

Operation Deadstick: Capture of Pegasus Bridge

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Introduction

The successful landings by the allied forces at Normandy were the first steps towards early capitulation of the German forces. As part of the Normandy landings, the British troops were landing at Sword Beach and the success of the 6 British Airborne Division depended on the capture of two road bridges intact as part of its advance and subsequent operations. Operation Deadstick was an airborne assault by soldiers of 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (Ox & Bucks) for the capture of bridges on the river Orne and the Caen canal at Renville and Benouville on June 06, 1944. Failure to capture the bridges would have rendered 6 Airborne Division susceptible to counter-attack by the German Panzer divisions as well as jeopardising the landings at Normandy.

Objective

The Orne river and Caen canal were formidable water obstacles for any raiding force. The two bridges on the Orne river and Caen canal were located approximately 8 km southwest of Sword Beach. The Orne river was 160 to 240-ft-wide with 10-ft-high mud banks. The Renville bridge on the river was 350-ft-long with a 20-ft carriage way. Caen canal was 150 ft in width with 6 ft high stone banks. The 190-ft bridge on the canal was a movable bridge and was the only crossing over the Caen canal between Caen and Sword Beach. Also known as

Benouville bridge after the neighbouring village, it was located approximately 500 m northeast of Renville bridge on the Orne river.

The bridges were guarded by a detachment of 50 men of 736 Grenadier Regiment of 716 Infantry Division. The division was deployed to defend the coastline from any possible invasion from Britain. The troops were mainly conscripts from Poland, Russia and France working under German Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and officers. 736 Grenadier Regiment was located at Renville under the command of Major Hans Schmidt. The Caen bridge had three machine-gun emplacements on its western bank, with a machine-gun and anti-tank gun on the eastern bank. There was also an anti-aircraft tower towards the south with three additional machine-gun emplacements on the northern edge. Similarly, the Renville bridge had anti-tank and machine-gun emplacements on the eastern bank. Both bridges were prepared for demolition to prevent their capture by the allied forces. The troops of 21 Panzer Division, the armoured reserve, were present in the region and were equipped with an older generation of armoured vehicles but had battle hardened veterans in their ranks who were part of the Afrika Corps.

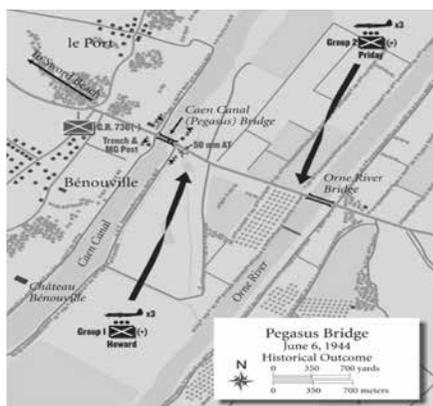
The Plan

British 6 Airborne Division was tasked to land between the Orne and Davis rivers and secure the left flank of the invasion beaches at Normandy. The bridges on the Caen canal and Orne river were to be captured intact to deny the crossing points on the water obstacles to the German troops. A glider-based airborne assault was planned to land the raiding force near the bridges and capture them. Delta Company of 2nd (Airborne) Battalion Ox & Bucks Light Infantry, under the command of Major John Howard, was nominated as the main raiding force. It was supplemented by two platoons of Bravo Company and an engineer detachment of 249 (Airborne) Field Company. The raiding force was divided into two groups each of three infantry platoons with an engineer detachment for the capture of each bridge. The troops were to be transported to the planned landing zones in six Horsa gliders. Each Horsa glider could carry 28 combat soldiers or a combination of weapons with a maximum load of 7,000 kg. 7 Parachute battalion of 5 Parachute Brigade was earmarked as the relieving force to relieve the raiding troops and hold the bridges against any German counter-attack.

The capture of these two bridges intact was essential for two reasons: firstly, the capture of both bridges would secure the eastern flank of 6 Airborne Division from any counter-attack by regiments of 21 Panzer Division. Secondly, the road from Caen and Ouistreham ran along the western bank of the Caen canal and would be a vital communication link for resupply as well as link up with the allied forces landing at Normandy. Failure to capture the bridges would leave 6 Airborne Division cut off within the enemy territory and would compromise safe landings of the allied forces.

Execution

The raiding force embarked on their mission in six Horsa gliders at 22:56 hrs on June 05, 1944, from the Royal Air Force's Tarrant Rushton base. The first group led by Major John Howard, was tasked to capture the Benouville bridge on the Caen canal. The second group under Captain Brian Priday headed towards the Renville bridge on the Orne river. Each glider carried one infantry platoon and five soldiers of Royal Engineers. The gliders were



towed by Halifax bombers and on reaching the Normandy coast at 0007 hrs, the gliders were released and now moved towards the bridge sites. In spite of the imminent warning of the invasion by the allied forces, the bridges were not well guarded. There were only two sentries present on the Benouville bridge, apart from the soldiers occupying the pillboxes and machine-gun posts. The first glider crash-landed into the barbed wire defences at the canal bridge at 0016 hrs and the other two gliders landed within a minute's interval. The soldiers quickly regrouped and charged towards the bridge. The sentries were able to fire a flare gun and alert the defenders and a brief firefight ensued. No 1 Platoon, though being attacked with machine-guns from the pillbox, was able to destroy the pillbox and the platoon crossed the bridge to take up defensive positions on the west bank. The second and third platoons then moved across the bridge and destroyed the machine-gun emplacements resulting in capture of the bridge intact. Meanwhile, the engineer detachment had cut the fuse wires of the explosives and removed any threat of demolition. Their job was made easier by

the fact that the explosives had not been wired by the German soldiers possibly fearing accidental explosion.

