

= 1st Airborne Division (United Kingdom) =

The 1st Airborne Division was an airborne infantry division of the British Army during the Second World War . The division was formed in late 1941 during World War II , after the British Prime Minister , Winston Churchill , demanded an airborne force , and was initially under command of Major @-@ General Frederick Arthur Montague Browning . The division was one of two airborne divisions raised by the British Army during the war , with the other being the 6th Airborne Division , created in May 1943 , using former units of the 1st Airborne Division .

The divisions first two missions ? Operation Biting , a parachute landing in France , and Operation Freshman , a glider mission in Norway ? were both raids . Part of the division was sent to North Africa at the end of 1942 , where it fought in the Tunisia Campaign , and when the Allies invaded Sicily in July 1943 , the division undertook two brigade sized landings . The first , Operation Ladbroke , carried out by glider infantry of the 1st Airlanding Brigade and the second , Operation Fustian , by the 1st Parachute Brigade , were far from completely successful . The 1st Airborne Division then took part in a mostly diversionary amphibious landing , Operation Slapstick , part of the Allied invasion of Italy in September 1943 .

In December , most of the 1st Airborne Division (minus the 2nd Parachute Brigade) returned to England , and began training and preparing for the Allied invasion of Normandy . It was not involved in the Normandy landings in June 1944 , being held in reserve . In September 1944 it took part in Operation Market Garden . The division , with the Polish 1st Parachute Brigade temporarily attached , landed 60 miles (97 km) behind German lines , to capture crossings on the River Rhine , and fought in the Battle of Arnhem . After failing to achieve its objectives , the division was surrounded and took very heavy casualties , but held out for nine days before the survivors were evacuated .

The remnants of the 1st Airborne Division was returned to England soon after . The division never fully recovered from their losses at Arnhem and the 4th Parachute Brigade was disbanded . Just after the end of the war in Europe , the depleted formation took part in Operation Domsday in Norway in May 1945 . They were tasked with the disarmament and repatriation of the German occupation army . The 1st Airborne Division then returned to England and was disbanded in November 1945 .

= = Background = =

Impressed by the success of German airborne operations during the Battle of France , British Prime Minister Winston Churchill directed the War Office to investigate the possibility of creating a force of 5 @,@ 000 parachute troops . As a result , on 22 June 1940 , No. 2 Commando assumed parachute duties , and on 21 November was re @-@ designated the 11th Special Air Service Battalion , with a parachute and glider wing .

On 21 June 1940 the Central Landing Establishment was formed at Ringway airfield near Manchester . Although tasked primarily with training parachute troops , it was also directed to investigate the use of gliders to transport troops into battle . At the same time , the Ministry of Aircraft Production contracted General Aircraft Ltd to design and produce a glider for this purpose . The result was the General Aircraft Hotspur , which was capable of transporting eight soldiers and was used for both assault and training purposes .

The success of the first British airborne raid , Operation Colossus , prompted the War Office to expand the airborne force through the creation of the Parachute Regiment , and to develop plans to convert several infantry battalions into parachute and glider battalions . On 31 May 1941 , a joint army and air force memorandum was approved by the Chiefs @-@ of @-@ Staff and Winston Churchill ; it recommended that the British airborne forces should consist of two parachute brigades , one based in England and the other in the Middle East , and that a glider force of 10 @,@ 000 men should be created .

= = Formation history = =

The existing 11th Special Air Service Battalion was renamed the 1st Parachute Battalion and , together with the newly raised 2nd and 3rd Parachute Battalions , formed the first of the new airborne formations , 1st Parachute Brigade , commanded by Brigadier Richard Nelson Gale who would later command the 6th Airborne Division . The 2nd and 3rd Battalions were formed from volunteers , between the ages of twenty @-@ two and thirty @-@ two , who were already serving in infantry units . Only ten men from any one unit were allowed to volunteer .

