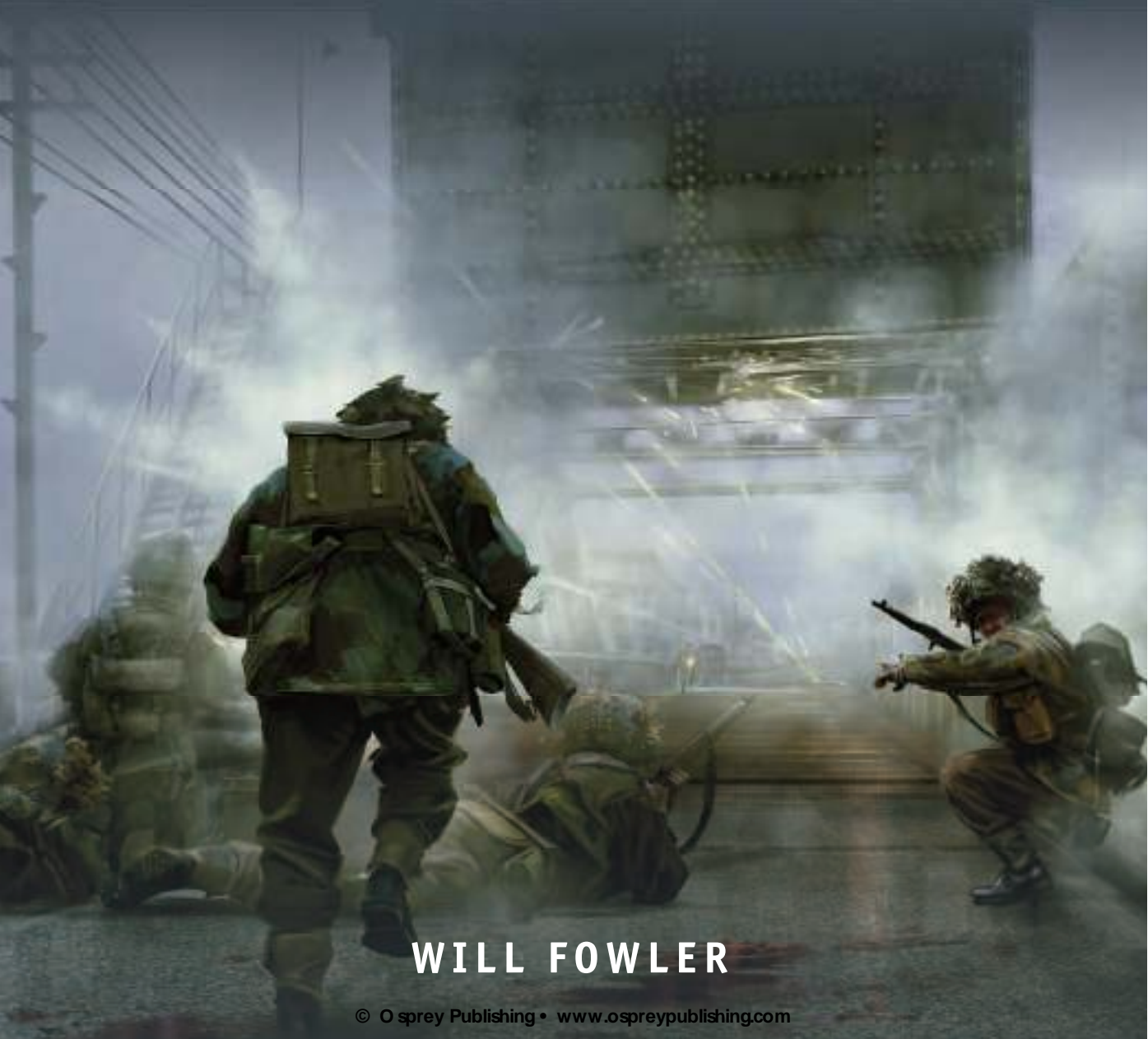


RAID

PEGASUS BRIDGE

Bénouville D-Day 1944



WILL FOWLER

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INTRODUCTION

To the young German soldier and his comrade, standing guard on the bridge across the shipping canal at Bénouville in Normandy early on the morning of 6 June 1944, it seemed as if a flak-damaged Allied bomber had crashed on the far bank. An aircraft of some type had certainly come hurtling down from the cloudy night sky and ploughed across the ground towards the eastern end of the bridge.

What 18-year-old Pte Helmut Romer, an easy-going big city boy from Berlin, did not realize was that he had become the first German soldier to witness D-Day, the Allied invasion of Normandy. The crashing aircraft was in fact the first of three troop-carrying gliders, and the bridge he was guarding was the objective of a company of highly trained and superbly led British soldiers of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. Moments after the landing, these soldiers had charged out of the gliders, stormed across the bridge, suppressed the defences and captured this key D-Day objective, all in about ten minutes.

In the 21st century, the 'Realities of War' training programme, devised for junior soldiers at the British Army Foundation College (AFC) at Harrogate, takes young men and women to the battlefields of Normandy. It is an opportunity for these 16- and 17-year-olds to see the places where in the summer of 1944, men, some only a little older than themselves, fought against a tough, well-equipped and battle-hardened enemy. Among the sites they visit are this bridge at Bénouville and another bridge about half a mile away across the River Orne. Today these are known respectively as Pegasus Bridge and Horsa Bridge, and the author is one of several Royal British Legion guides who have had the privilege of taking the young soldiers from AFC Harrogate to this unique battleground.

The soldiers who assaulted and captured the bridges in the early hours of the morning of D-Day, the Allied landings in Normandy on 6 June 1944, had been delivered to their objective by Horsa gliders. Today the officers and NCO staff from Harrogate, many of them veterans of operational tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, compare the Horsa gliders to the Chinook helicopter, the workhorse troop transport in these theatres. What distinguishes yesterday's Horsas from today's Chinooks is that once the glider pilots had started the descent flight to the landing zone (LZ) in 1944, there was no going back: pilots, glider and troops on board were committed to action – it was a one-way ride to death or glory. They were also making this hazardous landing without any of the sophisticated night vision aids available to pilots today – to land a Horsa at night, the pilots had only the 'Mark 1 Eyeball'.



The Café Gondrée, the first house to be liberated on D-Day and the Company Clearing Station in the fighting that followed, and now run by Arlette Gondrée, the daughter of the original owners. She continues a tradition of hospitality for British soldiers, both serving and veterans, that was begun at dawn on 6 June 1944. (WF)

To be exact, the glider-borne assault and capture of the two bridges was not a raid but a *coup de main*, a surprise attack launched to capture and hold a single key target. A raid would, for example, have seen troops capture and demolish the bridges and then withdraw. Here the tiny force captured and held the bridges until they were relieved by paratroops.

Soon after the capture of the bridges, ACM Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory said of the incredibly accurate landing by the glider pilots that it was probably the finest feat of flying in World War II – a true compliment, coming from a very senior and often very critical RAF officer to young NCO glider pilots, all of whom were soldiers.

