 1941.

Although he was physically unsuited to parachuting, Gale was popular with his men and British airborne services were expanded threefold. In April 1943 he was promoted to acting major general and commander of the newly formed 6th Airborne Division.

Gale's task was to make 6th Airborne ready for the invasion of

Europe but no whole British paratrooper division had been taken to a battlefield by air at full strength. He shrewdly drew on the technical ideas of his subordinates for planning and training but remained 6th Airborne's binding influence.

Gale was also successful in befriending his American counterparts and although they outnumbered the British paratroopers, 6th Airborne was responsible for the eastern flank of the invasion of Normandy.

The British airborne operations of 6 June 1944 were highly successful and included the capture of Pegasus Bridge, which was achieved with light casualties. Gale himself landed in Normandy by glider at dawn and the success of his paratroopers meant that they stood on an equal footing with the Americans. He was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Service Order and was in command of the entire British Airborne Corps by the end of the war. Gale later replaced Bernard Montgomery as the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Europe for NATO in 1958.

*Nicknamed "Windy", Gale was described as a "tall, bluff, ruddy individual" and "a bit of a buccaneer"*

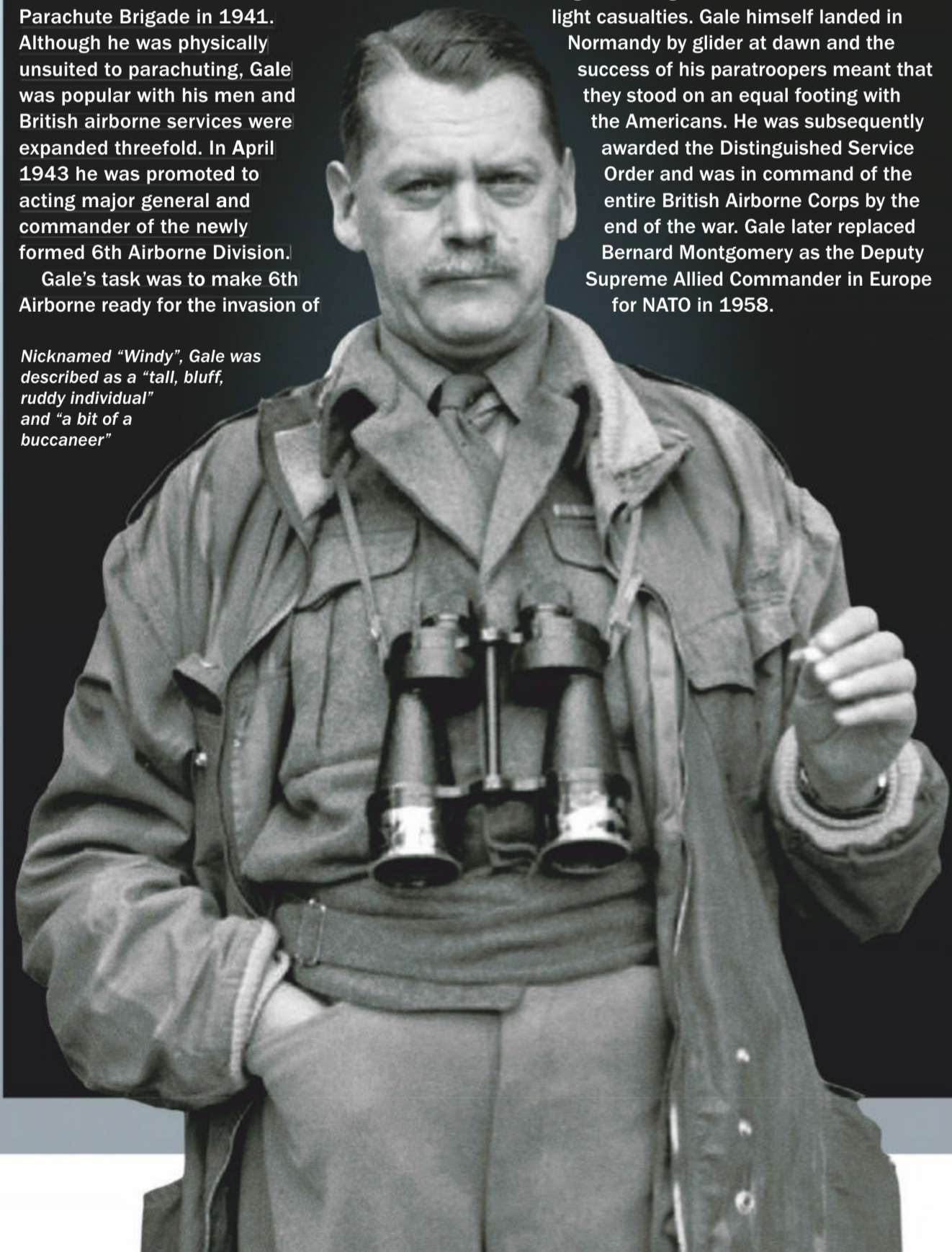
## MAXWELL D. TAYLOR

THE LAST-MINUTE COMMANDER OF US 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION  
1901-87 MAJOR GENERAL UNITED STATES

Taylor trained at West Point and graduated fourth in his class in 1922 before he was commissioned into the US Army Corps of Engineers. Having transferred to staff duties, Taylor was a brigadier general by 1942 and became chief-of-staff for 82nd Airborne Division in Italy. Despite his high rank he was active behind enemy lines and was greatly praised by Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Taylor unexpectedly became the commander of 101st Airborne Division in May 1944 when the first commander of the "Screaming Eagles", William C. Lee, suffered a heart attack. Now a temporary major