

5-4-2015

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### Recommended Citation

Bernd Horn and Michel Wyczynski (2004) "A Most Irrevocable Step: Canadian Paratroopers on D-Day, The first 24 hours, 5-6 June 1944," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 13: Iss. 3, Article 3.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol13/iss3/3>

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# A Most Irrevocable Step Canadian Paratroopers on D-Day The first 24 hours, 5-6 June 1944

**Bernd Horn and Michel Wyczynski**

Under the cover of darkness, in the late hours of 5 June 1944, 36 C-47 Dakota aircraft transporting the main group of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion and part of the headquarters staff of the 3rd Parachute Brigade (3 Para Bde) took off from Down Ampney Airport in England. The aircraft closed up in tight formation and headed toward the French coast. The steady drone of this armada filled the fuselages and drowned out all other noise. The heavily-laden Canadian paratroopers, crammed in the restrictive dark confines of their airplanes, shifted uneasily as the planes bucked and lurched in the wake of the preceding aircraft. The atmosphere was subdued. Some paratroopers slept, or prayed, while others nervously went over their assignments. Corporal Harry Reid gazed out a window and observed the ghostly silhouettes of the other Dakotas. "Then it hit home," exclaimed Reid, "We were finally on our way!"<sup>1</sup> To many this flight seemed to take forever. However, in the distant horizon the French coast was already within sight.

"Stand-up," bellowed the Jumpmaster! Despite this much anticipated order the paratroopers

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**Opposite top:** Mass drop during Exercise Co-operation, 7 February 1944 - preparation for D-Day.  
Courtesy of the 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives

**Opposite left:** Paratroopers of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion conduct range work as lead up to the Normandy invasion.  
National Archives of Canada (NAC) PA 209696

**Opposite right:** Esprit de corps built through shared hardship and experience.  
NAC PA206061

awkwardly struggled with their heavy loads and leg kit-bags to assume their jumping positions within each stick. Each man strained to hook up his static line to the overhead cable. The Dakotas now jerked and rocked violently as the pilots tried to avoid the deadly flak barrage that filled the sky as they crossed the coastline. The heavy fire forced the aircraft to break off from their assigned flight trajectory. Many pilots veered off their assigned flight trajectories and dropped to altitudes ranging between four and seven hundred feet in an effort to escape the lethal hailstorm.

As the pilots desperately tried to get back on course, the navigators scrutinized the rapidly unfolding French terrain hoping to recognize landmarks that confirmed the direction of their final approach to Drop Zone (DZ) "V". Meanwhile, the paratroopers were thrown violently within the aircraft. Static lines became tangled and equipment began to snag on the plane's interior. Individuals cursed as they scrambled to stand up long enough to execute their pre-exiting drills as the jumpmasters barked out orders.

"The pilots took such evasive action because of the flak," recalled one veteran, "that it resulted in some paratroopers not being able to get out of their aircraft."<sup>2</sup> Nineteen-year-old paratroop Private Bill Lovatt explained that "As we approached the DZ the aircraft took violent evasive moves and as I approached the door I was flung back violently to the opposite side of the aircraft in a tangle of arms and legs."<sup>3</sup> Major Dick Hilborn stated that "as we crossed the coast





Courtesy of the 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.

Canadian paratroopers in their staging area prior to D-Day. Two individuals from the “Victory Rifle Platoon” stand in the background with their distinctive haircuts. They were actually two of nine paratroopers who had their hair cut to spell out the word “Victory.”

of France the red light went on for preparing to drop. We were in the process of hooking up when the plane took violent evasive action...five of us ended up at the back of the plane.”<sup>4</sup> One airborne officer conceded that on D-Day “we lost a number of people over the sea from evasive action who fell out.”<sup>5</sup> Sergeant John Feduck was slightly more fortunate. “Before the light changed the plane suddenly lurched,” he remembered, “I couldn’t hang on because there was nothing to hang on to so out I went – there was no getting back in.”<sup>6</sup> Luckily, he was already over France.

Throughout the ordeal, the Jumpmasters urgently tried to restore order despite the hot, jagged shrapnel that ripped through the thin skin of the Dakota aircraft. Many of the occupants were surprised at “how much the aircraft bounced because of the flak.”<sup>7</sup> This extraordinary night jump would forever be etched in the very souls of the young paratroopers. “When I left the aircraft it was pitching,” stated Company Sergeant-Major (CSM) John Kemp. “I was standing in the door,” he explained, “There were 20 of us in the aircraft. I had 19 men behind me pushing. They wanted to get the hell out. The flak was hitting the wings.” Private Anthony Skalicky’s plane was one of those that was actually hit. One of the engines burst into

flames spewing thick black smoke. The plane was losing altitude and even though they were nowhere near the drop zone, “the entire stick just ran out the door,” recalled the frightened paratrooper. He conceded that “I couldn’t get out of the plane fast enough.”<sup>8</sup>

For the others, the red light came on – the drop zone was now only minutes away. Fear was now forgotten as the paratroopers desperately strained to steel themselves for the coming jump that would allow them to escape this airborne hell. Mercifully, the green light flashed on. “Go!” hollered the Jumpmaster as he literally pushed the first jumper out the door. He was followed by the remainder of the stick who were not already wounded. The paratroopers’ heavy loads hampered the exiting cadence causing the sticks to be dropped over a much longer distance. “With 60 pounds of equipment strapped to our legs we couldn’t run out the door,” reminisced Private William Talbot, a member of the anti-tank platoon. “We shuffled to the door and just dropped out.”<sup>9</sup>

Some pilots did not reduce their speed which further complicated the already stressful night jump. “The plane was going much too

fast," recollected Captain John Simpson of the Battalion's signal platoon. "When I went out the prop blast tore all my equipment off. The guy must have been going at a hell of a speed. All I had was my clothes and my .45 revolver with some ammo."<sup>10</sup>

The majority of the paratroopers exited on the initial run. Others were not so lucky and had to relive this hellish experience and endure a second pass over the DZ. "I was number 19 in the stick of 20 in my plane," explained Corporal Ernie Jeans, a medic from Headquarters Company. "As I made my way to the door, I heard the engine rev up and the jumpmaster pushed me back," he added. "I thought to myself," recalled a dejected Jeans that "we had come all this way to go back to England." However, the aircraft race-tracked and headed back to the DZ to drop the two remaining paratroopers. A few days later, Jeans learned that the remainder of his stick had been dropped off course on the initial run and were all either captured or killed.<sup>11</sup>

As Private Jan de Vries exited the aircraft he was met by an abrupt rush of wind, which physically yanked him out into the slipstream of the aircraft. Suddenly, the noise and the pandemonium of just a few moments ago disappeared. An eerie silence now surrounded the paratroopers who drifted to earth seemingly

