

= Battle of Merville Gun Battery =

The Battle of Merville Gun Battery occurred on 6 June 1944 , as part of Operation Tonga , part of the Normandy landings , during the Second World War . Allied intelligence believed the Merville Gun Battery was composed of heavy @-@ calibre guns that could threaten the British landings at Sword Beach , only 8 miles (13 km) away .

The 9th Parachute Battalion , part of the 3rd Parachute Brigade attached to 6th Airborne Division , was given the objective of destroying the battery . However , when the battalion arrived over Normandy , their parachute descent was dispersed over a large area , so instead of over 600 men , only 150 with no heavy weapons or equipment arrived at the battalion assembly point . Regardless , they pressed home their attack and succeeded in capturing the battery , only to discover that the guns were of a lower caliber than expected [Czech @-@ manufacture 100mm] . However , these still had the range (over 8000 metres) to hit targets on Sword Beach and in Ouistreham . Using what explosives they had been able to recover , the surviving 75 men tried to disable the guns .

When the British paratroopers had withdrawn , two of the guns were put back into action by the Germans . Another attack the next day by British Commandos failed to recapture the battery , which remained under German control until 17 August , when the German Army started to withdraw from the area .

= = Background = =

On 6 June 1944 , the British 6th Airborne Division was given the task of securing the left flank of the Allied seaborne landings . One of their objectives was the destruction of the Merville Gun Battery . Allied planners had judged from the size of the concrete gun emplacements that the guns must be around 150 mm in calibre . If so , the guns would have a range of about 8 miles (13 km) and could threaten Sword Beach , to the west of Ouistreham , where the 3rd British Infantry Division were due to land later that day .

= = = British forces = = =

The unit assigned to destroy the battery was the 9th Parachute Battalion , part of the 3rd Parachute Brigade , commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Terence Otway . The battalion 's normal complement of 600 men was supported by a section of sappers from the Royal Engineers , eight Airspeed Horsa glider loads transporting Jeeps and trailers , and stores including explosives , an anti @-@ tank gun and flamethrowers . Three of the gliders , transporting 50 volunteers , were to carry out a coup de main landing onto the position to coincide with the ground assault . In April 1944 , the force was taken to Walbury Hill in Berkshire , where over seven days the Royal Engineers had built a full @-@ scale replica of the battery , including obstacles and barbed wire fences . The following five days were spent holding briefings and getting acquainted with the layout of the battery . They carried out nine practice assaults , four of them at night . Due to the nature of the mission , the battalion was given additional medical support from No. 3 Section 224th (Parachute) Field Ambulance . Another unit that would be present during the attack but not directly involved was A Company of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion . This company was tasked to provide covering fire for the 9th Battalion 's approach to and withdrawal from the battery . The assault had to be completed and the battalion clear of the position by 05 : 00 , when the Royal Navy cruiser HMS Arethusa would open fire on the battery in an attempt to destroy it with naval gunfire .

= = = Battery = = =

The Merville Battery was composed of four 6 @-@ foot @-@ thick (1 @-@ 8 m) steel @-@ reinforced concrete gun casemates , built by the Todt Organisation . Each was designed to protect First World War @-@ vintage Czech M.14 / 19 100 mm guns . Other buildings on the site included a command bunker , a building to accommodate the men , and ammunition magazines . During a visit

on 6 March 1944 , to inspect the defences , Field Marshal Erwin Rommel ordered the builders to work faster , and by May 1944 , the last two casemates were completed .

The battery was defended by a 20 mm anti @-@ aircraft gun and several machine guns in 15 gun positions , all enclosed in an area 700 by 500 yards (640 by 460 m) surrounded by two barbed wire obstacles 15 feet (4 @.@ 6 m) thick by 5 feet (1 @.@ 5 m) high , which also acted as the exterior border for a 100 @-@ yard @-@ deep (91 m) minefield . Another obstacle was an anti @-@ tank ditch covering any approach from the nearby coast . The original commander of the battery , Hauptmann Wolter , was killed during a Royal Air Force bombing raid on 19 May 1944 . He was replaced by Oberleutnant Raimund Steiner , who commanded 50 engineers and 80 artillerymen from the 1st Battery , Artillery Regiment 1716 , part of the 716th Static Infantry Division .

