

= Operation Deadstick =

Operation Deadstick was the codename for an operation by airborne forces of the British Army that took place on 6 June 1944 as part of the Normandy landings of World War II . The objective was to capture intact two road bridges in Normandy across the River Orne and the Caen Canal providing the only exit eastwards , for British forces from their landing on Sword Beach . Intelligence reports said both bridges were heavily defended by the Germans and wired for demolition . Once captured , the bridges had to be held against any counter @-@ attack until the assault force was relieved by commandos and infantry advancing from the British landing zone .

The mission was vital to the success of the Operation Tonga , the British airborne landings in Normandy . Failure to capture the bridges intact or to prevent their demolition by the Germans , would leave the British 6th Airborne Division cut off from the rest of the Allied armies with their backs to the two waterways . If the Germans retained control over the bridges , they could be used by their armoured divisions to attack the landing beaches of Normandy .

Responsibility for the operation fell to the men of ' D ' Company , 2nd ( Airborne ) Battalion , Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry , part of the 6th Airlanding Brigade of the 6th Airborne Division . The assault group comprised a reinforced company of six infantry platoons and an attached platoon of Royal Engineers . They flew from the south of England to Normandy in six Airspeed Horsa gliders . Through what was later described as the " most outstanding flying achievements of the war " , the gliders delivered the company to their objective . After a brief exchange of fire , both bridges were captured and then defended against tank , gunboat and infantry counter @-@ attacks , until the company relief arrived .

= = Background = =

= = = British Forces = = =

During the planning stage of the Normandy invasion , the decision was made to land the 6th Airborne Division ( Major @-@ General Richard Gale ) on the left flank of the invasion beaches between the River Orne and the River Dives . Their primary objective was to capture the two road bridges over the River Orne and the Caen Canal and prevent a German flanking attack on the landing area . Failure to capture the bridges would leave the 6th Airborne Division cut off in enemy territory , so the 5th Parachute Brigade were earmarked to defend the bridges against counter @-@ attacks . Gale decided that the only way to capture the bridges intact was by a glider coup de main assault . He then asked Brigadier Hugh Kindersley of the 6th Airlanding Brigade to nominate his best company for the operation .

'D ' Company , 2nd ( Airborne ) Battalion , Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry ( Major John Howard ) and second in command Captain Brian Priday , was selected for the mission . The company had trained hard and became the fittest in the battalion , often utilizing bomb @-@ damaged inner @-@ city areas to practice street fighting with live ammunition . Howard expected the invasion to involve night @-@ fighting and changed the daily routine to ensure that his men were up to the task . For weeks at a time , they rose at 20 : 00 and completed exercises , drills and normal paperwork throughout the night before retiring at 13 : 00 . General Gale tested the company through two exercises where the objective was to capture bridges , when it became apparent that the company would not be able to carry out the mission on its own . Asked to select two more platoons from the battalion to join them , Howard chose two from ' B ' Company commanded by Lieutenants Fox and Smith . Any explosive charges found attached to the bridges were the responsibility of 30 Royal Engineers from the 249th ( Airborne ) Field Company , commanded by Captain Jock Neilson . Changes were then made to the operational plan to accommodate six platoons . Three were assigned to attack each bridge simultaneously with infantry overcoming the troops on guard duty while the engineers located and dismantled any demolition charges . For six days and nights the company carried out exercises just outside Exeter , in the south @-@ west of

England , where two bridges similar to their objectives were found over the Exeter Ship Canal .

Transport to Normandy was arranged in six Airspeed Horsa gliders , piloted by 12 NCOs from ' C ' Squadron , Glider Pilot Regiment . The Horsa had a wingspan of 88 feet ( 27 m ) and a length of 67 feet ( 20 m ) , with a maximum load of 15 @, @ 750 pounds ( 7 @, @ 140 kg ) or space for two pilots , twenty @-@ eight troops or a mixture of two jeeps , artillery guns and trailers . Pilot training involved practice landings on a small strip of land , instrument flying using stopwatches for accurate course changes and fitting flight crew goggles with dark glass to get them used to night flying . By May 1944 they had carried out 54 training sorties , flying in all weathers both day and night .