The attack on the Renville bridge, however, did not take place according to the plan. The fourth glider with Captain Priday missed the intended landing zone and was not traceable. It was later learnt that the glider had landed almost 13 km away from the planned landing zone. The fifth glider managed to land about 300 m from the bridge at 0020 hrs and was now responsible for clearing the German opposition. The platoon was immediately attacked by the German defenders who had been alerted due to a firefight at the Benouville bridge. However, a direct hit by a two-inch mortar destroyed the machine-gun post and the platoon crossed the bridge without any opposition. The last glider landed at 0021 hrs about 700 m short of the bridge and the platoon quickly deployed with two sections on the east bank and one on the west bank. The surprise factor helped in quick capture of the bridges and both bridges were in the hands of the raiding force within ten minutes of the assault. The relieving force, 7 Para, dropped east of the Orne river at 0050 hrs on June 06, 1944, and due to a scattered drop, less than 50 percent of the battalion strength was able to regroup without any heavy weapons and move to reinforce the bridges by 0130 hrs.

German Counter-Attack

The understrength battalion with only 200 men was deployed with Alpha and Charlie companies at Benouville village and Bravo Company at le Port village, with Delta Company between the two bridges as reserve. The first German counter-attack was by 2nd Battalion, 192 Panzer Grenadier Regiment assisted by tanks and mortars. 7 Para held on against the repeated onslaughts throughout the night even as Alpha Company was reduced to only 20 men. The bridges were again counter-attacked by 125 Panzer Grenadier regiment of 21 Panzer Division around midday on June 06, but withdrew after losing over 13 tanks in a single firefight. The air attack on the bridges was also unsuccessful as one of the bombs hit the Benouville bridge but failed to detonate, thus, aiding the allies. The defences around the bridges were strengthened by the arrival of 2nd Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, by 2115 hrs from the Sword Beach. By that time, the German counter-attacks had become ineffective and the troops were able to consolidate their positions around the bridges.

Lessons Learnt

Detailed Planning and Rehearsals: The troops under Major Howard had practised for almost one year for their task. They also practised with live ammunition to enhance their training levels. The raiding force was put through two exercises to fine-tune their continued practice. Useful information supplied by the French resistance cadres made their task easier.

Surprise: The German defenders did not expect an airborne landing so close to the objective which was one of the reasons for the bridges to be lightly held even when the threat of invasion was imminent. The raiding force was, thus, able to achieve total surprise by landing within striking distance and could capture both bridges with minimum casualties. Also, landings behind the enemy lines led to confusion amongst the defenders regarding the intended objectives and may have facilitated the overall offensive plan.

Delegation and Fog of War: The units of 21 Panzer Division were in the vicinity with 125 Panzer Grenadier Regiment located east of Caen. 21 Panzer Division being the armoured reserve could not be moved without the permission of Hitler. After the information of capture of the bridges was received and permission sought for counter-attack, Hitler's staff refused to wake him up, thus, delaying the counter-attack and losing precious time. The orders for the counter-attack were not issued till midday of June 06, and by then, it was too late to reclaim the bridges. When 125 Panzer Grenadier Regiment counter-attacked the bridges by midday, it came under heavy fire from artillery and air, and suffered heavy casualties. A coordinated and timely counter-attack with infantry and armour would have led to recapture of the bridges by German troops as 7 Para did not have any heavy weapons apart from one anti-tank gun and a few machine-guns at the bridge site. The German commanders also kept waiting for orders and did not display any initiative when they had confirmed information of capture of the bridges as well as the allied landings.

Conclusion

The quick capture of the bridges facilitated the task of 6 Airborne Division, and denying the use of the two bridges to the Germans was essential in shaping the ensuing campaign. Hitler was unable to launch a coordinated counter-offensive at Normandy as the only area available to form up was between Dives and Orne. The natural attack line was over the Pegasus bridge to Ouistreham and to the west

The capture of both the bridges intact secured the eastern flank of 6 Airborne Division.

along the beaches. As 6 Airborne Division held its bridgehead and Benouville bridge, the German Panzer divisions were forced to go around the town of Caen and enter the battle in a piecemeal fashion against the front of 6 Airborne units instead of its flank. Hence, the repeated counter-attacks by the Germans were unsuccessful. After the end of the war, the Caen canal bridge was renamed the Pegasus bridge in honour of the emblem of the Parachute Regiment. The Ranville bridge was renamed Horsa bridge to commemorate the allied victory.

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