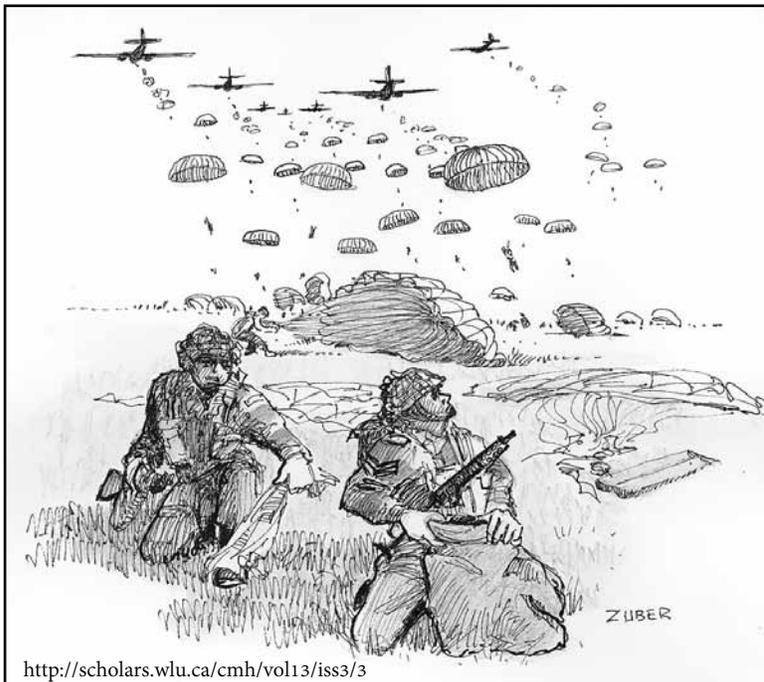
alone. "Going down I was surprised at the quietness and the darkness," recollected Corporal Boyd Anderson, "I had expected to hear sounds of shooting or at least some activity."<sup>12</sup> Engulfed in the inky darkness the paratroopers were given a moment of respite. However, that relief abruptly ended. The solitude and peacefulness of the parachute descent were replaced by the reality of airborne warfare.

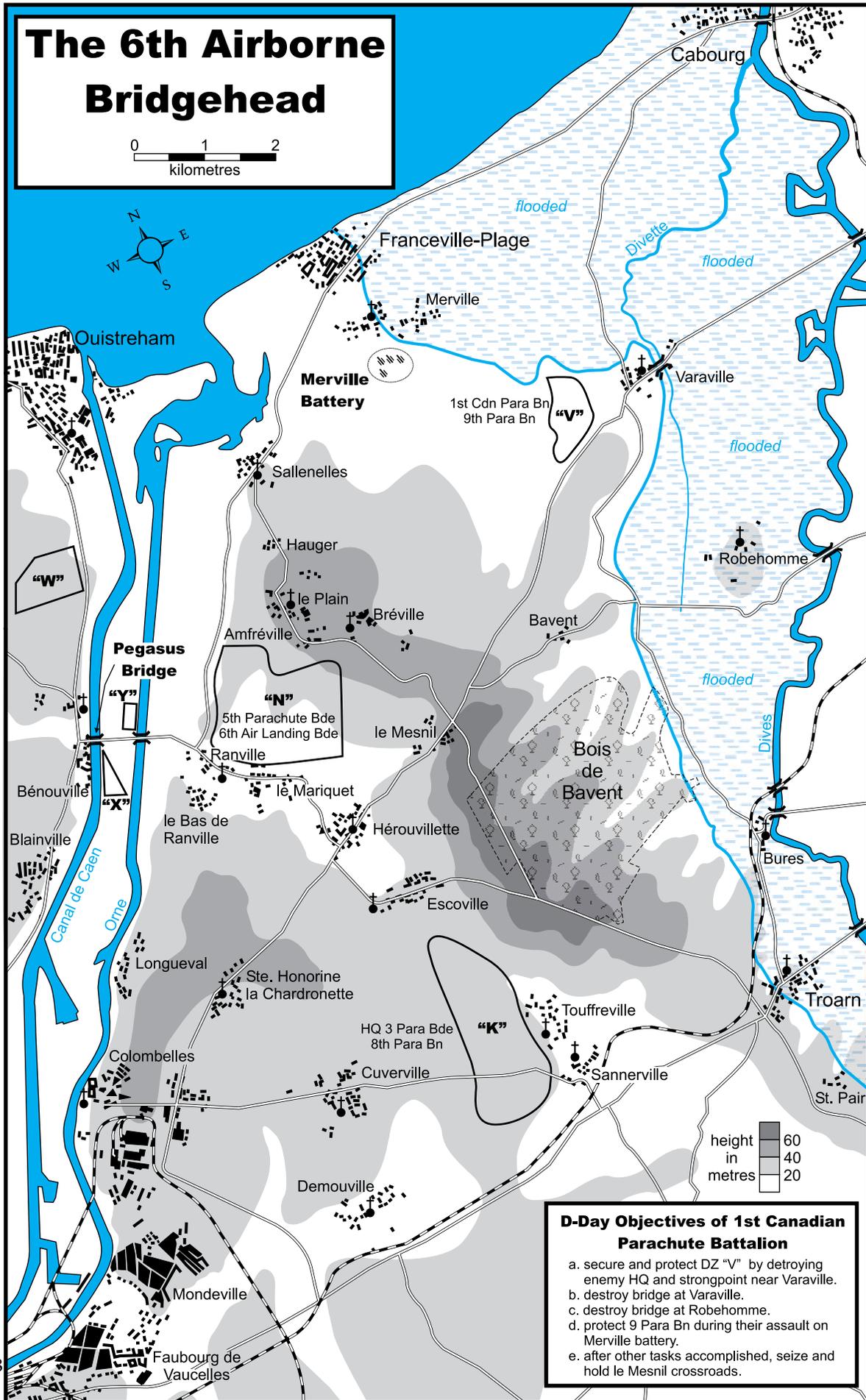
The lucky ones hit solid ground, albeit rather heavily. "When I landed flat on my back," reminisced one veteran, "I was in such agony that I cared very little whether I lived or died." But, "then the training took over," he explained, "I immediately pulled out my rifle and at the same time hit the release on my parachute. I placed my pack on my back and with the rifle in my arms I started to crawl toward a clump of trees which I could see very dimly. At this time I heard nothing, not an aircraft, not a bomb, not a shot."<sup>13</sup> Like many that night, he was lost and alone.

While many endured tumultuous exits, others experienced difficult landings. Several paratroopers crashed into trees or slammed onto buildings resulting in serious injuries and deaths.<sup>14</sup> Among the first casualties was the Battalion's medical officer, Captain Colin Brebner who had landed in a tree. Due to the darkness, Brebner misjudged his height. The

Right: "Descent" by Ted Zuber

Below: "Mass Drop" by Ted Zuber





anxious officer proceeded to cut his suspension lines and fell 40 feet down to the ground. His evasive action resulted in a broken left wrist and pelvis.<sup>15</sup> In certain cases the exits from the aircraft were too quick. Corporal Tom O'Connell's chute got tangled up with that of another jumper. "As we plunged toward the earth I heard the other fellow yell from below, "Take it easy old man!" Both men crashed to the earth. Around noon, a severely-injured O'Connell had finally regained consciousness. Beside him was the body of Padre Captain George Harris. A distraught O'Connell explained that the "two chutes were twisted together like a thick rope."<sup>16</sup>

O'Connell was not alone. Many paratroopers had sustained various injuries upon their landings, however, these landings paled in comparison with those who descended into the dreaded flooded and marshy areas. "Looking out of the plane it looked like pasture below us, but when I jumped I landed in water," recalled Private Doug Morrison. "The Germans," he explicated, "had flooded the area a while back and there was a green algae on the water so it actually looked like pasture at night from the air."<sup>17</sup> Many Canadian paratroopers drowned because they were so heavily laden with equipment and ammunition.<sup>18</sup> Sergeant W.R. Kelly was one of

the lucky paratroopers who cheated this watery grave. One man found Sergeant Kelly hanging upside down from a huge tree with his head in the water. Kelly's parachute suspension lines were knotted around his legs and feet. The canopy had caught on a limb and suspended Kelly so he was submerged from the top of his head to his neck. The eighty pounds of equipment that he carried was now bundled up around his chest. To stop from drowning, Kelly was required to keep lifting his face above the water for mouthfuls of air. He was nearly exhausted when a fellow Canadian found him, cut him loose and assisted him to dry land.<sup>19</sup> Others, however, were not so fortunate. Many drowned in the fields that the Germans flooded to deter the airborne landings.