Howard was not told the exact details of the operation until 2 May , 1944 . His orders were to seize the bridges over the River Orne and Caen Canal at Bénouville and Ranville intact and hold them until relieved . The relief force would initially be a company from the 7th Parachute Battalion under Howard 's command . When the remainder of the parachute battalion arrived , he would hand over to their commander Lieutenant @-@ Colonel Richard Pine @-@ Coffin . The 3rd Infantry Division and the commandos of the 1st Commando Brigade were scheduled to land at Sword Beach at 06 : 00 on the day then advance to the bridges where they were expected to arrive at 11 : 00 .

At the end of May 1944 , ' D ' Company left the battalion camp at Bulford in Wiltshire for RAF Tarrant Rushton in Dorset . The base was then secured and Howard briefed everyone on the mission , distributing photographs of the bridges and unveiling a model of the area . Glider pilot commander Staff Sergeant Jim Wallwork told Howard that with a full load of men , ammunition , assault boats and engineers ' stores his gliders would be dangerously overloaded . Howard decided to only take one assault boat per glider and leave behind two men from each platoon . At the last minute Doctor John Vaughan replaced an injured man in one of the platoons .

On 5 June 1944 , the company made final preparations for the mission . Each man was issued their personal weapons and ammunition as well as up to nine hand grenades and four Bren gun magazines . Each platoon also had a 2 @-@ inch mortar and a radio . Just before the men boarded the gliders , codewords were issued . ' Ham ' indicated the canal bridge was captured and ' Jam ' the river bridge . Capture and destruction of the canal bridge would be signalled using the codeword ' Jack ' ; ' Lard ' would be used if a similar fate befell the river bridge .

== = Bridges == =

The Ranville bridge spans the River Orne and the Bénouville bridge crosses the Caen Canal to the west . They are 5 miles ( 8 @. @ 0 km ) from the coast and provided the only access to the city of Caen . The main road between the two communes crosses the bridges and then continues east to the River Dives . At 190 feet ( 58 m ) long and 12 feet ( 3 @. @ 7 m ) wide , the Caen Canal bridge opens to allow canal traffic to pass underneath . The controls were housed in a nearby cabin . The canal is 27 feet ( 8 @. @ 2 m ) deep by 150 feet ( 46 m ) wide , with earth and stone banks 6 feet ( 1 @. @ 8 m ) high . Small tarmac tracks run on both banks along the canal 's entire length . Between the two bridges there is a strip of mostly marshy ground about 550 yards ( 500 m ) wide , broken up by ditches and small streams . The Ranville bridge over the River Orne is 350 feet ( 110 m ) long , 20 feet ( 6 @. @ 1 m ) wide and can be opened to allow river traffic to pass . The river is 160 ? 240 feet ( 49 ? 73 m ) wide and with an average depth of 9 feet ( 2 @. @ 7 m ) . It has mud banks averaging about 3 @. @ 6 feet ( 1 @. @ 1 m ) high and a tidal rise and fall of 16 ? 6 @. @ 5 feet ( 4 @. @ 9 ? 2 @. @ 0 m ) . A number of small houses lie to the west of the river , connected by a track 8 ? 10 feet ( 2 @. @ 4 ? 3 @. @ 0 m ) wide , that runs along both banks .

== = German forces == =

The bridge was guarded by 50 men belonging to the German 736th Grenadier Regiment , 716th Infantry Division . The unit was commanded by Major Hans Schmidt and based at Ranville , 1 @. @ 2 miles ( 1 @. @ 9 km ) east of the River Orne . The 716th was a static formation and had been assigned to Normandy since June 1942 . The division 's eight infantry battalions were deployed to defend 21 miles ( 34 km ) of the Atlantic wall . The unit was poorly equipped with a mixture of foreign

weapons and manned by conscripts from Poland , Russia and France under a German officer and senior non @-@ commissioned officers ( NCOs ) . Schmidt 's soldiers had orders to blow up the two bridges if they were in danger of capture .

