

Conditioning for Success

The Ox and Bucks at Pegasus Bridge on June 6th 1944



Executive Summary

This original article examines how the elite physical conditioning of British airborne forces contributed to their tactical effectiveness, during the opening phase of the Allied *Operation Overlord* on D-Day, 1944.

It highlights the role of D Company, 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, commanded by Major John Howard, whose rigorous training regime included the renowned 135-mile Ilfracombe-to-Bulford speed march in 1942.

Including other critical factors— precise glider navigation, detailed rehearsals, accurate intelligence, and the element of surprise—the article situates physical endurance as a decisive but not solitary contributor to the successful capture of Pegasus Bridge in June 1944.

As part of *Operation Tonga*, D Company spearheaded a daring *coup de main* glider assault on the night of 5–6 June 1944, capturing the Bénouville (“Pegasus”) Bridge intact.

Success at Pegasus Bridge also depended on precise glider navigation and landings, detailed rehearsals using accurate intelligence, and achieving complete surprise, followed by swift reinforcement from other airborne units to hold the bridges through D-Day.

The article also honours Sergeant Alfred Gordon Gooch and his comrades, whose courage and preparation were central to this victory.

Introduction

Bénouville (‘Pegasus’) Bridge is located in Normandy, northern France, spanning the Caen Canal near the village of Bénouville, just north-east of Caen. It lies between Caen and Ouistreham, close to the D-Day landing beaches, and it was the first bridge captured by Allied forces in the early hours of 6 June 1944.

Operation Deadstick was the specific *coup de main* assault on the Caen Canal and River Orne bridges (later known as Pegasus and Horsa Bridges).

The glider-borne attack by D Company, 2nd Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (‘Ox and Bucks’, part of the 6th Air landing Brigade), secured the bridges in about fifteen minutes, with the 5th Parachute Brigade arriving soon after to reinforce the position [5][6].

The mission required gliders to land with pinpoint accuracy followed immediately by a consolidated infantry assault [7]. Ultimately, the operation was a swift victory.

While historical analyses rightly praise gliders and pilots, the success of *Deadstick* was equally dependent on the physical and mental stamina of the allied troops involved [8].

It is worth balancing this with other factors highlighted by historians—navigation and piloting, detailed rehearsals, intelligence on German positions, and combined-arms follow-up.

We explore the "spearhead" role of WWII soldiers such as Sergeant Alfred Gordon Gooch, and the arduous training that forged their success [9].

From Ilfracombe to Bulford: Testing Leadership and Stamina

In 1942, as the British Airborne forces were in their infancy, General Richard Gale, commander of the 6th Airborne Division, emphasised a standard of fitness far exceeding that of the regular infantry [10]. The 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, was sent to Ilfracombe, Devon, for rigorous conditioning [11].

The culmination of this training was an endurance march of 135 miles, from Ilfracombe to Bulford Camp. This arduous exercise tested the men's leadership and stamina [1][12].

Leadership by Example

Accounts of the march highlight the leadership style of Major John Howard [13]. Primary anecdotes recount that Howard refused the use of a bicycle offered by his wireless operator, Corporal Tappenden, insisting on marching the entire distance [14].

"Major Howard's walking stick was worn down by an inch of brass, and his hands suffered significant blistering, yet he maintained his position at the head of the column" [15].

D Company, including Sergeant Gooch, completed the march in five days, arriving at Bulford half a day ahead of the rest of the regiment [16]. Their Light Infantry cadence of 140 paces per minute, while singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers", demonstrated fitness defining the unit's longstanding elite status [17].

Operational Application: June 6, 1944

The selection of D Company, Ox and Bucks, to lead the invasion can be linked to the company's fitness displayed during the Ilfracombe training. The objective was the capture of two bridges intact to prevent German armour from enfilading the eastern flank of the Sword Beach landings.

Enfilading fire means firing along the length of a target—a beach, trench, or line of troops—from the side, sweeping through the whole formation rather than just striking its front edge.

By seizing the bridges intact and holding them through the morning of 6 June, the Ox and Bucks and later reinforcing airborne and seaborne units simultaneously secured a vital route for Allied movement inland.

Success In Short Order

The glider troops had to literally bang into the ground, fight their way to the critical demolition points, neutralise the enemy defenders, and secure the wiring—all within a matter of minutes—to prevent the bridge's destruction.

Upon the crash-landing of the Horsa gliders shortly after midnight on June 6, 1944, the men were stunned and disorientated [20]. Recovering quickly, these elite troops proved to be decisive [21].

Sergeant Gooch and his comrades executed the assault with a speed that overwhelmed the inadequate German garrison [22]. The "astounding fitness" referenced in family archives allowed the platoon to cross the bridge and neutralise defences before their poorly trained and equipped enemy could repel the assault or detonate demolition charges [23].

The primary goal was to capture the bridge *intact*. German demolition charges were present and, though not yet fully armed, they could have been detonated instantly.

Legacy and Commemoration

The legacy of the "Ox and Bucks" is maintained not only through military archives but through the living memory of the families of those who served [25]. The march from Ilfracombe inspired "The Forces March," a modern endurance event replicating the route to honour the resilience of the 1942 regiment [1][4].

