

= 6th Airborne Division advance to the River Seine =

The 6th Airborne Division advance to the River Seine occurred in August 1944 , in the later stages of the Battle of Normandy , following the German Army 's defeat in the Falaise Pocket , during the Second World War .

The British 6th Airborne Division , under the command of Major @-@ General Richard Nelson Gale , was one of the first Allied units to arrive in Normandy on D @-@ Day , 6 June 1944 , and successfully secured the left flank of the invasion zone . Resisting efforts to dislodge them by the combined efforts of two infantry and one panzer division , a month later they were ordered to prepare to advance . Their objective was the mouth of the River Seine , 45 miles (72 km) away . To assist them in carrying out their mission , the division was reinforced by the 1st and 4th Special Service Brigades , the 1st Belgian Infantry Brigade and the Royal Netherlands Motorized Infantry Brigade , as well as increased artillery support . To reach the Seine , the division had to cross three rivers that had been flooded by the Germans , and had only two roads available to them .

The 6th Airborne Division began their advance on 17 August , after the German Army had started to withdraw . Fighting several small battles , by the end of the month they reached their objective at the River Seine . Here the division halted until early in September , when they returned to England to prepare for further airborne operations later in the war .

= = Background = =

On 6 June 1944 , the 6th Airborne Division landed in Normandy . Their mission was to secure the left flank of the invasion zone , by occupying and dominating the high ground between the River Orne and the River Dives . Despite the parachute troops being widely scattered , they managed to complete all of their objectives . After six days of counter @-@ attacks by German armour and infantry , the division 's position was secure by the end of the Battle of Breville on 12 June . Thereafter , they suffered only artillery bombardments .

Almost two months later on 7 August , the division was warned to prepare to advance . Their objective would be the mouth of the River Seine . To reinforce the lightly armed and equipped airborne division , the British 1st and 4th Special Service Brigades , together with the 1st Belgian and the Netherlands Infantry Brigades were placed under their command . Additional artillery support was provided by two field artillery regiments , a medium artillery battery , and a heavy anti @-@ aircraft artillery regiment used in a field artillery role .

In the operation the 6th Airborne Division together with the 7th Armoured Division , the 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division and the 51st (Highland) Infantry Division , formed the I Corps , attached to the First Canadian Army . When issuing his orders , Lieutenant General John Crocker , the Corps commander , aware that the 6th Airborne had almost no artillery , vehicles or engineer equipment , did not expect them to advance quickly . To reach the River Seine the division would have to cross three main rivers , along only two main lines of advance . One route was in the north , running along the French coast , while the other route was further inland between Troarn and Pont Audemer .

By this stage of Operation Overlord , German forces were of an unknown quantity and quality , but the division would be confronted by elements of Germany 's 711th Infantry Division , a part of the 15th Army . The 711th was composed of the 731st and the 744th Grenadier Infantry Regiments , together with artillery and other supporting arms . Even before the invasion the German division had not been considered a front line formation , but rather a static division on anti @-@ invasion duties , and many of its units had not been at full strength . Furthermore , many of its troops were older than was normal in a first line division , or were conscripted foreigners from Poland and Russia . Being a static division , it was hampered further by having almost no transport of its own , and what was available was mostly horse drawn .

= = Breakout = =

The three infantry formations of the British I Corps were deployed with the 6th Airborne Division on

the left , nearest the coast . In the centre was the 49th Division and on the right the 51st Division . The corps advance began on 15 August when the 49th Division captured Vimont , followed on the next day by the capture of Saint @-@ Pierre @-@ sur @-@ Dives by the 51st Division . On 17 August , the 6th Airborne Division advanced . The 6th Airlanding Brigade , with the Belgian and Netherlands brigades under its command , would advance along the French coastal route . The lighter forces of the 3rd and 5th Parachute and the two commando brigades would use the inland route .

When it was clear at 03 : 00 that the German Army in front of the division was pulling back , the first divisional unit to follow up was the 3rd Parachute Brigade . By 07 : 00 Bures was occupied by the 8th and 9th Parachute Battalions and by 08 : 00 the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion was in the Bois de Bavent . The rest of the division started advancing around the same time . The 4th Special Service Brigade headed for Troan and Saint Pair , while the 1st Special Service Brigade made for Bavent and Robehomme . In the north , the 6th Airlanding Brigade started moving along the road from Bréville to Merville .

= = = Northern sector = = =

The 6th Airlanding Brigade , with the Belgians and Dutch under its command , had to contend with German delaying tactics . The lead battalions advanced under heavy mortar and machine gun fire , until stopped by a strong defensive position at Cabourg . The 1st Battalion , Royal Ulster Rifles , unable to outflank the position , were ordered to dig in . The next day , the battalion was relieved by the Belgians and moved to a brigade concentration point , first at Le Plein and then at Troan , which they reached by the morning of 21 August . The 6th Airlanding Brigade advance continued from here with the 12th Battalion , Devonshire Regiment in the lead . The battalion was unopposed until that afternoon , when they had several casualties from German mortar and machine @-@ gun fire . With night approaching the battalion had to dig in , and prepared to continue the advance the next day . At 03 : 00 on 22 August , the battalion started an outflanking attack on Branville , which they occupied by 08 : 00 , and later the same day they liberated Vauville and Deauville , where they secured the high ground to the north of the town .

