



Chapter 9

“Blood upon the risers”

(The paratroopers' song)

“There was blood upon the risers, there were brains upon the 'chute.”

Airborne

Professor Allan R Millett



The Allied airborne assault on D-Day rivaled the amphibious landings in complexity, risk, drama, heroism, losses, and effort. It can be debated whether the physical and psychological damage the two American and one British airborne divisions inflicted on the Wehrmacht truly justified the airborne operation. What is certain is that the airborne operations did not go as planned. In some zones of operations, particularly those of the British 6th Airborne Division, the missions, although altered in battle, added a useful degree of confusion to the German Seventh Army's response to the invasion. In no case could operational flaws be attributed to the skill and ardor of the airborne troops themselves or to most of the transport and glider pilots who carried them into a day of death and near disaster.

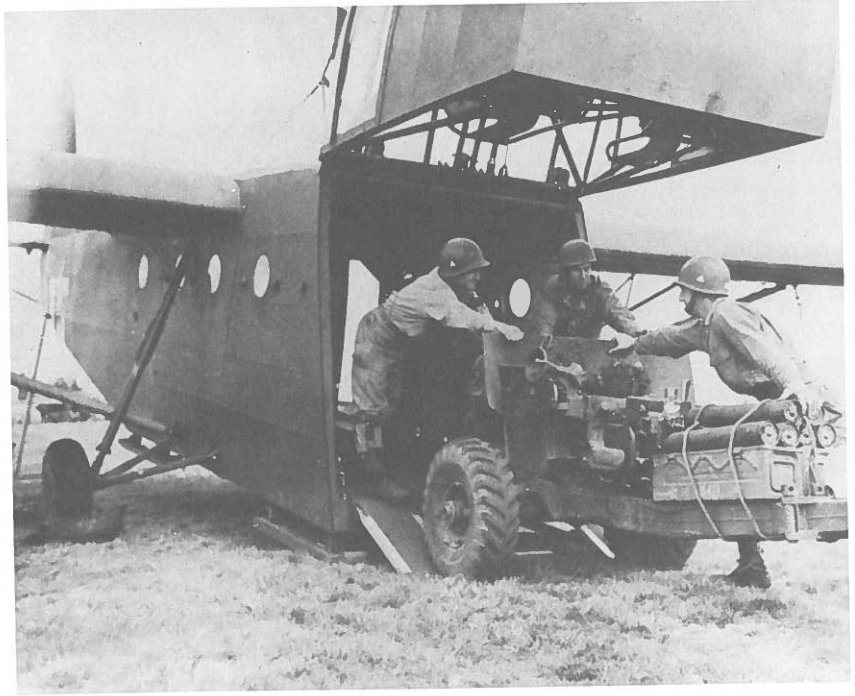
THE DEVELOPMENT OF AIRBORNE OPERATIONS

The airborne phase of Operation OVERLORD had its origins in the German invasion of Crete (May, 1941) and less ambitious Allied operations in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy in 1942-43. The concept of airborne assaults, however, predated World War II and grew from the awareness that the new air forces might provide a unique operational capability to ground forces, an ability to conduct a "vertical envelopment" of an enemy force too strong for a surface offensive to dislodge. As developed principally by the German, British, Russian, and United States armies by 1941, the concept took on more precise form. An airborne operation should be part of a larger ground offensive, probably an amphibious landing. The mission of an airborne assault would be to seize and defend critical terrain and military objectives that would impede enemy counterattacks on the landing forces. The airborne forces might also occupy key defensive terrain in a pre-emptive assault, thus disrupting the enemy's defensive plans. Even if casualties in the airborne troops were high on a percentage basis, airborne operations might reduce overall field army losses if the enemy lost its ability to conduct a cohesive, coordinated defense that required rapid counterattacks, a staple in German operational thinking.

An airborne operation that would be an important element in a larger offensive required three phases and three different kinds of air-landing forces. The first phase required the dropping of parachute infantry on or near critical objectives. A mission might require no other force but parachute infantry, but if a commander required sustained operations, the next phase brought glider-borne air-landing forces and critical amounts of ammunition, rations, and medical supplies.

OPPOSITE Two ready to load.
(Airborne and Special Operations
Museum)

Loading a .57mm anti-tank gun on a glider. (Airborne and Special Operations Museum)



The air-landing forces would be a mix of more infantry with mortars and heavy machine guns, field artillery batteries, and anti-mechanized artillery companies. Glider-borne units could also bring light vehicles and mounted, powerful radios to the assault force. If a glider-borne force was an operational necessity, then the initial parachute infantry objectives had to include clear glider-landing fields that would be safe from enemy direct-fire weapons like anti-aircraft machine guns and automatic cannon. If the first two phases of the airborne assault were successful, a third phase might occur, the landing of transport aircraft on a captured airfield or "heavy" air-landing operations that would bring medium artillery, heavier vehicles (including Bren gun carriers, perhaps light mechanized forces), sustaining logistics, and fresh infantry. If the planning included the heavy air-landing phase, then the first and second phase forces had to capture an enemy airfield capable of handling large, loaded transports and becoming an instant full-service airport. Such sites were obviously few in number, heavily defended, vulnerable to air and ground attack, and seldom located for the convenience of the attacking forces, the same limitation amphibious forces faced in capturing a major port like Cherbourg. In the Normandy operation the only feasible location for a complete three-phase, corps-sized airborne operation was a four-airfield

complex around the French city of Évreux, some 80 kilometers from the Normandy beaches and right in the middle of the German mechanized reserve forces south of the Seine River.

DIVIDED OPINION ON THE USE OF AIRBORNE TROOPS

The Allied and German airborne experiences in the Mediterranean theater provided a very mixed body of operational expertise that guaranteed continuous, heated arguments over the employment of airborne forces. The Wehrmacht simply opted out of division-sized operations after the capture of Crete, because senior army and Luftwaffe officers thought the losses of elite paratroopers (Luftwaffe forces) and aircraft were excessive; the Germans, however, received plenty of relevant experience in how to defend against an airborne assault. The Allied experience – principally by US Army airborne regimental combat teams (about 2,000 officers and men) – did not offer convincing proof that even a phase-one operation (parachute infantry only) was worth the risk.

For its impact on Allied airborne operational planning for D-Day, the US 82nd Airborne Division provided the bulk of the sadder and wiser experiences in Sicily, July, 1943. Transport aircraft could not find the drop zones; "friendly" anti-aircraft units ravaged the transport formations; paratroopers landed miles from their objectives; parachute infantry too light to stop mechanized enemy forces fought without adequate artillery and air support. The 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (Col. James M. Gavin) had less than one-fifth of its 2,000 assault paratroopers land on or near the proper drop zones in Sicily; the scattered combat groups found themselves locked in mortal combat with a German panzer division. In a week of fighting in Sicily, the 82nd Airborne Division took 27 percent casualties, but stopped the German counterattack on Gela with close combat, artillery, and naval gunfire. Two smaller operations by the British 1st Airborne Division also endured friendly-fire losses on the transports and gliders; half the paras came down around the actual drop zone and actually closed the bridge assigned as their objective. Of 16 gliders, three landed near the bridge, and 12 were lost to enemy action. The British took 23 percent casualties in a 3,856-man force. Subsequent airborne operations in Italy did not convince most senior commanders that divisional airborne operations had much future.

Despite the Mediterranean experience, Allied planning made airborne operations a centerpiece of the cross-Channel offensive. The late 1943 initial plans for NEPTUNE, the amphibious phase of OVERLORD, included an airborne assault deep behind the narrow

three-division beach. A British division would land east of the Orne River to guard the landing forces' left flank. Two American divisions would take Bayeux. Airborne operations had political-military support at the highest levels. On the British side, Winston Churchill, although skeptical about OVERLORD, remained transfixed by high-risk special operations, the coup de main that used British pluck and ingenuity to offset Axis numbers and material excellence. He also admired Britain's unconventional airborne generals, Richard N. Gale and Frederick A. M. "Boy" Browning, both heroic Western Front lieutenants in World War I.