Current efforts by the Veterans Charity to install a memorial at the march's start point near Wildersmouth Beach, Ilfracombe, represent a necessary step in the historiography of the war [26].

This anchors the memory of soldiers like Sergeant Gooch, reminding the public that the victory in Normandy was built on the foundation of training exercises conducted years prior on the British coast [27].

Conclusion

The capture of Pegasus Bridge was the result of thorough preparation combined with opportunity [28]. The men of D Company were conditioned to operate at their highest level under intense pressure [29].

The story must be balanced with other factors highlighted by historians—navigation and piloting, detailed rehearsals, intelligence on German positions, and combined-arms follow-up.

Sergeant Alfred Gordon Gooch's service shows how citizen-soldiers were reshaped into elite assault troops, a transformation honed on the long march from Ilfracombe [30].

The contrast in fitness and overall combat capability between the British and German forces at Pegasus Bridge (Bénouville Bridge) was stark, and it was a primary factor in the swift British victory.

The disparity was essentially between a specialised, elite assault force and a low-category static enemy defence unit. Still, this was by no means an easy win, and disparities in forces take absolutely nothing away from the Ox and Bucks.

Had the bridge been blown, the entire British 6th Airborne Division would have been isolated on the eastern side of the Orne River. Seaborne forces landing on Sword Beach would have been exposed to counter-attack by the formidable 21st Panzer Division, which was positioned nearby.

Richard Todd at Pegasus Bridge

Actor Richard Todd was present at Pegasus Bridge on D-Day [6][31]. He parachuted in as part of the 7th Parachute Battalion during Operation Tonga, arriving shortly after Major John Howard's Ox & Bucks had seized the bridge, and helped reinforce the position [32].

Richard Todd's story is remarkable because he later portrayed Major John Howard in the 1962 film *The Longest Day* [33]. That means he acted the role of his real-life commander in a dramatisation of the very battle he had fought in [34].

- **Military role:** Todd was a captain in the Parachute Regiment. On 6 June 1944, he parachuted near Pegasus Bridge and joined the defenders, reinforcing the Ox & Bucks who had captured the bridge minutes earlier [31].
- **Film connection:** In *The Longest Day*, Todd played Major Howard — the officer who had led the coup de main glider assault [33]. It's been claimed he wore his original battle helmet for the film.
- **Todd's casting** gave the film a unique authenticity, since the man had actually fought in the real life 'Op Deadstick' [34].
- **Legacy:** Todd's dual identity as both veteran and actor makes him one of the most famous figures associated with Pegasus Bridge [6][32].

While factually true that Richard Todd played the commander of the bridge assault (Howard), it is worth noting a minor military distinction: Todd was in the 7th Parachute Battalion, while Howard was Ox & Bucks. Therefore, Howard was not Todd's direct commanding officer in reality, though they fought in the same specific engagement.

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Pegasus Bridge (June 1944)

Photo Credit: Author: Christie (Sgt), No 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit. Custodian: IWM.

Pegasus Bridge Photo Description
English: *Pegasus Bridge, June 1944*

Transport moving across the Caen Canal Bridge at Benouville. The bridge was renamed Pegasus Bridge, after the mythical winged horse on the formation sign of British airborne forces.

Date: 9 June 1944

<http://media.iwm.org.uk/iwm/mediaLib//36/media-36070/large.jpg>

Bridging the Eastern Flank: Pegasus, Horsa and Nearby Crossings

Bridge / crossing	Objective	Capturing unit (initial coup de main)	Outcome	Approx. capture time after landing*
Caen Canal bridge (“Pegasus Bridge”)	Seize the canal crossing intact to block German armour and secure a route between Sword Beach and the 6th Airborne Division’s landing/drop zones	D Company (with attached platoons from B Company), 2nd Ox & Bucks LI, with Royal Engineers detachment	Bridge captured intact; demolition charges neutralised; crossing held against counter-attacks until reinforced by 6th Airborne Division	Roughly 10–20 minutes
Orne River bridge (“Horsa Bridge”)	Secure the river crossing to complete control of the Orne–Canal corridor and protect the eastern flank of the landings	Elements of 2nd Ox & Bucks LI (glider-borne detachment) with Royal Engineers	Bridge captured with light resistance and held to link up with parachute and seaborne forces	Within tens of minutes (slightly later but close in time to Pegasus)
Other local crossings (locks, minor bridges, causeways)	Deny alternative routes for German armour and improve Allied movement inland	Mixed elements of 6th Airborne Division and later reinforcing units	Various crossings secured or denied to the enemy as part of the wider Operation Tonga plan	Secured progressively through the night and morning of 6 June

A Note on Document Sources and Accuracy

Authors: [The Combe Martin History Project](#), © December 2025.

This original article has been prepared with care using published sources, regimental archives, and family accounts. While every effort has been made to ensure factual accuracy, some details—particularly anecdotal recollections, personal testimonies, and secondary interpretations—may vary between sources.

Readers should treat this original narrative as a synthesis of available evidence and interpretation, rather than a definitive record.

For precise verification, consult official war diaries, museum collections, and primary documentation held by the National Archives and the Imperial War Museum.