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The United States Airborne Divisions, and Their Role on June 6, 1944

By Dennis Carey '07



The United States Airborne Divisions that were dropped behind Utah Beach in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944 played a critical role in the eventual success of Operation Overlord. On the evening of June 5<sup>th</sup>, General Eisenhower visited the men of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne division as they geared up in preparation for their jump. In making his rounds among the troops giving his words of encouragement, a paratrooper remarked “Hell, we ain’t worried General. It’s the Krauts that ought to be worrying now.”<sup>1</sup> This is just one example of the confidence and fortitude that the men of both the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne divisions possessed on the eve of Operation Overlord. Characteristics such as these would prove to be invaluable as they flew over Hitler’s Atlantic Wall and parachuted into Nazi occupied France. Despite their optimism, most of the men of the Airborne would soon be faced with countless setbacks—setbacks that began before they even jumped out of their transport planes.

Things began to go wrong as soon as they began to approach the French coastline. On their approach to the designated drop zones the transport planes carrying the paratroopers planned to fly in a tight formation, dropping the men in a set pattern that would allow for quick assembly into an effective fighting force. Guiding the planes to their assigned drop zones would be seven teams of pathfinders. These pathfinders were specially trained and sent in ahead of the main force; at about midnight on June 6<sup>th</sup> they would become the first allied soldiers to hit the ground in Nazi controlled France. They carried with them beacons that were intended to guide the inbound transports to their targets. Upon landing, the pathfinders found that they had not been dropped where they intended, as Clay Blair notes in his book *Ridgway’s Paratroopers*. “Only two of the seven teams came down in precisely the right place. Owing to navigational and other errors, some pathfinders were dropped as far as two miles off target, errors that would

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<sup>1</sup> Ambrose, Stephen A. 1994. *D-Day June 6 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 193.

have grave consequences.<sup>2</sup> The first wave of aircraft carrying both the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> followed the route of the pathfinders towards their drop zones at about 1:00 AM on June 6<sup>th</sup>, expecting to be led by the pathfinders beacons. Most of the planes found no beacons at all. They were not aware that the many of the pathfinder's objectives were not yet accomplished—mainly because they were ordered to be under strict radio silence.

The men flying the transports were the pilots of the Army Air Force's Troop Carrier Command. For many it was their first combat mission. They had not been trained to deal with night operations, anti-aircraft fire, or foul weather.<sup>3</sup> As they came over France, all hell broke loose. They encountered cloudbanks which decreased their visibility to nearly nothing, along with heavy anti-aircraft fire from the Germans on the ground. Many of the ill-prepared pilots broke their tight V formations and took evasive action, essentially throwing the airborne divisions into chaos before they could even hit the ground. Instead of being dropped in their planned drop zones, there were two entire divisions of paratroopers scattered over several miles throughout the Normandy countryside.

The two airborne divisions being dropped each had their own objectives upon landing. The 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division was to be dropped into three zones around the town of Ste. Mere Eglise and the adjacent Merderet River. Their two main objectives were to secure the town, which lay to the north of their proposed drop zones, and to move to destroy bridges over the Douve River to protect the flank of the invasion force. Their commanding officer was General Matthew Ridgway; Operation Overlord was only his fifth parachute jump; it would certainly be a trial by fire. The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division was also supposed to be dropped into three zones, further east and closer to Utah Beach than the 82<sup>nd</sup>. They were to secure the causeways that crossed the marsh behind Utah Beach and also move to the south toward Carentan to seize key bridges. They were under the command of General Max Taylor.

Both of the airborne divisions would only be mildly successful in achieving their planned objectives on D-Day, and they each would face many of the same problems. One problem many paratroopers encountered was the loss of their equipment during the jump: many of the pilots had not slowed-down enough, causing more intense shock upon the opening of the parachutes which in turn caused essential gear to be ripped off. Another unanticipated problem was a large flooded area around the Merderet River into which elements of the 82<sup>nd</sup> were dropped. The Germans intentionally flooded the area, however reconnaissance had mistaken it for solid ground. Thirty-six paratroopers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> would drown in the marsh, while others were forced to abandon their gear to escape.<sup>4</sup> A typical paratrooper was wearing between 125 and 150 pounds of gear strapped to his body, which made it much harder to move upon landing.<sup>5</sup> Some troopers found themselves alone when they reached the ground; many were dropped from altitudes that caused them to land extremely spread out. Troops in both divisions would encounter this problem, and in some cases elements of the 82<sup>nd</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup> became mixed due to miss

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<sup>2</sup> Blair, Clay. 1985. *Ridgway's Paratroopers, the American Airborne in World War II*. Garden City, New York: The Dial Press, 217.