Browning was pure Victorian in background: an Eton and Sandhurst athlete, wealthy, a *matinée* idol in manner and appearance, a Grenadier Guards officer, and the husband of a literary lioness, the novelist Daphne du Maurier. Richard Gale, known to his peers as "Windy," shared Browning's enthusiasm for adventurous warfare. Of common means and family background, Gale, a machine gun officer in World War I, spent almost all of the inter-war years on regimental duty. An obscure major in 1939, he proved a great trainer as an infantry battalion commander, 1940-41, and took command of the 1st Parachute Brigade (September, 1941). When Browning took the British 1st Airborne Division to the Mediterranean, Gale succeeded him as War Office director of army air operations, which included the Parachute Regiment and the Glider Pilot Regiment.

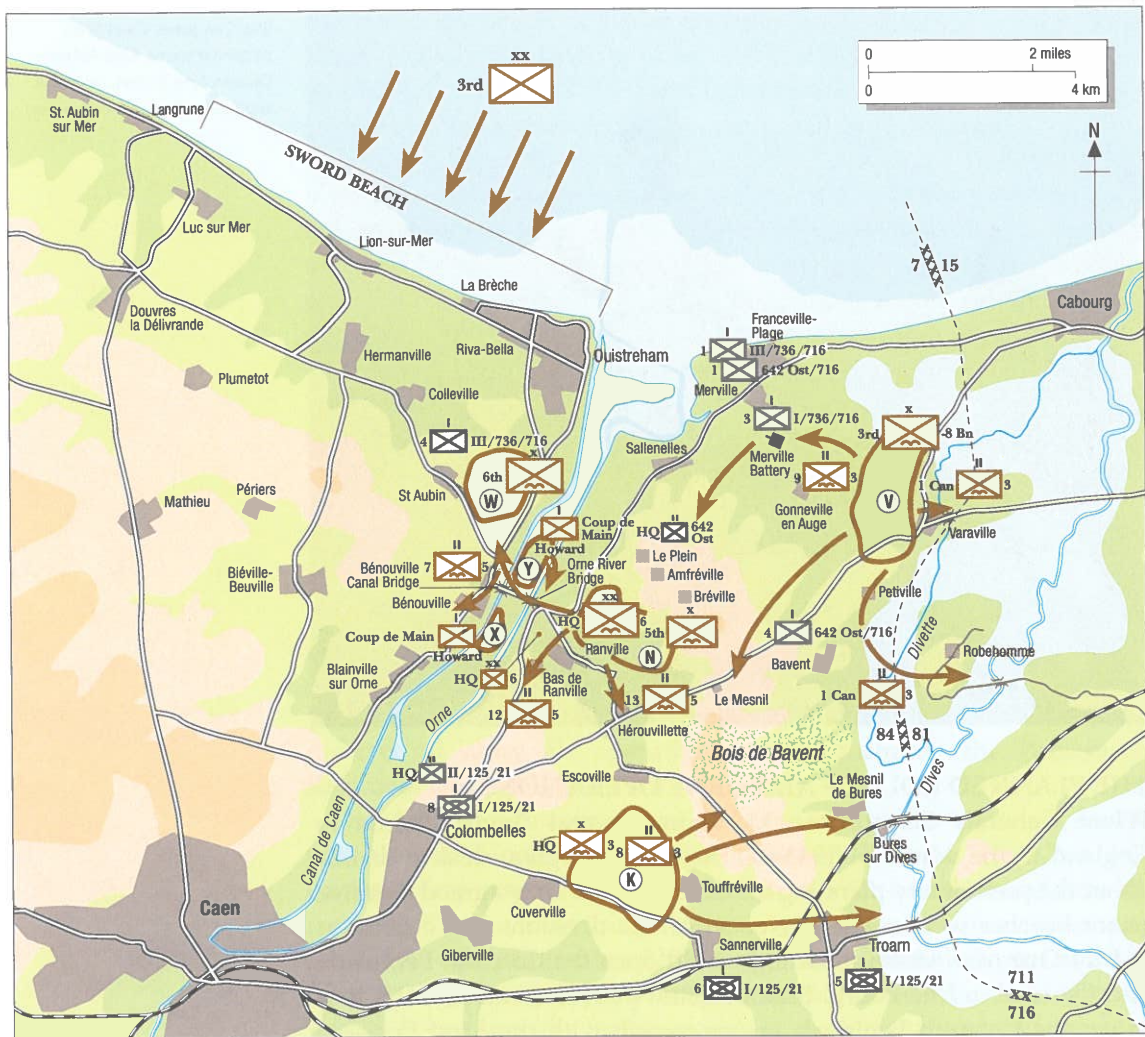
The American champions of airborne operations included Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall and General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, commanding general, US Army Air Forces. With Marshall and Arnold committed to the wide use of American air power, airborne operations needed no other advocates. Almost all other major Allied army and air force generals saw no special magic in battalion and brigade parachute special operations (the British model) or the Marshall-Arnold concept of corps-sized strategic air landing assaults on the Crete model. Even if the Allies could form airborne divisions (and there were four in Europe early in 1944), the transport and glider requirements looked insurmountable. The American army, however, did not have to deal with the equivalent of the Royal Air Force in buying transports since the USAAF had no separate service status. Marshall and Arnold could build an airborne army if they so desired, and they did. Based on their notions of strategic air landing operations, the two American generals created enough parachute and glider infantry regiments and C-47 transport groups for as many as seven airborne divisions. With this investment beyond recall in 1944, someone needed to find a use for this elite force.



Brig. Gen. James Gavin briefs pathfinder teams, 82nd Airborne Division, June 5, 1944. (Airborne and Special Operations Museum)

THE PLANNED ROLE OF AIRBORNE OPERATIONS

When Generals Eisenhower, Montgomery, and Bradley came to England in the winter of 1943–44, they found a great deal to dislike about the preliminary planning for OVERLORD. They agreed that five major beaches were needed, over which six divisions could land on D-Day. One new western landing would open the Cotentin Peninsula and the road to Cherbourg. Bradley's first plan (December, 1943) was to cut the Cotentin Peninsula in one assault with the 82nd Division establishing an airhead (an area that would assure the continued arrival of troops and materiel by air) west of the Douve River at the city of St-Sauveur-le-Vicomte. Gavin, now a brigadier general and the chief airborne planner, was disturbed by the risks. As elements of the German 91st Airlanding Division began to appear along the Douve, Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, RAF, and commander, Allied Expeditionary Air Forces, demanded that the plan be changed. The RAF's Cassandra predicted an aerial slaughter and a ground combat disaster that would endanger the whole Cotentin campaign. The next alternative Bradley saw was the Marshall–Arnold Évreux concept, even more frightening, and fueling Leigh-Mallory's opposition. Bradley and Gavin crafted another Cotentin plan,



British 6th Airborne Division,
D-Day, June 6, 1944

completed May 26, that moved the 82nd Airborne Division eastward to the Merderet River valley and closer to the 101st Airborne Division. Still worried that Leigh-Mallory would persuade Eisenhower to cancel the American air assault, Bradley insisted that there would be no UTAH Beach assault without the airborne operation. As Gavin recalled: "We received the new plan without a single regret."

The final plan committed the 82nd Division to drop its three parachute infantry regiments on either side of the Merderet River. West of the river the paratroopers would control a plateau and two major roads north of the Douve River before it joined the Merderet and flowed to the sea. The division's eastern sector included the town of

Ste-Mère-Eglise, five roads, a railroad, and two small towns – La Fière and Chef-du-Pont – that commanded two causeway-bridges that spanned the broad Merderet. The critical road east of the Merderet ran along a low ridge of small fields and thick woods that led to the city of Carentan, about ten miles to the south. The 101st Division's sector, about 40 square miles, lay east of the Ste-Mère-Eglise–Carentan road. Bradley assigned the division the mission of driving east to open the four causeway-roads that would bring the US 4th Infantry Division off UTAH Beach, isolated from the farmlands by marshes and flooded tidal plains. The paratroopers would attack the Germans, especially field artillery batteries, between them and the beach. The 4th Division would bring medium artillery and a tank battalion to give weight to the paratroopers' fight, especially against German mechanized counterattacks. Tactical air support might be available as well as naval gunfire. The 101st Division would try to capture Carentan even before help arrived, and defend the southern perimeter while the US VII Corps wheeled north toward Cherbourg.

