

## **1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (United Kingdom)** **OPERATION MARKET GARDEN 17-25<sup>th</sup> September 1944**

Dr Kingsley (Principal), staff, students and colleagues, I would like to thank you on behalf of the Newark Branch of the Parachute Regimental Association for the great privilege of being hosted here today at Harlaxton Manor. As students of British history you will be aware of the unique position that this historic manor and the surrounding areas hold in the annals of WW2 and for British Airborne Forces. It was a focus for the preparation and planning of the largest Airborne operation ever to take place, when, combined with our brethren from the US 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and the Polish Independent AB Bde, the 1<sup>st</sup> Allied Airborne Corps was deployed to support the Normandy landings and later to strike deep into German held positions along their Rhine borders, to expedite an end to the war.

It may be useful to consider the historical development and training of parachutists and glider troops that led to the Headquarters of 1st British Airborne Division being based here at Harlaxton from 1941 onwards.

In June 1940 Winston Churchill called for the forming of a body of 5000 parachutists having observed the earlier effect of German shock troops in taking key European strongholds during their invasion. Without any past experience, apart from an Air Staff view that gliders were preferable, a parachute school was set up at Ringway Airport using six clapped out Whitley bombers and any troops who would volunteer. It was a hazardous undertaking at that time, the first British paratrooper jumped on 13 July 1940 and the first was killed 12 days after. He would not be the last!

The development of parachutes and jumping techniques was largely trial and error/ (I was once made to feel very humble by one of our veterans who quietly described the lack of a reserve parachute or stabilizing skirt when exiting from crudely modified aircraft – but most of all the revelation that, pre Arnhem, every parachutist had also to train to be air landed by glider. (This was hazardous even beyond parachuting and accompanied by total airsickness for those passengers in the swaying glider.)

In the first recorded operation a squad of 38 paratroopers of 11 SAS was dropped from two adapted Whitley bombers successfully to destroy the Tragino Viaduct in Italy on Feb 10<sup>th</sup> 1941. They were all captured before their planned rescue by submarine. Nevertheless 11 SAS expanded to three parachute battalions to generate the first Airborne Bde by late September. The 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne formed up on October 31, 1941, under Maj Gen Frederick (Boy) Browning consisting of the British 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Brigade and the 1<sup>st</sup> Airlanding Brigade and became the first to use the famous Maroon Beret, now the symbol of the elite Airborne Forces.

In July 1942 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne received the 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute Brigade and in 1943 the 3<sup>rd</sup>



& 4<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigades, forming the complete 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. They saw operations in North Africa during 1942 and built up to a full division under Maj Gen Hopkisson, to support the invasions of Sicily and Italy in 1943, (where the General was killed in action). Later that year 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne was returned to England.

During all this time the 3rd Airborne Brigade had remained behind in UK forming the nucleus of what was later to become The 6<sup>th</sup> British Airborne Division. (Why the Sixth? A subtle ploy to make the Axis powers think there were more Para Divisions). In January 1944, Maj Gen Roy Urquart was given command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to form the main reserve in support of the Normandy landings whilst 6th Airborne Division actually made the drops into France supporting the D Day operations on Operation Overlord. British and US Airborne were later formed up together into the Allied Airborne Army under control of the British 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group.

During the preparation and training of 1<sup>st</sup> British Airborne Division prior to D Day and throughout the summer of 1944 their Headquarters was based here at **Harlaxton Manor, Grantham**. The Pegasus in the forecourt is a reminder of this history. Many other towns, villages and airfields in the area that accommodated elements of the 1st Airborne Division Parachute and Airlanding support units are well documented in the archives. Main airfields for embarkation were nearby Barkston Heath and Saltby.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne order of battle included the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Airborne Bdes, 1<sup>st</sup> Airlanding Bde and a large number of supporting Divisional units – Signals, pathfinders, artillery, anti tank, reconnaissance, engineers, logistics, transport, provost and Medics. Attached were the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Independent Bde and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Glider Pilot regiments. RAF Transport Command squadrons were ubiquitous in this part of England throughout the war. A vast array, then, of skilled and specialist fighting forces were billeted in many locations that surrounded this place.

This was no doubt a time of great activity at Harlaxton Manor and in the local areas and airfields as Parachute and Airlanded units trained hard, not just the paratroopers but aircrew, glider crews and their despatchers. There are still annual pilgrimages to places such as Caythorpe, Spalding or Fulbeck as comrades reunite to remember those challenging times.

