

= Operation Tonga =

This article summarises British airborne operations during the Normandy landings . For American airborne operations , see American airborne landings in Normandy .

Operation Tonga was the codename given to the airborne operation undertaken by the British 6th Airborne Division between 5 June and 7 June 1944 as a part of Operation Overlord and the D @-@ Day landings during the Second World War .

The paratroopers and glider @-@ borne airborne troops of the division , commanded by Major @-@ General Richard Nelson Gale , landed on the eastern flank of the invasion area , near to the city of Caen , tasked with a number of objectives . The division was to capture two strategically important bridges over the Caen Canal and Orne River which were to be used by Allied ground forces to advance once the seaborne landings had taken place , destroy several other bridges to deny their use to the Germans and secure several important villages . The division was also assigned the task of assaulting and destroying the Merville Gun Battery , an artillery battery that Allied intelligence believed housed a number of heavy artillery pieces , which could bombard Sword Beach and possibly inflict heavy casualties on the Allied troops landing on it . Having achieved these objectives , the division was then to create and secure a bridgehead focused around the captured bridges until they linked up with advancing Allied ground forces .

The division suffered from a combination of bad weather and poor pilot navigation which caused many of the airborne troops to be dropped inaccurately throughout the divisional operational area , causing a number of casualties and making conducting operations much more difficult . In particular , the 9th Parachute Battalion , which was assigned the task of destroying the Merville artillery battery , was only able to gather up a fraction of its strength before it had to attack the battery , with the result that the depleted force suffered a number of casualties . However , the battery was successfully assaulted and the guns inside it disabled , and the division 's other objectives were also achieved despite the problems encountered . A small force of glider @-@ borne airborne troops secured the two bridges over the Caen Canal and River Orne , the other bridges were destroyed , and a number of towns were occupied . A bridgehead was formed by the division , and it successfully repulsed a number of German counter @-@ attacks until Allied ground forces from the invasion beaches reached its positions . The actions of the division severely limited the ability of the German defenders to communicate and organise themselves , ensuring that the seaborne troops could not be attacked during the first few hours after landing when they were most vulnerable .

= = Background = =

Operation Tonga originated in the planning of Operation Overlord , the plan for the eventual invasion of France and the opening of a Second Front in North @-@ Western Europe . Planning for the invasion of Europe by the Allies had begun in May 1943 when President of the United States Franklin Delano Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had met at the Washington Conference . The two Allied leaders decided that all available Allied forces in the theatre should be concentrated in Great Britain , and that planning for the invasion of North @-@ Western Europe should begin . A provisional target date of May 1944 was set , the code @-@ name Overlord decided upon , and a joint Anglo @-@ American planning staff created under Lieutenant @-@ General Frederick E. Morgan , who was given the title of Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (COSSAC) . Planning then began for the invasion of Europe , and even early plans for Overlord called for the commitment of airborne forces to support the ground forces and protect their landing areas . Operation Skyscraper , for example , called for the deployment of two airborne divisions to land near Caen on the east coast of the Cotentin Peninsula in support of an invasion of Normandy by five divisions , whose objective would be the capture of Cherbourg and then breaking out to the east of Normandy . One ambitious proposal , " Plan C " , was put forward by General George Marshall that would have involved a large airborne drop on the Seine , aiming to cut the German forces in half during D @-@ Day itself .

A number of plans were eventually drawn up by Morgan and his cadre of staff officers for the

invasion of Normandy , finally deciding that the invasion should take place on a thirty @-@ mile front west of the River Orne , rejecting the need to capture the Pas De Calais and the ports there by calling for the creation of prefabricated artificial ports to ferry equipment and troops ashore once the initial landings had occurred . Morgan 's final plan would utilise three divisions in the first assault , with airborne forces being dropped onto the town of Caen early on the first day to seize the first breakout route .