ORIGINS

The landings at Pegasus Bridge grew out of the wider planning for D-Day – a process that had begun almost as soon as the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had been forced out of France in 1940 and evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk.

The Normandy beaches to the west of the River Orne had been identified as a possible area for a landing. Most of them were areas of flat, open sand on which landing craft could beach safely, and tanks, guns and vehicles could land. The south coast of England had several large ports that would accommodate troops and shipping before the invasion. Finally, the beaches were within range of single-engined fighters operating from airfields on the British mainland.

Aware that the French coast facing England was the most likely site for an invasion, the Germans had begun building coastal defences as far back as 1942. The main weight of defences lay around the ports and along the coast opposite Dover – the shortest route across the English Channel, and consequently the most logical area for an invasion force to land.

Both the British and the Americans had seen the success of German airborne forces in the opening years of World War II and were quick to see their potential. Intense selection and training programmes were instituted, and soon both nations had formidable airborne forces. Men could be delivered to battle by parachute (paratroops) or by glider (airborne).

The British adopted the distinctive maroon beret for airborne forces; at one stage the newly formed Special Air Service (SAS) was required to swap its distinctive sand-coloured berets for maroon. While the Parachute Regiment had its own distinctive cap badge of a winged parachute surmounted by a crown, older air-landing formations retained their regimental cap badges, and the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry's silver bugle horn badge was backed with a rifle-green patch. On their battledress tunics the men sported the striking Pegasus insignia.

In the summer of 1942 LtGen 'Boy' Browning, appointed as Commander of the 1st Airborne Division, asked the distinguished artist Edward (later Major) Seago to design an emblem for the airborne forces. In October that year Seago produced a classic design, a maroon square upon which was the outline in pale blue of the mythical Greek warrior Bellerophon riding the winged horse Pegasus.

Normally, both parachutes and gliders were used in major operations since gliders could carry heavy weapons and vehicles such as jeeps, anti-tank guns and even the Tetrarch light tank. The attraction of the glider, which the Luftwaffe had demonstrated at the modern Belgian fort of Eben Emael in 1940, was that like today's troop-lift helicopter, it could put down a formed group – normally of platoon strength – on a compact landing zone. The British required their glider pilots not only to deliver men and equipment safely into battle, but also to join them on the ground to fight as infantry following the landing. Paratroops were less vulnerable but could be scattered by the wind or the speed at which they exited from the aircraft, or both. It could take time for a group of paratroops to form up and become an effective fighting force.

The drawback of gliders was that they were very vulnerable, being made from light materials such as fabric and wood. While some might crash, killing and wounding the occupants, others could be raked with small-arms fire as they approached the landing zone.

Despite this drawback, from as early as 1940 the British had begun development of the Horsa troop- and cargo-carrying glider, to meet War Department specification

X.26/40. The first Airspeed Horsa made its maiden flight on 12 September 1941. The specification stated that the gliders were to be built in a number of sections, using facilities not needed for more urgent aircraft production, and as a result manufacture was spread across separate factories, which limited the likely loss from air raids.

The glider was a high-wing cantilever monoplane with wooden wings and a wooden semi-monocoque fuselage. The fuselage was built in three sections bolted together: the front was the pilot's compartment and main freight-loading door; the centre section was accommodation for troops or freight; the rear supported the tail unit. Airspeed subcontracted construction to Austin Motors and, since much of the airframe was made of wood, work also went to furniture manufacturers such as Harris Lebus.

The Horsa glider was one of the first to have a tricycle undercarriage. On operational flights this could be jettisoned after take-off and the landing made on a sprung skid under the fuselage. The wings had large 'barn door' flaps that allowed the pilot to make a steep, high rate of descent landing and consequently put the glider down in a very confined landing zone. There were two pilots, who sat in side-by-side seats with dual controls. Aft of the pilot's compartment on the port side was the hinged cargo-loading door, which doubled as a loading ramp. The main compartment could accommodate 15 soldiers and their equipment on bench seats along the sides. Besides the cargo door, they could enter and exit from a smaller door on the starboard side. On landing, the fuselage joint at the rear end of the main section could be broken to assist in rapid unloading. There were stories of soldiers so eager to exit the glider and unload the stores that they were already starting to unbolt this section as the glider started its final descent.

A Horsa could also carry six Central Landing Establishment (CLE) equipment containers fitted under the wings. The later AS.58 Horsa II had a hinged nose section, reinforced floor and double nose wheels to support the extra weight of vehicles. The tow was attached to the nose-wheel strut, rather than the dual wing points as in the Horsa I. By the end of World War II a total of 3,655 Horsas had been built and at D-Day there were about 1,000 available for operations.

The operational debut of the Horsa was during the landings on Sicily in Operation *Husky* in July 1943. So that the gliders could be available at airfields in North Africa, the pilots had to make a long and incredibly hazardous journey under tow from their bases in southern England. A number of factors contributed to the airborne operation suffering high casualties, with some gliders being cast off by their tug aircraft too far from the coast and ditching in the rough sea at night. Other aircraft had been fired on by Allied anti-aircraft gunners, who had mistakenly assumed they were under a low-level Luftwaffe attack.

Many lessons were learned from *Husky* and by D-Day new drills were in place to ensure that as far as possible there was no repetition of those tragic mistakes. One of these would be implemented dramatically on all Allied aircraft operating over Normandy – including the gliders. Wings and fuselages were painted in bold black and white stripes – D-Day stripes. Allied anti-aircraft gunners were instructed that no aircraft with these markings were to be engaged.

On D-Day, British, Canadian and American paratroops and airborne forces would secure the flanks of the amphibious landings, capturing and holding key ground and access routes near the beaches. To the west, men of the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions would ensure that soldiers of the 4th Division of the US VIII Corps were able to push inland from Utah Beach along the causeways across the flooded fields that blocked the exits off the beach. To the east, the British 6th Airborne

HORSA GLIDER



88ft



67ft



19ft 6in

Crew: 2
Capacity: 25 troops
Wing area: 1,104ft²
Empty weight: 8,370lbs
Loaded weight: 15,500lbs
Maximum speed: 150mph on tow; 100mph gliding

The Airspeed Horsa I glider had a maximum take-off weight of 15,500lbs. With the Horsa II this rose to 15,750lbs. However, in all operations with the prospect of no immediate resupply, the troops would attempt to carry as much ammunition as possible. The Horsa I was 67ft long and the II 11in longer. The Horsa II had a hinged nose for direct loading of vehicles and guns.

Division would capture the high ground to the east of Sword Beach, where the 3rd Division of the British 1st Corps would be landing. FM Bernard Montgomery, who had been appointed to command the 21st Army Group of the Anglo-American forces who would land on D-Day, had insisted that the invasion force should be increased and that Sword was vital if the German 15th Army was not to contain the beachhead and prevent a break-out.