The British 6th Airborne Division assumed a similar set of interdiction missions. The 5th Parachute Brigade would land just east of the Orne River/Caen Canal and prevent German use of the twin bridge complex at Bénouville ("Pegasus Bridge"), the only such crossing between Caen and the sea. The 3rd Parachute Brigade would drop to more dispersed drop zones farther to the east and seize four bridges, three of them over the Dives River. The paras would also capture a German battery at Merville and set up roadblocks to confuse German troop movements east of Caen. The 6th Airlanding Brigade (less one battalion) would come in by glider to provide light vehicles, heavy machine guns, pack artillery, and towed anti-tank guns. The 1st Special Service Brigade (Commando) would spearhead the amphibious force that would link up with airborne forces at Pegasus Bridge, to be captured by the glider-borne Company D, 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (Major John Howard).

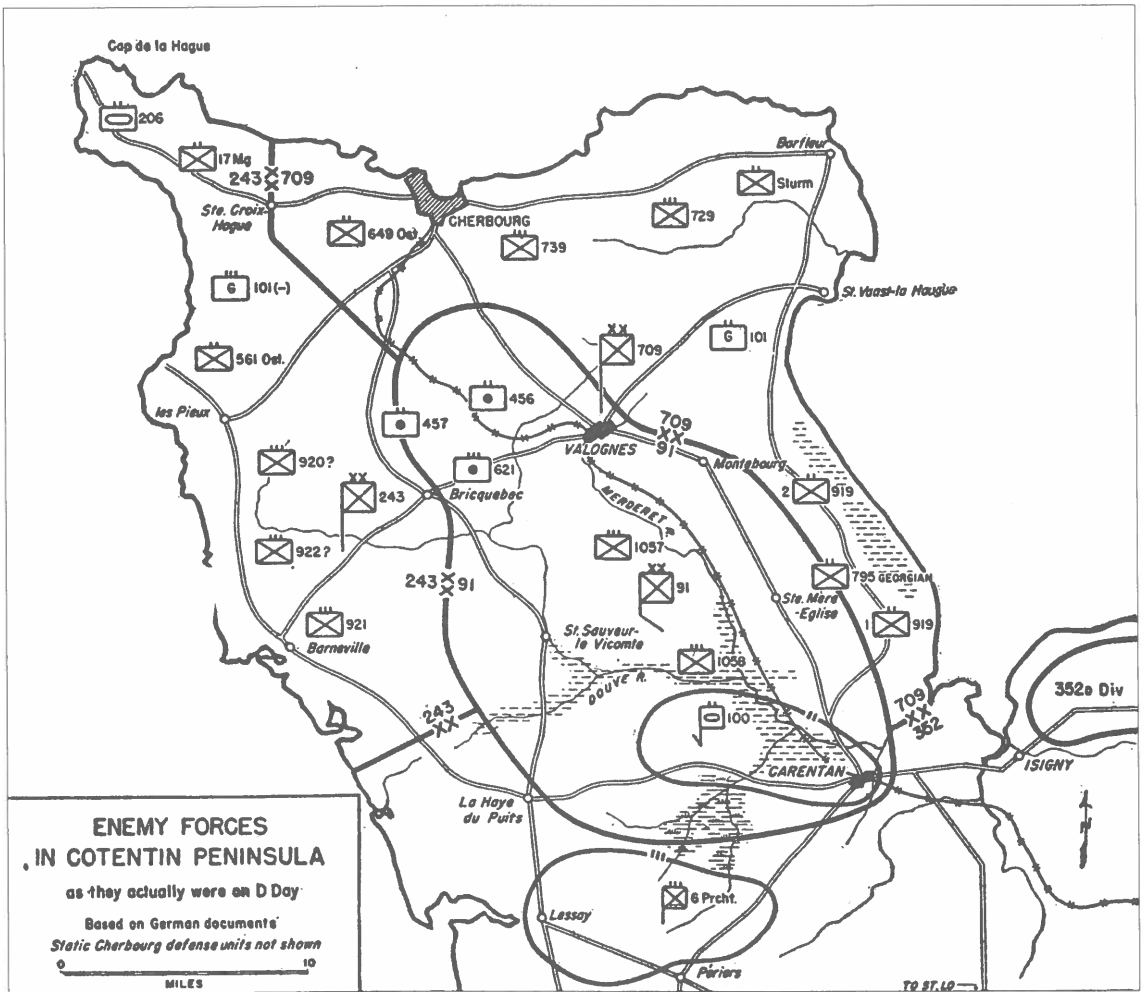
OVERLORD planners at all levels became aware of the known risks and unpredictable perils that faced the three airborne divisions. It was no comfort that Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory did not favor the airborne assault, since he had the direct responsibility for the operation's success. With extrapolations from Mediterranean losses and assuming no improvement in airborne tactics and techniques, Leigh-Mallory first predicted catastrophe in March and hectoring Eisenhower with memos of doom up until May 30. Leigh-Mallory's estimates ran from one-third to half the transports and gliders in

flight, "colossal losses" of aircraft, gliders, and embarked soldiers. Eisenhower finally told Leigh-Mallory to stop spreading his gloom, which must have affected the transport and glider pilots who had little or no combat experience and knew a C-47 as transport or glider tug made a slow, fat target.

THE OPPOSING FORCES

By the spring of 1944, the German commanders on the Cotentin Peninsula and the Norman coastline believed they might face a simultaneous amphibious and airborne assault. Their planning for counter-airborne operations differed with their perception of Allied plans, the terrain, and the forces at hand, but plan they did. In the

Enemy forces in Cotentin Peninsula
(Courtesy, U.S. Army Center of
Military History)



future drop-landing zones of the British 6th Airborne Division, the LXXXIV Corps (General der Artillerie Erich Marcks) controlled two third-rate infantry divisions (716th and 711th), committed to beach and air defense with an armored force, the war-weary 21st Panzer Division, in reserve. At the other flank of the planned amphibious objective area (UTAH Beach), the German 709th Infantry Division manned the fortifications that began at the mouth of the Vire River and extended to Cherbourg. Positioned west of the Merderet-Douve Rivers and south of Carentan, the 91st Airlanding Division and 6th Parachute Regiment had the mission of eliminating any Allied airhead. The British paras faced the greatest challenge, outnumbered and exposed to their worst nightmare, an armored attack on their landing zones. The American divisions faced about equal numbers (20,000 more or less), but German forces with no substantial mechanized forces. The biggest German deficiency was the Luftwaffe's departure for the air defenses of the Third Reich.

The German forces in the Caen-Orne River valley depended primarily on light, automatic, multi-barreled 20mm cannon for air defense, deadly against low-flying transports. They also erected anti-glider poles ("Rommel's asparagus") and other obstacles and mines in fields likely to be landing sites. The UTAH Beach area provided an additional option - flooding. The low tidal marshlands behind the beaches required no engineering magic. Inland, however, German pioneer troops dammed the Merderet and Douve rivers and their tributaries, thus turning the river valleys into temporary lakes and swamps. Most of the water obstacles were not over six feet deep, but the paratroopers (total landing weight as much as 400 pounds of man and equipment) were not prepared for survival-swimming under fire. Bundles of weapons, ammunition, and supplies easily disappeared in the murky waters. General Marcks also received some additional units to improve his anti-airborne capability: a special infantry assault battalion, a rocket battalion, a machine gun battalion, and a tank battalion. Marcks' immediate superiors - Generaloberst Friedrich Dollman (Seventh Army), Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel (Army Group B) and Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt (Army Group West) - did not believe that an airborne assault in the LXXXIV Corps area would open the expected Allied amphibious invasion.

The not-so-watchful waiting by the German generals, encouraged by the storms of June, influenced their army. Although the lower ranks labored away at building obstacles, storing ammunition, and checking their weapons' fields of fire, the tactical commanders showed little

urgency in organizing counterattack plans that could be mounted at night when Allied confusion would be greatest and air and naval fire support almost useless. The soldiers of the German infantry divisions in 1944 were a mix of veterans, foreign conscripts, and overage and teenage Germans, held together by cadres of officers and NCOs whose authority to punish (including field executions) was backed by the *feldpolizei*. Panzertruppen and *fallschirmjäger* remained more formidable enemies. Although German infantry battalions had fewer troops, they had more light mortars, AT weapons, and MG-42 machine guns, the most effective single infantry weapon the Allies faced in Normandy.