general, Taylor jumped with his division on 6 June and was the first Allied general to land in France on D-Day. He went on to command 101st during the Battle of Normandy until they left the frontline in late June. Taylor later commanded the division during Operation Market Garden and was also influential in both the Korean and Vietnam wars.

*In 1957, President Eisenhower ordered Taylor to deploy troops from 101st Airborne Division to enforce desegregation at Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas*



**DON PRATT**

THE HIGHEST-RANKING OFFICER TO BE KILLED ON D-DAY  
1892-1944 **BRIGADIER GENERAL** UNITED STATES

A native of Missouri, Pratt enlisted in the US Army in 1917 and was commissioned as a lieutenant. He variously served as an adjutant and instructor during the 1930s before he was appointed chief-of-staff to the 43rd Infantry Division. From August 1942, Pratt was the deputy commander of the newly formed 101st Airborne Division with the rank of brigadier general.

For 6 June 1944, Pratt had originally been assigned to command the reserves of 101st that were going to be landed at sea. However, he received permission to land with a force of Waco Gliders as part of Mission Chicago as a passenger. He was unqualified to jump by parachute and the underside of his glider was reinforced with steel to prevent enemy fire from piercing the aircraft. Pratt was sitting in the front passenger seat of a Jeep but when the glider slammed into trees in Normandy he was pitched forward and died of a broken neck. He was the highest-ranking Allied officer to be killed on D-Day.



Above: Pratt is buried in Arlington National Cemetery and has a 101st Airborne museum named after him at Fort Campbell, Kentucky

**MATTHEW RIDGWAY**

THE MASTERMIND BEHIND THE AMERICAN AIRBORNE CONTRIBUTION ON D-DAY  
1895-1993 **MAJOR GENERAL** UNITED STATES

Ridgway was the son of an American artillery officer and graduated from West Point in 1917. After a spell as the governor-general of the Philippines, Ridgway became an assistant to the staff of George Marshall's US Fourth Army until 1942. In that year he was promoted to command the new 82nd Airborne Division and worked on the planning for the invasion of Sicily in 1943.