One factor that could allow the German 711th Division and 21st Panzer Division to contain the British beachhead was the Canal de Caen à la Mer ('Canal from Caen to the Sea'), more commonly known simply as the Caen Canal. This ship canal with locks connected the inland city of Caen and its docks with the town of Ouistreham on the Channel coast. If defended, it would be a formidable obstacle, being 9 miles long and in places 33ft deep. Work on its construction had begun in 1837 and the canal was opened in August that year and deepened in 1920. The canal was an obstacle – but there was worse. To the east was the tidal River Orne; at low tide shelving banks of deep mud were exposed. Like the Caen Canal, if the river was defended it would be difficult to cross without suffering heavy casualties.

The lowest bridging point across the river and canal was at the small hamlet of Bénouville. At the canal there was a *bascule* or swing bridge, built in 1934, which had a heavy counterweight that allowed it to be quickly raised so that shipping could pass along the canal. The River Orne was spanned by a *pont tournant*, a narrow single-lane bridge that pivoted on a central stone pier, which had been designed by the famous French engineer Gustave Eiffel.

On the left bank of the canal an enterprising Frenchman had built a café, the Buvette du Tramway – an ideal spot to serve travellers waiting for ships to negotiate that stretch of the canal when the bridge was raised, and originally a stop on a tramway that linked Caen to the coast. In 1934 it was bought by Georges and Thérèse Gondrée and renamed 'Café Gondrée'. The café had a large garden where they were able to grow fruit and vegetables. By 1944, they and their two daughters, Georgette and Arlette, had endured 1,450 days of occupation and the unwelcome company of a German garrison and defences around the bridge. To the garrison, the Gondrées seemed to be a simple family business that sold drinks and snacks. For the Germans, one of the best features of the café was that the guard commander could keep watch on the bridge from the comfort of an indoor table.

However, far from being unsophisticated rural folk, the Gondrées were quiet members of the Resistance and would prove to be a valuable source of intelligence for the Allies. Thérèse Gondrée came from Alsace and consequently understood German, while Georges had worked for 12 years as a clerk in Lloyds Bank in Paris and understood English. Thérèse listened to the NCOs chatting in the café and reported anything of value to Georges, who passed it on to Mme Vion, the director of the Château de Bénouville, a big maternity hospital to the south of Bénouville. The director in turn told it to Resistance contacts in Caen on her trips to the city for medical supplies. From Caen the information was transmitted by clandestine radio or carried in RAF Lysander liaison aircraft, which made hazardous night flights to improvised airstrips in France. The maternity hospital was also used by Mme Vion to hide downed Allied aircrew who had evaded capture and were on the run. Mme Vion used the hospital's ambulances to move them on to other safe houses.

On 2 June, Georges had passed on a vital piece of intelligence that Thérèse had overheard: the firing point for the demolition charges on the bridge was located in the machine-gun bunker on the left bank of the canal. Allied planners knew that if these bridges were captured it would deny the German forces swift access to the left flank of the Allied invasion and would, moreover, allow the men landing at Sword





The elegant *pont tournant* across the River Orne designed by the famous French engineer Gustave Eiffel. The German traffic sign on the left, erected in February 1941, bans civilian vehicles except bicycles. (IWM B5230)

Beach to break out to the south and east to link up with the airborne forces landing on drop zones across the river.

Air photo-reconnaissance, as well as information from the Resistance, was collated at the 6th Airborne Division Headquarters at Brigmerston House on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, codenamed 'Broadmoor' and better known to the soldiers simply as 'the Mad House' – after the Broadmoor psychiatric hospital. The Allied planners had a wealth of detail, and the map of the area, which, like all D-Day documents, was given a new super-secret classification, 'Bigot', showed the bridge and its defences and those of other enemy positions in the vicinity. Those officers who were cleared to study this material were designated as 'Bigoted'.

Intelligence had established that the bridges were defended by a 50-strong garrison of the 736th Grenadier Regiment 716th Infantry Division, who were believed to be conscripts from occupied countries but with a stiffening of German

NCOs and officers. They were commanded by Maj Hans Schmidt. The main defences for the canal bridge were on the east bank and included a static anti-tank gun in a concrete weapons pit or Tobruk stand. Trenches radiated from this position, as they did from the bunker across the road. A simple movable barbed wire barrier was sited on the west bank with a machine gun in a sandbagged position. The river bridge was less heavily guarded but had a bunker and a machine gun in a weapons pit on the east bank. It appeared that the German garrison anticipated that an attack would come from the east and had taken precautions against this.

Although it was becoming increasingly obvious to the German high command in western Europe that an invasion was imminent, and Schmidt had been told that the two bridges were one of the most critical points in Normandy, his men were not 'stood to' on full alert on 6 June and, moreover, nor was he. He was up the road in Ranville, where he may have settled down for the night in his accommodation, a requisitioned house, though one version of events has him enjoying an evening with his French girlfriend. Except for the two sentries on each bridge, his troops were either asleep in their bunkers, or dozing in their slit trenches or in the machine-gun bunker, or enjoying late night hospitality in Bénouville.

Until not long before, the Germans had believed that the major threat to the bridges was the French Resistance, who had targeted road and rail links to sabotage German operations in France. Maj Schmidt had orders to blow the bridges if capture seemed imminent. However, he felt that if the charges were in place they might either be detonated by the Resistance or simply neutralized. It seemed prudent, therefore, to store the charges in a bunker, and, since his bridges were almost 5 miles from the coast, he reasoned that in the event of an amphibious landing, he would have plenty of warning before any Allied ground forces reached them. He would have time to prepare the bridges, blow them up and then hold the area. Schmidt saw himself as a

loyal German but like many men – non-political Germans and dedicated Nazis alike – he had grown soft in France.

On the night of 5/6 June at Vimont, east of Caen, a German colonel was in his headquarters working on personnel reports. Oberst Hans von Luck, commanding the 125th Panzer Grenadier Regiment of the 21st Panzer Division, would potentially pose the greatest threat to the British attack on the bridges. Von Luck was a veteran of the campaigns in Poland, France and the Eastern Front, where in the bitter winter of 1941 he and his troops had reached the outer suburbs of Moscow. His experience of the war in North Africa had left him with a respect for the British that bordered on affection: in the years after 1945 this would grow and a strong bond would be formed with John Howard and the men of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

The 21st Panzer Division was Rommel's favourite division and within it Von Luck's regiment, the 125th, was one of the best equipped. The original division had fought in North Africa, suffered heavy losses at El Alamein and during the fighting withdrawal to Tunisia, and was virtually destroyed in May 1943 at the end of the campaign in Africa. As with the units lost at Stalingrad, Hitler hated the idea that they no longer existed and had been removed from the order of battle, and so 21st Panzer Division was re-formed in Normandy in July 1943 with about 2,000 survivors of the original division. They were initially equipped with modified French Hotchkiss and Somua tanks that had been captured in 1940. A year later they had received their first PzKpfw IV tanks. In 1944, the division would suffer heavy losses in the defence of Caen and the fighting in the Falaise Pocket. On D-Day, however, it would be the only formation to launch a serious counterattack against the Allies and, in so doing, get close to splitting Juno and Sword beaches and reaching the sea.



