
Opening Extract from...

D-Day

D-Day and the Battle for Normandy

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The two American airborne divisions, the 82nd and 101st, had taken off about the same time as the British paratroopers. The pilots of their troop carrier squadrons had cursed and prayed as they pulled their 'grossly overloaded' C-47 Skytrains off the ground. Closing into their V formations, the matt-olive transport aircraft then streamed out over the Channel. The sky control officer on the cruiser USS *Quincy* observed that 'by this time the moon had risen, and although the overcast was still fairly solid, it lighted the clouds with a peculiar degree of luminosity . . . The first Skytrains appeared, silhouetted like groups of scudding bats.'

Their aircraft could not have felt very bat-like to the sticks of sixteen or eighteen men inside, as they endured the thundering roar and vibration from the over-strained engines. A number held their helmets ready on their laps, but most vomited straight on to the floor, which was to make it slippery at the crucial moment. Catholics fingered their rosary beads, murmuring prayers. The pilots had already noticed that the mood was significantly different from what it had been on exercise drops in England. One observed that they were usually 'cocky unruly characters', but this time 'they were very serious'. The aircrew were also far from relaxed about the mission. Some pilots at the controls wore goggles and a steel helmet in case the windscreen was shattered by flak.

Paratroopers in the main formations envied the pathfinders who had gone ahead with the radar beacons. They would already be on the ground, having jumped shortly after midnight, before the Germans realized what was happening. Many men feigned sleep, but only a few managed to doze off. General Maxwell Taylor, the tall commander of the 101st Airborne, even took off his harness and stretched out on the floor with some pillows. He looked forward to the jump with keen anticipation. It would be his fifth and thus gain him his wings.

As the aircraft reached the Channel Islands, German flak batteries on Jersey and Guernsey opened fire. One paratrooper remarked that it was ironic to get such a welcome from 'two islands named after nice moo cows'. A Royal Navy submarine on the surface signalled the point where the aircraft were to turn west for their run over the Cotentin peninsula to the drop zones. Once the French coast was in sight, pilots passed back the warning that they had less than ten minutes to go. On General Taylor's plane, they had trouble waking their commander and getting him back into his harness. He had insisted on being first out of the door.

Once the aircraft reached the coastline, they entered a dense fog bank which the meteorologists had not predicted. Paratroopers who could see out were alarmed by the thick white mist. The blue lights at the end of each wing became invisible. The pilots, unable to see anything, were frightened of collision. Those on the outside of the formation veered off. Confusion increased when the aircraft emerged from the fog bank and came under fire from flak batteries on the peninsula. Pilots

instinctively went to full throttle and took evasive action, even though this was strictly against their orders.

Because they were flying at little more than 1,000 feet, the aircraft were within range of German machine guns as well as flak. Paratroopers were thrown around inside the fuselage as their pilot weaved and twisted the plane. Bullets striking the plane sounded 'like large hailstones on a tin roof'. For those going into action for the first time, this provided the shocking proof that people were really trying to kill them. One paratrooper who suffered a shrapnel wound in the buttock was made to stand so that a medic could patch him up right there. General Taylor's order that no paratrooper would be allowed to stay on board was taken to the letter. Apart from a dozen who were too badly wounded by flak to jump, there appear to have been only two exceptions: one was a paratrooper who had somehow released his emergency chute by mistake inside the aircraft, the other a major who suffered a heart attack.

On the USS *Quincy*, the sky control team at the top of the cruiser's superstructure watched in dismay. 'Often, a yellow ball would start glowing out in the middle of a field of red tracers. This yellow ball would slowly start to fall, forming a tail. Eventually, it would smash into the black loom of land, causing a great sheet of light to flare against the low clouds. Sometimes the yellow ball would explode in mid-air, sending out streamers of burning gasoline. This tableau always brought the same reactions from us sky control observers: a sharp sucking-in of the breath and a muttered "Poor goddamn bastards".'

The red light by the door went on four minutes from the drop zone. 'Stand up and hook up!' came the shout from the dispatcher. Some of the heavily burdened men had to be hauled to their feet. They clipped their static line to the overhead cable running the length of the fuselage, then the order was yelled to check equipment and number off. This was followed by the command, 'Stand in the door!' But as the aircraft continued to jink or shudder from hits, men were thrown around or slid on the vomit-streaked floor. The flak and tracer were coming up around them 'in big arcs of fire', the wind was roaring in the open door, and the men watched, praying for the green light to come on so that they could escape what felt like a metal coffin. 'Let's go!' many shouted impatiently, afraid that they might be dropped in the sea on the east side of the peninsula.

The planes should have reduced speed to between ninety and 110 miles an hour for the jump, but most did not. 'Our plane never did slow down,' remembered one paratrooper. 'That pilot kept on floor-boarding it.' As soon as the green light came on, the men shuffled in an ungainly way towards the exit to jump. One or two made a hurried sign of the cross as they went. With all the shooting outside, it was easy to imagine that they were about to jump straight into crossfire from machine guns or land on a strongly defended position. Each paratrooper, as he reached the door, carried his leg pack, which would dangle below from a long strap as soon as he jumped. Weighing eighty pounds or more, many broke off during the descent and were lost in the dark. If any men did freeze at the last moment, then presumably the sergeant 'pusher' kicked them out, for there are hardly any confirmed reports of a man refusing to jump. As they leaped into the unknown, some remembered to shout 'Bill Lee!', the paratrooper's tribute to General Lee, the father of the US Airborne.