The Allied airborne divisions presented a sharp contrast to their German foes. Except for a handful of recent veterans in the British 6th and the US 82nd Airborne Divisions, the Allied paratroopers and

American glider infantry on the way to Normandy. (82nd Airborne Division War Memorial Museum)



glider infantry had endured almost two years of rigorous training, but no combat. They had become physically fit to their armies' highest standards and skilled in a wide range of infantry weapons. Continuous field exercises weeded out many ineffective leaders. Field training stressed tactical initiative at every level, since few paratroop leaders believed that any night drop would work as planned in terms of unit concentration and cohesion. Contrary to post-war mythology, often nourished by German veterans, the Allied airborne combat units were not armed with weapons that outclassed the Germans. The Allied airborne troops had to depend on surprise, speed, tactical ingenuity, physical stamina, sheer courage, and leadership at all ranks, not material superiority.

THE TRANSPORTS

Getting the elite paratroops and the glider infantry, with their supporting light artillery, to the battlefield in intact battalions proved more than their transports could manage. The glider pilots, another elite in the British service, had little choice but to find the best place to land when their tug-transports broke the two-rope connections. Transport pilots, USAAF or RAF, were not the pick of their service's aviators, and their aircraft matched their own low status. The British created transport groups of bombers and bomber air crews, a solution that provided excellent groups, but too few in numbers for even a British division. British heavy bombers could serve as glider tugs, but their flight characteristics made them poor troop-carriers. The success of the D-Day airborne assault depended, therefore, on the three C-47 wings of the US IX Troop Carrier Command (Brig. Gen. Paul R. Williams, USAAF), a force of 1,176 aircraft and 1,004 air crews assigned to the US Ninth Air Force and then attached to the Allied tactical air command. The flying officers of the IX Troop Carrier Command were the least effective pilots in the USAAF, rejected for offensive air operations and plagued by air and ground problems in attitude and behavior. One enlisted crew chief who became a command historian noted that transport pilots seldom developed primary groups or worked well with their commanders (often experienced airline pilots) or ground crews. Glider pilots, on the other hand, developed strong common bonds based on their lowly ranks, ground combat experiences, and shared danger and contempt for gun-shy transport pilots.

The C-47 had positive qualities that endeared it to its air crews and passengers. It was easy to fly and maintain. It remained a stable aircraft at slow drop-speeds (100-120 knots), and its reduced prop-wash (the

surge created by the propeller) reduced the dangers of 'chute-fouling for the jumpers. Beneath its military color scheme, however, the C-47 was still the Douglas DC-3 commercial airliner. It was not a high-priority USAAF acquisition and had not been altered much for airborne operations. Its gas tanks lacked armor and self-sealing features, increasing the chances of fires and fatal explosions. The pilot, co-pilot, and enlisted navigator had little protection. The crew chief had to stand in the narrow hatch to kick out the bundled arms, ammunition, and supplies before the paratroopers shuffled to the door, jumped right out, and counted to four. The greatest challenge was night navigation and formation flying. Flight leaders had SCR 717 radar, but it was too complex for time-urgent flight corrections. The ground terminal radio beacons ("Eureka") did not always reach their airborne partners ("Rebecca"). The ultimate source of direction was the group leaders' navigator and crew chief, which meant that humans under stress had to make the "red" signal (four minutes out) and "green" signal (jump) by hand-held lights to around 25-30 aircraft. The flight profile for a tight, safe drop demanded a high order of skill and courage. The concealment of darkness provided some element of surprise, assisted by low-level (600-800 feet) flying.

The optimum altitude for a drop was 600 feet at an airspeed of 100-120 knots. A higher-faster flight profile scattered a "stick" of 13-17



American airborne dead.
Cotentin Peninsula, June 1944.
(82nd Airborne Division War
Memorial Museum)

parachutists and exposed them to dangerous prop-wash, other aircraft, and enemy flak for more than 30 seconds. A high-speed drop meant that gravity forces would rip away a jumper's weapons and equipment when his 'chute blossomed. A reduction of altitude meant that a paratrooper's 'chute might not fully open. A partial or complete "Roman candle" (when a parachute failed to open) meant that a jumper landed at a speed of 35 to 150 miles an hour.

The gliders themselves were barely adequate in design and numbers. The American contribution, the CG4A "Waco," was too heavy and large in packaged form to ship in scarce cargo space and too small in payload capacity (15 troops or one jeep); only 3,750 Wacos reached the global war. British gliders flew or landed in a controlled crash with better aerodynamic characteristics. The Horsa (6,900-pound payload or almost twice a Waco's) and the Hamilcar (16,000-pound payload) provided space for towed anti-tank guns, heavy radio jeeps, and Bren gun carriers. The Hamilcar's weight meant that a four-engined bomber had to fly as tug while a C-47 could tow a Horsa. The British glider pilots (enlisted volunteers) had high morale and felt privileged to be members of The Glider Regiment. They received additional combat training and expected to join para or air-landing battalions in combat, a policy that created pilot shortages but enhanced esprit de corps and bonded air crew to their passengers.

THE BRITISH AIRBORNE ASSAULT

The 6th Airborne Division's missions on D-Day had few complexities and many difficulties. The division knew its objectives in February, 1944, and they remained unchanged. The purpose was to buy time and space for the Allied forces landing over SWORD Beach by commanding the high ground between the Caen Canal-Orne River and the Dives River. The bridges over the canal and western river were to be seized and held intact; those over the Dives would be destroyed, thus slowing a German panzer counterattack. An added (but crucial) mission was to destroy the German heavy coastal battery at Merville that endangered the SWORD landing. The transports and tugs for the 6th Division came from the RAF's 38th and 46th Groups (470 aircraft, 1,120 gliders), on the whole better-trained than their USAAF counterparts.

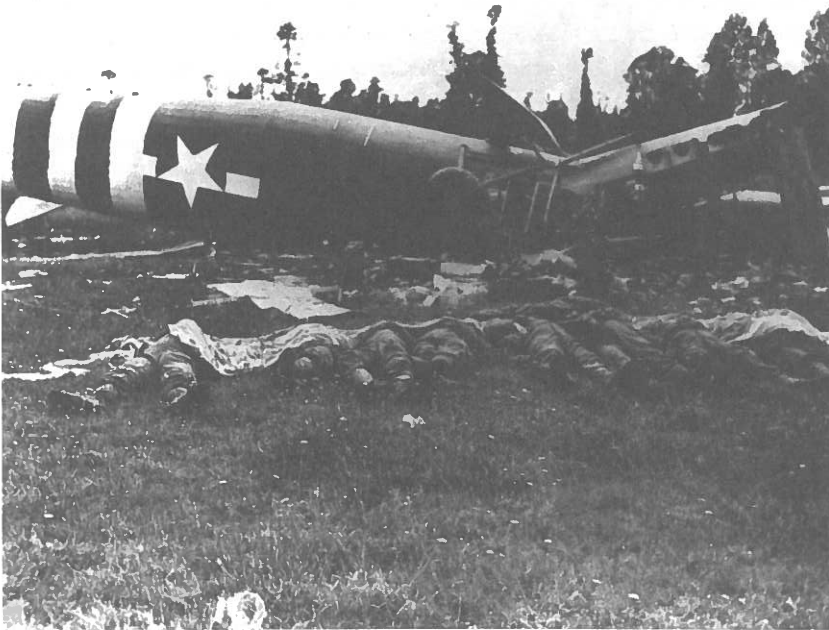
The 6th Division plan provided for four waves of assault before D-Day's dawning. Shortly after midnight, the reinforced company of the 2nd Ox and Bucks in six gliders would land near the Caen Canal-Orne River bridges and seize them intact. Within the same hour, pathfinder teams parachuted into three drop zones east of the Orne

Glider riders. (Airborne and Special Operations Museum)



and set up terminal guidance systems for the main force, six parachute battalions of roughly 4,200 officers and other ranks, who landed between 12:30a.m. and 1:00a.m.. At 3:20a.m. 68 Horsa gliders would deliver critical supplies, ammunition, anti-tank guns, engineers with mines and demolitions, communications jeeps, and light howitzers as well as the division's forward headquarters. During dusk of D-Day another glider force would bring in the 6th Airlanding Brigade (less one battalion) and the rest of the division's "heavy" units.