An oblique aerial reconnaissance photograph taken on 24 March 1944. To the left is the Caen Canal and on the right are the paler waters of the River Orne. The road between the two bridges would offer the paratroops and gliderborne soldiers some degree of security after the bridges had been secured. Howard's plan ensured that his forces were concentrated on the 'island' formed by the canal and river. (Museum of Army Flying)

INITIAL STRATEGY

The operation to capture the two bridges across the Caen Canal and the Orne, codenamed Operation *Deadstick*, would demonstrate that ordinary men can be capable of extraordinary courage and exemplary leadership. The force was made up of a reinforced company of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (widely known as the Ox and Bucks), and its leader was Maj John Howard.

John Howard had joined the King's Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI) in 1932. He remembered his early days in recruit training as an unhappy period of homesickness but he soldiered on and served for six years. He applied for a commission but, though he had the right educational qualifications, as a private soldier in the inter-war army, he was rejected; he was, however, made up to Corporal. It may be that this initial rejection was a spur to his ambition to prove himself not only as a soldier but as a commanding officer. He left the army and became a constable in the Oxford City Police. At the outbreak of the war he was recalled to the KSLI with his rank of Corporal; however, with his pre-war experience and maturity, he saw rapid promotion, rising to Company Sergeant Major (CSM). Within five months of rejoining the colours he had reached the pinnacle of non-commissioned ranks – WO1, Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM). He was offered a commission and went to an Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU) in mid-1940. On being commissioned, he joined the Ox and Bucks. Again his natural talents were recognized and he was promoted to Captain and given command of a company.

In 1941, the Ox and Bucks was one of several infantry regiments that began to convert to an airborne role and Howard volunteered for this new and challenging task, accepting demotion to Lieutenant to ensure that he was given command of a platoon. He was subsequently promoted to Major in May 1942.

During the planning for the D-Day landings, MajGen Richard 'Windy' Gale, commanding 6th Airborne Division, had decided on a glider-borne *coup de main* operation to capture the Bénouville and Ranville bridges. He contacted Brig Hugh Kindersley to ask for his opinion on the best company to carry out this task. Kindersley recommended Howard's company. To test the choice, the division was sent out on a three-day exercise in which D Company's role was to seize three bridges

from a small group of paratroopers who were defending them. Gen Gale, along with brigadiers Hugh Kindersley and Nigel Poett, followed the exercise and was impressed by the speed and style with which D Company went about their task. Shortly after the exercise, LtCol Michael Roberts invited Howard into his office and told him that D Company would spearhead the British invasion effort and would be charged with capturing two bridges intact. On Gale's orders, the four platoons of D Company were reinforced with two extra platoons. Howard was allowed to select the additional two platoons from any in the battalion and chose two from B Company commanded by lieutenants Dennis Fox and Richard 'Sandy' Smith.

FM Montgomery with MajGen Richard 'Windy' Gale (centre), commanding 6th Airborne Division, and Brig Nigel Poett, commanding 5 Para Brigade (right). Poett would parachute into Normandy and Gale arrive aboard glider Chalk 70. Both men reached Pegasus Bridge by 0900hrs on D-Day. (IWM B7053)



THE PLAN

The planners had estimated that four platoons would be sufficient to capture the two bridges – two to each bridge; but an extra platoon was added for each bridge as an insurance against casualties or the loss of a glider. This would prove to be a wise decision. Howard identified two possible landing zones for the gliders and they were codenamed LZ-X and LZ-Y. To the east, LZ-Y was a long four-sided field bordering the River Orne to the north of the bridge. LZ-X, to the south of the Caen Canal bridge, was the more hazardous of the two landing zones. There was a line of trees to the west bordering the canal, while to the east was a swampy pond, of which they were, however, unaware. The landing zone was triangular, tapering to a point by the bridge.

Howard had decided on these landing zones so that his force would land between the river and the canal, thus ensuring that if one of the bridges was blown soon after the landing, the platoons would not be stranded on the far bank. He also decided to make each glider load a self-contained formation – it would have both engineers and soldiers on board. The crew of a single glider could therefore capture and hold a bridge while the Sappers neutralized the charges.

As he began his planning, Howard was kept up to date with a full range of the latest reconnaissance photographs. In early May, GFM Erwin Rommel visited the two bridges and instructed that the Tobruk anti-tank-gun emplacement should be built and protected by barbed wire and a bunker. Within forty-eight hours RAF reconnaissance sorties had detected this work, and a week later the French Resistance passed on an accurate description. A scale model, measuring 12ft by 12ft, was made to show the bridge in perfect detail, including every building, tree and ditch. The Germans made alterations to their defences almost daily but, thanks to the RAF photo-reconnaissance sorties that took place each morning, the model was updated accordingly.

Key to the capture of Bénouville Bridge was neutralizing the bunker on the right bank of the canal. Three men from the lead section of 25 Platoon, in the first glider to land, would throw grenades through its embrasures. The rest of the platoon were to rush across the bridge and seize the western end. Close behind them, 24 Platoon would clear the remaining positions on the right bank, whilst the men of 14 Platoon, in the last glider to land, would cross to the western side to reinforce 25 Platoon. Exactly the same procedure was to be adopted for Ranville Bridge, with 22 Platoon rushing the defences and taking the eastern end, 23 Platoon clearing the western end, and then when 17 Platoon landed it would consolidate the defences.

The relief would come from the men of 7th Battalion, 5th Parachute Brigade, 6th Airborne Division. They would land in drop zones between the River Orne and the

The 1:1 scale reconstruction of a Horsa glider at Memorial Pegasus Museum close to Pegasus Bridge. The broad black and white D-Day stripes were an Allied identification sign while the black underside serves as camouflage at night. The vulnerable cockpit can be seen clearly. (WF)





Maj John Howard, inspirational leader, shrewd tactician and the man who made possible the remarkable victory at Pegasus Bridge.

River Dives at 0050hrs. Brig Poett, commanding 5th Para Brigade, told Howard that he could expect organized reinforcements within two hours of touchdown. The Paras would come down through the village of Ranville, where Poett would establish his headquarters for the defence of the bridges.

When he was assigned this critical mission, Howard set in place a tough and realistic training regime. He was satisfied with the company, in terms both of its officers and its men, and he also felt at home with them, as many were easy-going but confident young Londoners. In training, Howard demanded nothing less than first-class standards of fitness. He also took his responsibility as a commander very seriously – so much so that for the most part he abstained from drinking in order to keep a clear mind.

