

Pegasus Bridge: June 6, 1944 Study Guide

Pegasus Bridge: June 6, 1944 by Stephen Ambrose

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Plot Summary

Pegasus Bridge by Stephen E. