

Title:

In the footsteps of D Company 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry
D-Day, 6 June 1944

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Summary:

The true story of the coup-de-main assault by British Gliderborne soldiers to capture the two vital bridges near Bénouville, France in the early hours of D-Day, 6 June 1944. This was the first action of the greatest seaborne invasion the world has ever known.

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British Military History, Second World War, WW2, D-Day, Normandy, British Airborne, Pegasus Bridge

Article Body:

On the 6 June 1944 the greatest seaborne invasion the world has ever known took place on the Calvados Coast of Normandy, France. This invasion was the beginning of the end of the Second World War and the 6 June 1944 will be forever known as D-Day. This article is an account of the first action that took place on D-Day at the Caen Canal and River Orne Bridges near Bénouville, France. It tells the true story of the coup-de-main assault by British Gliderborne soldiers to capture these two vital bridges.

Preceding the seaborne landings three Allied Airborne Divisions were dropped to secure the flanks of the five-invasion beaches where the Allied 21st Army Group was to come ashore. In the west two US Airborne Divisions dropped onto the Cotentin peninsula behind UTAH beach and in the east the British 6th Airborne Division (Br 6 AB Div) dropped into the area between the River Orne and River Dives to the east of SWORD beach.

One of the primary tasks of the Br 6 AB Div was to seize intact the two bridges over the Caen Canal and River Orne near Bénouville and hold them until relieved against any German counterattacks. This mission was considered to be vital to the success of the invasion, as it would allow the seaborne forces to reinforce the Br 6 AB Div's area and subsequently break out to the east. D Company the 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (D Coy 2 OBLI) commanded by Major John Howard was selected to carryout this mission and this is their story.

On the morning of 5 June 1944 the men of D Coy 2 OBLI started their final preparations and at noon Maj Howard learned that the invasion was on. He

ordered the men to rest and when the evening meal was over they boarded the trucks to go to their gliders. As they climbed into their gliders he shook hands with the officers and called out words of encouragement to the men. Finally he moved to his own glider, upon the nose of which Pte Wally Parr had chalked 'Lady Irene' to name it after his wife. When Maj Howard got in the glider, the door was closed and on schedule they started to move down the runway. At 22.56 hrs 'Lady Irene' was airborne and D Coy 2 OBLI was on their way into history.

The six Halifax bombers from 298 Squadron RAF took-off with the accompanying Horsa gliders in tow and crossed the English Channel flying at an altitude of 7,000 ft. All around them were Heavy Bombers going to drop bombs on German positions in the invasion area, Caen or other selected targets. With all of this air activity the German anti-aircraft and searchlight crews failed to notice the gliders.

At the appointed time the Halifax bomber released the first glider to begin its run into the target. In the glider S/Sgt Wallwork checked their altitude and the compass, whilst S/Sgt John Ainsworth checked his stopwatch. At the appointed mark they turned to starboard and halfway down the crosswind leg of their approach S/Sgt Wallwork saw it, he could make out the river, the canal and both bridges. With visibility good and the target in sight he dropped the glider's nose and made for the LZ. With the ground rushing up at around 95mph he held the glider on course; they hit the ground and caught the first of the wire defences. Jim Wallwork shouted, "Stream" and John Ainsworth released the arrester parachute; it lifted the tail, forced the nose into the ground, tore off the wheels and bounced the glider back into the air. The arrester parachute did its job and they hit the ground again; this time on the skids. Jim Wallwork shouted, "Jettison" and John Ainsworth pressed the button to release the parachute; now travelling at about 60mph the glider threw up hundreds of friction sparks from the skids as they passed over rocks. Seeing these sparks through the open door Maj Howard thought that they had been spotted and were being fired upon. All of a sudden there was an almighty crash and the glider came to a jarring halt; Jim Wallwork and John Ainsworth were hurled out through the cockpit still strapped in their seats. It was 00.16 hrs early in the morning of D-Day 6 June 1944 and the first Allied soldiers had arrived on French soil.

