

THE TAKING OF HILLMAN

Storming the D-Day Fortress

Of all the D-Day fortifications barring the way to Caen, none was tougher to overcome than the strongpoint codenamed Hillman.

Steve Snelling charts a saga of courage and sacrifice in the face of extreme adversity.

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IMAGE: Sword Beach: infantry of 8 Brigade coming ashore in the wake of the first wave. The 1st Suffolks landed on time and with relatively few hitches. (PA ARCHIVE)

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D-Day was little more than 12 hours old when Dick Goodwin pushed forward up the gently rising slopes of Périers Ridge above Sword Beach to within sight of his final objective. Barely four hours had passed since his unit had splashed ashore in Normandy and almost everything in the early stages had, in the words of one company commander, “gone like clockwork”. They had hit the beach more or less on time, assembled and, having suffered just three casualties, moved on through the newly-liberated

village of Colleville-sur-Orne to capture an enemy gun position and its entire garrison without firing a shot. But by midday on 6 June, 1944, time was already slipping away. With the first part of his D-Day mission accomplished, the 1st Suffolks’ commanding officer was already turning his thoughts to his second and most important objective. Guided by a paratrooper who had landed in the wrong place, Goodwin crept as close as he dared to the position he had only previously seen marked on maps and in grainy aerial photographs.



ABOVE:

The Suffolks on the march in the hills of Scotland in preparation for Operation Overlord. Having fought in France in 1940, the battalion had spent the next four years in the UK, training for its role in the liberation of North-Western Europe
(COURTESY KEN MAYHEW).

RIGHT:

The insignia of the 1st Suffolk Regiment, the battalion from 8 Brigade, 3rd British Division.

LEFT:

The officers of the 1st Suffolks three months before the invasion during training in Scotland where they were visited by the Colonel of the Regiment, W N Nicholson.

Peeping above a field of corn, he glimpsed for the first time the fortified strongpoint which he knew as Hillman and the Germans called WN-17. Not that there was much to see. Most of it lay hidden from view, beneath the ground. “It was [just] possible to see the outer wire about 150 yds away,” he later wrote, “but it was difficult to discern much of the detail of the position itself; only one of the steel cupolas was visible.” The battle for Hillman, the most prolonged and contentious of all the actions fought in the Sword sector and one which would have far-reaching consequences for the Allies’ most ambitious first day objective, was about to begin...

‘SPEED AND BOLDNESS’

On Good Friday, 7 April, 1944, General Sir Bernard Montgomery, Land Force commander for the impending invasion, laid out his plans at the first of a series of high-level briefings. Having gained a bridgehead, the aim was to advance rapidly inland to secure critical ground from where



the inevitable counter-attacks could be repulsed. Correctly anticipating Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s plan to defeat an invasion on or near the beaches before the Allies had a firm foothold, he identified the heights between Caen and Falaise as being key to the defence of the beachhead. “Speed and boldness”, he stressed, were essential in order to cover the nine miles between the coast and the ancient Norman city of Caen by the end of D-day. The job of capturing it fell to Montgomery’s old division, the 3rd (Iron) Division, commanded by Major General Thomas Rennie.

Armed with a welter of detail about the coastal defences, but with a much vaguer idea about the strength and whereabouts of the enemy’s armour,



Rennie planned for 8 Brigade to secure a bridgehead west of Ouistreham, before releasing 185 Brigade, supported by tanks from 27th Armoured Brigade, to make the dash on Caen in the hope of arriving ahead of 21st Panzer Division which was thought to be located south of the city. Given its importance, and the increasing realisation of the likely presence of enemy tanks nearer to Caen than originally imagined, the size of the force was surprisingly small. Even more curious was the failure to recognise the danger posed to the thrust inland by the formidable-looking fortress identified by aerial reconnaissance as straddling the projected line of 185 Brigade's advance.

