

Pegasus Bridge

This is information from the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Room; that was the regiment whose troops were the first to land on D Day at Pegasus Bridge. Now you need to use your imagination when you are reading through the rest of this, try to imagine you are there.

The date is **June 5 1944**, and the time is sometime before **midnight**.

At the moment **Europe** is under occupation by the **German forces** and has been so for some considerable time. France has been under occupation for nearly 4 years.

This is **World War II** and it has been raging since 1939. The German forces are under the leadership of **Adolf Hitler**.

All of Europe is suffering with the lack of everything. Food is in short supply and has been rationed. Everyone who is able to fight has been called up for active service. Some jobs were considered essential like coalminers and train drivers but **everyone** is **somehow** involved.

Tomorrow, changes will start to take place. Tomorrow, **June 6 1944**, is **D-Day**. The invasion of Normandy in France is about to commence.

The beaches of Normandy have been given the code names: **UTAH, OMAHA, GOLD, JUNO and SWORD**. The forces from England will be landing on these shores.

Never before in history have so many men been involved. The **ALLIED armies** will include:

57,500 Americans

75,000 British and Canadians

200,000 Sailors

4,000 + Ships and other vessels

All of these men will be taking supplies with them as well. They will need supplies like food, ammunition, vehicles, spare parts, weapons, first aid . anything from a box of matches to a tank. All that you can think of will need to be taken along.

Tomorrow there will also be over 5,000 aeroplanes and gliders taking off from England. They will fly in formation and make a corridor which will be **3 miles wide and 90 miles long**. The sky will become black with aircraft. Some of these aeroplanes will carry men who will be landed by parachute to bring more weapons and supplies to the men already on the ground. Other aeroplanes will be bombers and their job is to clear the way forward for our ground troops.

We can cause great confusion by using **Rupert**. Rupert is a dummy parachute soldier who will explode on impact with the ground. The size of the dummy isn't important as it is coming from a blackened sky (because of all the aircraft) so the people on the ground won't have anything to measure him by. **Bletchley Park** will pick up a coded message from the Germans confirming that Rupert had indeed caused a lot of confusion.

But that is all happening tomorrow. Now it is sometime before **midnight on June 5, 1944**.

The moon and tides are right and there is a break in the weather which has been very severe. These conditions won't happen again until well into the month of July, so it is time to act.

From England, six bombers will take off at one minute intervals; each one is towing a glider.



These gliders are called **Horsa Gliders** and are made mainly from wood. The wings are **30m wide** and the body is **22m long**. The gliders have no **engines**, so once they are released the only way they are going is **downwards**.

This is the beginning of the **invasion force**. If you look on the wings of the aircraft there are three stripes painted on each wing so that they can be identified quickly. In each glider there are **30 Soldiers (including 2 pilots)** plus their weapons and ammunition that they will need when they are on the ground.

There are soldiers from the **Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Regiment**. They are élite troops at the peak of fitness and have been on exercise and training for over two years.

The gliders are numbered: 1-2-3-4-5-

6. In the leading glider (No. 1) is **Major John Howard** the officer in charge of the whole operation which includes 181 men in total.

John Howard is a good officer and he is well liked by his men. He would never ask any of them to do something he wouldn't do himself. His orders are simplistic in words but tremendous in action. The mission that he is in charge of is labelled **coup de main** (a French phrase which means . a sudden attack to gain a position). The mission is to capture **intact** two bridges to the **north** of the city of **Caen** in Normandy. The first is a rolling lift bridge over the **Caen Canal** near the village of **Benouville**.

The second, a few hundred metres to the east, is a cantilever pivot bridge over the **River Orne** close to the village of **Ranville**. The orders also include that the bridges have to be taken and **held until relief arrives**.

The relief will be coming from the troops who are forming the invasion force coming from England. The bridges are needed for the advancing armies from the beaches so that they can progress inland to the heart of France. If the bridges were to be blown up then that would really slow down our ground troops, that's why the coup de main mission is so important.

This is what happened when the gliders were released

At around midnight over Normandy **No 1 Glider** was released from its towing bomber. With only a **stopwatch** and **compass** the glider positioned itself to land as closely as possible to the **Benouville Bridge** (since the invasion this is now known as Pegasus Bridge after the divisional emblem).



The pilots were very skilful and landed the gliders very close to the bridges. At **16 minutes** past midnight **No 1 Glider** landed about 50 metres from the bridge, crashing through the barbed-wire guarding the bridge.

At **17 minutes** past midnight **No 2 Glider** landed approximately 60 metres further away and behind the first.

At **18 minutes** past midnight **No 3 Glider** landed in **between** No 1 and 2! **No 5 and 6 Gliders** landed to the east of the bridges but still only several hundred metres away. The soldiers were soon in action at the bridges.

One of the first actions was to overpower and capture the **German pillbox** on the north side of the bridge. This could have been the detonation point for any explosives set to destroy the bridge.

This action was successful and later became Major John Howard's Command Post. Within about half an hour both bridges were captured and made safe from explosives. Now came the time to hold off the German counter attacks, they had to hold them off until the relief came from the advancing invasion troops that had landed on the beaches of Normandy.

Pathfinder parachutists were due to make their jumps very soon after the gliders had landed. At this point when the bridges were in British hands the code words ~~Ham~~ and Jam+ were transmitted. This signified that both bridges had been captured successfully.

The German forces did try to **regain control** of the bridges by the **use of boats** on the canal but realised it was not possible. They radioed their German headquarters with this information.

Now, when we were being told about what happened to the gliders, **No 4 Glider** was left out of the descriptions. This is what happened to No 4 Glider. It was released at the wrong moment from the towing bomber, only by a few seconds but it made all the difference.

Slightly lost and off course they identified a bridge and made for it. The glider landed extremely close and in fact one of the wings was touching the water of the **River Dives**. In fact, because of those few seconds, **No 4 Glider** was about ten miles from the main target area and in an area that had been purposely flooded by the Germans.

Onboard No 4 Glider amongst the 30 soldiers was a gentleman by the name of **Raymond Rayner nicknamed "Tich"**. He is a good friend of Bletchley Park now and does some of the school visits. This is a brief summary from Tich, of what happened on No 4 Glider when they realised they were not where they needed to be.

They landed by a different bridge on the River Dives. Although it was the wrong bridge the 30 soldiers on the glider decided to capture the bridge anyway so that night the Oxf and Bucks actually captured three bridges. One of the men went to do a recce of the area and while doing this was captured by two of the German soldiers patrolling the bridge. In the meantime the rest of the soldiers were hiding in the undergrowth by the bridge, they saw their comrade had been captured and that the two Germans were holding guns to his back. When the captured comrade and the two Germans were close enough one of the English soldiers told their comrade to jump. As soon as he jumped out of the way they shot the two German soldiers. As one of the German soldiers was falling to the ground he obviously had his finger on the trigger before he was shot and as he went down his finger pulled the trigger, shooting Tich through the arm. Tich had been shot by a dead German soldier! He lost a lot of blood and the other soldiers patched up his wound to the best of their ability. They then had to find their way through the flooded ground to regroup with Major Howard by the main bridges. As Tich had lost blood he needed help through the water and the other soldiers helped him by towing him with their buoyancy ropes that they all have as part of their kit. They managed to make it back to the main group in approx 24hrs and then continued to help with the mission by Pegasus Bridge.