The glider's passengers were momentarily knocked unconscious, but Maj Howard's fanaticism for physical fitness paid off; they quickly recovered and in a matter of seconds their training kicked in. Automatically removing their harnesses, they exited the glider through any hole they could make or find. On reaching the outside Maj Howard realised that there was no shooting and they had landed without being spotted. Looking around he thanked god for Jim Wallwork and John Ainsworth; they had put the glider right into the corner of the field where he wanted it.

Lt Herbert Denham 'Den' Brotheridge and the men of 25 Platoon swiftly exited the glider and quietly shook out into their assault formation. Lt Brotheridge whispered into Cpl Jack Bailey's ear and off he went with his two men to deal with the pillbox where the firing mechanism to blow the bridges was located. Gathering the remainder of his platoon he gave a whispered, "Come on lads" and they made a dash for the bridge.

One minute had passed since the first glider had landed and S/Sgt Oliver Bowland at the controls of glider 92 came down within 25 yards of glider 91. Lt David Wood was thrown clear still clutching on to his sten and canvas bucket of extra grenades; relieved to find himself in one piece he pulled himself together, gathered his platoon and set off for the wire perimeter where Maj Howard would be waiting.

Lt Brotheridge and 25 Platoon were moving on to the bridge at a steady trot as two German sentries passed each other in the middle. The sentry walking towards the eastern end of the bridge was suddenly confronted by a pack of British airborne soldiers coming out of the night; confronted by this hellish sight he turned tail and ran shouting "paratroopers" as he went. The second sentry, a German NCO, turned to see what was happening and on seeing the British paratroopers running towards him pulled out the Verrey pistol that he was carrying. Pte Billy Gray sent a burst from his Bren towards him and Lt Den Brotheridge fired off a full magazine from his sten. The German NCO was hit by a storm of bullets, but as he fell dead to the ground the Verrey pistol went off and a flare shot up into the night.

As the flare went off Cpl Bailey and his two men arrived at the pillbox and tossed their grenades in through the weapon slits; the grenades were followed up with a burst of fire and they looked inside when the dust settled to find no one left alive.

Pte Wally Parr was just running on to the bridge when the flare shot skywards; he saw the door of a nearby dugout half open and abruptly shut again. Pulling out a grenade he ran across the road and by the time he got to the dugout the pin was out. Opening the door just enough to throw it in, he tossed the grenade through the opening and quickly shut the door. As the grenade exploded Pte Charlie Gardiner jumped into the dugout, Wally Parr opened the door again, and Gardiner finished off the Germans inside with a burst from his sten.

The shouts of "paratroopers" from the running sentry, the sound of Lt Brotheridge's sten, Pte Gray's burst from his Bren, the crump of Cpl Bailey's grenades going off and the flare from the German NCOs Verrey pistol brought the other German defenders to life. Many of the private soldiers were foreign conscripts and these quickly faded into the night, but the NCOs all of whom were German sprang to their positions.

Back on LZ 'X' glider 93 came to a halt with a shuddering crash on the edge of the pond between the two gliders already on the ground, as it did so it swung ninety degrees breaking in half. Capt John Vaughan RAMC was thrown clear and

knocked completely unconscious. Lt Richard 'Sandy' Smith was also thrown clear to land face down in the mud; he had lost his sten and momentarily did not know where he was or what he was doing. Picking up the nearest sten Lt Smith gathered his platoon together and made for Maj Howard's position. One of the other members of 14 Platoon however, was not so lucky; L/Cpl Fred Greenhalgh was knocked unconscious on impact and thrown clear to land face down in the pond where he drowned.

By now the sappers from glider 91 were under the bridge cutting wires and looking for explosives as they went. Lt David Wood's 24 Platoon were just arriving at Maj Howard's position and barely two minutes had passed since the first glider had touched down.

The German sentry reached the far end of the bridge without being hit and threw himself into a trench. The Germans in their trenches turned their weapons to point at the running airborne soldiers. Lt Brotheridge was almost across the bridge when he saw the first of the enemy beginning to react and pulled a grenade from his pouch as he ran. Pte Billy Gray fired his Bren from the hip towards the enemy, as did many of the other charging men of 25 Platoon. Getting the pin out of his grenade Lt Brotheridge threw it at one of the enemy occupied trenches. As he did so a machine-gunner in another enemy trench off to his right sent a burst in his direction. As his grenade exploded in the enemy trench wiping out its occupants Lt Den Brotheridge was thrown back by the force of the machine-gun's bullets to land on his back in the middle of the road. Other members of 25 Platoon began firing at the Germans in their trenches; the combination of this fire and a burst from Pte Gray's Bren knocked out the machine-gun that had brought Lt Brotheridge down.