The 6th Airborne took the major role in the D Day landings, establishing a bridgehead and disrupting the enemy behind its lines to prevent counter attack. Famous operations included the silencing of the Merville batteries and the taking of Pegasus Bridge. Those fortunate to have seen the epic film of “The Longest Day” may wish to take this opportunity to revive some of those experiences from our revered star of the film, Capt Richard Todd, himself a Para veteran of the Normandy landings. He is a native of Grantham and an honorary Branch member. We are equally proud to have with us today our two Arnhem veterans,



Alan Betts and Jack Taylor.

Throughout the subsequent liberation of France, Allied forces fought hard in making early rapid advances on a broad front against dogged German resistance. Several operations were planned for 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne during this earlier fighting through Normandy, but not executed. The risks to aircraft and men were deemed to be extreme as the Allies drove the German Army back through the Ardennes and the Low Countries towards Germany and its Rhine borders. There was also fierce Allied competition for strategic Air and logistic transport assets for the rapidly advancing ground troops of the US 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Army Groups and the British 21st Army Group which ruled out any support for planned Airborne operations. In all some 17 airborne operations were planned but not executed and the frustrated 1<sup>st</sup> Division in the UK characterized themselves as the "Stillborn Division".

However, once the Allied advance began to falter and get bogged down, Gen Eisenhower decided to form the Combined Airborne Forces HQ. In August, 1944 the 1<sup>st</sup> Division became part of the First Allied Airborne Army which was placed under control of British 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group. A bold plan was conceived by UK General Bernard Montgomery to bring the war to an end by Christmas 1944. An Airborne assault 100 miles behind enemy lines was to seize the canal and river crossings over the Rhine and lay down a protective carpet to enable the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group, led by 30<sup>th</sup> British Corps to break through and advance more rapidly to seize Berlin. There were many other prizes including the vital ports at Rotterdam and Antwerp, destruction of the V2 rocket sites in Holland and the encirclement of the Ruhr industrial heartland. This was **OPERATION MARKET GARDEN**.

The Airborne assault, by 40,000 Allied parachute and glider forces, involved 4850 troop carrying sorties and began on 17<sup>th</sup> Sept. It was the largest ever mounted and included the US 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Divisions, the British 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne and the Polish Independent Parachute Brigade. The plan was to secure the routes from Eindhoven through Nijmegen to Arnhem. The main objective for the British 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division was to occupy the bridge at Arnhem, and hold it for up to 48 hours until relieved by the advancing UK XXX Corps. The US Airborne was tasked to secure bridges and objectives around Eindhoven, Nijmegen and the surrounding high ground.

Preliminary bombing and fighter attacks suppressed the Luftwaffe and reduced anti aircraft battery fire before some 500 gliders went in to secure the landing sites and dropping zones. They were followed by over a thousand troop carrying transports with fighter escorts. A convoy nearly a hundred miles long and three miles wide provided the initial assault. Although deemed 90% successful, it was in fact a glorious failure through inability to secure the bridge at Arnhem and for the British XXX Corps to get through to it on time.

With hindsight there were problems from the outset. The only suitable dropping zones identified were 8 miles from the Arnhem Bridge which was itself many miles forward the other objectives to be seized by US forces. The routes to the bridges were hazardous for ambush and blocking actions, yet direct parachute assault on the targets was rejected by the planners. Local Intelligence had identified 2 German Panzers divisions in the area that had recently moved to Arnhem for refitting. **These warnings were ignored.** Top level decisions by 1<sup>st</sup> Allied Airborne Army to drop over three/four days instead of one, as requested by the Divisions, resulted in half of the force required to secure the dropping zones for the rest. There were many catastrophic events during the later drops due to bad weather, inadequate radio comms and poor strategic co-ordination of Air support. Less than 10% of resupply reached Allied troops despite heroic and often fatal efforts of Air crews and despatchers.

The initial drops were relatively successful and 20,000 Allied troops, 500 vehicles, 330 heavy weapons and 600 tons of stores were dropped between lunch and teatime. Many gliders and their aircraft were lost and, **critically, 38 gliders failed to arrive with much of the motorized transport** and essential fighting equipments for 1st Airborne. That which did arrive was slow off the mark and got ambushed on the narrow roads to Arnhem.