There were three weeks of intensive training for the battalion at Ilfracombe in Devon, at the end of which the men marched back to Bulford Camp on Salisbury Plain, a distance of 131 miles. They were carrying 80lbs of weapons and equipment and took only four days to complete the march, though, as Raymond ‘Tich’ Raynor recalled: ‘Some of the lads needed help on the way so we

took their packs and carried those as well.’ Lt Henry Sweeney, universally known as ‘Todd’, commanding 23 Platoon, recalled the ‘Great March’, which took place in two days of pouring rain and two of blistering heat: ‘In spite of the toughness and the blisters of it all, we got down to the barracks and we all started singing. Of course the Commanding Officer had come out and you had to march to attention – 140 paces to the minute, which was a terrible pain on your feet. Maj Howard insisted that an officer didn’t go back to his quarters and take his boots off until he had ensured that all his men’s feet had been inspected, so that any men who had really bad blisters were sent off to the medical inspection room. Then, and only then, were you allowed to hobble away to your own quarters, where you found the food was terrible and the water cold. This was drilled into us – you had to look after your men to the exclusion of everything else.’ It was the company’s performance on the ‘Great March’ that clinched its role as the *coup de main* force for the bridges.

Street fighting tactics were taught in bombed-out and evacuated parts of British cities and the men also learned the skills of unarmed combat. Essentially, Howard was taking men from an ordinary British infantry regiment and with good training quietly turning them into special forces.

To make their training more realistic, Howard asked that an area be found somewhere in Britain where conditions similar to those in Normandy existed, in other words two bridges running across a river and a canal with a very short distance between them. Such a spot was found south of Exeter, where the A38 crosses the River Exe and the Exeter Canal at Countess Wear. Howard moved his men down to Devon, where they practised attacks day and night for almost a week. All of this was carried out under the eyes of many curious onlookers from the surrounding area, some of whom interfered with proceedings. One local resident was angry that several tiles had been blown off his roof by an exploding grenade, and the town council felt that the exercises were weakening the bridges, and also they did not like the soldiers fishing with No. 36 grenades. Among the audience for the night attacks was the younger sister of Lt ‘Sandy’ Smith. She and other youngsters had been evacuated

from London and now lived in a large house that overlooked the river. Smith recalled: 'The girls used to lean out of their windows in their nightdresses and watch us throwing bombs and things at the bridge and attacking it. I had to confess to Maj Howard, "Look, there is my sister!" He looked a bit dumbfounded. They told me to keep my trap shut. I told my mother and sister that we were just playing games.'

Howard prepared his men for every conceivable eventuality that they might encounter on the ground, for example only one of the gliders reaching the bridges, or others falling short. In case all the Sappers in the *coup de main* force became casualties, Howard made his men fully familiar with locating and neutralizing demolition charges. They even learned how to handle assault boats, to be used if either of the bridges was blown.

Pte Billy Gray, a Bren gunner in 25 Platoon, recalled: 'We knew exactly what we had to do. We trained and practised it so often that we knew it like the back of our hand. Anyone could have taken each other's place. Each individual soldier knew exactly what he was supposed to do on the night. Lt Fox explained all the eventualities that were covered – "in case none of us arrived, in case one of us arrived, in case one of us arrived in the wrong place or at the wrong bridge, in case we had to carry boats from one bridge to the other". I don't think there was an incident that could have happened that we hadn't rehearsed in one way or another.'

In early May, Brig Nigel Poett assured Howard that he could have anything that he wanted; all he had to do was ask. One notable thing he requested was 'German' opposition for their exercises, in the sense that his opponents should be dressed as Germans, carry German weapons, and should even speak German. All of this was arranged, and the men of the *coup de main* force made a thorough study of German weapons and became familiar with their use. Besides Howard, no one in the company had any idea why they were constantly working on the art of capturing bridges and some were becoming very bored by it. Howard took the men into his confidence and assured them: 'We are training for some special purpose. You'll find a lot of the training that we are doing, this capturing of things like bridges, is connected with that special purpose. If any of you mention the word "bridges" outside our training hours and I get to know about it, you'll be for the high jump and your feet won't touch the ground before you are RTU [returned to unit].'

To Pte Wally Parr of 25 Platoon, the Company Commander seemed to be 'a mad bastard; he'll get us killed one day. Slog! Slog! Slog! Look at C Company; they're not doing it. Look at A Company; they're not doing it. They don't get it – we get it all.'

Lt David Wood, commanding 24 Platoon, recalled that 'It became the talking point of the battalion that D Company did everything rather harder than anybody else. We were that kind of company. We flogged ourselves. He flogged himself – Maj Howard – he didn't spare himself at all but he expected us to do the same. The whole approach was that you were going to do better than the chap next door, even though he was one of your brother platoon commanders.'

In May 1944, the 6th Airborne Division mounted a pre-invasion exercise named Exercise *Mush*. Howard's *coup de main* force were ordered to capture a bridge across the Thames at Lechlade in Gloucestershire. The bridge was held by men of the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade. Gliders were not used to land the company; instead, the men were driven to the general area of the bridge in trucks (since the war many soldiers will have had similar experiences where trucks have become 'helicopters'). The men of the Ox and Bucks then marched to a point within yards of the bridge that represented the landing zones where their gliders would have touched down, and they lay low until a signal was given to indicate that they had 'landed'. The signal was given and Howard's men with their supporting Sappers moved silently forward to the bridge. An umpire was

SOLDIER OF THE OXFORDSHIRE AND
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY



A soldier of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry dressed in a camouflaged Denison smock over a khaki serge battledress jacket and trousers. His 37 Pattern webbing is light khaki and consists of belt, cross braces, two ammunition pouches, bayonet and water bottle. He has a toggle rope around his waist. He wears a steel rimless helmet with netting cover and scrim garnishing to break up the outline. Around his neck is a camouflaged netting face veil. His face and hands are covered in black camouflage paint. His personal weapon is the Sten Mk V SMG.



Pte Frank Gardner, Capt Brian Priday and LCpl B. Lambley after 22 Platoon had rejoined D Company Ox and Bucks. Gardner has a Bren gun and pistol, Priday a Sten Mk V, and both he and Lambley have toggle ropes around their waists. (IWM B5586)

present on the ground and, although the company had captured their objective, he ruled that they had not and that the bridge had been blown. As was to be expected, the Poles provided a spirited 'enemy'. Lt Hooper of 22 Platoon argued furiously with the umpire over this point, but to no avail. More seriously, in the darkness there was a 'blue on blue' (friendly fire) contact between two platoons and according to the umpires they had inflicted heavy casualties on one another. The role of the *coup de main* force in *Mush* ended in failure. However, there had been valuable lessons for Howard and his men about the tactics required to capture a bridge. It was perhaps the experience of the 'blue on blue' that led to the adoption of the platoon radio call-signs as a simple form of identification – on the night of the attack the men would shout the phonetic alphabet letter that identified their platoon – 'Able' or 'Baker' for example. Happily for Lt Fox's platoon, their identifying shout would be 'Fox'.