Wally Parr was trying to shout "Able, Able, Able" as he ran on to the bridge, but the words would just not come out. Freeing his tongue from the roof of his dried out mouth he finally let out a yell of "Come out and fight you square-headed bastards" in his broad Cockney accent. Lt David Wood's men were now starting to get to grips with the Germans on the home bank.

Running straight past Maj Howard, 14 Platoon raced on to the bridge; Lt Sandy Smith had wrenched his knee and more hobbled than ran. As he crossed the bridge he saw Lt Brotheridge's Platoon firing their weapons and throwing grenades at the German defenders. As he reached the far end he saw a German soldier near the low wall in front of the Café Gondrée about to throw a stick grenade; with a burst from his sten he sent the German sprawling across the wall dead, but the grenade landed close to Lt Smith and went off. He did not feel a thing and it was only when one of his corporals who was nearby asked if he was all right that Lt Sandy Smith noticed the holes in his Denison smock and trousers; he had been hit by the grenade's fragments and the wrist of his trigger hand had lost all of its flesh, but he could still use his trigger finger.

Inside the Café Gondrée the owner, Georges Gondrée, had been awakened by all the noise. Crawling to one of the upper floor windows he peeped over the sill to

see what was going on; as he did so Lt Smith saw the movement and thinking that it was a German soldier let off a burst from his sten in the direction of the Café. Fortunately for Georges Gondrée the burst went high shattering the window and hitting the wooden beams. He beat a hasty retreat, gathered his family together, and then took them downstairs to the comparative safety of the cellar. Lt Smith continued with the task in hand and led his platoon in the clearing of the remaining trenches on the western bank of the Canal.

At 00.21 hrs, the fighting at the Caen Canal Bridge started to die down and Pte Parr made his way to the Café that was the rallying point for 25 Platoon. As he ran past the end of the bridge he saw one of his comrades lying on the ground in the middle of the road. Knowing that he had to report to Lt Brotheridge he continued on for a few more paces before he pulled up short. Turning around he realised that the soldier on the ground was Lt Brotheridge. He went back and knelt down beside his Platoon Commander; Lt Brotheridge had been shot in the neck, his eyes were open and his lips were moving, but not a sound came out; as Wally Parr put his hand under Lt Brotheridge's head to lift it up his eyes just rolled back.

24 Platoon had finished clearing the trenches on the home bank of the canal and Lt Wood decided to report to Maj Howard that his task was complete. With Sgt Leather and a runner he was moving back towards Maj Howard's position when a burst from a German schmeisser rang out. Three bullets caught Lt David Wood in the leg and he fell to the ground. Bleeding profusely, frightened and shaken up he tried to stand but found he was unable to so. Both Sgt Leather and the runner had also been hit and lay on the ground nearby. Cpl Godbold one of his section commanders took over command of the platoon.

It was about this time that a shaken, but none too seriously injured S/Sgt Jim Wallwork started to regain consciousness; he was lying on his stomach with his seat on top of him. He could hear John Ainsworth calling out his name and asking if he was all right. Looking around he saw S/Sgt Ainsworth pinned under the wreckage of the glider's nose and when he asked him if he could crawl out he replied, "No." He asked if he lifted the nose of the glider could he crawl out, to which he received the reply, "I'll try" and as he lifted the wreckage John Ainsworth crawled out. After getting a medic to see to John Ainsworth's injuries, Jim Wallwork began his secondary task of unloading ammunition and carrying it forward to the men on the bridge.