Following the appointment of General Bernard Montgomery to the command of the 21st Army Group , the plan underwent a number of further revisions , and on 21 January 1944 a revised Overlord plan was presented to General Dwight D. Eisenhower , who had been chosen as the Supreme Allied Commander for the invasion . The updated and revised plan widened the landing area to include all of the coastline between the River Orne and the eastern coast of the Cotentin Peninsula , to be taken with five divisions , with airborne divisions to land either side of the landing areas to secure their flanks and protect the landing troops from counterattack . The British airborne forces were to land in the east and the American airborne forces to land to the west of Bayeux to protect the flanks of the infantry and armoured units moving inland from the beaches .

= = Prelude = =

= = = British Preparation = = =

The British 6th Airborne Division , which was under the command of Major @-@ General Richard Nelson Gale , was chosen to conduct airborne operations on the eastern flank of the invasion area . The division was new , having been activated in April 1943 . Operation Overlord would be its first experience of combat . It had been the first to be established for the purpose of undertaking division @-@ level airborne operations , rather than contributing to a range of smaller operations , and there was considerable debate over what the unit should do in practice .

As late as January 1944 , Gale noted that he had ? no indication as yet of a definite airborne task ' for his unit and continued to keep all options open , reflecting the ongoing discussions at the strategic level over the wider plan for D @-@ Day . On 17 February 1944 Major @-@ General Frederick Arthur Montague Browning , commander of all British airborne forces , arrived at the headquarters of the division to brief General Gale on what the division was expected to achieve during Operation Tonga . The original plan for Tonga did not involve the entire division , however , instead only calling for a single parachute brigade and an anti @-@ tank battery to be attached to the British 3rd Infantry Division . This force would be tasked with seizing bridges over the Caen Canal and the River Orne near the towns of Benouville and Ranville . Gale , however , objected to this small @-@ scale operation , arguing that a single brigade would not be able to achieve these objectives with such limited manpower , and asked for the entire division to be deployed . After consultation with his superiors , Browning agreed to the request and ordered Gale to begin planning for the operation .

The division was allotted three specific tasks to achieve as a part of Operation Tonga , apart from protecting the eastern flank of the Allied seaborne landings and taking control of the areas of strategic importance to the east of Caen . First , it was to capture intact the two bridges over the Caen Canal and the Orne River at Benouville and Ranville . The bridges then would be defended against counterattacks . Before D @-@ Day , Gale knew that the capture of the bridges would be critical for the resupply and reinforcement of 6th Airborne but he did not know that the bridges were incapable of supporting tanks . Second , the division was to destroy the heavily fortified Merville coastal artillery battery located at Franceville Plage , to ensure that it could not shell the British forces landing on Sword Beach . A third task was to destroy several bridges which spanned the River Dives , located near the towns of Varaville , Robehomme , Bures and Troarn . The division would then hold the territory that it had seized until it could be relieved by advancing Allied ground forces .

Planning for the operation began in February , starting with the number of transport aircraft

assigned to the operation being expanded rapidly to accommodate the entire division . Two Royal Air Force air groups were provided for the operation to ensure that the division could be deployed into Normandy in just two airlifts . The pilots and crew of these transport aircraft then began a campaign of formation flying training and specialised aircrew training to ensure that they were as familiar with what the operation required of them as was possible . The 6th Airborne Division carried out several large @-@ scale airborne exercises , using them to find the most efficient way to deploy a brigade group on one or multiple landing @-@ zones . On 6 February the 3rd Parachute Brigade undertook an exercise in which the entire brigade was dropped by some 98 transport aircraft , and at the end of March 284 aircraft were used in Exercise ' Bizz II ' in which the entire division was deployed by parachute or glider . Finally , between 21 April and 26 April , Exercise ' Mush ' utilised approximately 700 aircraft to deploy the British 1st Airborne Division and the Polish 1st Parachute Brigade against the 6th Airborne Division , who moved by road , in a simulation of a full @-@ scale airborne operation .