At the end of May, the company climbed into its trucks and prepared to leave the battalion camp at Bulford. The rest of the regiment turned out to watch them leave, for, as Lt Sweeney, commanding 23 Platoon, recalled: 'they knew we were going on some special operation. They didn't know what. It was very unusual to see people poking their heads out of windows and coming to the doors of barrack blocks to see you motoring around the square and out. They obviously thought, "We're not going to see that lot again," and off we went.'

The company moved to a sealed camp; its barbed wire perimeter was guarded by Military Police, and from then on the men were cut off from any communication with the outside world. Inside this secure compound, like thousands of other troops destined to land on D-Day, they were told of their destination and learned the reason behind the intense training they had been through in the preceding months.

Sweeney recalled: 'We entered the briefing room one morning and everything was covered up. Maj Howard said to us, "OK, we'll have a little bet. Everybody will put 5 shillings [the equivalent of about £8 today] into the hat and whoever guesses where we are going to land gets the lot." He said, "Alright, now, where are we going to land?" At that stage most people thought that the landing would take place across the narrowest strip – the Pas de Calais – and that finally we had to invade Germany. So I said somewhere in the Antwerp Scheldt area; someone else said the Pas de Calais

MAY
1944

**Exercise *Mush*
carried out to train
the 6th Airborne
Division.**

BIGOT NEPTUNE

TOP SECRET

Copy No 1

2nd May, 1944

5 PAR BDE OO No 1 Appx A

Ref Maps. 1/50,000 Sheets 7/F1, 7/F2
1/25,000 Sheet No.40/16NW

To: Maj R.J. HOWARD, 2 OXF BUCKS

INFM

1. Enemy

(a) Static def in area of ops.

Garrison of the two brs at BÉNOUVILLE 098748 and RANVILLE 104746 consists of about 50 men, armed with four LAA guns, probably 80mm. Four to six LMG, one AA MG and possibly two A.Tk guns of less than 50 cm cal. A concrete shelter is under constr, and the br will have been prepared for demolition. See ph enlargement A21.

(b) Mobile res in area of ops.

One bn of 736 GR is in the area LEBISEY 0471–BIEVILLE 0647 with probably 8 to 12 tks under comd. This bn is either wholly or partially carried in MT and will have at least one coy standing by as an anti-airtps picket.

Bn HQ of the RIGHT coastal bn of 736 GR is in the area 065772. At least one pl will be available in this area as a fighting patrol, ready to move out at once to seek infm.

(c) State of Alertness.

The large-scale preparations necessary for the invasion of the Continent, the suitability of moon and tide will combine to produce a high state of alertness in the GERMAN def. The br grn may be standing to, and charges will have been laid in the demolition chambers.

(d) Detailed infm on enemy def and res is available on demand from Div Int Summaries, air phs and models.

2. Own Tps

(a) 5 Para Bde drops immediately NE of RANVILLE at 'H' minus 4 hrs 30 mins, and moves forthwith to take up defn posn round the two brs

(b) 3 Para Bde drops at 'H' minus 4 hrs 30 mins and is denying to the enemy the high wooded ground SOUTH of LE MESNIL 1472

(c) 6 Airlgd Bde is ldg NE of RANVILLE and WEST of BÉNOUVILLE at about 'H' plus 12 hrs, and moves thence to a def posn in the area of STE HONORINE LA CHARDONNERETTE 0971 – ESCOVILLE 1271

(d) 3 Br Div is ldg WEST of OUISTREHAM 1079 at 'H' hr with objective CAEN.

3. Ground

See available maps, air ph and models.

INTENTION

4. Your task is to seize intact the brs over R. Orne and canal at BÉNOUVILLE 098748 and RANVILLE 104746, and to hold them until relief by 7 Para Bn. If brs are blown you will est personnel ferries over both water obstacles as soon as possible.

METHOD

5. Composition of Force

(a) Cmd Maj RJ HOWARD, 2 OXF BUCKS

(b) Tps: 'D' Coy 2 OXF BUCKS less sp Brens and 3" M dets. Two pls 'B' Coy 2 OXF BUCKS Det of 20 Sprs 249 Fd Coy (Airborne) Det 1 Wing Glider P Regt

6. Flight Plan

(a) HORSAs gliders available 6

(b) LZ-X triangular fd 099745. 3 gliders LZ-Y, rectangular fd 104747. 3 gliders

(c) Timing. First ldg 'H' minus 5 hrs

7. Gen Outline

(a) The capture of the brs will be a *coup de main* op depending largely on surprise, speed and dash for success.

(b) Provided the bulk of your force lands safely, you should have little difficulty in overcoming the known opposition on the br.

(c) Your difficulties will arise in holding off an enemy counter-attack on the br until you are relieved.

8. Possible Enemy Counter-Attack

(a) You must expect a counter-attack any time after 'H' minus 4 hrs.

- (b) This attack may take the form of a Battle gp consisting of one coy inf in lorries, up to 8 tks and one or two guns mounted on lorries, or it may be lorryed inf coy alone, or inf on foot.
- (c) The most likely line of approach for this force is down one of the rds leading from WEST or SW, but a cross-country route cannot be ignored.

9. Org of Def Posn

It is vital that the crossing places be held, and to do this you will secure a close brhead on the WEST bank, in addition to guarding the brs. The immediate def of the brs and of the WEST bank of the canal must be held at all costs.

10. Patrolling

- (a) You will harass and delay the deployment of the enemy counter-attack forces of 736 GR by offensive patrols covering all rd approaches from the WEST. Patrols will remain mobile and offensive.
- (b) Up to one-third of your effective force may be used in this role. The remaining two-thirds will be used for static def and immediate counter-attack.

11. Emp of RE

- (a) You will give to your Sprs the following tasks only, in order of priority:-
Neutralizing the demolition mechanisms
Removing charges from demolition chambers
Establishing personnel ferries
- (b) In your detailed planning of the op you will consult with CRE or RE comd nominated by him in the carrying out of these tasks by the RE personnel under your comd.

12. Relief

I estimate that your relief will NOT be completed until 'H' minus 3 hrs, ie, two hours after your first ldg. One coy 7 Para Bn will, however, be dispatched to your assistance with the utmost possible speed after the ldg of the Bn. They should reach your posn by 'H' minus 3 hrs 30 minutes, and will come under your comd until arrival of OC 7 Para Bn as in para 13 (b).

INTERCOMM

- 13 (a) You will arrange for an offr or senior NCO to meet CO of 7 Para Bn near their BN RV at 'H' minus 4 hrs 30 minutes with the following infm:-
(i) Are brs securely held?
(ii) Are brs intact?
(iii) Are you in contact with enemy, and if so where, and in what strength?
(iv) If brs blown, state of ferries?
(v) Where is your coy HQ?

In addition you will give your prearranged signal for the brs, to show that they are in your possession, about 'H' minus 4 hrs 15 minutes.

- (b) OC 7 Para Bn will take over comd of the brhead and of your force on his arrival at the EAST br.