But the real problems for the Canadian paratroopers had just begun. The parachute drop had been a disaster. The drops were widely dispersed and scattered. The evasive action of the pilots had created some of the problems. However, the lingering smoke and dust created by heavy *ongoing* bombing made navigation difficult. This situation was exacerbated by the failure of the 'Eureka' homing beacons to function properly. As a result, during the next few hours following the airborne insertion, those who had been dropped off course experienced difficulties

"Wet Landing" by Ted Zuber



in identifying their location. Additionally, the dark night, and the fields partitioned by high hedgerows further impeded the paratroopers' abilities to confirm their positions.

"Airplanes dropped us all over hell's half acre," chided Lance-Corporal H.R. Holloway.<sup>20</sup> "On landing," commented Private De Vries, "I wondered where I was and where the others were. I got out of my chute and quietly moved to the hedgerow at the edge of the field. I was lost. I could not recognize anything."<sup>21</sup> Corporal Dan Hartigan acknowledged that "The scattering had an operating influence on the whole battle. We lost more than 50 percent of our officers on D-Day, 15 of 27." He added, "The fighting in the weeks that followed turned from an officer's war to a Senior NCO's war."<sup>22</sup>

Some paratroopers were lucky and would eventually rejoin their units. Others did not. "I tried to find out where I was, but could not," reminisced Sergeant Feduck, "I wandered for an hour or so with no success. I laid down in a bomb crater and tried to get my bearings. Finally, I spotted two English Chaps, we moved out to find our respective units."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the paratroopers had been briefed on how to orient themselves after their landings. "If you are in doubt of the location of the RV," stated Lance Corporal D.S. Parlee, "we were instructed to face the line of incoming aircraft and then move off to the left of their flight path. That was all well and good," continued Parlee, "until I discovered that every aircraft I could see was going in a different direction."<sup>24</sup>

Sergeant Denis Flynn felt that the dispersal "changed the whole attitude – once on the ground we all wondered, 'where are we?'" He explained, "Because of the dispersal of the drop I was separated from my group. Things were a little strange." Flynn added, "I wondered, 'where am I? How do I meet up with the others?'" He confessed that "there were a lot of anxious moments."<sup>25</sup> As dawn pierced through the heavy smoke and clouds, the increasing natural light helped numerous paratroopers find their way to the objectives. However, the early morning sunlight proved more of a hindrance to the

airborne soldiers who found themselves in the midst of German positions and troops.

The net result of the aerial difficulties now manifested themselves on the ground. Many of the paratroopers who were not drowned or killed on landing, were hopelessly lost, 82 becoming prisoners of war.<sup>26</sup> Some, like Private Anthony Skalicky, were captured shortly after their landing. "Another paratrooper and I decided to move out," recollected the unlucky paratrooper. "We walked on a road and were suddenly surrounded by German bicycle troops. We were searched, tied up and marched off."<sup>27</sup> Others were more fortunate and successfully eluded many enemy patrols. "I came face to face with a German patrol," reminisced Private Morris Zakaluk of the heavy machine gun section. "I counted six men in single file about three paces apart," he recounted, "They are in full battle gear, rifles, submachine guns, grenades, one man packing a radio...As I am taking a bead on the lead man, but holding my fire, they turn to the left [and] proceeded along this hedge until they found an opening and disappeared." The

Courtesy of the 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn.



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The dispersed drops resulted in 82 Canadian paratroopers becoming prisoners of war.

bedeviled paratrooper lay silently and held his fire. "A minute or so later three other men showed up," continued Zakaluk. "These men had MG42s at ready hip position and had I opened fire on the first six-man group," he explained, "I surely would have been a dead duck."<sup>28</sup> In the end, a mere one third of the force was actually able to assemble at their designated rendezvous points and carry on with their missions.

Although this wide dispersal greatly complicated the initial missions allocated to the paratroopers, it also confused the German forces. Unable to confirm the exact area of the drop zones, German commanders delayed, for many hours, the deployment of their reserve units. Landing in the town of Varaville, Major Nicklin witnessed this confusion first hand. "The Germans were really windy in Varaville," he observed, "They ran around that town like crazy men and shot at anything that moved. Even a moving cow would get a blast of machine-gun fire. They were so jumpy [that] they ran around in twos and threes to give themselves moral support."<sup>29</sup>

However, the dispersal of Battalion Headquarters personnel severely limited Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.P. Bradbrooke's command and control capabilities, as well as his communications with brigade and divisional headquarters during the first 24 hours.<sup>30</sup> "I personally was dropped a couple of miles away from the drop zone," related the 1 Cdn Para Bn Commanding Officer (CO), "in a marsh near the River Dives and arrived at the rendezvous about one and a half hours late and completely soaked."<sup>31</sup> "The problems of getting organized," explained Bradbrooke, "into effective fighting units are immense, there is considerable confusion in getting order out of chaos."<sup>32</sup> However, on the bright side, he added, "We [Bradbrooke's stick] were not troubled by the enemy at this time [during and immediately after the drop], I suppose he [the enemy] was just as confused as we were."<sup>33</sup> In the end, concluded the CO, "The hardest part of the job wasn't the fighting, although that was hard enough at times, but getting ourselves organized after we hit the DZ."<sup>34</sup>

As if the dispersion had not created enough problems, most of the paratroopers' heavy

equipment was lost due to exits made from aircraft that were traveling too fast, resulting in equipment being ripped away by the heavy wash of the plane or by the hard opening shock of the parachute canopy. In addition, much equipment was also lost when the leg-kit bags were released by the paratroopers. The shock caused by the sudden full extension of the 20-foot rope was such that the bottom of these canvas bags ripped open. Paratroopers watched helplessly as their heavy weapons, equipment and much needed extra ammunition and explosives fell, scattered and disappeared into the darkness below. A frustrated Major Hilborn, who commanded the heavy machine gun platoon, reported that he had only two Vickers machine guns, one tripod and a limited quantity of ammunition.<sup>35</sup> Corporal Ernie Jeans, one of the few surviving medics was also very concerned. The battle had not even started and, "I hardly had any medical equipment or supplies."<sup>36</sup> In sum, more than 70 percent of the Battalion's heavy equipment, support weaponry and supplies was lost before a single shot had been fired.