A second division , the 21st Panzer , moved into the area in May 1944 . One of its regiments , the 125th Panzergrenadier , commanded by Colonel Hans von Luck , was billeted at Vimont just east of Caen . There was also a battalion of the 192nd Panzergrenadier Regiment based at Cairon to the west of the bridges . Colonel von Luck trained his regiment in anti @-@ invasion operations . He also identified likely incursion points and marked out forward routes , rest and refuelling areas and anti @-@ aircraft gun positions . The 21st Panzer Division was a new formation based on the former Afrika Korps unit , which had been destroyed in North Africa . Although equipped with an assortment of older tanks and other armoured vehicles , the division 's officers were veterans and 2 @,@ 000 men from the old division filled its ranks . Further afield were the 12th SS Panzer Division at Lisieux and the Panzer Lehr Division at Chartres , both less than a day 's march from the area .

Defences were in place at both bridges . On the west bank of the Caen Canal bridge there were three machine @-@ gun emplacements and on the east bank a machine @-@ gun and an anti @-@ tank gun . To their north were another three machine @-@ guns and a concrete pillbox . An anti @-@ aircraft tower equipped with machine @-@ guns stood to the south . At the River Orne bridge , the eastern bank south of the bridge had a pillbox with anti @-@ tank and anti @-@ aircraft guns . To the north of the bridge were two machine @-@ guns . Both bridges had sandbagged trench systems along the banks .

= = Deadstick = =

At 22 : 56 on 5 June , 1944 , the six gliders towed by Halifax bombers took off from RAF Tarrant Rushton . Horsa number one , the first of the three headed for the Caen Canal , carried Howard with Lieutenant Den Brotheridge 's platoon , number two bore Lieutenant David Wood 's platoon , and number three carried Lieutenant Smith 's platoon . Priday with Lieutenant Hooper 's platoon made for the river bridge aboard number four . Horsa number five carrying Lieutenant Fox 's platoon was followed by number six bearing Tod Sweeney 's platoon . Each glider also carried five Royal Engineers . Flying over the English Channel at 7 @,@ 000 feet ( 2 @,@ 100 m ) , the bombers crossed the Normandy coast at 00 : 07 on 6 June , 1944 and released their towed gliders . With Wallwork at the controls , the number one glider crashed into the barbed wire surrounding the canal bridge defences at 00 : 16 . The other two gliders followed at one @-@ minute intervals . The number two glider broke in half and came to halt at the edge of a large pond . One of the men fell into the water and drowned , becoming the first casualty of the operation . Brotheridge and Smith 's platoons headed for the bridge , while Wood 's platoon moved towards the trenches on its north east side .

= = = Bridges captured = = =

The Germans knew the invasion was imminent if not the exact location ; Major Schmidt , in command of the bridges , had been told that they were one of the most critical points in Normandy . The defenders however were not on full alert and only two sentries were on duty when the gliders landed . The sound of a gunshot alerted the two sentries on the bridge . As Brotheridge 's platoon attacked , one ran off shouting " paratroops " while the second fired a flare gun to alert nearby defenders . Brotheridge shot him while other members of his platoon cleared the trenches and pillbox with grenades . Alerted by the flare , the German machine gunners opened fire at the men on the bridge , wounding Brotheridge as he threw a grenade . The grenade silenced one of the machine gun positions and another was taken out by Bren gun fire . Number One Platoon crossed the bridge to take up a defensive position on the west bank . The Royal Engineers from number one glider searched for explosive charges and cut the fuse wires when they found any . Smith 's platoon crossed the bridge next , exchanging fire with the German defenders , whereupon Smith was wounded by a grenade . Using grenades and sub @-@ machine gun fire , the platoons cleared the

trenches and bunkers . By 00 : 21 German resistance on the west bank of the canal bridge was over . Checking the area , the men of Brotheridge 's platoon now realised that their leader was wounded . He failed to recover and soon died of his wounds , becoming the first Allied soldier killed by enemy action during the invasion . On the east bank Wood 's platoon cleared the trenches and bunkers with little opposition . Woods was hit in the leg by machine @-@ gun fire as he ordered the platoon to storm the German defences . All three platoon commanders at the canal bridge were now either dead or wounded .