The battery had a complement of some one hundred men in all . These were chiefly gunnery crews , of course , such as my team , but also included staff officers and their assistants , medical , cooks , observation teams , maintenance teams and guards with side arms . It was intended that the battery could remain under siege for up to three months , with sufficient rations and generator fuel kept on site for this event ; the water supply came from an aquifer and could not be interrupted . It was a remarkable structure , and it featured prominently in propaganda of the time ?

= = Assault = =

Just after midnight on 6 June , the 9th Parachute Battalion 's advance party landed with the brigade 's pathfinders , and reached the battalion assembly area without any problems . While some men remained to mark out the company positions , the battalion 's second in command , Major George Smith , and a reconnaissance party left to scout the battery . At the same time , Royal Air Force Lancaster bombers started their bombing run , which completely missed the battery , their bombs landing further to the south . The pathfinders in the meantime were having problems . Those who had arrived at the correct drop zone found their Eureka beacons had been damaged when they landed , and in the smoke and debris left over from the bombing , their marker lights could not be seen by the pilots of the transport aircraft . The main body of the 9th Parachute Battalion and their gliders were to land at drop zone ' V ' , located between the battery and Varaville from 01 : 00 . However , the battalion was scattered , with a number of paratroopers landing a considerable distance from the designated drop zone . Lieutenant Colonel Otway landed with the rest of his " stick " 400 yards (370 m) away from the drop zone at a farmhouse being used as a command post by a German battalion ; after a brief fire @-@ fight , they helped other scattered paratroopers , and reached the drop zone at 01 : 30 . By 02 : 50 , only 150 men had arrived at the battalion 's assembly point with 20 Bangalore torpedoes and a machine gun . The mortars , anti @-@ tank gun , mine detectors , jeeps , sappers and field ambulance section were all missing .

Aware of the time constraints , Otway decided he could wait no longer , and the reduced battalion headed for the battery and joined up with Major Smith 's reconnaissance party just outside the village of Gonneville en Auge . The reconnaissance party had cut a way through the barbed wire , and marked four routes through the minefield . Otway divided his men into four assault groups , and settled down to await the arrival of the three gliders .

In England , one of the gliders never left the ground , as its tow rope had snapped on taxiing . The other two gliders , unable to locate the battery , did not land where expected . On their run in , both gliders were hit by anti @-@ aircraft fire . One landed around 2 miles (3 @.@ 2 km) away , the other at the edge of the minefield . The troops from this glider became involved in a fire fight with German troops heading to reinforce the battery garrison .

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 attackers survived to reach Casemate Four , which they disabled by firing into apertures and throwing grenades into air vents . The other casemates were cleared with fragmentation and white phosphorus grenades , as the crews had neglected to lock the doors leading into the battery . During the bombing raid , the battery 's guns had been moved inside the

casemates and the steel doors left open for ventilation . During the battle , 22 Germans were killed and a similar number made prisoners of war . The rest of the garrison escaped undetected by hiding in the underground bunkers .

Steiner was not present during the bombing , but at a command bunker in Franceville @-@ Plage . After the raid , he set out for the battery , but was unable to gain entry due to the volume of fire from the British paratroopers . At the same time , a reconnaissance patrol from an army Flak unit with a half @-@ track mounting a large anti @-@ aircraft gun arrived . The crew had intended to seek cover at the position , but instead used the gun to engage the paratroopers .

With the battery in their hands , but no sappers or explosives , the British gathered together what plastic explosives they had been issued for use with their Gammon bombs to try to destroy the guns . By this time , Steiner had returned to Franceville @-@ Plage , and directed his regiment 's 2nd and 3rd Batteries to fire onto the Merville Battery .

= = Aftermath = =

Just before 05 : 00 , the battalion 's survivors , just 75 men of the 150 who had set out , left the battery and headed for their secondary objective , the village of La Plein . The battalion , being too weak , only managed to liberate around half of the village , and had to await the arrival of the 1st Commando Brigade later in the day to complete its capture .

After the British had withdrawn , the Germans reoccupied the battery position . Steiner was unable to see Sword Beach from his command bunker , so even though he was able to get two of his guns back in action , he was unable to direct accurate fire onto the landings . However , observers with the 736th Infantry Regiment , holding out at La Brèche , were able to direct his guns until that position was neutralised .

On 7 June , the battery was assaulted again by two troops of commandos from No. 3 Commando , part of the 1st Special Service Brigade . The attack in daylight was repulsed with heavy losses to the commandos . As they withdrew , they were engaged by the battery 's guns firing over open sights . The British never succeeded in completely destroying the battery , and it remained under German control until 17 August , when the German Army started to withdraw from France .