<sup>3</sup> Ambrose, 198.

<sup>4</sup> Ambrose, 214.

<sup>5</sup> Blair, 219.

drops. Soldiers were forced to band together and work individually or in small units towards their rally points.

Following the first waves of parachutists, at roughly 3:00 AM more C-47s began to arrive towing behind them glider-borne troops of both the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup>. Sixty-nine of these gliders landed in the area of Ranville, reinforcing the 101<sup>st</sup>, forty-nine landed safely in a zone cleared by the paratroopers earlier. Simultaneously fifty-two gliders landed six kilometers from Ste. Mere Eglise, intended to reinforce the 82<sup>nd</sup>. These gliders had many problems when attempting to land—the clearings in which they were to land were much too small. They also encountered massive hedgerows, which many of the gliders slid into upon landing causing great damage. The glider force would go on to have twenty-five men killed, one hundred eighteen wounded, and fourteen missing out of nine hundred fifty-seven total men. The glider troops of the 82<sup>nd</sup> took sixteen percent casualties before it even was in action.<sup>6</sup> Many of these came due to the poor reconnaissance that did not consider the size of the Norman hedgerows and the German defenses in the area.

Of the two divisions, the 101<sup>st</sup> was in much better shape than the 82<sup>nd</sup> in the early morning hours of June 6<sup>th</sup>. The 101<sup>st</sup> was able to quickly move towards their objective behind Utah Beach. Twenty-four hours after the drop, the 101<sup>st</sup> had assembled only about 2,500 of the 6,000 men who had jumped. They had taken Ste. Martin de Varreville along with Pouppeville, which were both key to the breakout of troops landing on the beach. Elements of the 101<sup>st</sup> were also moving towards Carentan, which General Omar Bradley hoped could be taken by D+1 [the day after D-Day].

Although their force was more scattered, elements of the 82<sup>nd</sup> were also able to make headway. Of all of the troops jumping on D-Day, the 505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry of the 82<sup>nd</sup> had one of the best jumps. In the book *Out of the Blue*, James Huston explains why this occurred: “Its troop carrier planes too had been scattered, but many of them were able to circle back and find the drop zone which the pathfinders had clearly marked.”<sup>7</sup> The dangerous decision to circle back allowed for about 180 men, under the command of Lt. Col. Ed Krause, to assemble.

By 4:00 AM Krause was moving toward Ste. Mere Eglise. He was guided by a French man into town, who pointed out the locations of the defending Germans. Some thirty Germans surrendered to Krause and his men, while ten were killed resisting.<sup>8</sup> At 4:30 AM, Krause hoisted the American flag on a church steeple in Ste. Mere Eglise. Americans had liberated their first town in France since 1918.<sup>9</sup> Despite being the only airborne unit to achieve one of its objectives, the 82<sup>nd</sup> was still much slower to assemble. Two days after jumping, they had only 2,100 men under unified command.<sup>10</sup> Without the success of the pathfinders that marked the landing area of the 505<sup>th</sup> or the fortitude of the pilots who chose to circle back instead of simply dropping the men, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne division probably would not have accomplished any of its objectives on D-Day. This is a prime example of what the paratroopers could have accomplished had their drops gone as planned.

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<sup>6</sup> Ambrose, 219-221.

<sup>7</sup> Huston, James A. 1972. *Out of the Blue, US Army Airborne Operations in World War II*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Studies, 183.

<sup>8</sup> Ambrose, 237.

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert, Martin. 2004. *D-Day*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 141.

<sup>10</sup> Huston, 183.