As the date of the operation approached , training became more intensive . Glider units spent hours aloft every day circling over airfields as they practiced the manoeuvres required to land the airborne forces next to the bridges over the Orne and Dive and the Merville artillery battery . Once the pilots had practiced this sufficiently during the day , they were then switched to night operations . In the landing grounds used by the division for their operations , dozens of poles similar to those in Normandy were erected , with engineering units then timed on how fast they could demolish the obstacles . The units tasked with destroying the Merville artillery battery spent two weeks at a special camp where they built a replica of the battery and carried out several rehearsal exercises in and around it . The units that were to be used to capture the Orne bridges were transferred to Exeter , where they conducted intensive exercises around the River Exe and the nearby canal . The pilots of the gliders and transport aircraft were also constantly briefed with thousands of maps and photographs of the landing zones and the surrounding areas , as well as dozens of scale models of the zones and the primary objectives , such as the bridges and the Merville artillery battery . A coloured film was produced from aerial reconnaissance photographs which , when played at the correct speed and height over the scale models , realistically simulated the paths the glider pilots would take towards their landing @-@ zones .

= = = German Preparation = = =

The airborne troops of the 6th Airborne Division would be opposed by the Wehrmacht formations stationed in the area around Caen and the River Orne , which by June 1944 consisted of the 709th and 716th Infantry Divisions , both of which were static formations whose manpower consisted of medically downgraded troops and conscripts recruited from the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe . Both divisions also had a miscellaneous collection of anti @-@ tank guns and artillery pieces , as well as a small number of German and French tanks and self @-@ propelled guns . Neither division was rated as being highly efficient , with Allied intelligence rating them at a forty per @-@ cent efficiency compared to a first @-@ class line infantry division in a static role , and fifteen percent in a counter @-@ attack role . Allied intelligence also indicated that two companies of armour were in the area , as were a number of ad hoc infantry formations formed from training establishments . The 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend was also considered to be a threat to the airborne forces as it was based in nearby Rennes and possessed a large number of tanks and self @-@ propelled guns , including the Panther . It was believed that the armoured division would be able to arrive east of Caen within twelve hours of the airborne landing , and that a nearby infantry division , the 352nd , would be able to arrive within eight hours .

The British airborne troops would also face a large number of static defensive positions and obstacles which had been erected under the orders of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel . Rommel had been appointed Inspector General of Coastal Defences and commander of Army Group B in November 1943 by order of Adolf Hitler . On his arrival he had assessed the existing defences in the region and had immediately begun the process of improving them , particularly those situated inland as he believed no more than thirty percent of the German defences were adequate . These anti

@-@ airborne measures consisted of planting a large number of mines to create minefields as well as the erection of so @-@ called " Rommel 's asparagus " , a system of wire @-@ braced poles up to two metres in height , a great many of which were laced with mines or other booby @-@ traps aimed at destroying gliders and killing or wounding airborne troops . Rommel noted in his diary during an inspection of one area that a division had placed over 300 @,@ 000 stakes in the ground to deter airborne landings , and a corps had erected over 900 @,@ 000 . The Merville artillery battery , the destruction of which was one of the main objectives of the 6th Airborne Division , was a particularly heavily fortified position . From the beach it was protected by two strongpoints , which included approximately thirty bunkers as well as an observation post , and the battery itself consisted of a bunker containing the battery 's command post , two blockhouses , a light flak emplacement and four casemates able to contain artillery pieces up to dimensions of 150 mm . The entire battery covered an area roughly four hundred metres in diameter and was surrounded by an inner perimeter of barbed wire , a minefield , and an outer perimeter of barbed wire as well as an anti @-@ tank ditch .