In October 1941 , Frederick Arthur Montague Browning was promoted to Major General , named the Commander Parachute and Airborne Troops , and ordered to form a headquarters to develop and train airborne forces . The next unit formed was the 1st Airlanding Brigade on 10 October 1941 , by the conversion of the mountain warfare trained 31st Independent Infantry Brigade Group , commanded by Brigadier George F. Hopkinson . The brigade comprised four battalions : the 1st Border Regiment , 2nd South Staffordshire Regiment , 2nd Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry , and the 1st Royal Ulster Rifles . The men who were unsuitable for airborne forces were replaced by volunteers from other units . By the end of the year Browning 's command had become the headquarters of 1st Airborne Division .

== = 1942 ? 1943 == =

Browning expressed his opinion that the force must not be sacrificed in " penny packets " , and urged the formation of a third brigade . Permission was finally granted in July 1942 , and the 2nd Parachute Brigade , commanded by Brigadier Ernest Down , was formed . The 2nd Parachute Brigade was assigned the existing 4th Parachute Battalion , and two new battalions converted from line infantry units , the 5th (Scottish) Parachute Battalion , converted from the 7th Queen 's Own Cameron Highlanders , and the 6th (Royal Welch) Parachute Battalion , from the 10th Royal Welch Fusiliers .

The 3rd Parachute Brigade , comprising the 7th Parachute Battalion , previously the 10th Somerset Light Infantry , the 8th Parachute Battalion , converted from 13th Royal Warwickshire Regiment , and the 9th Parachute Battalion , which was previously the 10th Essex Regiment , Parachute Battalions , was formed in November 1943 , and also assigned to the division . Soon afterwards , the 1st Parachute Brigade left the division , to take part in the Operation Torch landings in North Africa .

In April 1943 , the commander of the 1st Airlanding Brigade , Hopkinson , was promoted to Major General and given command of the division . Later that year , the division was deployed to Tunisia for operations in the Mediterranean theatre . The 3rd Parachute Brigade and two battalions from the 1st Airlanding Brigade ? the 1st Royal Ulster Rifles and 2nd Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry ? remained behind in England , forming the nucleus of the newly raised 6th Airborne Division . On arrival , the 1st Airborne was reinforced by the 4th Parachute Brigade . The 4th Parachute Brigade had been formed in the Middle East during 1942 . In addition to the 156th Parachute Battalion , which had been raised from British troops stationed in India , it comprised the 10th and 11th Parachute Battalions , which had been raised from troops based in Egypt and Palestine .

The division took part in two brigade sized operations in Sicily , and an amphibious assault at Taranto in Italy . During the fighting in Italy , Major General Ernest Down became the divisional commander , after his predecessor died of wounds received in the fighting . After service in the Mediterranean , the division returned to England in December 1943 , leaving the 2nd Parachute Brigade behind as an independent formation .

== = 1944 ? 1945 == =

After the division arrived in England , Ernest Down was posted to India to oversee the formation of the 44th Indian Airborne Division , and was replaced by Major General Roy Urquhart . In September 1944 , for Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands , the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade was attached to the division . Following Market Garden , fewer than 2 @,@ 200 men from the 10 @,@ 000 that were sent to the Netherlands returned to the British lines . Having suffered such severe

casualties , the 4th Parachute Brigade was disbanded , with its surviving men being posted to the 1st Parachute Brigade . The division then went through a period of reorganisation , but had still not fully recovered by the end of the war , due to the acute shortage of manpower throughout the British Army in 1944 @-@ 1945 . Still under strength in May 1945 , it was sent to Norway to disarm the German army of occupation ; returning to Britain in November 1945 where the 1st Airborne Division was disbanded .

= = Operational history = =

= = = France = = =

Operation Biting , also known as the Bruneval Raid , was the codename for a raid by Combined Operations in 1942 . Their objective was a German Würzburg radar installation at Bruneval in France . Due to the extensive coastal defences erected by the Germans to protect the array , it was thought a commando raid from the sea would incur heavy losses , and give the garrison sufficient time for the radar equipment to be destroyed . It was therefore decided that an airborne assault followed by sea @-@ borne evacuation would be the ideal way to surprise the garrison and seize the technology intact .