Despite the chaos, the well-trained paratroopers now began to assemble to carry on with their mission. Those who had landed away from the drop zone adapted to whatever unplanned situation unfolded. "I began to meet up with others and we made our way toward our objective," asserted Sergeant Denis Flynn, "Everyone knew what was required and we did whatever could be done under the circumstances." After all, Brigadier James Hill, their well-respected and beloved Brigade Commander had warned them that "One must not be daunted if chaos reigned [because] it undoubtedly will!"<sup>37</sup> The Brigadier's words provided some degree of reassurance to the paratroopers. "I think most of us anticipated that we could go into battle by dropping right onto our objective – right into battle," confessed Private de Vries, "Nonetheless, Brigadier Hill warned us that chaos would reign."<sup>38</sup>

As such, the paratroopers now, as individuals and small groups, began to fulfill their tasks. "C" Company was part of the 3 Para Bde's advance party and landed before the main group. They exited their Albemarle aircraft between 0020 hours and 0029 hours, 6 June 1944, and were some of the first Allied soldiers to invade

occupied Europe. While most of the men of the first aircraft landed on or near DZ "V", northwest of Varaville, those in the following aircraft were dropped between eight and ten kilometers from the intended point.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after landing on their designated drop zone, the Canadians, as well as the members of the 3 Para Bde pathfinder teams experienced serious difficulties.<sup>40</sup> Many of their 'Eureka' beacons required to guide the main body to the DZ had been either damaged or lost.<sup>41</sup> This would have dramatic consequences. The paratroopers of "C" Company also experienced their fair share of problems. Less than 50 had reached the rendezvous (RV) assembly point.<sup>42</sup> Regardless, an impatient Company Commander, Major H.M. McLeod, refused to wait. With the impending arrival of the main body of 3 Para Bde, including the remainder of 1 Cdn Para Bn, it was imperative that "C" Company accomplish its initial task - securing the DZ.

Once the area was secured, McLeod split up his skeletal force and dispatched one group to seize and hold the Varaville bridge. These paratroopers were instructed to defend the

structure at all costs until the arrival of the airborne engineers who were tasked to destroy it. Then, McLeod and the remaining men proceeded to their next objective - the capture of a series of defensive positions located on the grounds of le Grand Château in Varaville. McLeod knew that speed under the cover of darkness, combined with bold aggressive action and surprise would offset the temporary lack of manpower. Upon arrival they located, captured and disabled a German communication center. McLeod then organized his men into small groups to seize the remaining positions that consisted of a bunker, a series of trenches and an anti-tank gun position. However, as the paratroopers deployed and inched their way toward these positions, the defenders opened up with a withering fire.

Throughout the next few hours, the ongoing battle at the Varaville Château and surrounding area attracted small groups of paratroopers who had been dropped off course. All moved to the sound of battle. Private Cliff Funston was among a group of paratroopers who had finally made their way to Varaville before dawn. "It was rather confusing to tell you the truth," related Funston, "There was a lot of uncertainty as well as a lack

Composite/panoramic photograph taken from L/Cpl John Ross' trench in front of the gate house at Varaville. The picture shows Germans surrendering on the left side of the picture, and being disarmed on the right side.



Canadian paratrooper on the outskirts of a wooded area, Normandy, France, 6 June 1944.

of heavy weapons and men.”<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, these welcome reinforcements were immediately fed into the battle. One British airborne captain, who landed in the outskirts of Varaville described the intense fighting. “Complete chaos seemed to reign in the village,” he reported. “Against a background of Brens, Spandaus and grenades,” he described, “could be heard shouts in British and Canadian, German and Russian.”<sup>44</sup>

Initially, the German defenders pinned down the paratroopers with heavy-machine gun and anti-tank fire. However, once the enemy’s range and positions were confirmed, the paratroopers replied with well directed anti-tank, mortar and Bren gun fire of their own. Around 0300 hours, a German anti-tank shell crashed through the Château’s Gatehouse where Major MacLeod and six other paratroopers had set up their anti-tank gun. Upon impact, the projectile ignited the paratroopers’ anti-tank shells and grenades. A terrible explosion ripped through the group and resulted in the death of four paratroopers. Of the original six man group, only Privates H.B. Swim and G.A. Thompson survived but they did sustained serious injury.<sup>45</sup>

Despite this terrible blow, the battle raged on. As additional paratroopers joined the fray they successfully cordoned off the German defenders. Nevertheless, the enemy was not prepared to surrender. Private Esko Makela who had been separated from “B”Company showed up in Varaville as the darkness began to fade. He was ordered to take up a position in the gatehouse and engage the anti-tank gun position with his Bren gun. The intensity of the increased firepower forced the German gun crew to pull back. As the sun rose over the horizon, the Canadians could now observe the layout of the enemy’s positions and troop movements. “I was then given a rifle,” explained Private Makela, “and I sniped at quite a few heads.”<sup>46</sup>

By 1030 hours that morning, the German garrison of Varaville surrendered. A total of 80 prisoners and walking wounded were corralled. As the prisoners were marched off the airborne soldiers were surprised by the number of defenders captured. “Two enemy soldiers,” tallied Corporal Dan Hartigan, “for every Canadian