The position on the northern edge of Périers Ridge was Hillman, a maze of inter-locking trenches and concrete emplacements housing the battle headquarters of Colonel Ludwig Krug, commanding 736th Grenadier Regiment and 642nd Ost (East) Battalion, one of two units, composed mostly of former Soviet POWs, attached to 716th Infantry Division.

Covering nearly three-quarters of a square mile and ringed by two wire entanglements separated by an extensive minefield, the strongpoint boasted a commanding view of the coast and surrounding countryside with fields of fire extending to 600 yards in most directions. It comprised two large bunkers, three heavily armoured steel cupolas equipped with machine-

ABOVE:
Hitting the beach: a landing craft heads in to the Sword sector with a clutter of tanks lining the shore, at least one of which appears to be on fire. The Suffolks found their beach a litter of 'burning vehicles and boats'.

RIGHT:
D-Day objective: WN-17, the heavily fortified German command and control post better-known to the British as Hillman, was the dominating strongpoint barring the way for the breakout from Sword Beach. The fight for the position on the Périers ridge would have profound consequences for the ambitious plan to capture the city of Caen on June 6, 1944.



guns that were set deep into concrete emplacements 3½ metres thick, seven more machine-gun posts and a zig-zag network of linking trenches covering every conceivable approach. With its underground sleeping quarters, kitchen and telephone exchange, it was a veritable fortress which, according to one former Suffolk officer, bore comparison with "the Maginot line". But so well-hidden were some of its defences that the full extent of Hillman remained unknown to the D-Day planners - despite the best efforts of the RAF's 'spy' flights.

As late as the end of May, when Lieutenant Colonel Goodwin was briefed on his battalion's target, he was led to believe the garrison opposing him was only "one platoon strong" and armed only with "two infantry guns

and several machine-guns". Whatever the reality, it was anticipated that a combination of early morning air strikes and naval bombardment would be sufficient to either cow or destroy the majority of the position.

All of which explains why the force assigned to capture Hillman consisted of a single company and a breaching platoon from 1st Suffolks, together with three mine-clearing teams from 246 Field Company, Royal Engineers. Such an under-estimation of German resolution and thoroughness would prove costly.

'MORALE SKY-HIGH'

The Suffolks landed on Queen White beach an hour after the assault battalions stormed ashore to be greeted by a scene of carnage. >>

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Company commander Charles Boycott recalled a background of “shattered, smoking seaside houses with naked slats in their roofs”. There was “a pungent, burning and explosive sort of stink”. Goodwin’s landing craft narrowly avoided a collision with a derelict tank at the water’s edge, and as he waded ashore his first impression was of “burning vehicles and boats”.

Not far away, a half-drowned Corporal George Rayson, of A Company, struggled ashore minus helmet, weapon and most of his kit which he had been forced to discard after plunging into surf deep enough to require a desperate swim for survival.

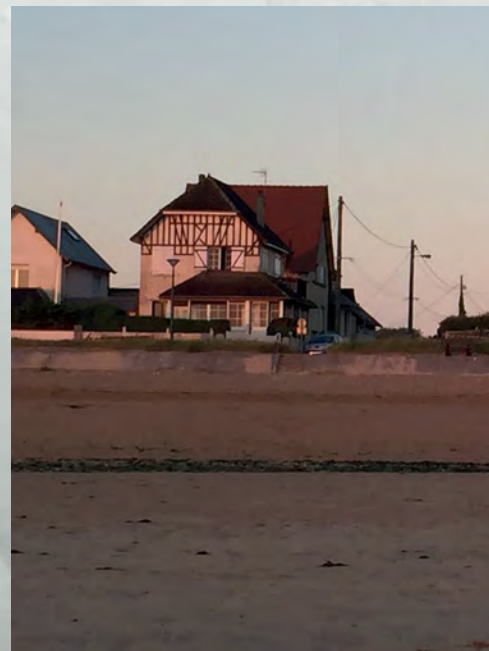
Soaked through and frozen, he trudged up the beach to where the bodies of six or seven men from the South Lancs assault battalion lay. “I looked round and picked up a Sten gun, a couple of grenades which I shoved in my top pockets and some magazines which I shoved in my inside jacket pocket,” he recalled. “I never bothered about equipment; I just couldn’t get myself to take equipment off a dead man somehow. A steel helmet would come in handy, so I put that on and off I go up the beach.”