Most suffered a far more violent jerk than usual as the parachute opened, because of the aircraft's excessive speed. Those who fell close to German positions attracted heavy fire. Their canopies were riddled with tracer bullets. One battalion commander, his executive officer and a company commander were killed immediately, because they had landed among an advance detachment of Major Freiherr von der Heydte's 6th Paratroop Regiment. Another officer, who landed on top of the command post, was taken prisoner. An Obergefreiter in the 91st Luftlande-Division wrote home, 'US parachute troops landed in the middle of our position. What a night!'

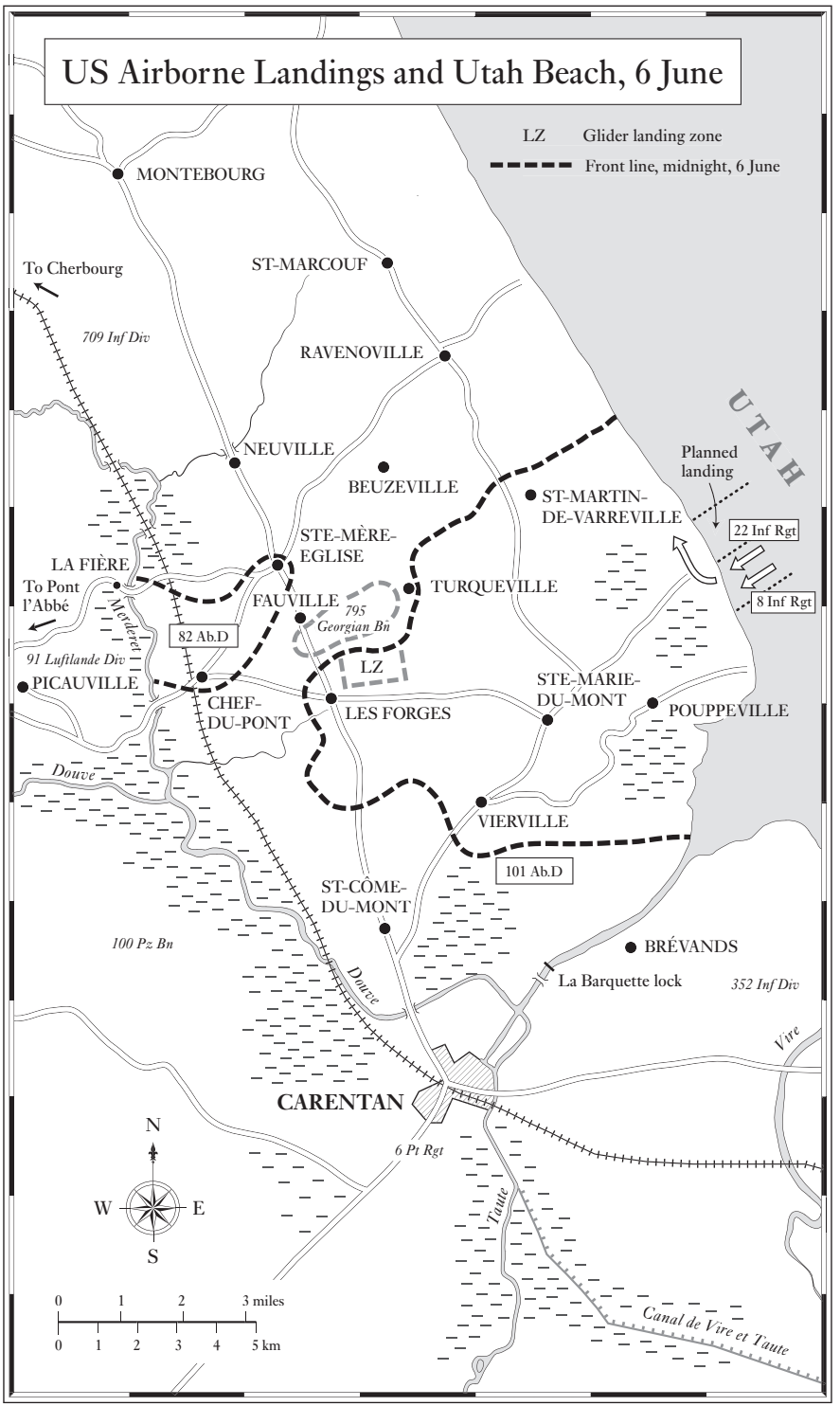
The natural instinct, when dropping under fire, was to pull your legs up almost into a foetal position, not that it provided any protection. One man literally exploded in mid-air, probably because a tracer bullet had hit his Gammon grenade. In some cases the pilots had been flying below 500 feet and the parachutes barely had time to open. Many legs and ankles were broken, and a few men were paralysed with a broken back. One paratrooper who landed successfully was horrified when a following plane dropped its stick of eighteen men so low that none of the chutes opened. He compared the dull sound of the bodies hitting the ground to 'watermelons falling off the back of a truck'. The men of another stick which had been dropped too low along a small ridge

were found later in a long line, all dead and all still in their harnesses.