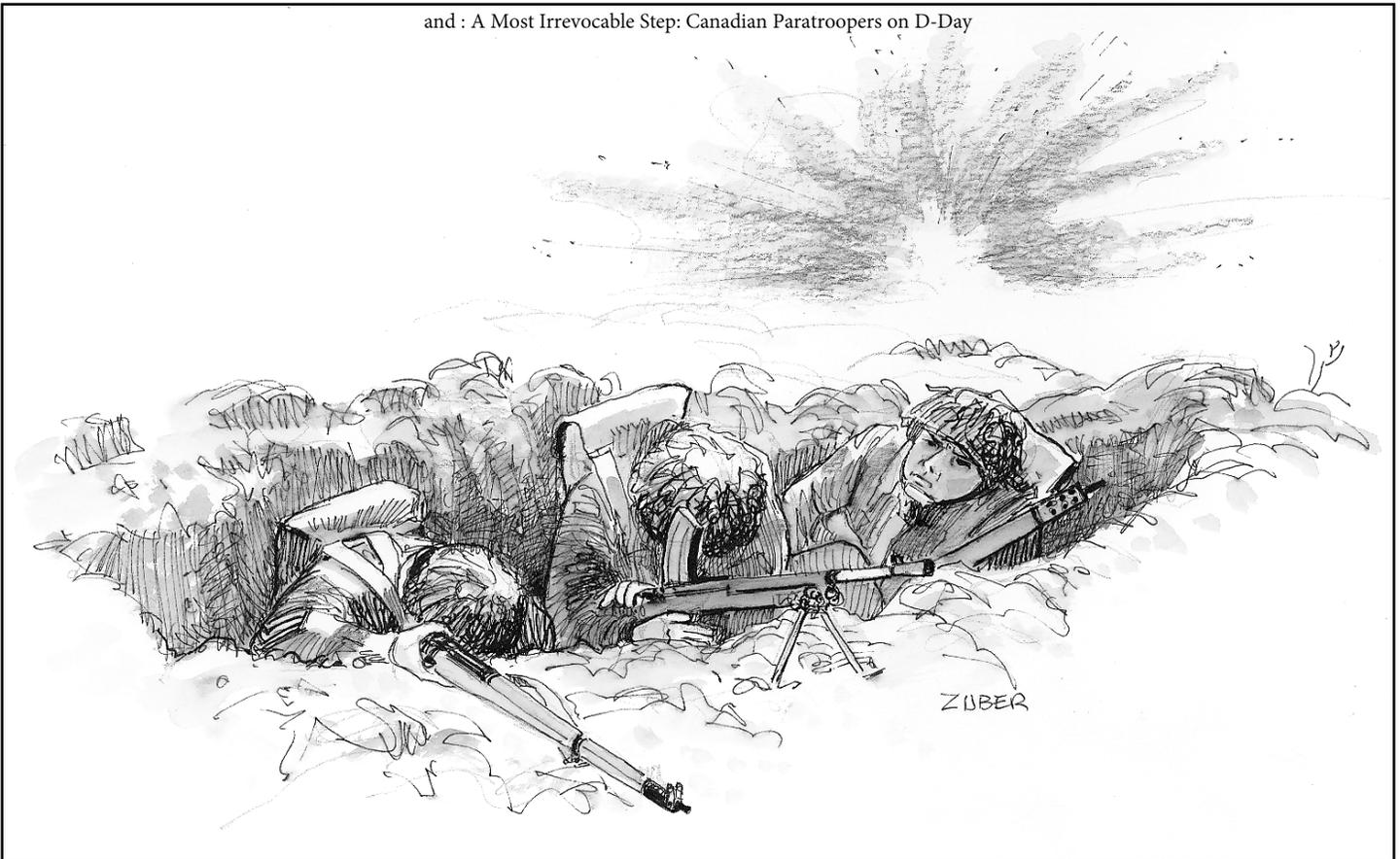
Photo by D.A. Reynolds, NAC PA 209703



paratrooper who fought in Varaville.”<sup>47</sup> “The Germans were mad,” recalled Corporal John Ross, a signalman attached to “C”Company, “when they saw that they had been captured by a small group of lightly-armed paratroopers.”<sup>48</sup>

“C” Company was then ordered to pull out, regroup and take up a series of defensive positions to guard the roads going through Varaville.<sup>49</sup> By 1500 hours, the first elements of the British 6th Commando Cycle Troop arrived and relieved the Company.<sup>50</sup> The Canadian paratroopers now commenced the final phase of their D-Day mission. They marched to the le Mesnil crossroads and took up new defensive positions within the Battalion perimeter.

“C” Company was not the only sub-unit to be afflicted by a scattered drop. By 0600 hours, only two officers and 20 paratroopers from “A” Company, as well as a handful of airborne soldiers from other units had reached their RV. Severely undermanned and behind schedule, Lieutenant J.A. Clancy assembled his small group and headed to the Merville Battery to join the 9th Parachute Battalion (9 Para Bn). The drop had also severely hampered 9 Para Bn who had been give the critical task of destroying the battery. Of the 650 paratroopers earmarked for the assault, only 150 had managed to reach the RV.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, anxious to get on with this important task, Lieutenant-Colonel T.H. Otway, the commanding officer, organized his men into two assault teams. They quickly cleared two paths



"Under Fire" by Ted Zuber

across the minefield surrounding the battery. As they painstakingly inched their way toward their final objective, the German defenders positioned in adjoining casemates opened fire with three heavy machine guns. It quickly turned into a blood bath.<sup>52</sup> Seventy British paratroopers were killed in the short savage battle. Notwithstanding these heavy losses Otway and his men succeeded in capturing the battery by approximately 0500 hours.<sup>53</sup> Yellow signal flares were sent up shortly after to confirm that the battery had been captured and more importantly to cancel a naval bombardment from the *HMS Arethusa* that was planned for that morning.<sup>54</sup>

Upon entering the main structure, the British paratroopers were surprised by the type and caliber of the guns positioned at Merville Battery. Due to the size of battery's outer structure, Allied planners assumed that it could possibly contain four 150 mm guns capable of firing 96 pound shells, every 15 to 20 seconds with a maximum eight-mile range.<sup>55</sup> They concluded that if this battery opened fire it could cause great mayhem on the beaches. Therefore, it was of prime importance that it be neutralized at all costs before the troops disembarked on the beachhead. But instead of the anticipated 150

mm guns, the paratroopers found only four 100 mm 1916 Skoda Works Czechoslovakian howitzers. Regardless, these had to be destroyed in the event that the Germans mounted a counterattack and recaptured the battery. But since the airborne engineers attached to the Battalion had been dropped off course it was now up to the paratroopers to neutralize these guns themselves. Gathering their Gammon bombs, they proceeded to destroy two guns and disable the others.<sup>56</sup>

Lieutenant Clancy's group finally reached the Battery as Otway's men were in the process of securing the perimeter, tending to the wounded and assembling the prisoners. Their trek had been delayed at Gonneville-sur-Merville because of a heavy Royal Air Force (RAF) bombardment. As the British paratroopers assembled and prepared to move out, Clancy briefed his men. They were to lead the way and protect Otway's march to their final assembly point, the high ground of le Plein in Amfréville.

As the survivors and walking wounded of 9 Para Bn headed toward le Plein, they suddenly came under fire from a heavy German machine gun located in a nearby château. The Canadians

quickly spread out and neutralized this enemy position. Following this short engagement, Clancy reorganized his group so that they formed an all around protective shield for the members of 9 Para Bn during their withdrawal to their new positions in le Plein.<sup>57</sup> Despite being severely undermanned, the members of "A" Company had nevertheless successfully completed all their D-Day missions. By 0900 hours, they left their British comrades and rejoined the Battalion at the le Mesnil crossroads.

"B" Company's personnel fared no better than the other companies. A total of only 30 all ranks had managed to gather at the designated RV. Lieutenant Normand Toseland moved the group toward their objective, the Robehomme bridge. During their advance they unexpectedly came across a young French girl who volunteered to guide them. Once at the bridge, they met up

with two other Battalion officers, Major C.E. Fuller and Captain Peter Griffin, and a mixed group of British and Canadian paratroopers. The small force took up a defensive posture and waited patiently until 0300 hours for the arrival of a team of British airborne engineers.<sup>58</sup>

Growing restless and unsure if the engineers would actually arrive, the group decided to blow up the bridge themselves. Toseland collected all the available high explosives. A charge was prepared and subsequently detonated. Regrettably, it proved insufficient. Even though the structure had been weakened, it could still be used by enemy infantry. Knowing that this blast would surely attract the enemy's attention, Major Fuller ordered his group to form a defensive perimeter once again to repel any German patrols. As the paratroopers were digging in, a small group of British airborne engineers led by Lieutenant Jack

The Robehomme bridge, photographed on 22 March 1944. The destruction of this bridge was the responsibility of "B" Company.

Courtesy of the 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn.





Canadian paratroopers dig-in along a road in Normandy, France, 8 June 1944.

Inman finally arrived. They proceeded to rig a second charge. It was successfully detonated and sent the structure crashing into the river.<sup>59</sup> With the mission accomplished the group moved off to the le Mesnil crossroads.