The plans did not produce complete success, but on the whole the 6th Division accomplished all its missions within acceptable time limits and casualties. The transport force experienced fewer losses than anticipated; all but five of 129 transports dropped their "sticks" somewhere between the Orne and Dives. Of the 264 transports that flew D-Day missions for the Sixth Division, only seven were lost. The glider force lost 22 of 98 gliders, a more serious statistic that included 71 glider pilot casualties. The actual placement of the troops was another matter through flak avoidance and poor navigation. The 3rd Brigade, which had five missions for three battalions, had two zones, V for Varaville and K for Touffréville, separated by six miles. Some of its pathfinders landed in Zone N (the 5th Brigade's area) and guided planes to the wrong place. Only about half of Zone V's two battalions (9th Para and 1st Canadian) found their rendezvous, and



The perils of glider landings,
Normandy June 6, 1944.
(82nd Airborne Division War
Memorial Museum)

only one of 11 gliders found the zone. The brigade lost most of its mortars and demolitions engineers. It also lost its naval gunfire party. The 9th Paras took the Merville battery by unsupported direct assault with only 170 men, led by the battalion commander. Two gliders of assault troops arrived for a coup de main, but missed the battery. The storming party lost half its men, but captured the complex from the 716th Division's defenders, only to find no heavy guns inside the battery.

The 1st Canadians destroyed two Dives River bridges with two composite companies of its own and errant paras from two other battalions. One Canadian company almost became a complete casualty in a flooded area, but its remnants and some late-arriving engineers destroyed one bridge. To the south, the 8th Para battalion mustered only 141 officers and men in Zone K, since only four of 37 C-47s found the zone while the rest of the battalion landed miles away in Zone N. Nevertheless, the 8th Paratroopers fought their way into Bures and Troarn and battled the Germans while the gallant sappers of 3rd Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers rushed the bridges under fire and blew away one span. All of the 3rd Brigade's battalions returned to pre-planned defensive positions west of the Dives, brought in some stragglers, and beat back the half-hearted local counterattacks of the 716th Division and one battalion of panzergrenadiers, 21st Panzer Division.

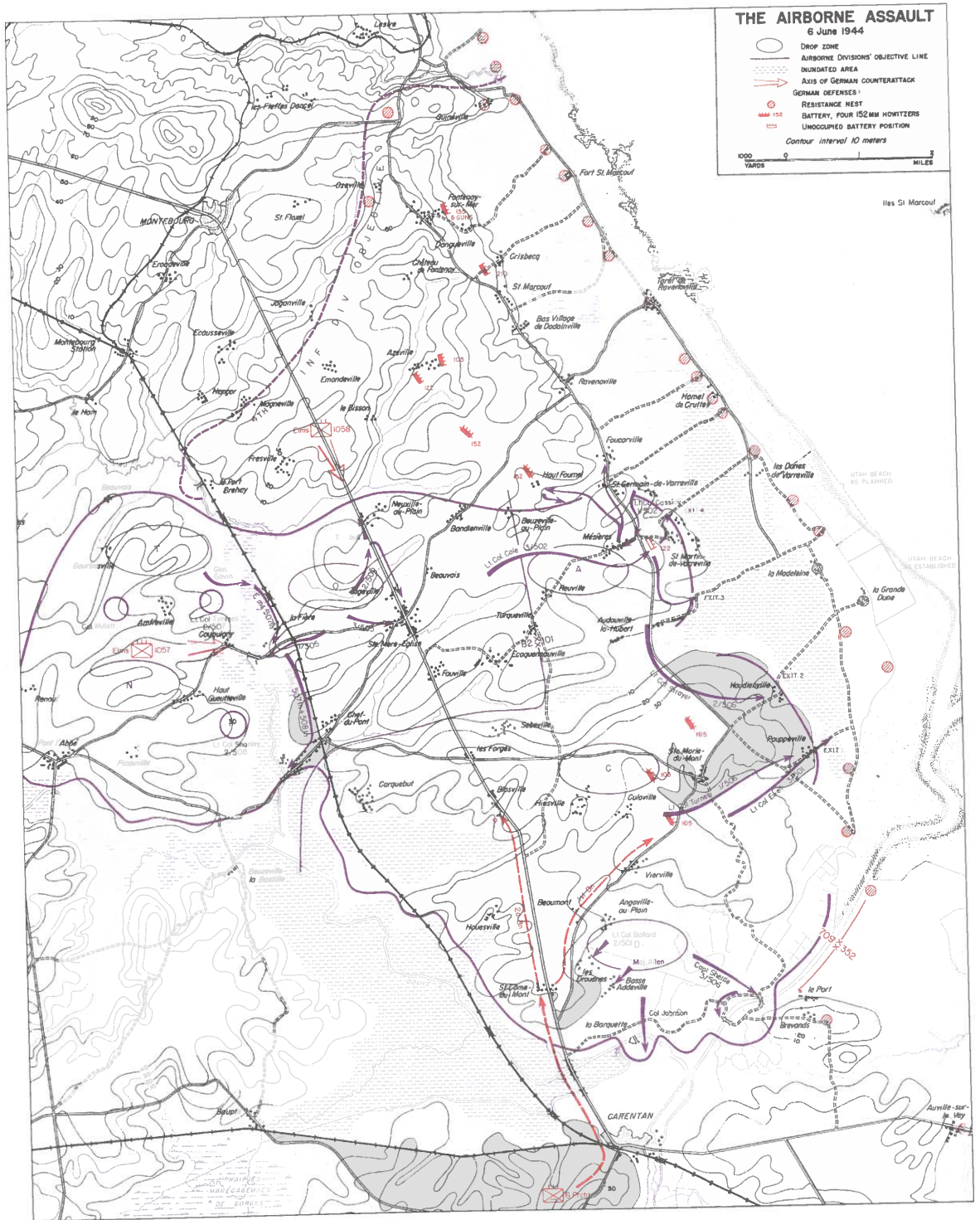
The 5th Parachute Brigade faced a sterner challenge, serious counterattacks by the 21st Panzer Division to recapture the Caen–Orne bridges. The first two parachute battalions (7th and 12th Para) arrived in disarray. Without most of its crew-served weapons and with about half its troops, 7th Para rushed to reinforce the Ox and Bucks company at Bénouville and Le Port west of the Caen Canal. The 12th Para had half of its “sticks” hit Zone N, but its own stragglers and those of 7th Para allowed it to establish a good position east of the Orne, facing south. The reserve 13th Para had the best drop and held Zone N while helping the other battalions beat back two panzergrenadier battalions that began probing attacks around 3:30a.m. The critical reinforcement was the 3:20a.m. glider wave; 50 of 68 scheduled Horsas arrived with 11 anti-tank guns, mines, and machine guns as well as General Gale and his staff. With good ground and sufficient men and munitions, the 6th Division had arrived to stay. The commandos of the 1st Special Service Brigade reached Pegasus Bridge at 1:00p.m., followed five hours later by infantry and tanks from the British 3rd Infantry Division. The 6th Airlanding Brigade made its glider entry as scheduled at dusk, with 248 of 258 gliders landing west of the Caen Canal. By dark, the airhead contained 14 infantry battalions, medium artillery, armor, and a full complement of engineers, air control parties, naval gunfire spotters, and service troops. The German 716th Division presented no threat, and the bloodied 21st Panzer Division broke off its attacks along the Caen Canal–Orne axis to await the arrival of I SS Panzer Corps. With ingenuity, initiative, and determination, the 6th Airborne Division had secured the Allied left flank at a cost of 821 dead, 2,709 wounded, and 927 missing, about evenly divided between the dead and prisoners.

THE AMERICAN AIRBORNE ASSAULT

The American airborne operation behind UTAH Beach by the 82nd Airborne and 101st Airborne divisions remains second only to the OMAHA Beach landing in near disaster. The excessive losses and general confusion are usually blamed on Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory and the C-47 transport pilots, convenient scapegoats for Generals Bradley, Ridgway, and Taylor, a trio of senior officers consumed by ambition, peer rivalry, and an indecent desire to please the media and their superiors. The only airborne skeptic in the Normandy operation was Brigadier General Gavin, assistant division commander of the 82nd Airborne, who served as COSSAC airborne planner after commanding the 505th Airborne Infantry Regiment, the only combat-tested regiment in all the American airborne forces in

England. Gavin watched one poor decision after another eventually ruin three American airborne regiments, two in his own division. He helped make the plans, too. Never have so many dropped in so small an area with so little purpose and so much loss. Only the fighting heart of younger officers and sturdy troops saved the operation.