Ridgway was instrumental in arguing for two American airborne divisions to take part in Operation Overlord. He jumped with 82nd on 6 June and the division fought for 33 days during the Battle of Normandy. Until it was relieved from front line duty in early July 1944, 82nd suffered 46 per cent casualties. Ridgway went on to command XVIII Airborne Corps, which played a significant role during the Battle of the Bulge and Operation Varsity. He led the corps into Germany but did not escape injury when he was wounded by enemy grenade fragments on 24 March 1945.

President Ronald Reagan said of Ridgway in 1986, "Heroes come when they're needed; great men step forward when courage seems in short supply"

**JOHN HOWARD**

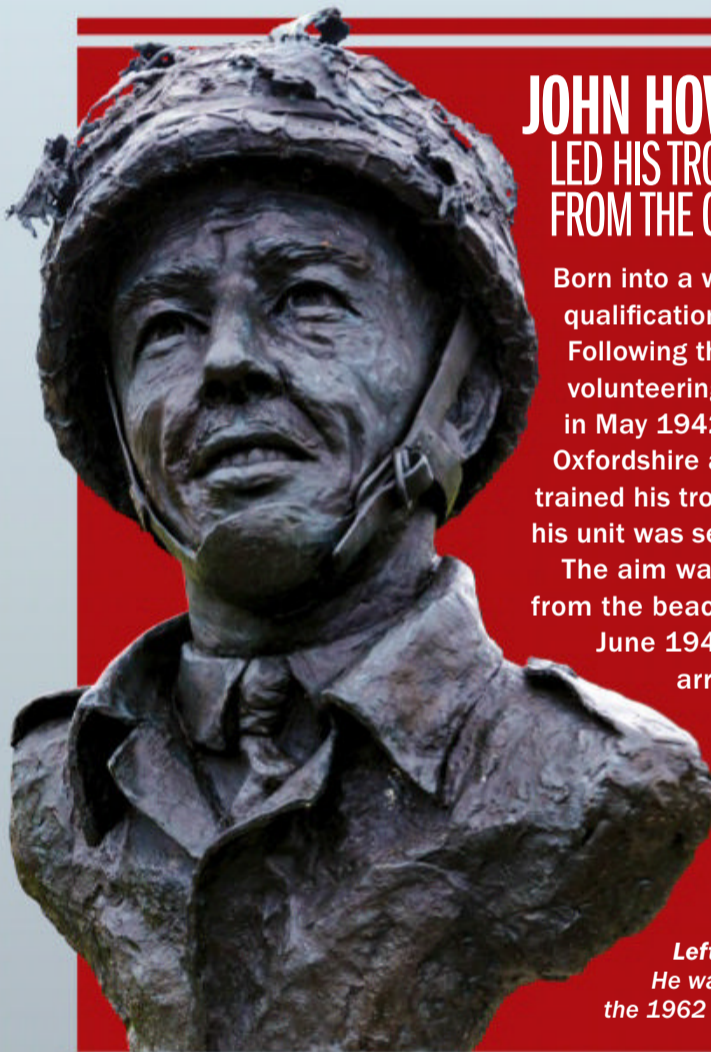
LED HIS TROOPS TO SUCCESSFULLY CAPTURE TWO BRIDGES FROM THE GERMANS 1912-99 **MAJOR** UNITED KINGDOM

Born into a working-class family, Howard left school without qualifications and joined the British Army as a private in 1932.

Following the outbreak of war, he was commissioned before volunteering for airborne services. Howard became a major in May 1942 and commanded D Company, 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. He vigorously trained his troops in gliders, despite being frequently airsick, and his unit was selected to spearhead Operation Deadstick.

The aim was to capture two road bridges five miles inland from the beaches at Ranville and Bénouville. On the night of 5 June 1944, Howard's force flew in six Horsa gliders and arrived on target shortly after midnight. His men rapidly defeated the German defenders and seized the bridges within ten minutes. A German counterattack was fought off before Howard was relieved near midnight on 6 June. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his leadership and courage.