On the night of 27 February , ' C ' Company , 2nd Parachute Battalion , under the command of Major John Frost , parachuted into France a few miles from the installation . The force then proceeded to assault the villa in which the radar equipment was kept , killing several members of the German garrison and capturing the installation after a brief fire @-@ fight . A technician that had come with the force partially dismantled the Würzburg radar array and removed several key pieces to take back to Britain , the raiding force then retreated to the evacuation beach . The detachment assigned to clear the beach had failed to do so , however , and another brief fire @-@ fight was required to eliminate the Germans guarding the beach . The raiding force was then picked up by a small number of landing craft and transferred to several Motor Gun Boats which brought them back to Britain . The raid was entirely successful . The airborne troops suffered only a few casualties , and the pieces of the radar they brought back , along with a German radar technician , allowed British scientists to understand German advances in radar and to create counter @-@ measures to neutralise those advances .

= = = Norway = = =

Operation Freshman was the first British airborne operation conducted using gliders , its target was the Vemork Norsk Hydro chemical plant in Norway , which produced heavy water for Nazi Germany . By 1942 the German atomic weapons programme had come close to being able to develop a nuclear reactor , but in order for the reactor to function it would require a great deal of heavy water . The source of this water was the Norsk Hydro plant , which had been occupied in 1940 ; when the British government learned of the German nuclear developments , it was decided that a raid would be launched to destroy the plant and deny the Germans the heavy water . Several tactics were discussed and discarded as impractical , and it was finally decided that a small force from the 1st Airborne Division , comprising 30 sappers from the Royal Engineers , would land by glider a short distance from the plant , and demolish it with explosives .

Two aircraft , each towing one glider , left Scotland on the night of 19 November 1942 . All managed to reach the Norwegian coast , but none were able to reach their objective . The first pair suffered from navigational difficulties and severe weather , which resulted in the tow rope snapping and the first glider crash @-@ landing , with its towing aircraft returning to base ; eight airborne troops were killed outright , four were severely injured and five unhurt . The survivors were captured shortly after the crash . The second pair fared even worse , with both aircraft and glider crashing into a mountain for unknown reasons ; the aircrew and several men were killed outright , and those who survived were taken prisoner . None of the prisoners survived for very long , being either poisoned

or executed as a result of Adolf Hitler 's Commando Order , which stated that all British Commandos personnel were to be killed immediately when captured .

= = = Sicily = = =

Operation Turkey Buzzard , also known as Operation Beggar , was a supply mission to North Africa that took place between March and August 1943 . The mission was undertaken by the division 's glider pilots and No. 295 Squadron Royal Air Force , as part of the preparations for the Allied invasion of Sicily .

The mission involved Halifax bombers towing Horsa gliders 3 @, @ 200 miles (5 @, @ 100 km) from England to Tunisia . The Horsas were needed to complement the smaller American Waco gliders , which did not have the capacity required for the planned operations . During the mission two German Condor patrol aircraft located and shot down a Halifax @-@ and @-@ Horsa combination . Altogether five Horsas and three Halifaxes were lost , but 27 Horsas arrived in Tunisia in time to participate in the invasion of Sicily .

Operation Ladbroke was a glider assault by the 1st Airlanding Brigade near Syracuse , that began on 9 July 1943 as part of the invasion of Sicily . The brigade were equipped with 144 Waco and six Horsa gliders . Their objective was to land near the town of Syracuse , secure the Ponte Grande Bridge , and ultimately take control of the city itself with its strategically important docks .

On the way to Sicily , 65 gliders were released too early by the towing aircraft and crashed into the sea , drowning around 252 men . Of the remainder , only 87 men arrived at the Pont Grande Bridge , which they successfully captured and held beyond the time they were to be relieved . Finally , with their ammunition expended and only 15 soldiers remaining unwounded , they surrendered to the Italian forces . The Italians sought to demolish the bridge after regaining control of it , but were unable to do so because the airborne forces had removed the explosive charges . Other troops from the airlanding brigade , who had landed elsewhere in Sicily , destroyed communications links and captured artillery batteries .

Operation Fustain , the division 's second mission in Sicily , was carried out by the 1st Parachute Brigade . Their objective was the Primosole Bridge across the Simeto River . The intention was for the parachute brigade , with glider @-@ borne forces in support , to land on both sides of the river . While one battalion seized the bridge , the other two battalions would establish defensive positions to the north and south . They would then hold the bridge until relieved by the advance of XIII Corps , part of the Eighth Army which had landed on the south eastern coast three days previously .