= = Battle = =

Operation Tonga began at 22 : 56 on the night of 5 June , when six Handley Page Halifax heavy bombers took off from Tarrant Rushton airfield towing six Horsa gliders carrying the coup @-@ de @-@ main force consisting of D Company , Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry reinforced with two extra platoons from B Company and a party of sappers , who were tasked with capturing the bridges over the Caen Canal and the River Orne . A few minutes later , between 23 : 00 and 23 : 20 , six Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle transports took off carrying pathfinders of the 22nd Independent Parachute Company , who were to mark the three drop @-@ zones to be used by the airborne troops of the division . Another sixteen Albemarles followed the transports carrying the pathfinders , these transporting elements of the 9th Parachute Battalion , 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion and 3rd Parachute Brigade Headquarters . After this small group , the remainder of the transports carrying 6th Airborne Division began to take off thirty minutes after the pathfinders , this ' lift ' being divided into three groups . The first consisted of 239 Douglas Dakota and Short Stirling transports and seventeen Horsa gliders carrying the bulk of the 3rd and 5th Parachute Brigades and their heavy equipment . These forces were due to land in their respective drop @-@ zones at 00 : 50 . The second part of the lift was destined to land at 03 : 20 and consisted of sixty @-@ five Horsa and four Hamilcar gliders transporting 6th Airborne Division headquarters and an anti @-@ tank battery . The final part of the lift was formed of three Horsa gliders carrying sappers and men from the 9th Parachute Battalion , who were to land atop Merville Battery at 04 : 30 . A second ' lift ' of 220 Horsa and Hamilcar gliders carrying the 6th Air @-@ landing Brigade and other units were to land at another drop @-@ zone at 21 : 00 .

= = = 5th Parachute Brigade = = =

The first unit of the 6th Airborne Division to land in Normandy , as part of Operation Deadstick , was a coup @-@ de @-@ main force from the 2nd Battalion , Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry , under the command of Major John Howard ; although separated from the rest of the Brigade geographically , the small unit did form a part of 5th Parachute Brigade , commanded by Brigadier Nigel Poett . Their mission , codenamed Operation Deadstick , was to capture the bridges over the Caen canal and Orne River . Although the three gliders carrying the coup @-@ de @-@ main force targeting the Caen Canal bridge were supposed to land at 00 : 20 at LZ X , the lead glider was actually released slightly earlier , at 00 : 07 , and landed at 00 : 15 , using a specially designed parachute which deployed from the rear of the glider (fitted to compensate for heavily laden troopers) to slow its speed and ensure it was not destroyed by the impact . However , the glider still impacted at considerable speed against an earth bank near to the bridge , the resulting impact throwing both pilot and co @-@ pilot through the windscreen and knocking them unconscious and stunning the passengers . The second glider landed precisely sixty seconds later ,

swerving to avoid hitting the first and breaking in two as a result . The third glider landed successfully at 00 : 18 , but skidded into a pond , causing several injuries and a single fatality amongst the occupants . The airborne troops emerged from the gliders and formed up , the noise of the gliders landing having been ignored by the sentry on patrol , who believed the sound to be that of a bomber crashing . One platoon opened fire on the sentry and threw grenades into a concrete bunker believed to hold the triggering equipment for the bridge demolition charges , a second platoon began to assault a number of trenches and gun @-@ pits on the eastern bank of the canal , and a third began moving towards the bridge . One sentry fired a flare @-@ gun , whilst a second was killed when he opened fire at the airborne troops and a third retreated .

After a brief fire @-@ fight with an NCO who appeared on the scene and who retreated unhurt after expending all his ammunition , the airborne troops were able to secure the bridge , which they discovered was not rigged with explosives as had been believed . The bridge was secured by 00 : 24 . The second coup @-@ de @-@ main force suffered more difficulties than the first in their attempt to capture the Orne River Bridge . Whilst two gliders landed intact at 00 : 20 at LZ Y , the third glider was released off @-@ target when the aircraft towing the glider mistook the River Dives for the Orne , and the glider landed eight miles (13 km) east of its intended target . However , the occupants captured the bridge and then headed for the Orne River . At the Orne River bridge , a machine @-@ gun nest was suppressed with mortar fire but no other defenders were found , and the two platoons captured the bridge before radioing Major Howard and informing him of their success . Both bridges had been secured within fifteen minutes by the coup @-@ de @-@ main forces at the cost of only a small number of casualties . The forces held the bridges until the arrival of reinforcements from 7th Parachute Battalion , but in the meantime had to repel several spontaneous attempts by the Germans to re @-@ take the bridges ; at 01 : 30 two German tanks attempted to drive onto the bridge , but were repelled with the loss of one tank to a PIAT anti @-@ tank weapon .