As groups of soldiers came together all across the Norman countryside, they were forced to make due with what they had and do whatever it took to link up into larger groups. There was little to no chain of command; it was the responsibility of the Junior Officers and enlisted men to act independently to link up into larger forces. For many of these soldiers, Overlord was their first combat jump; American soldiers were not professionals, but rather citizen soldiers that may have been young teenagers when Hitler took over France. They were faced with a situation for which they had not trained, and were forced to improvise in many situations. In their briefings prior to their jumps they were instructed to do whatever they could to disrupt the Germans, and they did just that.

“The overall missions of the three airborne divisions were to disrupt and confuse the Germans so as to prevent a concentrated counterattack against the seaborne troops coming in at dawn, and to protect the flanks,”<sup>11</sup> is Stephen Ambrose’ description of the universal objective of the airborne troops from his book *D-Day*. The men of the airborne did exactly that on June 6, 1944. They had clear objectives, but it became very clear to nearly all of the men that their objectives were largely unattainable due to the scattered nature in which they were dropped.

Many units began to render the German lines of communication useless in their efforts to cause havoc behind the German lines. The Germans had been firmly in place in France for almost five years, and in that time they had grown reliant on more secure land communication lines rather than radio. When the men of the airborne began to cut as many telephone lines as they possibly could, it isolated some German units and left them out of contact with their commands. These isolated units were unsure of what was happening, and were caught off-guard by the paratroopers. Without contact to their high command, they were forced to wait for other avenues of communication to be established before taking drastic action. This confusion bought the paratroopers much needed time to organize.

Since the paratroopers were so scattered, it was hard for the defending Germans to discern how many of them actually landed. Sightings of US soldiers all across Normandy in varying strengths confused the Germans. In addition to not being sure of where the main drop was, the Germans were thrown off by a diversion called Operation Titanic. Titanic consisted of about 12 commandos, along with about 1,000 dummy parachutists that were dropped southeast of Omaha Beach. The commandos were armed with recordings of chatter and small arms fire that they played over loudspeakers. The German unit in that section, the 915<sup>th</sup> Infantry, moved not toward the invasion beaches but the “allied force” near Isigny. Only two of the twelve commandos would survive the action.<sup>12</sup>

By the time the 915<sup>th</sup> Infantry realized where the real landings were, the Allies had already established a strong beachhead and were moving inland. Operation Titanic was just one of the many deceptions that were put forward to confuse the German defenders and make the job of the American paratroopers easier. The German high command knew an invasion was coming, and many of them mistakenly felt that the invasion at Normandy was not *the* invasion.<sup>13</sup> This blunder would allow the Allies to breach the Atlantic Wall and establish a firm beachhead on the Normandy coast. From

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<sup>11</sup> Ambrose, 227.

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert, 130-131.

<sup>13</sup> Ambrose, 303.

that beachhead would flow an amazing volume of allied men and firepower that would open Hitler's dreaded second front, and eventually penetrate deep into Nazi territory.

The United States Airborne forces that landed in Normandy on June 6, 1944 truly played an integral role in Operation Overlord. It is realized that there were many shortcomings in the parachute drops of the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne divisions; both units still contributed to Allied victory at Normandy. The 82<sup>nd</sup>, despite being scattered, managed to take Ste. Mere Eglise and hold it until they were supported by seaborne tanks. The 101<sup>st</sup> was successful in opening up the causeways behind Utah Beach and taking out key German artillery batteries.

Although neither division of the U.S. Airborne was successful in all of their initial objectives, they accomplished their overall mission to disrupt the Germans and cause confusion behind their lines. The Airborne troop divisions were elite units that were highly trained and superbly equipped, and they proved their value on D-Day and in the campaign following it. By June 11, D+5, 17,400 paratroopers and glidetroops had landed in Normandy. The airborne divisions continued to fight as ground units in Normandy following D-Day for thirty-three more days, until being relieved on July 8<sup>th</sup>.<sup>14</sup> Both divisions of United State parachutists would serve bravely in the campaign for Normandy. The men of the airborne, from Privates to Generals, would continue to impress the Allied high command with their improvisational skills in Operation Overlord and many subsequent campaigns in the liberation of Nazi-occupied Europe.

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<sup>14</sup> Huston, 186.

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