Incredibly, despite the din of guns and small arms fire, almost the entire battalion made it safely to the assembly area. A notable exception was the loss of a small party of gunners attached to the Suffolks who were caught in a mortar blast as they left their landing craft. Among the dead was 27-year-old Captain Glyn Llewellyn, the ‘Forward Observation Bombardment’ officer responsible

ABOVE:
From the air:
a bird’s-eye
view of the
Hillman complex
taken by aerial
reconnaissance
in the days
leading up to
the invasion.
(COURTESY GIG
HOUSE FILMS)

LEFT:
Colonel or
Oberst Ludwig
Krug, who
commanded the
736th Grenadier
Regiment and
642nd Ost
Battalion, from
his underground
headquarters in
the heart of the
Hillman position.



for calling up naval support for the assault on Hillman. His loss meant the Suffolks had no means of contacting the ships earmarked to provide covering fire. That setback apart, the battalion made good, albeit somewhat delayed, progress.

While Major Boycott's C Company swept through Colleville, a portion of D Company cut through some orchards en-route to the battalion's first objective, a four-gun battery codenamed Morris, lying to the west of the village.

Their way slowed by mines, they eventually made it to within sight of the position where they established a 'firm base' from which to cover B Company's planned assault. The cratered ground around about told of the ferocity of the morning's air and sea bombardment, though none of the concrete emplacements appeared to have been hit. Crucially, they reported no sign of movement, leading Goodwin to speculate that the guns might have been abandoned.

Just in case it was a trick he ordered B Company forward, but as sappers were preparing to blow a gap in the wire a white flag was raised from one of the gun positions. Moments later the garrison emerged from their concrete shelters with their hands up.

All told, there were 67, many of them Poles, who, according to Goodwin, were "in poor shape" following their ordeal. The easy capture of such a "formidable" position came as a relief and a fillip. "The 'success' signal went up," recalled Corporal Edwin Byatt, "and our morale was sky-high."

'A REAL DELUGE'

To the Germans occupying Hillman, the loss of Morris was quickly apparent, with an intensification of fire from the direction of the captured battery making it "dangerous to venture into the open".

Hans Sauer, a corporal who had spent the morning watching developments from an observation cupola, had a lucky escape when a spent round



ABOVE: Under fire: a British tank from 79th Armoured Division provides a makeshift shelter for British troops landing on Sword Beach.



LEFT: The Suffolks battled their way into the network of concrete communication trenches but were too few to make good their original gains and were forced to retreat. (COURTESY GIG HOUSE FILMS).



whistled towards him and buried itself in the ground just in front of him.

With an increasing number of British troops moving out from Colleville, he steeled himself for the inevitable attack. It wasn't long in coming.

Having carried out his own reconnaissance, Goodwin left his assault leader, Captain Reggie Ryley, to make a closer inspection of the position while he organised the rest of his battalion to give cover and support to the attacking force. In the absence of any naval bombardment, which had been neutralised by Captain Llewellyn's death, and the failure of the morning's B17 air strike, which had been thwarted by cloud cover, Goodwin had no choice but to trust to a short barrage by the guns of 76 Field Regiment, RA, the tanks of C Squadron, 13/18th Hussars and the Suffolks' own 3-inch mortars to undermine the defenders' resolve. >>

LEFT: Peace restored: buildings on the edge of what was Queen White beach, where the Suffolks came ashore to a scene of 'shattered, smoking seaside houses with naked slats in their roofs' at H-plus 60 on D-Day. (COURTESY GIG HOUSE FILMS).