The coup @-@ de @-@ main unit had been followed closely by the pathfinders of the 22nd Independent Parachute Company , tasked with marking out the drop @-@ zones and landing @-@ zones to be used by the division during the operation , but due to a combination of heavy cloud cover and poor navigation only one pathfinder team was dropped correctly , and the aircraft carrying the remainder had to make between two and three runs over their respective drop @-@ zones . Pathfinders assigned to DZ N were dropped wide and did not manage to get to the drop @-@ zone for thirty minutes , whilst another team destined for DZ K accidentally dropped onto DZ N without realising their error , and set up radio beacons and markers that caused a number of airborne troops to drop in the wrong area . Another pathfinder team belonging to 9th Parachute Battalion , assigned to mark out the drop @-@ zone area for the unit tasked with destroying the Merville artillery battery , was all but wiped out when an air @-@ raid by RAF Avro Lancaster heavy bombers missed the artillery battery itself and bombed the area the team was in .

As such , when the rest of the 5th Parachute Brigade began to land , many of the units were scattered and dropped incorrectly . The constituent units of 7th Parachute Battalion were so badly scattered that by 03 : 00 the battalion ' s commander could only command around forty percent of the battalion , although more men arrived throughout the night and day . Relatively few supply containers had been found by the airborne troops , meaning that they possessed few heavy weapons or radio sets . However , the Battalion managed to rendezvous with the coup @-@ de @-@ main forces at the Caen and Orne bridges , and were able to set up a defence against German counter @-@ attacks . The first organised German responses to the capture of the bridges came between 05 : 00 and 07 : 00 and consisted of isolated and often uncoordinated attacks by tanks , armoured cars and infantry , which grew in intensity throughout the day . The Luftwaffe attempted to destroy the Caen bridge with a 1 @,@ 000 lb (450 kg) bomb which failed to detonate , and two German coastal craft which attempted to attack the bridge were also repelled . Despite the ferocity of the attacks , the battalion and the coup @-@ de @-@ main forces were able to hold the bridges until 19 : 00 , when leading elements of the British 3rd Infantry Division arrived and began to relieve the airborne troops , a process that was completed around 01 : 00

The other two battalions that made up 5th Parachute Brigade were the 12th and 13th Parachute

Battalions , and much like the 7th Parachute Battalion , both were badly scattered when they were dropped at 00 : 50 ; when both units moved away from their rendezvous points neither had more than sixty percent of their strength , although individual airborne troops and small groups would join the battalions throughout the day . Both of the battalions had been tasked with securing the area around DZ N and the two bridges captured by the coup @-@ de @-@ main forces , a task which was made much more difficult by being scattered throughout the area . 12th Parachute Battalion had been tasked with securing the village of Le Bas de Ranville , which it did so by 04 : 00 , whilst 13th Parachute Battalion was to secure the town of Ranville , which it achieved around the same time , albeit against heavier resistance than that encountered by the other battalion . One company from 13th Parachute Battalion was detailed to remain at the landing @-@ zone the battalion had used to provide protection for a company of Royal Engineer sappers , who were to demolish the poles and explosives that were present in the area so that 6th Airborne Division headquarters could safely land . The two battalions held their respective areas until relieved by ground forces advancing from the beaches , although 12th Parachute Battalion was bombarded with heavy mortar and artillery fire , and repelled two German counter @-@ attacks by the 125th Panzer Grenadier Regiment ; the first was defeated after destroying a tank and taking a number of prisoners , and the second was repulsed with the help of an air @-@ landed anti @-@ tank battery which had recently arrived .