The start of the operation was a disaster . Many of the aircraft carrying the paratroopers from North Africa were shot down , or were damaged and turned back , due to both friendly fire and enemy action . The evasive action taken by the pilots scattered the brigade over a large area , and only the equivalent of two companies of troops were landed in the correct locations . Despite this and the defence by German and Italian forces , the British paratroops captured the bridge . Resisting attacks from the north and south , they held out against increasing odds until nightfall .

The relieving force led by the 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division , which was short of transport , found it hard going to reach the parachute brigade and were still 1 mile (1 @. @ 6 km) away when they halted for the night . By this time , with casualties mounting and supplies running short , the brigade commander , Brigadier Gerald Lathbury , had relinquished control of the bridge to the Germans . The following day the British units joined forces , and the 9th Battalion , Durham Light Infantry with armour support attempted to recapture the bridge . It was not finally secured until three days after the start of the operation , when another battalion of the Durham Light Infantry , led by the paratroopers , established a bridgehead on the northern bank of the river .

= = = Italy = = =

Operation Slapstick was an amphibious landing at the Italian port of Taranto , part of the Allied invasion of Italy in September 1943 . The mission had been planned at short notice , following an offer by the Italian government to open the ports of Taranto and Brindisi on the heel of Italy to the

Allies . The 1st Airborne Division was selected to undertake the mission , but at the time they were located in North Africa . A shortage of transport aircraft meant the division could not land by parachute and glider , and all the landing craft in the area were already allocated to the other landings : Operation Avalanche at Salerno on the western coast , and Operation Baytown at Calabria . Instead , the division had to be transported across the Mediterranean by ships of the Royal Navy . The landing was unopposed , and the airborne division successfully captured the ports of Taranto , and later Brindisi on the Adriatic coast , in working order .

The only German forces in the area were elements of the German 1st Parachute Division , which engaged the advancing British in ambushes and at roadblocks during a fighting withdrawal north . By the end of September , the 1st Airborne Division had advanced 125 miles (201 km) to Foggia . Reinforcements from two infantry divisions , the 8th Indian and British 78th , had by then been landed behind them , which allowed the airborne troops to be withdrawn back to Taranto . Despite casualties for the 1st Airborne Division in Italy being relatively light , the General Officer Commanding (GOC) , Major @-@ General George Hopkinson , was killed while watching an assault by the 10th Parachute Battalion where he was mortally wounded by a burst of machine gun fire . He was replaced by Brigadier Ernest E. Down , previously the commander of 2nd Parachute Brigade .

= = = England = = =

By December 1943 the division had returned to England and begun training for operations in North @-@ West Europe under the supervision of I Airborne Corps . Although the 1st Airborne Division was not scheduled to take part in the Normandy landings , a contingency plan , Operation Wastage , was drawn up whereby the division would be parachuted in to support any of the five invasion beaches if serious delays were experienced . This plan turned out not to be required .

While the 6th Airborne Division were still fighting in Normandy , numerous plans to parachute the 1st Airborne Division into France were formulated , all to no avail . In June and July 1944 , the plans included Operation Reinforcement , which was a landing to the west of St Sauveur @-@ le @-@ Vicomte to support the US 82nd Airborne Division , and Operation Wild Oats to seize Carpiquet airfield in support of the First Canadian Army . There was also Operation Beneficiary , intended to support the American XX Corps in capturing St Malo , and Operation Lucky Strike which had the objective of seizing bridges across the River Seine at Rouen . In Operation Sword Hilt , the division was to isolate the port of Brest and destroy the Morlaix viaduct . Operation Hands Up was intended to support the US Third Army by seizing the Vannes airfield .