The difficulty began with General Bradley's decision, approved by General J. Lawton Collins of VII Corps, to use both American divisions at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. Leigh-Mallory didn't like the plan: too many gliders (almost 700 by the eve of D-Day), too much risk in isolation for the 82nd Division, out of range for naval guns and any 4th Division artillery. Leigh-Mallory might have committed USAAF tactical aircraft to inland targets in the drop zone, but he resisted any use of fighter-bombers in close air support, and the Americans, scared of "friendly fire" but unwilling to train to eliminate it, did not protest. Leigh-Mallory insisted that predawn glider operations be cut from 260 to 100 tugs and gliders and the evening waves from 400 to 200. Bradley made the change, and neither Taylor nor Ridgway objected. The final change the Americans accepted was to create three new drop zones for Ridgway's division closer to those of the 101st Airborne, which made sense since both divisions would be short on anti-tank guns and howitzers, victims of the glider reductions. The battle would be borne by some 13,000 paratroopers of six airborne regiments wedged between the beach marshes and flooded Merderet River valley. There was a better option, but it required the cooperation of Maxwell D. Taylor, no friend of either Ridgway or Gavin, who regarded Taylor as a dilettante artilleryman of too much quick intelligence, great charm, sycophantic brilliance, questionable courage, and convenient ethics. Ridgway's former chief of staff and division artillery commander, Taylor had escaped Ridgway's wrath for inattentive work by promotion to brigadier general and a transfer, championed by Bradley, to the 101st Division. Taylor replaced Maj. Gen. William C. Lee in March, 1944 when Lee, the true airborne pioneer, collapsed from a heart attack. Taylor regarded Ridgway as a relentless egotist of limited intelligence, boundless energy, more physical courage than judgment, and a sanctimonious hypocrite who surrounded himself with dim-witted staff officers and commanders he manipulated through intimidation. Taylor may have excluded Gavin (who loathed him) from this characterization because he regarded Gavin - a poor orphan from coal-mining Pennsylvania who completed West Point without a high school education - as a social inferior. Taylor would accommodate Ridgway only as much as Bradley demanded. Fearing that internal battle would fuel Leigh-Mallory's demands to scratch the whole operation, the



airborne generals and Bradley stopped the operational adjustment with one change too few.

The adjustment untaken was the assignment of the 101st Airborne's 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) to take causeway Exits Four and Three right behind UTAH Beach. Absorbed with training and buried in trivial matters his obsessive personality could not ignore, Ridgway did not propose one more logical change: shift the 502nd PIR to Exits Two and One to the south and use the proven 505th PIR to take Exits Four and Three, the 507th or 508th PIR to take Ste-Mère-Eglise and the Merderet bridges from the east bank, and the remaining regiment to hold the river's western bank or concentrate at Chef-du-Pont, another east bank crossroads. As Ridgway doted on the 505th PIR, so Taylor regarded the 502nd PIR as "Max's Own." Its commander, Colonel George Van Horn Moseley, Jr., a general's son, was mediocre and obliged everyone by breaking a leg just before he emotionally collapsed. His executive officer and replacement, Lt. Col. John H. "Mike" Michaelis, was a true warrior as were the three battalion commanders, Patrick Cassidy, Steven Chappius, and Robert G. Cole. Three, deservedly, became generals, but Cole died in Holland before learning he had been awarded a Medal of Honor. Taylor would not deny the 502nd PIR the best mission on D-Day.

In the face of Ridgway's and Taylor's demands to stage realistic parachute exercises, Bradley and Maj. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton, the Ninth Air Force commander, had no stomach for revising the airborne plan. Like a vulture at Agincourt, Leigh-Mallory hovered around the IX Troop Carrier Command, looking for fatal flaws. Taylor held to his high risk, high glory scheme unchallenged. Two of his regiments would open UTAH Beach while the third (the 501st PIR) drove south to take and hold a canal lock, bridge system, and road around the city of Carentan, key to the Douve-Taute and Vire River valleys and the roads to OMAHA Beach. This zone was the responsibility of the German 6th Parachute Regiment and the reinforcements it was likely to receive from LXXXIV Corps. The 501st PIR had the most demanding mission, but Taylor put one of its battalions in division reserve while the 506th PIR opened Exits One and Two, well south of the planned UTAH Beach. Basically, the division would put two regiments behind the beach and only one in the most menacing entrant to the battlefield. Moreover, the 4th Division's scheme of maneuver would send it north, not to reinforce the 501st PIR.

82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION

By midnight June 6 in a clear, moonlit night, the American aerial armada (917 transports with 96 towing gliders) formed up over the Channel, then turned south away from the invasion fleet below it. In a

OPPOSITE The Airborne Assault.
(Courtesy, U.S. Army Military
History Institute)

V-of-Vs, the transport groups droned on at 1,500 feet above the water, crossed over the occupied Channel Islands, and began their west-east run across the 23-mile-wide base of the Cotentin Peninsula. Pathfinders would drop from the first wave on six drop zones: T, N, and O for the 82nd Division and (north to south) A, C, and D for the 101st Division. The transports dropped to 600 feet and slowed down – and ran into a dense cloud bank. Alerted by their radars, the German flak batteries fired in blind abandon at the passing aerial host. The leading waves escaped almost unscathed, the 21 transports actually shot down coming from the rear serials. The clouds and flak, however, broke up the neat Vs as some transports climbed as high as 2,000 feet, others dropped below 500 feet, and many increased their airspeeds well above 120 knots. Many of the transports, overloaded at take-off, had to increase their airspeeds to avoid stalling. Controlled navigation disappeared. Individual air crews had less than ten minutes to plot adjusted courses. Dropping bundles added to the miscalculations. Confused and terrified air crews missed or misread terminal guidance beacons and lights. In four zones, the pathfinders fought more and guided less. One pilot made three passes to find the right drop zone for his stick; few had equal faith and determination. Weapons and equipment came down willy-nilly, torn by gravity from the parachutists. The transports carrying the 505th PIR found Ste-Mère-Eglise, in part because a large house on its square had caught fire. The better half of three battalions and Ridgway and his staff (60 of 118 sticks) landed in Zone O or at least within two miles of it. Eight sticks landed as much as 14 miles from the zone. Confused by the rain of paratroopers, the Germans fought only briefly for the town and then fled; a flak company riddled the troopers who came down within the town, but moved off for Cherbourg. The 505th PIR set up an extemporized defense with about half its jump strength, the only one of Ridgway's regiments to fight with any degree of cohesion.