= = = 3rd Parachute Brigade = = =

The 3rd Parachute Brigade , commanded by Brigadier James Hill , began to land at the same time as the main elements of 5th Parachute Brigade , and suffered from the same problems . All of its constituent units being scattered throughout the area due to poor navigation and heavy cloud cover and several of the drop @-@ zones either not being marked correctly or marked correctly but incorrectly positioned due to pathfinder error . One of the first units to land was 9th Parachute Battalion , which had been given a number of objectives ; not only was it to destroy the Merville artillery battery , it was also tasked with holding the village of Le Plein , blocking roads leading to that village , and capturing a German naval headquarters at Sallenelles near the River Orne . However , the battalion scattered throughout the area , with a number of paratroopers landing a considerable distance from the designated DZ ; Lieutenant @-@ Colonel Terence Otway , the commander of the battalion , landed with the rest of his stick 400 yards (370 m) away from the drop @-@ zone in a farmhouse being used as a command post by a German battalion , and after a brief fire @-@ fight and helping other scattered paratroopers , only arrived at the drop @-@ zone at 01 : 30 . By 02 : 35 only 110 paratroopers had arrived at the drop @-@ zone , and only a single machine @-@ gun and a small number of Bangalore torpedoes had been recovered . This was a significant set @-@ back for the battalion , as the plan to assault the artillery battery relied on having the entire battalion present with a number of sappers , as well as a large quantity of heavy equipment . Under strict orders that the battery was to be destroyed no later than 05 : 30 , Otway felt that he could no longer wait for any more reinforcements and set off for the battery at 02 : 50 , the under @-@ strength battalion having been increased to around 150 paratroopers after a small group of stragglers arrived at 02 : 45 .

The battalion arrived at the battery at 04 : 00 , where it linked up with the survivors of the pathfinder group who had been hit by the RAF raid against the battery , and began readying for an assault on the battery whilst the pathfinders marked out areas for the Bangalore torpedoes to be placed . The battalion was divided into four assault groups , one for each of the casemates of the battery , and was ready by 04 : 30 , when the gliders carrying the Royal Engineer sappers arrived over the battery . Only two arrived , one having been forced to land immediately after take @-@ off because of mechanical complications , and both were engaged by anti @-@ aircraft and machine @-@ gun fire , causing one to land fifty yards short of the battery and setting the second alight which landed 400 yards (370 m) away . Otway launched the assault as soon as the first glider overshot the battery , ordering the explosives to be detonated to form two paths through the outer perimeter , through which the paratroopers attacked . The defenders were alerted by the explosions and opened fire ,

inflicting heavy casualties ; only four men assigned to assault Casemate Four survived long enough to reach it , which they disabled by firing into apertures and throwing grenades into air vents . The other casemates were cleared with fragmentations and white phosphorus grenades as the crews had neglected to lock the doors leading into the battery . A number of prisoners were taken by the paratroopers , and explosives were then readied to disable the artillery pieces inside the battery . However , it was discovered that the pieces were not modern 150 mm calibre weapons , but were instead Czechoslovakian First World War @-@ era 100 mm field howitzers . The paratroopers did the best with the explosives they had , using Gammon grenades to disable one gun and jamming shells into the muzzles of other guns , but the job was less than thorough , as at least one gun went back into action when the Germans later reoccupied the battery . Having completed the assault , the paratroopers gathered the German prisoners and their wounded and retreated , having no wish to remain by the battery ; the battalion possessed no radio , and if no signal were received by the light cruiser HMS Arethusa by 05 : 30 it would begin shelling the battery as a back @-@ up plan . The paratroopers had achieved their primary objective , but at a heavy cost , with fifty paratroopers dead and twenty @-@ five wounded , a casualty rate of exactly fifty percent . The battalion then attacked Le Plein , securing the village by expelling the platoon @-@ sized enemy garrison . The survivors retired to a planned rendezvous point at 05 : 30 , the battalion too understrength to achieve its other secondary objectives .