Left: A bronze memorial bust of Howard at Pegasus Bridge. He was portrayed by fellow airborne veteran Richard Todd in the 1962 film *The Longest Day*

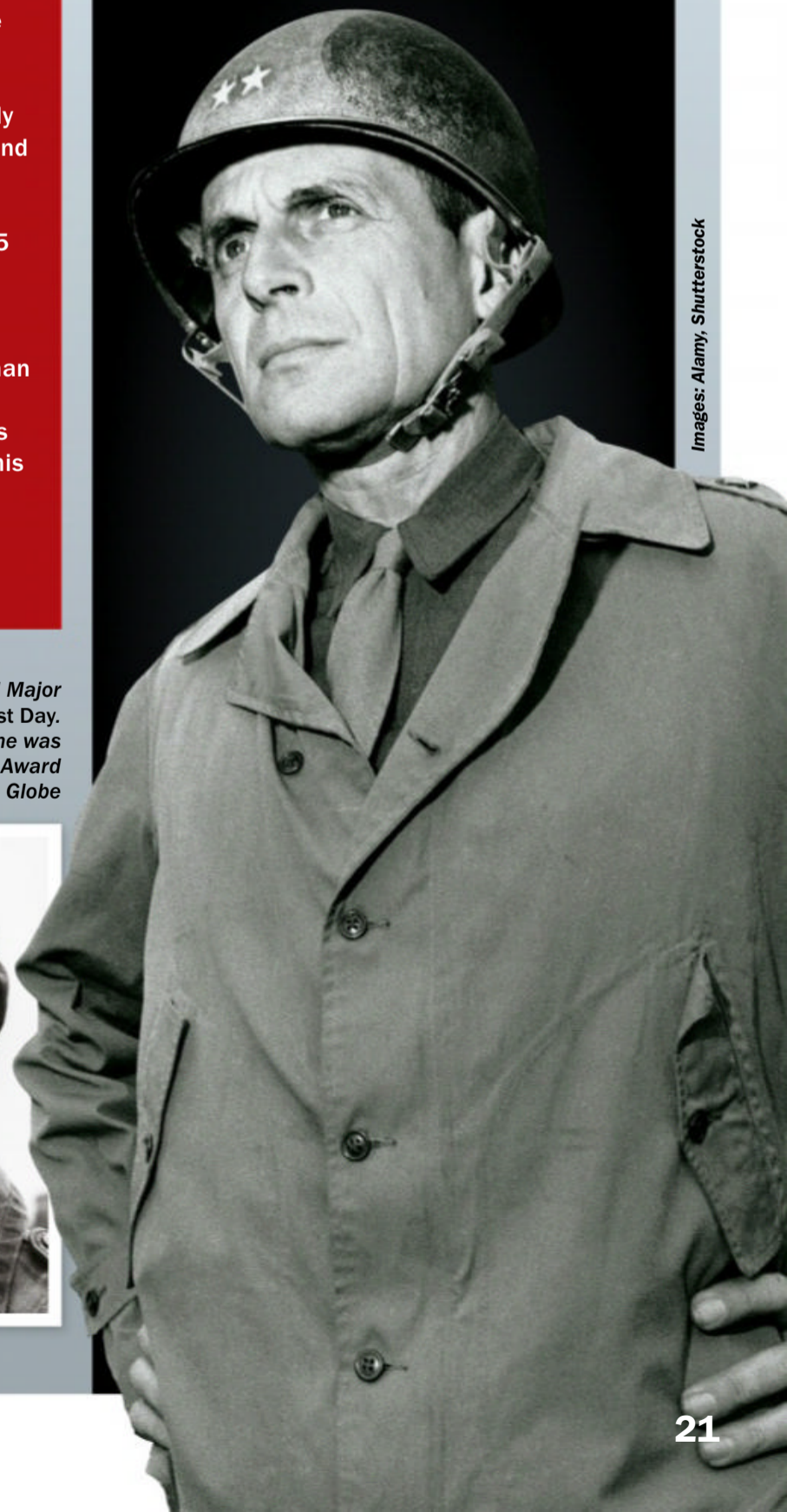
**RICHARD TODD**

STAR OF THE DAM BUSTERS WHO JUMPED INTO NORMANDY  
1919-2009 **CAPTAIN** UNITED KINGDOM

Although he was most famous for portraying Wing Commander Guy Gibson VC in the 1955 film *The Dam Busters*, the Irish-born actor was also a distinguished WWII veteran himself. Todd had already begun his acting career when war broke out but he joined the British Army and was commissioned in 1941. After serving in the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, Todd joined the 7th (Light Infantry) Parachute Battalion. He was one of the first British paratroopers to jump into Normandy at 12.40am on 6 June 1944 and his unit landed after Major John Howard's men had captured the Ranville-Bénouville crossings.

Todd and his men were tasked with preventing German reinforcements from reaching the landing beaches and fought at Pegasus Bridge. They ended up fighting for 21 hours and were not relieved until the following night. Despite his subsequent fame as an actor, Todd later said, "I would prefer to be known for what I achieved on the ground on D-Day."

Below: Todd later portrayed Major John Howard in *The Longest Day*. During his acting career he was nominated for an Academy Award and won a Golden Globe





# PEGASUS BRIDGE

In one of the most daring airborne missions on 5-6 June, six gliders were used to grab two bridges from under the Germans' noses

**T**he British 6th Airborne Division had the job of securing and holding the British left flank. To accomplish this, they were to be dropped by parachute and glider to the northeast of Caen. Their target was the wooded ridge in the Bois de Bavent area, the German battery at Merville and several local bridges. The River Orne and Caen Canal run parallel from Caen to the coast. Between the villages of Bénouville and Ranville the coastal road was carried over the waterways by two bridges.

## Glider assault

Possession of the bridges was crucial because it would permit Montgomery to breakout eastward and stop Rommel bringing up reinforcements.