At 00 : 19 pathfinders from the 22nd Independent Parachute Company landed in the area between the River Orne and the River Dives . Brigadier Nigel Poett commanding 5th Parachute Brigade and a small team accompanied them . Disoriented after landing , Poett heard Brotheridge 's Sten gun and set off for the bridges with the only man he could locate . Only one of the Germans at the bridge , Unteroffizier Weber escaped ' D ' Company 's attack , he reached Bénouville and reported the bridge had been captured .

Fox 's glider number five was the first to land 330 yards ( 300 m ) from the river bridge at 00 : 20 while glider number four was reported missing . When the Germans opened fire with an MG 34 , the platoon responded with a 2 @-@ inch ( 51 mm ) mortar and destroyed the gun with a direct hit . They then crossed the bridge without further opposition . At 00 : 21 glider number six landed , 770 yards ( 700 m ) short of the bridge . Sweeney left one of his sections on the west bank then moved the rest of the platoon across the bridge to take up defensive positions on the east bank .

From his newly established command post in the trenches on the eastern bank of the canal near the bridge , Howard learned that the river bridge had also been taken . Captain Neilson of the engineers reported that although the bridges had been prepared for demolition , the explosives had not been attached . Howard ordered his signaller to transmit the code words ' Ham ' and ' Jam ' then brought Fox 's platoon across the canal bridge , positioning them at the Bénouville to Le Port crossroads as the company 's forward platoon .

= = = 7th Parachute Battalion = = =

At 00 : 50 aircraft carrying the rest of the 6th Airborne Division appeared overhead and the paratroopers descended into drop zones marked out by the pathfinders . Howard began blowing the morse code letter ' V ' on his whistle , to help guide the 7th Parachute Battalion to the bridges . The first paratroops to arrive at 00 : 52 were Brigadier Poett and the soldier he had picked up en route . Briefed by Howard on the situation , they heard tanks and lorries moving around in Bénouville and Le Port . On the drop zone , only about 100 men of the 7th Parachute Battalion had made it to the rallying point but all their signal equipment , machine guns and mortars were missing . Pine @-@ Coffin , aware that his battalion was the only unit allocated defensive positions west of the bridges , decided they could not wait any longer and at 01 : 10 left for the bridges .

At about the same time Major Schmidt , the German commander of the bridge guard force , decided he needed to see for himself what was happening . He headed for the bridge in his SdKfz 250 with a motorcycle escort . Travelling at high speed they unknowingly passed the forward line of ' D ' Company 's defence and drove onto the bridge whereupon the company opened fire . The soldier aboard the motorcycle was killed and the SdKfz 250 was forced off the road . Schmidt and his driver were taken prisoner .

The commander of the 716th Infantry Division Generalleutnant Wilhelm Richter was informed at 01 : 20 of the parachute landings and that the bridges had been captured intact . One of his first actions was to contact Generalmajor Edgar Feuchtinger of 21st Panzer Division . Richter ordered the division to attack the landing areas . While Feuchtinger 's tanks were delegated to support the 716th , it was also part of the German armoured reserve , which could not move without orders from the German High Command . All German panzer formations could only be moved on the direct orders of Adolf Hitler , who was sleeping at the time and his staff refused to wake him . When Colonel Von Luck of the 125th Panzergrenadier Regiment received the news of the airborne landings at 01 : 30 he ordered the regiment to their assembly areas north and east of Caen and waited for further orders .

The closest large German unit to the canal bridge were the 2nd Battalion , 192nd Panzergrenadier Regiment based at Cairon . General Feuchtinger ordered them to recapture the bridges and then attack the parachute landing zones further west . At 02 : 00 the 2nd Battalion headed for the bridges from the west , supported by the 1st Panzerjager Company and part of the 989th Heavy Artillery Battalion coming from the north . As the first Panzer IVs from the north reached the junction leading to the bridge , the leading vehicle was hit by a round from ' D ' Company 's only serviceable PIAT anti @-@ tank weapon . The vehicle exploded , setting off its stowed ammunition , and the other tanks withdrew .