The 8th Parachute Battalion , tasked with destroying two bridges near Bures and a third by Troarn , was dropped at the same time as 9th Parachute Battalion and was also widely scattered with a number of its paratroopers landing in the operational area of 5th Parachute Brigade . When the commanding officer of the battalion arrived at the battalion rendezvous point at 01 : 20 he found only thirty paratroopers and a small group of sappers with a Jeep and trailer . By 03 : 30 this number had increased to just over 140 paratroopers , but there were still no other signs of the sappers who would be required to demolish the bridges . The commanding officer therefore decided to send a small force to demolish the bridges at Bures and lead the rest of the battalion to a crossroad north of Troarn where it would await more reinforcements before it attacked Troarn itself . However , the small force sent to Bures discovered that the two bridges had already been demolished by a group of sappers who had reached the bridges a few hours earlier , and so rejoined the battalion at the crossroads , which had increased in numbers after another fifty men had arrived . A reconnaissance party was sent into Troarn to ascertain the status of the bridge there , alongside a party of sappers , which came under fire from a house near the bridge . After a brief fire @-@ fight the paratroopers captured a number of Germans from the 21st Panzer Division and then made their way to the bridge , which they discovered had been demolished already . Once the sappers had widened the length of bridge demolished using their explosives , the party retreated back to the battalion at the crossroad . Having achieved its objective , the battalion then moved north and took up positions near Le Mesnil to widen the airborne bridgehead formed by the division .

The third unit in the 3rd Parachute Brigade was the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion , which was allotted as its primary tasks the demolition of two bridges , one at Varaville and another at Robehomme . Much like the rest of the units in the division , the battalion was scattered throughout the operational area , with one stick of paratroopers landing ten miles (16 km) away from their drop @-@ zone , and another group landing only a short distance from the invasion beaches . A number of paratroopers were dropped in flooded areas around Varaville and several drowned when they were dragged under the surface of the water due to the weight of their equipment . A group of paratroopers under a Lieutenant moved towards the Robehomme bridge , encountering and gathering together several other groups of airborne troops and sappers en route , before reaching the bridge where they discovered it was still intact . However , after waiting several hours the sappers tasked with the demolition of the bridge had failed to arrive , and so at 03 : 00 the paratroopers gathered together the small amount of explosives they possessed and set them off , weakening the bridge . The sappers finally arrived at 06 : 00 and completed the demolition of the bridge whilst the paratroopers protected them . Meanwhile , another company of the battalion had been attempting to complete the tasks it had been ordered to fulfil ; it was to clear the enemy garrison from Varaville and destroy a gun emplacement , demolish a bridge over the Rive Divette

and also destroy a radio transmitter near Varaville . However , the company was highly understrength , with only a fraction of its normal strength of 100 men available . A small group of paratroopers under the company commander assaulted the fortifications outside Varaville which were manned by approximately ninety @-@ six Germans as well as several machine @-@ gun nests and an artillery piece . The artillery piece inflicted a number of casualties on the small group , killing the company commander , and a stalemate ensued until 10 : 00 when the enemy garrison surrendered after being subjected to mortar bombardment . The paratroopers were then relieved by British Commandos from the 1st Special Service Brigade .

= = = 6th Airlanding Brigade & 6th Airborne Division Headquarters = = =

The Headquarters of the 6th Airborne Division landed by glider in the landing @-@ zone cleared by the sappers and the company from 13th Parachute Battalion at 03 : 35 hours , with only a few gliders missing the landing @-@ zone due to the poor weather and errors in navigation . Once the headquarters staff and accompanying airborne troops had been gathered together , the headquarters was moved to the Le Bas de Ranville area and set up there . Contact was established with the headquarters of 5th Parachute Brigade at 05 : 00 , and with the headquarters of 3rd Parachute Brigade at 12 : 35 , and linked up with 1st Special Service Brigade as it advanced from the invasion beaches at 13 : 53 . At 21 : 00 Operation Mallard the gliders transporting 6th Airlanding Brigade arrived at their landing @-@ zone , coming under heavy small @-@ arms and mortar fire from nearby German positions as they landed . However , casualties were light and within ninety minutes the glider @-@ borne troops had gathered at their rendezvous points . By 00 : 00 the entire 6th Airborne Division was fully deployed on the eastern flank of the invasion beaches , with the exception of 12th Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment which formed a part of 6th Airlanding Brigade but was due to arrive by sea the next day . 3rd Parachute Brigade was holding a four @-@ mile (6 km) front , with 9th Parachute Battalion at Le Plein , 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion at Les Mesneil and 8th Parachute Battalion in the southern part of the Bois de Bavent . 5th Parachute Brigade had 12th Parachute Battalion occupying Le Bas de Ranville and 13th Parachute Battalion holding Ranville , whilst 7th Parachute Battalion was retained as a reserve formation . 6th Airlanding Brigade was ready to use its two battalions to extend the bridgehead held by the division and 1st Special Service Brigade , which temporarily came under the command of the division was holding villages to the north and north @-@ east of DZ N.