The planners decided the best way to take these was by employing a glider-borne coup de main ahead of the main parachute drop. To Major John Howard's D Company, 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry fell the honour of being the very first British troops of the invasion force to set foot in Nazi occupied France. "My company was lucky to be selected for what turned out to be a wonderful operation," recalled Howard. "It would be a night landing and they chose gliders to do the job as distinct from parachutists in order to get complete surprise."

## German defences

Howard set about preparing his men. He was greatly aided by an enormous 12-foot model of

the bridges' location produced as a result of RAF reconnaissance flights. British intelligence assessed that they were held by a company of about 50 German soldiers. Most of whom were billeted at Bénouville. Both bridges were rigged for demolition and the Caen Canal bridge was thought to be the most heavily defended. The latter was protected by a pillbox on the eastern side, which was thought to house the detonator for the demolition charges. In addition, the Germans could call on several companies in the area should they be needed.

## The snag

Just before they were about to go, aerial photographs showed that on the landing zones the Germans were erecting long poles

*Men of the 6th Airborne Division getting ready for their D-Day drop*



to deter airborne assault. Howard summoned his leading glider pilot Staff Sergeant Wallwork and showed him this unwelcome development. "That's just what we needed," said Wallwork after examining the photos closely. Howard's heart sank. "You remember that embankment where we end up by the road," continued Wallwork. "Well, we've always been worried about piling into that if we overshot the landing zone." Howard nodded not sure where the conversation was going. "A heavy landing and one grenade going off by accident..." Howard nodded again. "Now these stakes are just right. They're spaced so as to take a foot or two off each wing and pull us up just right."

### Right on target

At 10.00pm on 5 June 1944 as the men loaded their equipment and clambered into their gliders Howard wished them luck. The first tow plane rumbled along the runway with its glider behind it at 10.56pm.