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Otherwise, his plan was one rehearsed in pre-invasion exercises: the barrage would be followed by a smokescreen designed to cover the approach of the D Company breaching platoon as it crept through the corn to blow a gap in the outer wire and then the sappers would take over, clearing 3ft wide lanes through the minefield to enable the breaching party to blast a way through the inner wire for A Company to charge through. At 1310, final instructions having been given and the assault force having crept up to within 30 yards of the outer wire, the barrage began.

RIGHT:
Hero of Hillman: Lieutenant Arthur Heal, leader of the sappers from 246 Field Company who cleared a path through the minefield for tanks to pass through. His courage earned him a Croix de Guerre.



fearless to a fault, pushed on with Lieutenant Trevor Tooley and no more than seven others. Rayson zigzagged his way deeper into the position until he caught up with some of them, bunched up near a bend in the trench. "What are you all stopped for?" he asked. A Corporal replied: "Round the corner, Captain Ryley, Lieutenant Tooley, Corporal [Fred] Stares, they're all dead." All three had been killed or fatally wounded by the same burst of machine-gun fire. "We didn't know what to do," said Rayson. "We was [sic] there trying to work things out and Jerry chucked some stick bombs and they just missed us. One or two of our blokes threw some... back and that quietened them down..."

Soon after a runner appeared round the corner with instructions to pull out "as fast as you can". "We didn't want no telling," recalled Rayson. "I beat all Jesse Owens' records going out of there."

The first attempt to capture Hillman had been thoroughly defeated.

'WINKLE THE BOCHE OUT'

It wasn't just the assault on Hillman that was in trouble. As the remnants of A Company fell back, dragging their wounded with them, the entire D-Day breakout plan was fast unravelling. Congestion on the beaches and



"Suddenly," recalled Sauer, "the enemy artillery started firing at us. A real deluge of mortar bombs and artillery shells. The ground was ploughed up. I was in the cupola which probably saved my life..."

Five minutes later the bombardment ceased and the assault force disappeared into the smoke. The outer wire was breached and paths cleared. But then they ran into trouble.

The charger on the second string of Bangalore torpedoes failed to detonate causing an anxious wait while the platoon commander, Lieutenant Mike Russell, dashed back to find another which he gallantly exploded within 50 yds of the enemy. Worse was to follow as, at the second attempt, Ryley led A Company into the labyrinth of trenches only to come under fire from a steel-turreted gun which scythed down the two leading men. "Of course, we all got down quick and he couldn't get the gun down further," recalled Corporal Rayson, "otherwise he'd have had the lot of us. We laid there quite a long time and suddenly everything went quiet. The bloke had disappeared inside."

Taking advantage of the lull, Ryley, a school teacher in civilian life and

ABOVE:
The Hillman defences photographed recently.

RIGHT:
Delayed: 2nd King's Shropshire Light Infantry, spearhead unit for the dash on Caen, held back in the log-jam on the road to Hermanville.



continuing resistance inland had resulted in log-jams, slowing the crucial advance on Caen to a costly crawl. With guns and tanks delayed or diverted, the infantry were belatedly ordered to push on alone. Advancing at 1300, just as the attack on Hillman was about to go in, the spearhead unit, the 2nd King's Shropshire Light Infantry, soon came under fire from positions on Périers ridge. The 1st Royal Norfolks, preparing to follow on, found themselves caught up in the backwash of the Hillman battle.

Marooned, without orders, amid the traffic-snarled confusion of Colleville, they waited while the Suffolks sought in vain to clear the way forward.

Eventually, at 1500, they received orders to move out, making a wide detour to the east of the strongpoint – but that wide detour proved not wide enough. Spotted by observers in Hillman, the leading companies were flailed by machine-guns as they tried to skirt the position, forcing the survivors to worm their way slowly forward through fields of standing corn.