= = Ground role = =

Operation Tonga was a successful airborne operation , with all of the tasks allotted to 6th Airborne Division being achieved within the time limits imposed on the individual units of the division . These tasks had been achieved despite the problems caused by a large number of the airborne troops being scattered throughout the operational area assigned to the division due to a combination of bad weather and poor navigation on the part of the pilots of the transport aircraft carrying them . Glider @-@ borne airborne troops also suffered from navigational errors , with ten of the eighty @-@ five gliders assigned to the division landing more than two miles (3 km) from their landing @-@ zone . However , an unintended but beneficial result of these scattered drops was that the German defenders were greatly confused as to area and extent of the airborne landings . The division suffered 800 casualties between 5 June and 7 June as a result of Operation Tonga , out of the 8 @-@ 500 airborne troops who made up the strength of the division when it was deployed . The division maintained its bridgehead after it had linked up with Allied ground forces advancing from the invasion beaches , and was then deployed in a purely ground @-@ based role as infantry . Between 7 June and 10 June , the division would repulse a number of German attacks , with 9th Battalion coming under particularly heavy enemy bombardment in its positions and being the focus of a number of German assaults .

From 7 June until 16 August , it first consolidated and then expanded its bridgehead . On 10 June the decision was taken to expand the bridgehead to the east of the River Orne , with 6th Airborne

Division tasked with achieving this ; however , it was deemed not to be strong enough , and 5th Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) was placed under 3rd Parachute Brigade 's command ; the battalion launched an attack on the town of Breville on 11 June , but was met with extremely heavy resistance and was repulsed after suffering a number of casualties . The next day 3rd Parachute Brigade 's entire front was subjected to fierce artillery bombardment and assaults by German tanks and infantry , with the Germans particularly focusing on the positions held by 9th Parachute Battalion . Both 9th Parachute Battalion and the remnants of the Black Watch defended the Chateau Saint Come but were gradually forced to retreat ; however , after Lieutenant Colonel Otway stated that his battalion would be unable to defend its position for much longer , Brigadier Hill gathered together a number of paratroopers from 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion and led a counter @-@ attack that forced the Germans to withdraw .

From then until mid @-@ August the division remained in static positions , holding the left flank of the Allied bridgehead and conducting vigorous patrolling . It was a difficult period for the division , as most of the airborne troops had expected to be withdrawn from Normandy at an early point ; as the static role continued , disappointment and frustration were often in evidence , and " great attention had to be paid to maintaining an aggressive spirit . " On 7 August the division was ordered to prepare to move over to the offensive , and on the night of 16 / 17 August it began to advance against stiff German opposition . This advance continued until 26 August , when the division reached its objective - the mouth of the River Seine . In nine days of fighting it had advanced 45 miles , despite , as Gale put it , his infantry units being " quite inadequately equipped for a rapid pursuit , " captured 400 square miles (1 @,@ 000 km²) of German territory and taken prisoner over 1 @,@ 000 German soldiers . Its casualties for the period were 4 @,@ 457 , of which 821 were killed , 2 @,@ 709 wounded and 927 missing . It was finally withdrawn from the frontline on 27 August , and embarked for England at the beginning of September .