MISC

14. Glider Loads

- (a) Outline.
Gliders 1-4. One rifle pl less handcart. 5 Sprs
Gliders 5-6. One rifle pl less handcart. 5 men
Coy HQ
- (b) Detailed Load Tables will be worked out by you in conjunc with the RE and Bde Loading Officer.

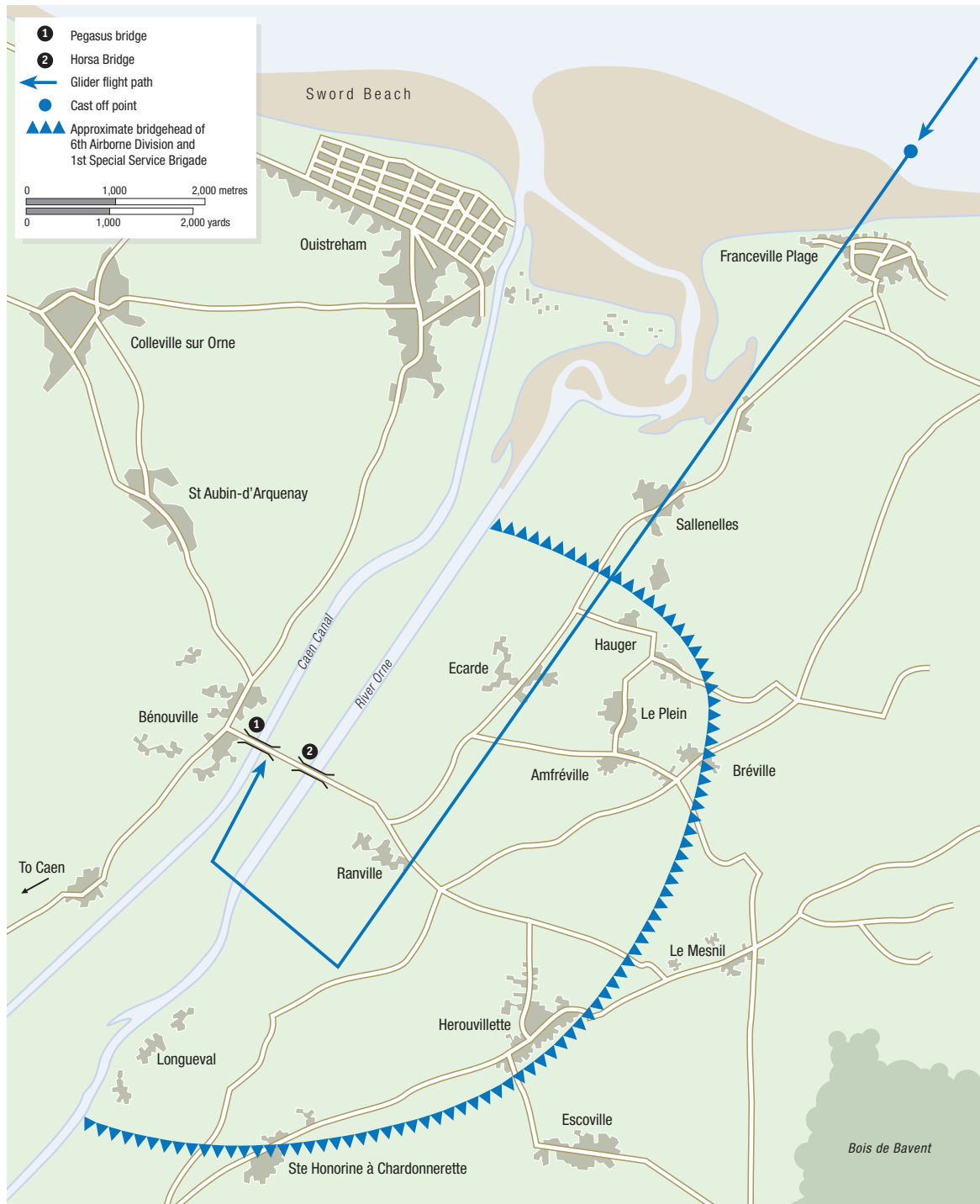
15. Trg

The trg of your force will be regarded as a first priority matter. Demands for special stores and trg facilities will be sent through your Bn HQ to HQ 6 Airdg Bde. Until further notice all orders and instrs to you will either originate from or pass through HQ 6 Airdg Bde.

Both Bde HQ will give you every possible help.

APO ENGLAND

(Signed) J.H.N. Poett, Brig. Cmd, 5 Para Bde



The cast-off point for the gliders was just short of the French coast, but there were few visual navigation aids for the pilots since low cloud cover obscured major features. Flying was consequently done by dead reckoning and timing. There were two critical turns to starboard for the pilots, the first to the south of Ranville and the second over the River Orne. This would place them flying north-east towards their landing zones. However, it was only when the clouds had cleared that they could be certain that they were correctly positioned to land – and then they had to fight as infantry alongside the soldiers of the Ox and Bucks.

and Le Havre. Two people said the Cherbourg peninsula without necessarily knowing there were any rivers.’ As winners, they pocketed the equivalent of about £15.

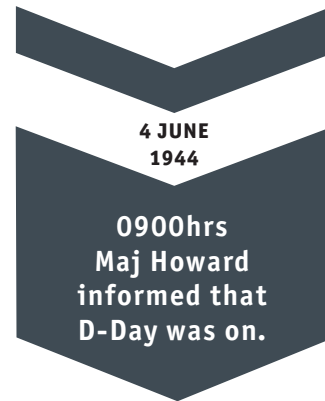
It was a dramatic moment, therefore, when Howard gave the order ‘Strip off the paper’ and maps, aerial photographs and the superb model were revealed. ‘Maj Howard then went through his plan again: how we were going to land and what we would do. After you had been briefed,’ recalled Sweeney, ‘you then had an opportunity to bring in your own platoon to do exactly the same thing with them, with the Company Commander listening.’

The mass of detailed intelligence was remarkable. ‘I don’t think there was a bush we didn’t know the height of, a ditch we didn’t know the depth of or whether it had any water in. We knew the strength of the enemy, we knew where the nearest Panzers were, we knew what to expect, who was coming behind, how many soldiers and how many anti-glider poles there were and when the last one had been put up or how many new holes had been dug. We knew the name of old Georges Gondrée in the café and that he spoke English.’

Several briefings were held and Howard addressed individual platoons and even sections. He encouraged his men to make use of a hut in which all of the maps and photographs were on display, and asked that they study all before them in detail and then talk amongst themselves about any ideas that they could add to the plan.

Gen Gale spoke to the men at Tarrant Rushton and, in a robust morale-boosting briefing, explained the prospect facing the German garrison of the Atlantic Wall: ‘The German today is like the June bride. He knows he is going to get it, but he doesn’t know how big it is going to be.’