The first company of the 7th Parachute Battalion , commanded by Major Nigel Taylor , arrived at the bridges . Howard directed them to defensive positions west of the canal in Bénouville and Le Port . When Lieutenant @-@ Colonel Pine @-@ Coffin arrived at the bridges , he was briefed by Howard , and crossed into Bénouville and set up his headquarters beside the church . Pine @-@ Coffin had about 200 men in his three companies . He positioned ' A ' and ' C ' Companies in Bénouville facing south towards Caen and ' B ' Company in Le Port facing Ouistreham . ' D ' Company was now pulled back into the area between the two bridges and held in reserve . A further check of the trenches and bunkers captured a number of Germans .

At 03 : 00 the 8th Heavy Company , 192nd Panzergrenadier Regiment with 75 mm SP guns , 20 mm AA guns and mortars attacked ' A ' and ' C ' Companies , 7th Parachute Battalion , from the south . The paratroops were forced back and the Germans established their own positions in Bénouville , but were unable to break the British line . They dug in and waited for tank support before moving forward again . The Germans fired mortar rounds and machine guns at the paratroopers and attempted small assaults on their positions throughout the night .

Just before dawn Howard summoned his platoon commanders to a meeting . With their senior officers dead or wounded , numbers One , Two and Three Platoons were now commanded by corporals . Howard 's second in command , Captain Priday and number Four Platoon were missing . Only Lieutenants Fox and Sweeney in Five and Six Platoons had a full complement of officers and NCOs . The landings at Sword Beach began at 07 : 00 , preceded by a heavy naval bombardment . At the bridges , daylight allowed German snipers to identify targets and anyone moving in the open was in danger of being shot . The men of number One Platoon who had taken over the 75 mm anti @-@ tank gun on the east bank of the canal used it to engage possible sniper positions in Bénouville , the Château de Bénouville and the surrounding area . At 09 : 00 , two German gunboats approached the canal bridge from Ouistreham . The lead boat fired its 20 mm gun and number Two Platoon returned fire with a PIAT , hitting the wheelhouse of the leading boat , which crashed into the canal bank . The second boat retreated to Ouistreham . A lone German aircraft bombed the canal bridge at 10 : 00 , dropping one bomb . The bomb struck the bridge but failed to detonate .

= = = 1st Commando Brigade = = =

The German 2nd Battalion , 192nd Panzergrenadier Regiment continued to attack Bénouville and Le Port , assisted by their tanks , mortars and infantry . The attack caused serious problems for the understrength 7th Parachute Battalion , until the leading tank was blown up with a Gammon bomb , blocking the road . During the attack 13 of the 17 tanks trying to get through to the bridge were destroyed . The paratroopers were then reinforced by number One Platoon from ' D ' Company . The platoon moved forward into Bénouville and cleared the Germans in house to house fighting . Numbers Five and Six Platoons also moved into positions opposite the Gondrée Cafe on the west bank of the canal . By midday most of the missing men from the 7th Parachute Battalion had arrived at the bridges and the three platoons were moved back to their original positions .

Just after midday , the 21st Panzer Division received permission to attack the landings . Colonel von Luck east of the River Orne , moved the 125th Panzergrenadier Regiment towards the bridges . The column was quickly spotted and engaged for the next two hours by Allied artillery and aircraft causing heavy losses . The 1st Battalion , 192nd Panzergrenadier Regiment and the 100th Panzer Regiment , attacking from west of the canal , had more success reaching the beaches between the

British Sword Beach and the Canadian Juno Beach . At 13 : 30 the men at the bridges heard the sound of bagpipes , played by Bill Millin of the 1st Commando Brigade . As the commandos arrived they crossed the bridges and joined the rest of 6th Airborne Division defending the eastern side of the bridges . Some of the tanks accompanying the commandos moved into Bénouville to reinforce its defences while others crossed the bridges with the commandos . At 15 : 00 a boat loaded with German infantry approached from Caen . It was engaged with the anti @-@ tank gun manned by number One Platoon . It was hit in the stern by the second round fired and retreated back toward Caen .

At 21 : 15 the 2nd Battalion , Royal Warwickshire Regiment of the 185th Infantry Brigade arrived from Sword Beach and began taking over the bridges ' defences . At around midnight Howard handed over command of the bridges to the Warwickshire Regiment and his company left to join the rest of their battalion at Ranville . At 03 : 30 they finally located the battalion 's positions . They found Captain Friday and number Four Platoon had already joined the battalion . The platoon had landed beside the River Dives at Varaville about 8 miles ( 13 km ) away and had spent the previous day fighting their way towards the bridges , trying to rejoin the company .