Hitler, meantime, had given absolute priority to his Luftwaffe and land reserves to defeat the Airborne assault, probably remembering his own successes in Crete. The weather deteriorated over the next days, which disrupted subsequent drops and also caused the loss of Allied air cover superiority. The drop zones which 1 Airlanding Bde had been left to secure were compromised and this resulted in the further loss of men, equipment and resupply under heavy German counter attack. Communications were not fully effective and the dispersal of troops made coordination of the plan difficult. Many bridges and objectives were either blown early or successfully defended by the Germans as their local reinforcements arrived.

1<sup>st</sup> Airborne had mainly advanced on foot. Only one Battalion (the 2<sup>nd</sup> under Lt Col John Frost) being able to reach the Arnhem Bridge at its North end. Substantial German reinforcements built up steadily from nearby and prevented 2 Para from securing the whole bridge. They were able to push the rest of 1st Airborne back from Arnhem Bridge. **By the 20<sup>th</sup> Sept a decision had to be made for 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne to abandon Frost and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on the North of Arnhem Bridge and to occupy positions in Oosterbeek to secure a bridgehead for XXX Corps from the South to cross the Rhine, (and thus to meet up with 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne.)**

The XXXth Corps having joined up with 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101 US Airborne was only making very slow progress. The German counterstroke gained momentum whilst the weather prevented any Airborne reinforcement with the limited glider reserves. Air cover supremacy was lost. Alternative Bailey bridges had to be erected en route. The Allied Forces faced continued attrition against mounting

odds.

Frost hung on for another day, but seriously outgunned and outnumbered, with their ammunition almost gone, they were forced to abandon the bridge piecemeal after 4 days and fall back to the main body at Oosterbeek. Their dogged resistance had held up the German counter attack to the benefit of those units to the south of Arnhem.

The valiant attempt to take and hold the bridge at Arnhem was immortalized in the film "**A Bridge Too Far**". A single battalion of 600 men had held the key position for four days, which had been the task allocated to the whole Division (10,000 men) for 48 hours. The main force of XXX Corps and the Polish Airborne Brigade arrived at the Rhine on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, **three days late**.

The weather cleared by the 24<sup>th</sup>, too late for reinforcement and resupply to influence an exhausted force. Albeit, with Air support restored and XXX Corps artillery provided they were able to hold the Oosterbeek perimeter for a further 36 hours as German assaults continued. On the 25<sup>th</sup> Sept, 1st Airborne were ordered to withdraw across the river leaving their badly wounded, medics and radiomen behind. **The priority had now become the recovery of the remnants of 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne.** With 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> US Airborne securing routes to the South, British XXX Corps renewed its attempts to reach 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne. They were unable to cross except for some 200 Polish paras who then helped to reinforce the Oosterbeek perimeter during the final withdrawal under operation Berlin. Survivors were evacuated by engineer ferries, **or swam**, across the river through a narrow gap under an artillery deception plan. Of the 11,000 men of 1st British Airborne Division under 2,500 escaped death or capture. Only 16 from 2 Para returned to their lines although some 300 evaded capture due to the brave efforts of the Dutch civilian underground. Many of 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne that did escape, exhausted, sick and injured made it on foot to Nijmegen. Four VCs were awarded to the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, three posthumous.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division saw no more action for the rest of the war apart from detachments sent to Norway and Denmark in May 1945 to disarm the German Garrisons there. It was disbanded in August 1945. **US and Polish Airborne had also suffered some 4,000 casualties** and the US and UK aircrews, glider pilots and despatchers also paid a heavy price.

It is a poignant after note that the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> were retained in the front line through to the end of 1944 to help set up the subsequent spring offensive through Holland and into Northern Germany. The very action that Market Garden had been set up to avoid cost the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group some 30,000 more casualties including many amongst the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. The failure to reach Berlin has had major consequences for the subsequent history of post war Europe and the consequent Cold War.

Retaken by the Germans, Arnhem suffered badly from re-occupation reprisals



and Allied bombing until finally relieved six months later on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1945. The Dutch **gratitude**, **forgiveness** and **hospitality** are legendary and very humbling for those who have been fortunate to attend the annual Arnhem or Nijmegen remembrance parades and view the beautifully kept war cemeteries.

The Parachute Association are grateful for the opportunity to access this beautiful old estate and be allowed to pay homage at the Pegasus heart of what was once the focus of British Airborne Forces. Airborne ties transcend national interests and we are conscious of the sacrifice made by our US and Polish Airborne brethren in making this pilgrimage to Harlaxton, where the US have maintained both the history and the links.