The route to the Battalion's position, however, was now active with enemy troops. Without any means of communications, and uncertain as to the fate of the other companies, Major Fuller preferred to use patience and caution. He opted to travel by night and make maximum use of the terrain to cover his movements. During the next day and a half, Major Fuller's group increased to 150 Canadian and British paratroopers. While pleased in assembling such a large force it nevertheless complicated his mobility behind enemy lines. He ordered that all contacts with the enemy be avoided so as not to compromise their position. If contact could not be averted, they were to attack and pull out quickly. Fuller ordered a group of 30 paratroopers to act as an advance force to protect the main group and the wounded. Sergeant Roland Larose was part of

this band. "As we advanced silently up the road towards le Mesnil we came across a parked German half-track. We froze instantly. A German officer stepped out and said something to us," recalled Larose. "My friend Russell Harrison yelled back at him, 'I beg your pardon'. Then we opened up and threw grenades into the vehicle." Within seconds 11 enemy soldiers had been killed. An hour later, the group was called back to provide rear area protection. A German jeep drove up. Before the driver could get his vehicle into reverse a volley of automatic fire killed all the occupants.<sup>60</sup> The ad hoc company group finally reached le Mesnil at 0330 hours on 8 June.<sup>61</sup>

Notwithstanding the numerous unforeseen complications and the loss of most of their heavy support weaponry during and immediately following the dispersed drop, the stamina and composure of the paratroopers enabled the Battalion to successfully accomplish all its assigned D-Day tasks.<sup>62</sup> The enemy was fully aware that they were not facing a conventional ground force. The Commander of the 711th Infantry

Division was impressed by the fighting qualities of the Canadian paratroopers. "The portion which were employed in the bridgehead to the east of the Orne," observed Lieutenant-General Joseph Reichert, "fought in an excellent manner both during the attack and the defense."<sup>63</sup>

This is high praise considering the immense strain due to the bad drops, fatigue, stress and combat. However, the rigorous training and physical conditioning enabled the Canadian paratroopers to endure and more importantly overcome the great physical and mental hardships encountered during D-Day, as well as the remainder of the Normandy Campaign. In hindsight, Lieutenant-Colonel Bradbrooke attested that the Battalion's D-Day successes could not have been achieved if the unit had not undergone such a demanding airborne training regime. "Dropping at night, several hours before the seaborne assault, in strange and hostile territory, all added up to confusion and an appreciation of the reasons why prior training of such severity was necessary," remarked Bradbrooke.<sup>64</sup>

Brigadier Hill agreed. "All this training," he later acknowledged, "gave us an invaluable asset – Endurance." Hill added, "I think after D-Day without it we would have had difficulty

in producing the stamina required to stick to our ridge for ten whole days of intensive fighting at close range after a tough initial parachute operation and with the casualties suffered." Hill underlined that "Physical fitness saves lives in battle and enables men to better survived their wounds."<sup>65</sup> The young paratroopers now also realized the benefits of such a demanding training regimen. "The training you got, the people you trained with, the people that trained you," explained Sergeant John Feduck, "you might have hated them, but that is why you were there and that is why you were alive."<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, the Battalion's initiation to airborne operations was achieved at a very heavy price. Casualties (killed, wounded or taken prisoner) after the first 24 hours amounted to 116 all ranks, of the 541 paratroopers who had jumped into Normandy.<sup>67</sup> And, a great number of paratroopers were still missing. Others were hunted down and captured. Those who had landed far from the DZ and sustained serious injuries during their landings or had been wounded in subsequent firefights, died alone. During the course of the following days, the lucky ones eventually made their way to le Mesnil.

As the troops arrived on the high ground of le Mesnil they were immediately directed to their

Fatigue, the soldier's constant companion, is clearly evident in the faces of these Canadian paratroopers standing ready to oppose the inevitable German counterattack. Courtesy of the 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn.



Courtesy of the 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn.



Courtesy of the 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn.



A pause in the battle.

respective company defensive positions. Morale was good, however the paratroopers were tired and hungry. The first priority was to consolidate the perimeter and dig in. The initial defensive positions were very crude. “We dug holes in a large ditch about one hundred yards from the cross roads,” remembered Major Hilborn. “They provided good protection against mortar fire.”<sup>68</sup> Setting up and defending the assigned Battalion perimeter proved to be a challenging task for the under strength companies. “We did not have the manpower. We were pretty thinned out,” recounted Feduck. “Many times, I wish the hell that I was back home.”<sup>69</sup>

Others such as Corporal John Ross were becoming frustrated because positions were being changed regularly. “We were told to dig a defensive position, which we did. The area that I was in consisted of gravel. We had to work very hard to dig this hole,” explained Ross. “By the time we were finished we were told that we weren’t in the right spot. We were ordered to move further down and start all over again.”<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, as dusk

fell over the Orne bridgehead the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion’s le Mesnil positions were occupied.

Undermanned, and with very few support weapons and no radio communications between the Battalion Headquarters and the Companies, the surviving paratroopers braced themselves for the imminent German counterattacks. Regardless, Lieutenant-Colonel Bradbrooke was pleased with his men’s fighting spirit and the Battalion’s defensive perimeter. “The country around le Mesnil was very close with its ditches and hedges,” described the CO, “and it was a perfect position for determined boys like ours.” However, Bradbrooke did not like the fact that his men were isolated from the main invasion force. Nevertheless, a contemplative Bradbrooke resigned himself to the fact that during the following days his unit would be “just one little pocket on the end of nowhere.”<sup>71</sup>

In the end, the night of 6 June 1944, was seared into the minds and souls of the Canadian

paratroopers. "No soldier involved," wrote one veteran, "could ask for more: exciting challenges, tests of ingenuity, matching of wits with a clever and dedicated enemy. More adventure in one night than most men live in a lifetime."<sup>72</sup> Another paratrooper agreed, but was slightly more cautious. "I am proud and very glad I was part of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion airborne invasion of France," confided Private Mervin Jones, "But I would never, never do it again...jumping out of an airplane into black space towards a land full of the enemy...There are no front lines at a time like this; there were Germans all over the place...you could be among any number of them."<sup>73</sup>

His sentiments are understandable. They had jumped in the dead of night into chaotic conditions. As individuals, small groups, and severely depleted sub-units, they overcame the bedlam and successfully attained *all* their assigned objectives. And so, the Canadian

paratroopers of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion as part of the British 3rd Parachute Brigade of the 6th Airborne Division played a vital part in ensuring the protection of the eastern flank of the invasion force's D-Day landing. But, after all, the exit from the aircraft was a most irrevocable step – there was no going back.

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### Notes

1. Interview with Harry Reid. 24 January 2002. Oral History Project. 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion Association Archives.
2. Jan de Vries interview with Bernd Horn, 18 January 2001.
3. David Owen, "A Portrait of a Parachutist," unpublished manuscript, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives, David Owen fonds.
4. Terry Copp, "The Airborne on D-Day," *Legion Magazine*, May-June 1998, p.46.
5. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge* (London:

"Bocage" by Ted Zuber





Courtesy of the 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn.



Courtesy of the 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn.