= = Aftermath = =

Bénouville was the farthest forward point of the British advance on 6 June 1944 . Of the 181 men ( 139 infantry , 30 engineers and 12 pilots ) of ' D ' Company involved in the capture of the bridges , two had been killed and fourteen wounded . On 9 June , the German Air Force attacked the bridges with 13 aircraft . The British had positioned light and medium @-@ sized anti @-@ aircraft guns around the bridges and in the face of intense anti @-@ aircraft fire the attack failed , although they did claim one of the bridges was destroyed by a direct hit .

The 6th Airborne retained control of the area between the Rivers Orne and Dives until 14 June , when the 51st ( Highland ) Infantry Division took over the southern part of the Orne bridgehead . In the days that followed the division was reinforced by the Dutch Princess Irene Brigade and the 1st Belgian Infantry Brigade . A period of static warfare ended on 22 August when the division crossed the River Dives . Within nine days it had advanced 45 miles ( 72 km ) to the mouth of the River Seine . Between the 6 June and 26 August when they were pulled out of the front line the division 's casualties were ; 821 killed , 2 @,@ 709 wounded , and 927 missing . After Operation Deadstick the engineers , glider pilots and ' B ' Company men were returned to their parent formations . ' D ' Company played their part in the division 's defence of the Orne bridgehead and advance to the River Seine . On 5 September when the division was withdrawn to England , all that remained of the company were 40 men under the only remaining officer , Howard , the other officers , sergeants and most of the junior NCOs having been among the casualties .

The glider pilots were the first group to leave ' D ' Company , their expertise being required for other planned operations . In particular Operation Comet , which included another coup @-@ de @-@ main operation where eighteen gliders would be used to capture three bridges in the Netherlands . The mission would be carried out by the 1st Airborne Division with a brigade allocated to defend each bridge . Comet was scheduled for the 8 September 1944 , but was delayed and then cancelled . The plans were adapted and became Operation Market Garden , involving three airborne divisions , however the coup @-@ de @-@ main assault plans were not carried out .

Prior to being withdrawn on 16 July , Howard was awarded the Distinguished Service Order , presented in the field by General Bernard Montgomery . Other awards were the Military Cross to Smith and Sweeney , the Military Medal to Sergeant Thornton and Lance @-@ Corporal Stacey , Lieutenant Brotheridge was posthumously mentioned in dispatches . Air Chief Marshal Trafford Leigh @-@ Mallory of the Royal Air Force praised the pilots involved , saying the operation included the " most outstanding flying achievements of the war " . The feat was recognised by the award of the Distinguished Flying Medal to eight of the glider pilots involved .

= = Legacy = =

The Caen Canal bridge was renamed Pegasus Bridge after the emblem of the British airborne forces , while the River Orne bridge became Horsa Bridge . The road across them is now the " Esplanade Major John Howard " . Since the end of the war , Pegasus Bridge and the adjacent Café Gondrée have become a place where British veterans of the conflict visiting Normandy congregate . In 1994 , Pegasus Bridge was replaced by a new structure and the old bridge was added to the displays at the Pegasus Museum in Benouville .

The original model of the area around the bridge , that was used to brief troops taking part in the assault , is preserved in Airborne Assault : The Museum of The Parachute Regiment and Airborne Forces , located at the Imperial War Museum Duxford .

A number of books have been written about or have mentioned the assault . In 1962 , Operation Deadstick featured in Darryl Zanuck 's film The Longest Day which was based on the book of the same title by Cornelius Ryan . Major John Howard was played by Richard Todd , who had been an officer in the 7th Parachute Battalion during the battle .

In 2003 , the attack on the Bénouville ( Pegasus ) Bridge was recreated in the highly successful and lauded video game , Call of Duty , in which the player joins the assault of the 6th Airborne Division in both capturing and holding the bridge .

The film Pegasus Bridge , which begins filming in 2016 , covers the events of Operation Deadstick , the fighting at the bridge and the fighting in Benouville and Le Port and is written and directed by Lance Nielsen .