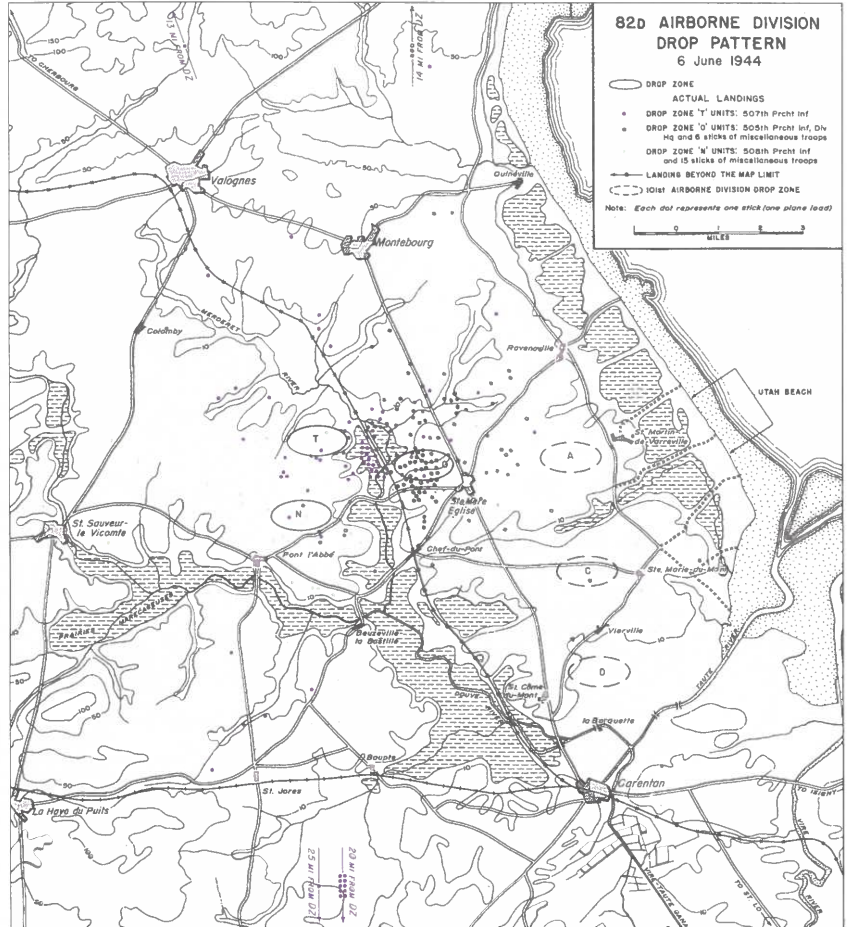
The rest of the 82nd Division met a cruel fate west of the Merderet. The 507th PIR missed Zone T almost completely. About 20 sticks landed around Ste-Mère-Eglise and joined the 505th PIR. Most of the regiment landed in the flooded Merderet; those not drowned, or shot or captured by the 1057th Infantry Regiment, 91st Division, were too exhausted and weaponless to fight. There were some exceptions. Expecting trouble west of the Merderet, Jim Gavin, M-1 tied to his body, jumped with the 508th PIR west of the Merderet marshes. Most of the 508th PIR landed on high ground, but badly scattered. Thirty sticks landed east of the river, nine almost on UTAH Beach. Gavin and the regimental commander rallied about 50 men and then joined



150 more survivors of the 507th PIR and 508th PIR. This demi-battalion, all that could join the 505th PIR, entered the fight to hold the Merderet bridges. By nightfall, Ridgway commanded about one-third of his original division. Most of the 507th and 508th PIRs died or were captured in three isolated pockets west of the Merderet; of 12 parachute and glider battalion commanders, only four survived the battle in command, three of them wounded. Half of their replacements became casualties. About half of the three Ridgway PIRs became casualties on D-Day alone, establishing a division loss rate that held for 33 more days of fighting for control of the Merderet valley and Ste-Mère-Eglise. Of the division's 5,436 casualties, only an estimated

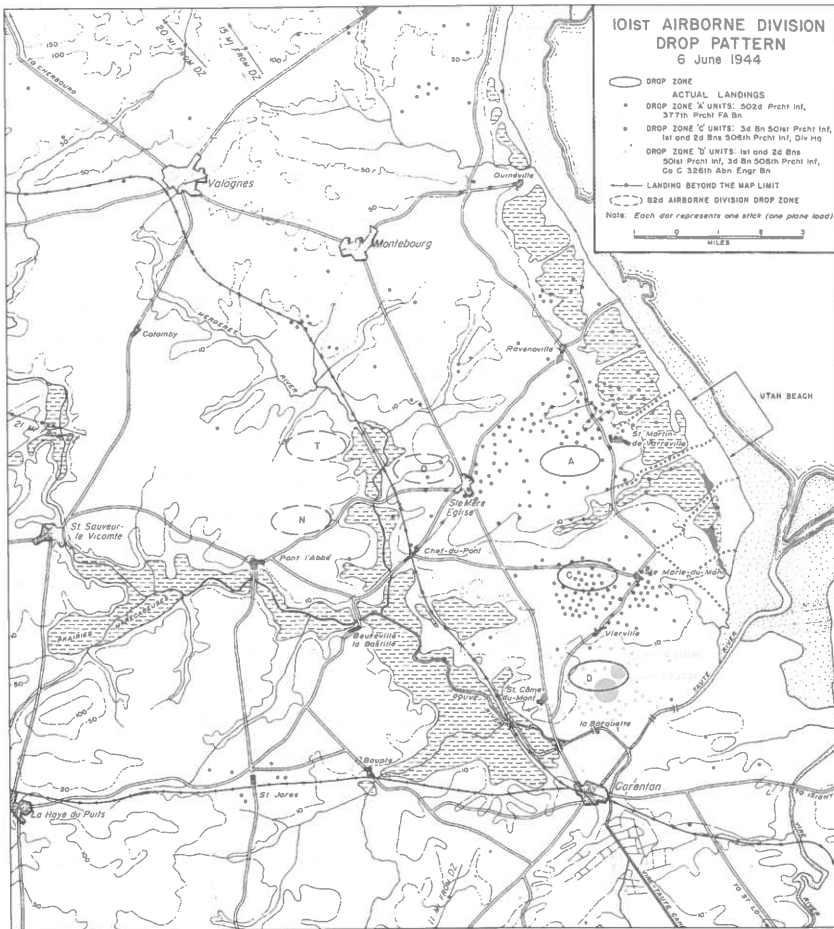
Ste-Mère-Eglise. (Airborne and Special Operations Museum)

82d Airborne Division Drop Pattern. (Courtesy, U.S. Army Military History Institute)



272 were lost in the drop itself, but the scattered drop doomed hundreds more.

The 82nd Division glider serial (52 gliders) completed the debacle at about 4:30a.m. on June 6 by crashing in the woods, hedgerows, orchards, cattle herds, German obstacles, and stone walls around Ste-Mère-Eglise. Thirty-one gliders landed within two miles of their goal, Zone O of the 505th PIR. Twenty-two gliders (wherever they landed) crashed and ruined their cargo: 26 soldiers, eight precious anti-tank guns, 11 jeeps, medical supplies, the division's best radio equipment, and much of Ridgway's staff became casualties. Six big 57mm anti-tank guns, however, went into the 505th PIR's position, Ridgway's greatest fire power until late on D-Day when his sea echelon (mostly artillery) arrived and D+1 when the 325th Glider Infantry arrived in a glider lift.



101st Airborne Division Drop Pattern. (Courtesy, U.S. Army Military History Institute)

101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION

The experiences of the three parachute regiments of the 101st Division mirrored those of the 82nd Division, but with variations on the confusion theme. In the broad sense, the division accomplished one of its two missions, eliminating the German positions at the western ends of the Exits Four-One Causeways. It did not take Carentan or stop the German 6th Parachute Regiment from counter-attacking deep into the division's position. The paratroopers did, however, capture or isolate six artillery batteries of the German 709th Division, as well as engage that division's infantry to such a degree that it posed no threat to the landing. The initiative and tactical skill of individual leaders and the fragments of companies and battalions carried the day, since General Taylor and his regimental commanders never controlled their organizations.

The reinforced 502nd PIR (it had an attached artillery battalion) landed in disarray behind Exits Four and Three. Fifty-two sticks came down outside the division's northern boundary; another 25 sticks landed around Zone C to the south among the 506th PIR. The transports evened the maldistribution by dropping over 30 sticks of the 506th PIR among the 60 or so 502nd sticks that came down around Zone A. Probably around 30 sticks hit the tidal marches behind the beach. Private David Webster of the 506th PIR found himself on a swamp hillock with six castaways from four different regiments. Blessed with superior leadership once Colonel Moseley departed, the three 502nd PIR battalions, really mixed groups of 200 paratroopers each, attacked the German batteries and garrisons between them and the causeways. The drop itself wrecked the 377th Parachute Artillery Battalion, which lost all 12 of its howitzers in a drop that varied from three to 12 miles from Zone A. Of 2,500 Zone A paratroopers about 600-800 fought the Germans on D-Day. It was enough - barely. Cassidy and Cole took their teams against the Germans between them and the beach while Chappius's scattered battalion defended the zone to the north and south. Cole's 3rd Battalion, 502nd PIR controlled Exit Three by 7:30a.m. where it met the advance guard of the US 8th Infantry Regiment early that afternoon after the battalion had ambushed a fleeing German company. Cassidy's battalion had to fight its way through four fortified villages to open Exit Four. Colonel Michaelis with 200 troopers arrived to hold Exit Four while Cassidy pushed north to block the roads on the regiment's flank. A handful of paratroopers actually outfought the Germans. The best example was the feat of Staff Sergeant Harrison Summers, who almost single-handedly killed or captured the 150-man garrison of La Mézières in five hours of house-to-house fighting. Summers then admitted: "I'm sure I'd never do anything like that again."