As the Germans had flooded large areas around the River Merderet and inland from the beaches, many paratroopers fell into water. A number drowned, smothered by a soaked chute. Others were rescued either by buddies or, in a number of cases, by a French family who had immediately launched their rowing boat. Most who landed in water up to their chest had to keep ducking under the surface to reach their trench knife to cut themselves free. They cursed the American harness and envied the British quick-release system. Similarly, those whose chutes caught on tall trees had to strain and stretch to cut themselves free, knowing all the while that they presented easy targets. A number were shot as they struggled. Many atrocity stories spread among the survivors, with claims that German soldiers had bayoneted them from below or even turned flame-throwers on them. A number spoke of bodies obscenely mutilated.

Those coming down into small pastures surrounded by high hedges were reassured if they saw cows, since their presence indicated that there were no mines. But they still expected a German to run up and 'stick a bayonet' in them. To land in the dark behind enemy lines with no idea of where you were could hardly have been more disorientating and frightening. Some heard movement and hurriedly assembled their rifle, only to find that their arrival had attracted inquisitive cows. Men crept along hedgerows and, on hearing someone else, froze. Colonel 'Jump' Johnson, whose determination to knife a Nazi had led him to bring a veritable arsenal of close-quarter combat weapons, was nearly shot by one of his own officers, because he had lost his 'damn cricket'. These 'dime-store' children's clickers were despised by many in the 82nd Airborne. They resorted to the password 'Flash', to which the reply was 'Thunder': these two words were chosen because they were thought to be difficult for a German to pronounce convincingly.

The sense of relief to find another American was intense. Soon little groups formed. When an injured paratrooper was found, they gave him morphine and marked his position for medics later by sticking his rifle with the bayonet in the ground and the helmet on the butt. The most bloodthirsty went off 'Kraut-hunting'. Tracer gave away the position of German machine-gun positions, so they stalked them with grenades. Most paratroopers followed the order to use only knives and grenades


US Airborne Landings and Utah Beach, 6 June
LZ Glider landing zone
Front line, midnight, 6 June
MONTEBOURG
To Cherbourg
ST-MARCOUF
709 Inf Div
RAVENOVILLE
UTAH
NEUVILLE
BEUZEVILLE
Planned landing
ST-MARTIN-DE-VARREVILLE
22 Inf Rgt
8 Inf Rgt
STE-MÈRE-EGLISE
LA FIÈRE
To Pont l'Abbé
TURQUEVILLE
FAUVILLE
795 Georgian Bn
Merderet
82 Ab.D
LZ
91 Luftlande Div
PICAUVILLE
CHEF-DU-PONT
LES FORGES
STE-MARIE-DU-MONT
POUPPEVILLE
Douve
VIERVILLE
101 Ab.D
ST-CÔME-DU-MONT
100 Pz Bn
BRÉVANDS
La Barquette lock
352 Inf Div
Vire
CARENTAN
6 Pt Rgt
Taute
Canal de Vire et Taute
N
W
E
S
0 1 2 3 miles
0 1 2 3 4 5 km

during darkness. But one who did fire his rifle noticed afterwards the torn condom hanging loosely from the muzzle. 'I had put it there before the jump to keep the barrel dry,' he explained, 'then forgot about it.'

The 'Kraut-hunters' would also follow the sound of German voices. In some cases they heard Germans approaching down the road, marching in formation. After hurried whispers, they lobbed grenades over the hedge at them. Some claimed to be able to smell Germans from the strong odour of their tobacco. Others recognized them by the creaking of all their leather equipment.

German troops seemed to be hurrying in all directions as reports of landings up and down the peninsula came in. A couple of pilots had become so disorientated from the fog and taking evasive action afterwards that they had dropped their sticks near Cherbourg, some twenty miles from the correct dropping zone. The captain with them had to go to a farmhouse to find out where they were. The French family tried to help by giving them a simple map of the Cotentin torn from a telephone directory. Another airborne officer, however, observed that the unintended dispersal of units during the chaotic drop had proved an unexpected advantage in one way: 'The Germans thought we were all over creation.' But the paratroopers were only slightly less confused themselves. As a lost group approached a well to refill their canteens, an old farmer appeared from his house. One of them asked him in bad French, 'Ou es Alamon?' He shrugged and pointed north, then south, east and west.

The most successful ambush took place not far from the command post of the German 91st Luftlande-Division near Picauville. Men from the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment opened fire on a staff car bringing the divisional commander, Generalleutnant Wilhelm Falley, back from the command post exercise in Rennes. Falley was thrown from the vehicle wounded and, as he crawled to retrieve his pistol, an American lieutenant shot him dead.