By August the division was still waiting to be deployed , but now plans envisioned using them as part of a larger force . Operation Transfigure involved the division , the 52nd (Lowland) Infantry Division , the US 101st Airborne Division , and the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade landing at Rambouillet St Arnoult , to close the gap between Orléans and Paris . Operation Axehead , using the same force , was to seize the bridges over the River Seine in support of 21st Army Group . Operation Boxer , with the same force , was to seize Boulogne and assault V1 flying bomb sites . Near the end of the month , Operation Linnet , with the same units as before , was formulated to seize crossings over the Escaut . Operation Infatuate , drawn up in early September , involved the entire I Airborne Corps landing in Belgium to trap the retreating German armies in the Scheldt estuary , as well as aiming to threaten Antwerp .

Finally , in September , there was Operation Comet , in which the division 's three brigades were to land in the Netherlands and each capture a river crossing . The first of these was the bridge over the River Waal at Nijmegen , the second the bridge over the River Maas at Grave , and the last was the bridge over the River Rhine at Arnhem . Planning for Comet was well advanced when on 10 September the mission was cancelled . Instead , a new operation was proposed with the same objectives as Comet but to be carried out by three divisions of the First Allied Airborne Army .

= = = Arnhem = = =

Operation Market Garden was an airborne assault by three divisions in the Netherlands in September 1944 , including the 1st and the American 82nd and 101st , to secure key bridges and towns along the expected Allied axis of advance . Farthest north , 1st Airborne , supported by the 1st Polish Parachute Brigade , landed at Arnhem to secure bridges across the Nederrijn . Initially expecting an easy advance , XXX Corps planned to reach the airborne force at Arnhem within two to three days .

1st Airborne landed some distance from its objectives and was quickly hampered by unexpected resistance , especially from elements of the 9th SS and 10th SS panzer divisions . Only a small force was able to reach the Arnhem road bridge , while the main body of the division was halted on the outskirts of the city . Meanwhile , XXX Corps was unable to advance north as quickly as anticipated and failed to relieve the airborne troops . After four days , the small British force at the bridge was overwhelmed and the rest of the division became trapped in a pocket north of the river , where they could not be sufficiently reinforced by the Poles , or by XXX Corps when it arrived on the southern bank . After nine days of fighting , the shattered remains of the airborne forces were eventually withdrawn south of the Rhine . 1st Airborne lost 8 @, @ 000 men during the battle and never saw combat again .

= = = Norway post @-@ war = = =

In May 1945 , immediately after the Allied Victory in Europe Day , the 1st Airborne Division was sent to disarm and repatriate the 350 @, @ 000 @-@ strong German occupation army in Norway . The division maintained law and order until the arrival of the remainder of Force 134 , the occupation force . During its time in Norway , the division was tasked with supervising the surrender of the German forces in Norway , as well as preventing the sabotage of important military and civilian facilities .

The German Instrument of Surrender was delivered on 8 May to General Franz Böhme , the commander of all German forces stationed in Norway ; the 1st Airborne Division landed near Oslo and Stavanger between 9 and 11 May . Most of the transport aircraft carrying the division landed safely , but one crash caused several fatalities . The division encountered little of the expected German resistance . Operational duties included welcoming back King Haakon , looking after Allied ex @-@ prisoners of war , arresting war criminals and supervising the clearing of minefields . While in Norway , the division was also able to investigate what happened to the airborne troops that had taken part in Operation Freshman . The division returned to Britain , and was disbanded on 26 August 1945 .

= = Order of battle = =

= = = Commanders = = =

Major @-@ General Frederick Browning
Major @-@ General George F. Hopkinson
Major @-@ General Ernest Down
Major @-@ General Roy Urquhart

= = = Units = = =

1st Parachute Brigade
1st Airlanding Brigade
2nd Parachute Brigade
3rd Parachute Brigade
4th Parachute Brigade
Divisional troops

Divisional headquarters and signal squadron
1st Airlanding Light Regiment , Royal Artillery
1st Forward (Airborne) Observation Unit , Royal Artillery
21st Independent Parachute Company , Army Air Corps
1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron
9th (Airborne) Field Company , Royal Engineers
261st (Airborne) Field Park Company , Royal Engineers
250th (Airborne) Light Company , Royal Army Service Corps
93rd Company , Royal Army Service Corps
Detachment Ordnance Field Park
Detachment , Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers Workshop
89th Field Security Section , Intelligence Corps
1st Airborne Division , Provost Company , Royal Military Police