The drop of the 506th PIR (Col. Robert F. Sink) and the 3rd Battalion, 501st PIR (Lt. Col. Julian Ewell, a future general) on Zone C behind Exits Two and One did nothing to reassure General Taylor, who made his second jump into Normandy. (He wore jump wings for one "qualifying" jump that Ridgway approved for his division staff in 1943.) Sink's 2nd Battalion landed in Zone A, far from its objectives, Exits Two and One. The scattered battalion fought its way back to its zone, but arrived at Exit Two that afternoon to find it in the hands of other paratroopers and the 8th Infantry. Colonel Sink sent his 1st Battalion (fewer than 100 effectives) to clear the exits, but it made little headway against German resistance. General Taylor, initially part of a group of 15 led by two generals and two colonels, sent

Ewell's battalion (again perhaps 100 men) to take the defended towns of Houdienville (Exit Two) and Pouppeville (Exit One). Ewell's force drove the Germans out of Pouppeville and held the exit until the 8th Infantry arrived at mid-morning. In the meantime, Colonel Sink gathered some of his 1st and 2nd Battalions around Ste-Marie-du-Mont where he waged an all-day battle in the hedgerows with a battalion of the 191st Artillery Regiment and a force of German paratroopers. This sharp local fight was shaped by Sink's responsibility for holding a new Zone E for the late afternoon glider operation that would bring in 32 Horsas. Twenty-four landed more or less on location under German fire; the enemy fire and crashes eliminated 54 of the 157 embarked soldiers, including Brig. Gen. Don F. Pratt, Taylor's assistant, dead of a broken neck. The operation improved Taylor's supply situation, but he already had heavy weapons support from the 4th Infantry Division. Sink ended the day with 650 men in two battalions.

The destruction of a four-gun battery of 105mm howitzers positioned near a French farm-fortress, Brécourt Manor, typified the sort of independent action that kept the Germans off-balance. With the 506th PIR still scattered in the early morning of June 6, Colonel Sink sent an extemporized platoon of 20 officers and men from three different companies to silence the guns, defended by perhaps 50 enemy infantry. The risks were acceptable since the guns had begun to shell the "new" UTAH Beach. Lieutenant Richard D. Winters (Company E, 506th PIR) got the assignment since he, another lieutenant, and nine enlisted men would be the initial assault force. With a classic example of supporting fires (two machine guns) and close assault with grenades, rifles, and submachine guns, Winters' group killed or routed the crews, spiked the guns, and held the Germans at bay before ending the raid with four dead and two wounded. Winters returned later in the afternoon with a 4th Division tank-infantry team to kill or capture the remaining Germans in the strongpoint.

The 101st Division's non-beach oriented mission went to the 501st PIR (Colonel Howard R. "Skeets" Johnson) and the attached 3rd Battalion, 506th PIR. Johnson's regiment (less Ewell's battalion) and the 506th PIR battalion were supposed to capture Carentan and its canal-river locks and bridges. The Germans prevented this success. Despite heavy flak, the transports dropped Johnson's force almost all on or near Zone D, just west of the Vierville-St-Côme-du-Mont road. Only ten sticks went wildly out-of-area. The German defenders, however, had Zone D under heavy machine gun and artillery fire. The 1st Battalion, 501st PIR lost its battalion commander, his staff, and all



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its company commanders and half its troops, thus leaving the battle without making any impact. The 3rd Battalion, 506th PIR fared little better. Its senior surviving officer, a staff captain, gathered 50 men and reached the Taute River, but could go no farther. Johnson's headquarters and his 2nd Battalion, also disorganized by its landing, split into two groups of about 150 each. Johnson and his operations officer took one group to a canal lock, one objective, but again met stubborn German defenders. The second group found too many Germans at St-Côme-du-Mont to advance. Naval gunfire from a US Navy cruiser, directed by a team of naval gunfire controllers, kept the Germans immobile, but the stand-off ended when two battalions of the 6th Parachute Regiment slipped north of Carentan and attacked both the 501st and 506th PIR, supported by troops from the German 91st and 709th Divisions. Johnson concentrated his faux regiment (perhaps 500 effectives) for a defense well short of his D-Day objectives and awaited help. The help could not come from the 101st Division, which mustered about 2,500 men of the 6,500 troopers who had made the night drop.

OPPOSITE General Eisenhower visits the 101st Airborne Division on June 5, 1944. (Airborne and Special Operations Museum)

THE UTAH BEACH LANDING

The UTAH Beach landing by the 4th Infantry Division rescued the airborne divisions. For once, fortune smiled on the Americans. For one thing, the presence of the airborne divisions forced the navy to use pinpoint naval gunfire against the beach defenses, its doctrinal preference, rather than area fire inland. The Ninth Air Force's pre-landing attacks came down the beach's long axis (north to south), not at a right angle, the bombing pattern at OMAHA Beach. A wave of B-26s missed their primary targets, but their "overs" smashed the strongpoint La Madeline and damaged La Grande Dune strongpoint. The initial waves of landing craft drifted south 2,000 yards, which brought them into the accidental gap in the beach defenses and gave them direct access to Exits Two and One, not to Exits Four and Three, still defended by stubborn German troops. The American infantry with tanks pushed forward through Exits Three-One, which stiffened the 101st Division's positions. Since Taylor's 327th Glider Infantry Regiment and two missing artillery battalions did not come ashore with any urgency, the reinforced 8th Infantry made a welcome appearance. It took another whole day for the 4th Infantry Division to shore up Ridgway's fragile line along the Merderet and his division's northern perimeter. Like the 82nd Division, the "Screaming Eagles" left Normandy in July reduced by 4,670 casualties, but it was impossible to be precise about how many paratroopers fell on D-Day. The estimate

is that 40 percent of the division's parachute force of June 6 became casualties, about 2,600 officers and men.

SUMMARY

No one quibbles about the fortitude and tactical skill of the three Allied airborne divisions that participated in Operation NEPTUNE. It is easy to forget how few of them from colonel to private had been in combat before June 6, although they had certainly trained hard and long. There was no appreciable difference between the combat performance of the British and Canadian paras and their American comrades. All three divisions fought a mix of first rate and second rate German troops; the 6th Parachute Regiment, 91st Airlanding Division, and 21st Panzer Division were as good as any unit in the regular German army, and the 701st and 709th Divisions had infantry that would defend fixed positions under the command of veteran NCOs, and both divisions had good artillery, field and fixed. Why did the British 6th Airborne Division accomplish all its missions and the American divisions did not? The answer is not the quality of the transport air drops. Although the British C-47 squadrons flew slightly steadier and tighter formations, they also faced somewhat lighter flak and thinner clouds. The British did use more and bigger gliders, flown by skilled pilots, and they timed the glider force arrival more expertly. Therefore, the British parachute brigades had more light artillery and anti-tank guns to face German counter attacks. The amphibious forces brought up tanks and heavier artillery slightly more rapidly from SWORD Beach. None of the divisions received much naval gunfire or any close air support, common in the Pacific in mid-1944.

The essential American problem revolved around two airborne division commanders (both eventually chiefs of staff, US Army) and their willingness to pressure Bradley and, to a lesser degree, Collins into approving an overly ambitious plan based on heroic assumptions about IX Troop Carrier Command and their own parachute regiments. The plan wasted the 507th and 508th Parachute Infantry Regiments (82nd Division) and allocated at least one regiment too few to the capture of Carentan. Clearing the four beach exits received too much emphasis; naval gunfire, close air support, and the US 8th Regimental Combat Team and its attached tank battalion could and did force three of four beach exits, only one with a serious fight shared with the paratroopers. Future planning, for example Operation MARKET in Holland, September 1944, reflected the lessons of Normandy: flak suppression by tactical aircraft, the earlier introduction of big gliders with artillery and anti-tank guns, and a drop in broad daylight with

more effective terminal guidance in more hospitable landing zones. This time the planning errors would be British - Montgomery's and "Boy" Browning's to be precise - and the cost at Arnhem worse than D-Day. Learning remained an early casualty in war.