**Above left:** Taking a break in the battle. **Above right:** Airborne medic W.S. Drucker tends to a wounded German prisoner of war.

- Touchstone Books, 1985), p.109.
6. Interview with John Feduck. 19 December 2001. Oral History Project. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  7. Bernd Horn interviews with 1 Cdn Para Bn veterans.
  8. Interview with Anthony Skalicky. 10 January 2002. Oral History Project. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  9. Interview with William Talbot, 28 December 2002. *Ibid.*
  10. Interview with John Simpson, 13 December 2002. *Ibid.*
  11. Interview with Ernie Jeans, 22 January 2002. *Ibid.*
  12. Boyd Anderson, *Grass Roots* (Wood Mountain: Windspeak Press, 1996), pp.269-270.
  13. *Ibid.*, pp.269-270.
  14. "Recollections of a Canadian Parachuting Medical Officer in World War II," p.6. Brian Nolan Fonds. Colin Brebner file, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  15. *Ibid.*, p.6.
  16. Michael Hanlon, "Paratroopers Landed at Night," *Toronto Star*, Special Section on the Normandy Landing, 6 June 1944, Section D, D2.
  17. Doug Morrison, interview with Bernd Horn, 2 February 2002.
  18. Letter from Ted Kalicki to Brian Nolan, Warsaw, New York, 7 February 1994. Brian Nolan Fonds, Ted Kalicki file, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  19. Dan Hartigan, *A Rising of Courage*, (Calgary: Drop Zone Publishers, 2000), p.113.
  20. H.R. Holloway, interview with Bernd Horn, 4 November 1998.
  21. Jan de Vries, written submission to authors, 9 January 2001.
  22. Dan Hartigan, interview with Bernd Horn, 30 October 2000.
  23. Letter from John Feduck to Dan Hartigan, non-dated. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives, Dan Hartigan , file 23-7.
  24. Letter from D.S. Parlee to Dan Hartigan, 24 March 1990. *Ibid.*
  25. Denis Flynn, interview with Bernd Horn, 18 April 2001.
  26. Colonel C.P. Stacey, Historical Officer, Canadian Military Headquarters, *Report No. 19, The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion In France, 6 June - 6 September 1944*, p.13.
  27. Interview with Anthony Skalicky. 10 January 2002. Oral History Project. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  28. "Eighty Days Behind Enemy Lines, 1944." Private M. Zakulak, Vickers Section. 1 Cdn Para Bn. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives, file 8-7, Gavinski, Thomas.
  29. Ross Munro, "Nicklin's Feat, Lands In Nazi-Held Town," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 26 June 1944, Vol 50, No. 232, 1, 8. NL, microfilm N-24564.
  30. Lieutenant-General Richard N. Gale, *With The 6th Airborne Division in Normandy*, (London: Sampson, Low, Martson & Co. Ltd., 1948), pp.80-81, 83.
  31. Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.P. Bradbrooke (ret'd) to David Owen, 6 March 1985. David Owen Fond, Series 1: Correspondence, File G.F.P. Bradbrooke, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  32. Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.P. Bradbrooke (ret'd) to Brian Nolan, Ramsey, Isle of Man, 19 August 1985. Brian Nolan Fond, Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.P. Bradbrooke file, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  33. *Ibid.*
  34. Ralph Allen, "Canadian Paratroops Create Proud History," *Globe and Mail*, No. 29,495, 26 June 1944, 1 and 3, microfilm N-20057.
  35. Interview with Richard Hilborn, February 2002, Oral History Project, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  36. Interview with Ernie Jeans, 22 January 2002. *Ibid.*
  37. Jean E. Portugal, *We Were There - The Army. A Record*

- for Canada, Volume #2 of Seven. (Toronto: The Royal Canadian Military Institute, 1998), 943-944.
38. Jan de Vries, interview with Bernd Horn, 18 January 2001.
  39. RAF Station, daily entry, 5 June 1944. Public Record Office (PRO), AIR 28/343 Air Ministry and Minister of Defense: Operations Record Book, Royal Air Force Station, Harwell. Hartigan, *A Rising of Courage*, pp.108-109.
  40. A total of three advance parties with pathfinders were dropped to protect and mark three Drop Zones between the Orne and Dives Rivers. The units of the main body that jumped onto them were: Drop Zone 'N', 5th Para Bde Gp; Drop Zone 'V', 3rd Para Bde Gp and Drop Zone 'K', 8th Para Bn. Peter Harclerode, ""Go To It!" *The Illustrated History of The 6th Airborne Division* (London: Caxton Edition, 2000), 88. The Drop Zone 'V' pathfinder group consisted of two sticks. Stick No. 1 dropped directly onto the DZ. Regrettably this stick's DZ marking equipment was either damaged or lost in the marshes. Stick No. 2 landed 1,000 yards north of the DZ. They finally reached the DZ as the main body was jumping. The DZ markings that were set up for the main body consisted of two green lights set up prior to the main drop. An additional two lights were installed by the paratroopers of the second stick during the main body's jump. 6 Airborne Division, Report on Operations in Normandy, 6 June - 27 August 1944. Part III, Conclusions, Appendix "H". Details of Pathfinder Drop. National Archives of Canada [hereafter NA], RG 24, Vol 10955, file 225.B6.013 (D1), 6 AB Div report. Simultaneously, two small forces of "D" Company Group 2 Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry were glider inserted to carry out a *coup de main* which resulted in the capture of the bridges over the Caen Canal and the River Orne. Harclerode, p.88.
  41. The "Rebecca/Eureka" was a two-part homing devise. The first part the 'Eureka', was a beacon housed in a small rectangular box with a collapsible aerial. The 'Eurekas' were operated by pathfinder units to assist the pilots, transporting the main bodies, to locate their DZs. This beacon was designed to receive on one frequency and transmit on another. The second part, the 'Rebecca' was installed in the aircraft. It was designed to transmit and receive on the 'Eureka's' transmitter frequency. When receiving the 'Rebecca's' impulse signal, the 'Eureka' responded by sending a signal. This enabled the pilot to confirm his approach and distance to the DZ. Otway, Appendix D, Radar Homing Devices, 405-406. *Circumstances attending dispersion of the 6th Airborne Division on D-Day* from "The Liberation of North West Europe. Volume III: The Landings in Normandy." The Varville Dropping Zone 'V', 2-3. NA, RG 24, Vol. 10955, file 2255B6.013(D3), Circumstances attending dispersion of the 6th AB Div on D-Day.
  42. Hartigan, *A Rising of Courage*, p.109.
  43. Interview with Cliff Funston. 25 January 2002. Oral History Project. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  44. *By Air To Battle, The Official Account of The British First and Sixth Airborne Divisions* (London: The Whitefriars Press Ltd., 1945), p.87.
  45. Hartigan, *A Rising of Courage*, pp.114-115.
  46. Taped recollections of Esko Makela. Non-dated. Dan Hartigan fonds, Makela file, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  47. *Ibid.*, p.132.
  48. Interview with John Ross. 14 February 2002. Oral History Project. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  49. 1 Cdn Para Bn War Diary, 6 June 1944, Varaville, "C" Company. NA, RG 24, Vol 15299, June 1944. 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, Operational Order No.1, Method, 4. "C" Company, Phases 1-5. *Ibid.*, May 1944, Appendix 6.
  50. 1 Cdn Para Bn War Diary, 6 June 1944, Varaville, "C" Company. *Ibid.*
  51. Carl Shilleto, *Pegasus Bridge & Merville Battery, British 6th Airborne Division Landing in Normandy D-Day, 6 June 1944* (South Yorkshire: Battlefield Series Club Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2001), pp.81, 93.
  52. 1 Cdn Para Bn War Diary, 6 June 1944, Protection of left Flank of 9 Para Bn , "A" Company. NA, RG 24, Vol 15299, June 1944. 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, Operational Order No.1, Method, 5, "A" Company, Phases 1-3. *Ibid.*, May 1944, Appendix 6.
  53. Shilleto, p.104.
  54. *Ibid.* p.87. Hilary St. George Saunders, *The Red Beret, The Story Of The Parachute Regiment At War 1940-1945* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1950), p.185; and "Silent Guns", *Red Berets' 44, The Illustrated London News* 1994, p.38.
  55. Shilleto, p.77; and 'Silent Guns', *Red Berets' 44, The Illustrated London News* 1994, pp.36-40.
  56. Gregor Ferguson, *The Paras, 1940-1984, Elite Series No. 1*, (London: Osprey Military, 1996), p.29.
  57. 1 Cdn Para Bn War Diary, 6 June 1944, Protection of left Flank of 9 Para Bn , "A" Company. NA, RG 24, Vol 15299, June 1944.
  58. Napier Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy, The Story of the American and British Airborne Assault on D-Day 1944* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), p.210.
  59. There are conflicting accounts from both British and Canadian sources as to how this bridge was destroyed. Canadian sources: Lieutenant N. Toseland recalled that "We attempted to blow the bridge with the plastic explosives each man carried in his helmet. We did not succeed in destroying the bridge as our charges were insufficient. Finally, the British Para Engineers appointed to do the job arrived and expertly dropped the bridge into the river." Interview of Normand Toseland, "Out Of The Clouds. The Story Of The First Canadian Parachute Battalion" *The Legion Bugle*, Vol 2, Issue 11, July/August 1988, p.1. The Battalion's War Diary entry reads, "Captain Griffin waited until 0630 hours for the R.E.'s who were to blow the bridge. As they failed to arrive explosives were collected from the men and the bridge successfully demolished." 1 Cdn Para Bn War Diary, 6 June 1944, "B" Company. NA, RG 24, Vol 15299, June 1944; Captain Peter Griffin writes, "In the first two days I had fun blowing up two bridges...So finally we pooled all the explosives we normally carry and no one knowing anything about engineering, we slapped it up against the bridge hoping against hope. Sure enough when I touched it off the bridge split in the center and fell in the river - big thrill!" Letter from Captain Peter Griffin to his sister Margeret, Normandy, 20 June 1944. NA, MG 30, E 538, William M.R. Griffin and Peter R. Griffin fonds. British sources: Lieutenant Inman states that he arrived at the bridge at 0900 hours where he met Sergeant William Poole. The Sergeant stated that he had dropped nearby and collected 30 pounds of explosives from the paratroopers and "destroyed the span with a clean cut." Appendix C, Report on Operations