On 23 August a reconnaissance patrol from the 1st Battalion , Royal Ulster Rifles crossed the River Touques by boat , but German resistance in the area was too heavy for the battalion to cross . Instead they moved upriver , intending to cross at Bonnaville sur Touques . Intelligence reported that the railway embankment on the river was held in force by the Germans , and this put attempts to cross the river there on hold . Elsewhere the 2nd Battalion , Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry reached the river . Major John Howard and his D Company swam across and established the battalion 's bridgehead . With local French assistance and a collection of small boats and rafts , the rest of the battalion were also able to cross the river , entering Touques on 24 August . The next day they liberated Saint Philibert , La Correspondence and Petiville , and reached Malhortie where the Germans were still defending the bridge and high ground . At 13 : 00 , the battalion assaulted and captured the bridge intact , but German resistance prevented them from proceeding any further . On 26 August the advance continued , and at 19 : 00 Foulbec was liberated . Circumstances had divided the 6th Airlanding Brigade 's forces , and they were now advancing along two routes , with the Belgian and Dutch brigades along the coast and the airlanding battalions further inland . The 6th Airlanding Brigade battalions headed towards Honfleur and Berville sur Mer , meeting slight German opposition , while the Belgians occupied the area around Berville and Foulbec .

= = = Southern sector = = =

In the south , the 3rd Parachute Brigade started crossing the River Dives on 18 August , delayed by the need to build a crossing to replace the bridge destroyed by the division during Operation Tonga . By nightfall the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion was engaging the German rearguard and the 8th Parachute Battalion reached the outskirts of Goustranville . The next morning the brigade advance

continued into Goustranville , where they came under heavy artillery fire from the high ground at Putot . Their attack faltered and Gale decided to restart the advance that night . He ordered the 3rd Parachute Brigade to secure the start point along the Dives canal and railway line , while the 5th Parachute Brigade assaulted the artillery position at Putot .

At 22 : 00 the 3rd Parachute Brigade moved forward , capturing the two canal bridges intact , and 150 prisoners from the 744th Grenadier Regiment . By 01 : 00 on 19 August , they were on the outskirts of Dozule , but were then targeted by German artillery , causing several casualties . At the same time the 5th Parachute Brigade crossed the canal further south . The 7th Parachute Battalion were ordered to secure the area to the east of Putot @-@ en @-@ Auge , while the 12th Parachute Battalion assaulted the village . En route , the 7th Parachute Battalion came under fire from German machine @-@ guns , then observed a line of troops approaching them . Initially thought to be the 13th Parachute Battalion they were soon identified as Germans , and the battalion ambushed them at a distance of 25 yards (23 m) , causing severe casualties to the Germans .

When the 13th Parachute Battalion advanced close enough to Hill 13 , they carried out a bayonet charge on the summit . However , they arrived at the same time as a battalion of German reinforcements , who immediately counter @-@ attacked , forcing the battalion back , inflicting several casualties . A follow @-@ up attack by the Germans on the withdrawing British was stopped by an artillery barrage . During this time the 12th Parachute Battalion captured Putot @-@ en @-@ Auge , taking 160 prisoners and several heavy weapons .

The next day , 21 August , the 3rd Parachute Brigade advanced towards the River Touques at Pont @-@ l'Évêque , fighting through a German infantry and armour position at Annebault . The village was eventually captured by the 8th Parachute Battalion after some heavy fighting . Here the brigade held firm while the 5th Parachute Brigade moved through them , and reached Pont @-@ l'Évêque on 22 August . The 13th Parachute Battalion then led the brigade attack into the town ; their objective was to cross both branches of the Touques in the town and form a bridgehead on the northern bank . At the same time the 12th Parachute Battalion would cross further upriver and secure a railway embankment at Saint Julien . At 15 : 00 the Royal Artillery laid down a smoke barrage to cover the advance of the 12th Parachute Battalion . The Germans opened fire when they were around 400 yards (370 m) from the river ; only ten men from the battalion succeeded in crossing , and then became trapped on the far bank . Running low on ammunition , and without support , they eventually withdrew . The 13th Parachute Battalion fought its way into the town and across the first branch of the river , but German resistance was heavy and they could not get across the eastern branch .

On 22 August a patrol from the 13th Parachute Battalion succeeded in crossing the eastern branch of the river , and was quickly reinforced by the rest of the battalion . They fought for three hours to gain a proper foothold and were then forced to withdraw again . The next day , patrols from the 7th Parachute Battalion discovered that the Germans had withdrawn during the night , and they therefore crossed the river and secured the high ground to the north , closely followed by the rest of the brigade . On 25 August the 1st Special Service Brigade took over as the lead formation , and headed towards Beuzeville , but once again German defences held up the advance . The 3rd Parachute Brigade and the 4th Special Service Brigade carried out a left flanking attack to capture the village , suffering heavy losses from German mortar fire .

Later that day , Gale received orders that the 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division would take Pont Audemer . Convinced he was in a better position to capture the crossing over the River Risle there , he ordered the Netherlands Infantry Brigade to move and join the 5th Parachute Brigade in taking the town . On 26 August the men of the parachute brigade , some mounted on the Cromwell tanks of the 6th Airborne Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment , raced towards the bridge from the east while the Dutch headed there from the west . The Dutch brigade arrived first , just minutes after the Germans destroyed the bridge , slightly ahead of the 7th Parachute Battalion . The Dutch brigade moved to secure the heights overlooking the river , while the 5th Parachute Brigade occupied the town .

= = = River Seine = = =

Having reached the River Seine , the division was ordered to hold firm between Honfleur and Pont Audemer and prepare to return to England . In nine days of fighting they had advanced 45 miles (72 km) , despite , as the divisional commander Major @-@ General Gale put it , his infantry units being " quite inadequately equipped for a rapid pursuit , " captured 400 square miles (1 @,@ 000 km2) of German held territory , and took more than 1 @,@ 000 German prisoners . Since landing on 6 June , the division 's casualties were 4 @,@ 457 , of which 821 were killed , 2 @,@ 709 wounded and 927 missing . The division was withdrawn from France , and embarked for England at the beginning of September .