It was now 00.22 hrs, six minutes after the first glider had landed, and reports of what was happening started to reach Maj Howard. The first information to come in was about Den Brotheridge; this was devastating news, as they were the best of friends. The next piece of news he received was that Lt David Wood and his Platoon Sergeant had also been hit; two of his three platoons at the bridge were now without their Platoon Commander. This was followed up with a report from 14 Platoon that informed him of Lt Smith's injuries. Whilst Sandy Smith was still on his feet Maj Howard could not help thinking that he had effectively

lost all three of his Platoon Commanders at the canal bridge; added to this he did not know what was happening at the Orne River Bridge.

At the Orne River Bridge the action was nowhere near as dramatic, glider 94 had missed the target area altogether landing some eight miles away near one of the bridges over the River Dives by Varaville; the Halifax crew had released the glider in the wrong place due to a navigational error.

Glider 96, piloted by S/Sgt Roy Howard and S/Sgt Fred Baacke, was the only one of the three gliders to come to rest on LZ 'Y'. At 00.20 hrs they made an easy landing coming to a halt some three hundred yards from the bridge; in this glider were Lt Dennis Fox and 17 Platoon. On landing Sgt Thornton reminded Lt Fox that he had forgotten to open the door, but when Dennis Fox tried to open it the door would not budge so Sgt Thornton had to show him how it was done.

A minute later glider 95, piloted by S/Sgt Stan Pearson and S/Sgt Len Guthrie, touched down and came to a halt short of LZ 'Y', some 700 yards away from the bridge. This glider carried Lt H J 'Todd' Sweeney and 23 Platoon.

Dismounting from their glider 17 Platoon shook out into their approach formation; one section to the front followed by Lt Dennis Fox, the remaining two sections and Sgt Thornton with the remainder of platoon headquarters at the rear. When the lead section did not move off, Dennis Fox went forward to find out why. The section commander pointed out a German manning a machine-gun at the bridge. Lt Fox told him to get moving, but he still hesitated; so taking the bull by the horns Lt Dennis Fox led 17 Platoon off to start their approach. They had just got moving when the German at the bridge saw them and opened up with his MG 34; the men of 17 Platoon dived for cover. Sgt Thornton at the back grabbed hold of the platoon's 2-inch mortar and immediately returned fire, putting a mortar round right on top of the machine-gunner. Seeing this land, Lt Fox and his platoon got up and charged to the bridge shouting "Fox, Fox, Fox" as they went. Reaching the bridge they were just in time to see the last of the Germans running away. One of the NCOs from the 17 Platoon's lead section jumped into the empty machine-gun pit, grabbed hold of their discarded MG 34 and sent a long burst of fire after them. These were the only shots fired in the capture of the bridge over the River Orne.

Lt Todd Sweeney and 23 Platoon dismounted from glider 95 to hear the machine-gun open up at the bridge. They quickly shook out and headed off for the bridge at the double with Lt Sweeney leading the way. The only casualties they suffered were those that failed to see the drainage ditches that crossed their approach. Soaked to the skin and covered in mud, Lt Sweeney led his men up to the bridge. Unnerved by the seemingly calm situation and the lack of any opposition on the bridge, he made the final approach with caution. Leaving one section to secure the home bank, Lt Sweeney led the remainder across at the run. As they reached the far end Lt Todd Sweeney saw Lt Dennis Fox. Lt Sweeney raced up to him, "Dennis, how are you, is everything all right?" to which he received the reply, "Yes I think so, but I can't find the bloody umpires!"

Leaving Lt Fox to organise the immediate defence of the River Bridge Lt Sweeney made his way to the Canal Bridge to report to Maj Howard. At 00.26 hrs, ten minutes after glider 91 had landed, John Howard had the news he had been waiting for; D Coy 2 OBLI had seized both bridges intact. Exuberant Maj Howard turned to his radio operator Cpl Tappenden and told him to send the message that the bridges had been captured. "HAM and JAM, HAM and JAM, HAM and JAM" out over the radio the codewords went; "HAM and JAM, HAM and JAM, HAM and JAM" Cpl Tappenden continued to send. What Maj Howard and Cpl Tappenden did not know was that Brig Poett was unable to receive the message.

The Caen Canal Bridge was named "Pegasus Bridge" after the Pegasus emblem worn by the British 6th Airborne Division in memory of this action. The River Orne Bridge was renamed "Horsa Bridge" after the gliders that carried the men who landed here.