- Re. 6th AB Div D-Day + 1, Part 1, D-Day, 3 Parachute Squadron, Royal Engineers. NA, RG 24 Vol 10956, file 2556.018 (D2+3), War Diary 6AB Div, June-July 1944. Crookenden concurred with Inman recollections, but added that Lieutenant Inman used his explosives, "to create a worse obstacle by preparing two carterers on the near side abutment." p.210; and Peter Harclerode wrote, "However, Sergeant Bill Poole of No.3 Troop of 3rd Parachute Squadron RE, who was one of the sappers who had joined up with Lieutenant Toseland, collected all the plastic explosives carried by infantrymen to make Gammon bombs. This amounted to some thirty pounds in all. Sergeant Poole attempted to blow the bridge but, with the limited amount of explosive available to him, only managed to weaken it. At about 0600 hours, however, Lieutenant Jack Inman and five sappers of No.3 Troop arrived with 200 pounds of explosive charges and the bridge was duly destroyed." p.72. It is most likely that during the course of the night, two charges had been set off. The first charge prepared with the explosives collected from the paratroopers only weakened the structure. The second larger charge rigged by the British engineers destroyed the bridge.
60. Interview with Roland Larose. David Owen fonds, Larose file, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  61. 1 Cdn Para Bn War Diary, 6 June 1944, Protection of left Flank of 9 Para Bn , "A" Company. NA, RG 24, Vol 15299, June 1944. As the group made its way to Le Mesnil, they met up with Lieutenant I. Wilson, a Battalion Intelligence Officer. Wilson guided the paratroopers back to the Battalion's defensive positions.
  62. The members of the Vickers platoon had packed their machine guns, spare parts and ammunition in their leg kit bags. This was the first time that they had used these kit bags to jump with their weapons. This method of transporting weaponry into combat proved totally unsatisfactory. When the paratroopers released the bags, the shock generated by the full extension of the twenty foot rope was so severe that the bottoms ripped. Within seconds, the contents fell out, scattered and crashed to the ground. Mortar platoon personnel also experienced the similar problem with their leg kit bags. Since most of these platoons members were mostly dropped over marshy and flooded areas, the conditions were such that it was impossible for the paratroopers to locate their heavy weapons. 1Cdn Para Bn War Diary, 6 June 1944. NA, RG 24, Vol 15299, June 1944. The signalers fared no better. All the radios had been lost. John Simpson, interview with Michel Wyczynski, 13 December 2001.
  63. David C. Isby, ed., *Fighting The Invasion, The German Army at D-Day* (London: Greenhill Books, 2000), pp.145, 179.
  64. Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.P Bradbrooke (Ref'd) to David Owen, Ramsey, Isle of Man, 6 March 1985. David Owen Fonds. Series 1, Correspondence, G.F.P Bradbrooke, file. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  65. Brigadier James Hill's speaking notes on the training and briefing of the 6th Airborne Division for their role in Operation "Overlord". Talk given to Staff College, Camberley, 7 June 1968. Brigadier James Hill's speaking notes, November 1993. Brian Nolan Fonds, file Brigadier Hill, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives. Ross Munro, "Canadian 'Chutists Held Crossroads In 11 Days and Nights of Fighting" *The Evening Citizen*, No. 321, 26 June 1944, 8. NL, microfilm N-18015.
  66. Interview with John Feduck, 19 December 2001. Oral History Project. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  67. On 6 June 1944, the casualties sustained by the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion were: 3 Officers and 18 ORs, killed or died of wounds; 1 officer and 8 ORs wounded; 3 officers and 83 ORs captured. Colonel C.P. Stacey, Director, Historical Section (G.S.). The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion in France, 6 June-6 September 1944. DHH, Report No.26 Historical Section (G.S), Army Headquarters, 23 August 1949, p.21.
  68. Interview with Richard Hilborn. February 2002. Oral History Project. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  69. Interview with John Feduck. 19 December 2001. Oral History Project. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.
  70. Interview with John Ross. 14 February 2001. Oral History Project. 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.

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