With pressure building, Goodwin called up more tank support. The Shermans of C Squadron, 13/18th Hussars, moved up to the edge of the outer wire and opened fire. But it was all to no avail. To the dismay of the watching infantrymen, the shells merely bounced off the steel cupolas.



The only option was another full-scale attack, with a further bombardment after a wider gap had been cleared through the minefield enabling the tanks to lead the assaulting troops onto the position in order, as Goodwin put it, to “winkle the Boche out”.

Flail tanks would have made things easy, but there were none available.

Instead, the success or failure of the operation hinged on the courage and skill of a few sappers, edging forward, under fire, to broaden the existing gap.

Their leader was Lieutenant Arthur Heal. A swift ‘reccé’ had found four rows of mines, at least some of which were 1940-vintage British Mark II

ABOVE:

Tailback: British armour and infantry faced long delays in the villages just inland from Sword Beach.

BELOW:

Inside the communications room of Colonel Krug's control and command centre in the midst of the Hillman position. (COURTESY GIG HOUSE FILMS)

anti-tank devices. He estimated it would take an hour to make “a proper gap”, but as an alternative suggested “I blow one row of mines with some gelignite... and then lay tapes for the tanks which would give a gap about 5 yards wide”. The tank commander having agreed to accept the risk, Heal and another man went forward and, with bullets zipping inches above their prone bodies, worked fast and expertly until the job was done. Incredibly, it had taken them barely 10 minutes.

A five-minute bombardment from the tanks and supporting gun batteries duly followed before the Shermans rumbled into the smoke now blanketing Hillman. Moments later, a report >>



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ABOVE: Comrades in arms: Captains Ken Mayhew, left, and Ron Russell, right, were astonished by the strength of the Hillman defences and the number of troops manning them. (COURTESY KEN MAYHEW)

RIGHT: One-man assault force: Private Jim 'Tich' Hunter single-handedly silenced a machine-gun firing from a steel cupola in a near-suicidal act of gallantry which resulted in an award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

from one of the cupolas reached Colonel Krug telling him "a tank was in the middle of the minefield" and that the "English" [sic] were in the process of breaking in. Hans Sauer was among those ordered to counter-attack.

Carrying a box of grenades, he dashed along a trench leading towards the breach. Bullets whistled above them. Just then, they met more men running in the opposite direction.

"They told us that a tank was on top of the kitchen and was posting down the ventilation shaft," recalled Sauer. "Together, we [then] did an about-face and returned to the command post."

'A SLOW BUSINESS'

Out in the open, the advance was bitterly-contested and the fighting, in places, desperate. At least two tanks were hit as they tried to cross the minefield and the Suffolks were still struggling to make any headway against the armour-turreted machine guns which seemed impervious to even the heaviest close-range fire.

As well as being, in Goodwin's expression, "a slow business", it was also a hazardous one, which might have proved more costly but for the intervention of one man - a pugnacious little private soldier by the name of Jim Hunter.

Nicknamed 'Tich', Hunter was among a group of Bren gunners pushed forward to counter the "intensive fire" from one of the cupolas covering

the minefield. He later recalled: "As I moved up to the gap a member of our group was in the centre. I told him to get moving and got no response so I moved alongside him and realised he had bought it. I decided it was not the place to hang about and dived into a hole some distance inside the position. The German gunner was having a right old time. He kept us all down. Two other men joined me and the gunner must have seen them and gave us a lot of attention. While we lay there a few explosions around [us] suggested light mortars or grenades. I didn't intend to be one of the victims and decided to make a move."

According to a witness, Hunter appeared to lose his temper and was heard to shout, "I've bloody well had enough of this", before climbing out of the shell-hole and marching straight for the enemy gun, firing his Bren from the hip. His own account was more prosaic if no less remarkable. "I watched the turret," he wrote, "and when it traversed away I made a run towards the turret which, in the meantime, decided

to come back to me. As it fired I stood my ground and sprayed the gun opening hosepipe fashion. After a few bursts the gun stopped firing and I was joined by some of the lads and we checked the trenches..."