The glider pilots, who had been practising their skills on carefully demarcated landing zones on the British Army training area on Salisbury Plain, were concerned that their aircraft would be overloaded, and so each of Howard’s platoon commanders had to tell two of their men that they would not be going on the operation but would rejoin the company after they had landed. A few days later, it was suggested that the company ought to have a medical officer on board because they were going into action completely alone, and so Capt John Vaughan RAMC was included. This meant that another man had to be left behind, but fortunately a soldier had sprained his ankle in a tough game of football and was excluded.



Maj John Howard’s beret: as he was part of the airborne forces, it is in their distinctive shade of maroon, but as he was an officer in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, the silver bugle horn has a dark green Light Infantry backing. (WF)

OPERATION DEADSTICK

**Glider No. 1. Tarrant Rushton Chalk No. 91
(Glider No. 667)**

Pilot	SSgt Wallwork
Co-pilot	SSgt Ainsworth MM
Tug pilot	WgCdr Duder, Halifax of 298 Sqn
No. 25 Platoon D Company, 2 Ox and Bucks	
Lt	Brotheridge
Sgt	Ollis
Cpls	Caine, Webb, Bailey
LCpls	Packwood, Minns
Ptes	Baalam, Bates, Bourlet, Chamberlain, Edwards, Gray, Gardner, O'Donnell, Parr, Tilbury, Watson, White, Windsor, Jackson 08
Maj	Howard
Cpl	Tappenden
Royal Engineers	
Cpl	Watson
Sprs	Danson, Ramsey, Wheeler, Yates

**Glider No. 3. Tarrant Rushton Chalk No. 93
(Glider No. 663)**

Pilot	SSgt Barkway
Co-pilot	SSgt Boyle
Tug pilot	WO Herman, Halifax of 644 Sqn
No. 14 Platoon B Company, 2 Ox and Bucks	
Lt	Smith
Sgt	Harrison
Cpls	Higgs, Evans, Aris
LCpls	Madge, Cohen, Greenhalgh
Ptes	Wilson, Hook, Stewart, Keane, Noble, Crocker, Basham, Watts, Anton, Tibbs, Slade, Burns, Turner, Golden
Capt	Vaughan (RAMC)
Royal Engineers	
LCpl	Waring
Sprs	Clarke, Fleming, Greenhalgh, Preece

**Glider No. 2. Tarrant Rushton Chalk No. 92
(Glider No. 661)**

Pilot	SSgt Boland
Co-pilot	SSgt Hobbs
Tug pilot	WO Berry, Halifax of 298 Sqn
No. 24 Platoon D Company, 2 Ox and Bucks	
Lt	Wood
Sgt	Leather
Cpls	Godbold, Cowperthwaite, Ilsley
LCpls	Roberts, Drew
Ptes	Chatfield, Lewis, Cheesley, Waters, Clark 33, Musty, Dancey, Harman, Warmington, Leonard, Weaver, Radford, Clark 48, Pepperall, Malpas
LCpl	Harris (RAMC)
Royal Engineers	
A/Capt	Neilson
Sprs	Conley, Lockhart, Shorey, Wilkinson

**Glider No. 4. Tarrant Rushton Chalk No. 94
(Glider No. 662)**

Pilot	SSgt Lawrence
Co-pilot	SSgt Shorter
Tug pilot	FgOff Clapperton, Halifax of 644 Sqn
No. 22 Platoon D Company, 2 Ox and Bucks	
Lt	Hooper
Sgt	Barwick
Cpls	Goodsir, Bateman
LSgt	Raynor
LCpls	Ambrose, Hunt
Ptes	Allwood, Wilson, Hedges, Everett, St Clair, Waite, Clive, Timms, Whitford, Johnson, Lathbury, Griffiths, Hammond, Gardner 08, Jeffrey
Capt	Priday
Royal Engineers	
LSgt	Brown
Sprs	Deighan, Guest, Paget, Roberts

Glider No. 5. Tarrant Rushton Chalk No. 95 (Glider No. 660)	
Pilot	SSgt Pearson
Co-pilot	SSgt Guthrie
Tug pilot	WO Bain, Halifax of 298 Sqn
No. 23 Platoon D Company, 2 Ox and Bucks	
Lt	Sweeney
Sgt	Gooch
Cpls	Murton, Howard, Jennings
LCpls	Porter, Stacey
Ptes	Allen, Bowden, Buller, Bright, Bleach, Clark 46, Galbraith, Jackson 59, Roach, Roberts, Read, Tibbet, Wixon, Wood, Willcocks
Lt	Macdonald (7th Para)
Royal Engineers	
Cpl	Straw
Sprs	Bradford, Carter, Field, Hadlett

Glider No. 6. Tarrant Rushton Chalk No. 96 (Glider No. 664)	
Pilot	SSgt Howard
Co-pilot	SSgt Baacke
Tug pilot	FgOff Archibald, Halifax of 644 Sqn
No. 17 Platoon B Company, 2 Ox and Bucks	
Lt	Fox
Sgt	Thornton
Cpls	Reynolds, Lally, Burne
LCpl	Loveday
Ptes	Jollet, Halbert, Clare, Peverill, Pope, Whitehouse, Whitbread, Lawton, Rudge, O'Shaughnessy, Ennetts, Summersby, Woods, Wyatt, Ward, Starr
LCpl	Lawson (RAMC)
Royal Engineers	
WS Lt	Bence
Sprs	Burns, C.W. Larkin, C.H. Larkin, Maxted

This list is based on one prepared by Denis Edwards, who, as Pte Edwards D No. 5391739, served in 25 Platoon D Company Ox and Bucks. Though Lt Macdonald, the liaison officer from 7th Bn The Parachute Regiment, landed at Ranville Bridge, he left soon afterwards to attempt to link up with the men of his battalion who were approaching from the east. In two sources Capt Vaughan, the RAMC doctor, is misleadingly named as Jacob. The spelling of Pte Charlie 'Gus' Gardner in 25 Platoon in some sources is given as 'Gardener'. Where two soldiers of the Ox and Bucks have the same surname, the last two digits of their army number have been added; the two Sappers named Larkin are distinguished by their initials. The name of Pte Clare of 17 Platoon is spelt as 'Claire' in the 5 RGJ Ham and Jam battlefield tour; however, this may have been a confusion with the Pte St Clair of 22 Platoon.

Dr Vaughan would look back over 50 years later and smile as he recalled how he was enrolled in the operation. He was enjoying a drink in the Mess when 'Col McEwan came in and said would we have a drink with him at the bar. He suddenly said to us, "I want a volunteer for a forlorn hope." We thought he was exaggerating and there was a nasty silence but everybody was so scared of this chap that we were more scared of not volunteering and therefore offending him, so everyone said they would like to do it. He said, "Well thank you very much, gentlemen," and left the bar. About ten days later I got a message from him: "Come to the HQ. I want to see you." [He said,] "Well, Vaughan, you wanted some action. You're going to get it now. You're going to be attached to a special force." I was then taken down in his car to the camp, where I was introduced to Maj Howard and his men.'

The constant stream of intelligence kept the soldiers and glider pilots up to date with changes around the bridges. Howard was worried by the increasing appearance

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