In Howard's glider platoon commander Lieutenant Den Brotheridge opened the door once over Normandy and saw the lines of the canal and river below them. There was a rush of air and the glider skids hit the ground and the aircraft bounced into the air again. The second time it came down it stayed there



The Pegasus Bridge pictured during WWII

crashing along until finally lurching to a halt. It was 12.20am and they had landed just 47 feet from the German pillbox.

Howard bumped his head and for a moment could not see. At first in a panic he feared that the impact had blinded him, then realised to his embarrassment that his helmet had simply slipped over his eyes. "Den Brotheridge said 'Gun out,' which was me," recalled Private William Gray. "Out I jumped, stumbled on the grass because of the weight I had on me, and set the Bren [gun] up facing the bridge and the rest of the lads jumped out."

By a stroke of good luck, the glider's nose had gone through the German barbed wire.

Back in England Howard had cheekily asked the pilot if he could do this so they would not have to use explosives to make a breach. Howard was delighted "we really caught old Jerry with his pants down". Men ran forward and tossed grenades through the pillbox slits and then over the bridge. "I saw a German on the right-hand side and let rip at him and down he went," observed Private Gray. "I still kept firing going over the bridge and on the other side was another German and he went down too." The crossing was not without casualties. Lieutenant "Sandy" Smith, who had broken an arm on landing "arrived at the other end to find Brotheridge dying". Howard's other two gliders also landed right on target.

### "Ham and Jam"

The men under Lieutenant Dennis Fox assigned to take the Orne bridge captured it without firing a shot. This was fortunate as two other platoons went astray. Once informed Howard instructed his radio man to signal the code words for success, which were suitably British "Ham and Jam". At 12.50am the 7th Para Battalion were dropped to relieve Howard's men and the rest of the division comprising the 3rd and 5th Parachute Brigades were dropped on the other objectives.

## ACHTUNG PANZERS! TAKING ON GERMAN TANKS WITH UNRELIABLE WEAPONRY

Howard had been warned to expect a German counterattack within an hour of landing. At 01.30am he "heard the ominous sound we most dreaded ... two tanks were slowly coming down the road". They were heading along the Ouistreham road toward the junction just to the east of the Gondrée café. The only anti-tank weapon his men had was the largely unreliable PIAT, which had a range of just 50 yards and often fired duds.

Nonetheless they engaged the lead tank. Lieutenant Smith observed "there was a sharp explosion as Sergeant Thornton ... had fired at it at point blank range". It was at this point that Captain Todd and 7 Para came trotting over the Orne bridge to get to the canal. Looking ahead Todd saw the explosion "I thought oh God, a real battle has started". Their job was to hold the perimeter west of the canal ready for the arrival of Lord Lovat's Commandos.



The British Army's anti-tank weapon, the PIAT

**"POSSESSION OF THE BRIDGES WAS CRUCIAL BECAUSE IT WOULD PERMIT MONTGOMERY TO BREAKOUT EASTWARD AND STOP ROMMEL BRINGING UP REINFORCEMENTS"**

# WERE D-DAY'S AIRBORNE LANDINGS ALMOST 'FUTILE SLAUGHTER'?

Some historians have criticised the paratrooper missions with the benefit of hindsight, but one general at the time also argued they were doomed

**O**n paper at least the Allied airborne landings supporting D-Day were simple enough. The idea was to protect the flanks using two American divisions to the west and one British division to the east. The only problem with this was that nothing had been attempted on such a scale before and the landings the previous year in Sicily had not gone well. To make matters worse Field Marshal Erwin Rommel had flooded large areas of Normandy just behind the coast and sown it with obstacles quaintly dubbed "Rommel's Asparagus".

To some the whole enterprise seemed madness. In particular, it greatly troubled Air Chief Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, in overall command of the Allied air forces. His staff estimated that the airborne assault could suffer over 80 per cent casualties – if that happened it would be a wholesale massacre.

A highly alarmed Leigh-Mallory less than a week before D-Day went to see the Allied Supreme Commander General Eisenhower. He warned him that the American divisions were facing "futile slaughter".

Leigh-Mallory pointed out to Ike that the American divisions were going to come in from the west over the Channel Islands. This would give the Germans ample warning and flying in a full moon they would have to cross the Cotentin peninsula in the face of German searchlights and anti-aircraft guns.

The British flying directly across the channel to get to the Orne river were not so at risk. At

least on this route gaps had been detected in the German flak defences.

Ike was taken aback that the airborne forces "participation had been so severely questioned by the air commander". This was the last thing he wanted to hear, everything was in place after months and months of detailed planning. The American drops were vital in securing the causeways off Utah beach as well as neutralising the Germans' inland batteries. If he called them off, then the Utah landings would have to be cancelled as well. This would leave a single American beach further east designated Omaha. It would also place the US army even further from its primary goal – the port of Cherbourg.

Leigh-Mallory was a highly experienced commander and Eisenhower respected his advice. Diplomatically Eisenhower asked him to put his concerns in writing. He then consulted his other airborne commanders. "I was encouraged," recalled Eisenhower, "to persist in the belief that Leigh-Mallory was wrong!" Nonetheless, he was still taking an enormous gamble that his airborne divisions would not be shot out of the sky before they ever reached their drop zones.

On the night of 5-6 June 1944 Ike, bowed with worry, watched the US 101st Division depart for Normandy. Naval aide Captain Harry Butcher noted the general wanted to watch them "load for the great flight – one which Leigh-Mallory said would cost so heavily in lives and planes". Once they were all in the air Ike shed a tear, such was the burden of command.

The British 6th Airborne's drop miraculously went like clockwork. In contrast, as Leigh-Mallory predicted, the US 82nd and 101st drops rapidly came to grief. Although German flak over the Channel Islands did no harm, the weather intervened once over the French

coast. Heavy cloud forced the transport aircraft to scatter for fear of collision and when they emerged they were greeted by search lights and more flak. The drop turned to chaos.

Some pilots desperately dived to escape enemy fire and dropped their paratroopers at too low an altitude for their parachutes to fully deploy. Men were scattered everywhere and the two divisions became mixed up in places. At Ste-Mère-Église they dropped directly into the German held village with predictable results. Others falling into the flood waters burdened with heavy equipment were drowned.

When the American gliders came in across the channel, many were smashed on landing as they hit hedgerows, stone walls, trees and Rommel's Asparagus. Half the 82nd's gliders missed their landing zone altogether and they suffered a 16 per cent casualty rate. Both divisions lost most of their radios and those retrieved were damaged beyond repair. In consequence Generals Ridgway and Taylor found it very difficult to communicate with their men. This was not a good start.

It seemed that Leigh-Mallory had been right all along. The operation was turning into a failure of epic proportions. However, he had not taken into account American training and morale. Nor did he know how the Germans would react. While the anti-aircraft gunners were quick to respond, on the ground the German army was caught completely by surprise. Rommel had gone home for his wife's birthday. German intelligence was patchy and many senior commanders were away in Rennes taking part in a wargame. Confusion reigned. The American paratroopers and glider infantry dusted themselves off and got on with the job. It was not long before German communications were cut and gun batteries stormed. They also reached the Utah causeways.

News filtered in that the British had secured the Orne and Caen Canal bridges with minimal losses. The Americans were also achieving their goals despite all the mishaps. Both Eisenhower and Leigh-Mallory were highly relieved that the airborne operations were not turning into bloodbaths. Eisenhower noted that Leigh-Mallory "was the first to call me to voice his delight and to express his regret that he found it necessary to add to my personal burdens during the final days before D-Day". The Allied airborne assault had not turned out to be a "futile slaughter". The airborne forces had gained most of their objectives and were drawing the Germans meagre reserves away from the invasion beaches.

*Left: Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory was convinced the airborne assault on D-Day would be a massacre*

*Coming in from the west the US airborne forces were very exposed to German flak*