Through it all, he had been aware of bullets "spattering all around" but was "so annoyed" as not to care. His luck, though, nearly ran out a few minutes later. Rounding a corner in one of the trenches, he found himself face to face with a German defender. They both fired at the same time: the enemy bullet pierced 'Tich's' steel helmet, wounding him in the head, while his burst hit caught the German full in the chest, killing him outright.



'OBJECTIVE TOO FAR'

Hunter's action was a key turning point in the battle for Hillman, but it did not mark the end of enemy resistance. Grenades dropped down ventilation shafts were enough to settle



ABOVE: Subterranean stronghold: views inside the restored bunker. (COURTESY GIG HOUSE FILMS)



ABOVE: Home from home: the living and sleeping quarters, complete with original central heating. (COURTESY GIG HOUSE FILMS)



LEFT:
A little part of Suffolk in a corner of France: the Union Jack flying over the restored Hillman position where a memorial plaque now commemorates the struggle. It reads: 'In memory of those who fell on 6 June 1944 in the liberation of Colleville sur Orne, the capture of Hillman and later during the fighting in Normandy and North West Europe. Thanks to the generosity of a Colleville family this site records for future generations the bravery and sacrifice of these soldiers.'

matters in some places, but elsewhere they fought on with a grim defiance even as the Suffolks swarmed over the position.

Goodwin reported: "They continued to fire from their emplacements while the mopping up was going on and in some cases had to be blown out... with heavy explosive charges." It was not until 2015, by which time all resistance appeared to have ceased, that Goodwin felt confident enough of the position's capture to send two companies onto a ridge a kilometre ahead to consolidate their hard-won gain.

Moving up onto Hillman, Captain Ken Mayhew, commander of the Suffolks' carrier platoon, was

astonished by the strength of the defences. "We had known it would be a tough nut to crack," he recalled, "but when I first saw the bunkers, all that wire and mines, it was quite a shock to see what A Company had had to overcome."

Around 50 prisoners had been taken from the strongpoint before night fell, but the true scale of the victory did not become apparent until the following morning. At 0645, more than six hours after a last telephone conversation with divisional headquarters had told Krug to "act according to your conscience", the commander of Hillman, immaculate in full dress uniform, emerged from the suffocating darkness of his beleaguered headquarters at the head of 50 officers

and men, including his orderly who was carrying two suitcases. "I couldn't believe it," recalled Captain Ron Rogers, second in command of A Company. "I was so amazed I just stood there and watched. And out they came, looking so smart, and carrying all sorts of cases and private belongings, not to go on holiday, as they looked as if they were going, but to a POW cage somewhere near the beach."

Comical though it may have seemed, there was nothing funny about the fight for Hillman. What one officer called "possibly the outstanding success of D-Day" was later recognised by a shower of awards which included a Distinguished Service Order for Dick Goodwin, a Distinguished Conduct Medal for 'Tich' Hunter and a Croix de Guerre for Arthur Heal. Such, however, had been the German defenders' tenacity that it contributed significantly to the delays, self-inflicted and otherwise, which helped ensure the failure of Montgomery's ultimate day-one objective. As Lord Dannatt, a former Chief of the General Staff, astutely concluded in a recently-commissioned documentary about the capture of Hillman, too much had been expected of too few, making Caen "an objective too far".

BELOW:
Entente cordiale: the ceremony in June 1989 when the site of the Hillman strongpoint was formally handed over to the Suffolk Regiment Association as a 'living' memorial to the unit's gallant struggle on D-Day. (COURTESY KEN MAYHEW)

Thanks to Richard Kennan and Jim Ring of Gig House Films for their help in researching and providing photographs for this article. Their film, *The Suffolk Regiment on D-Day*, was commissioned by the Trustees of the Suffolk Regiment Museum and is on sale at the museum in Bury St Edmunds.

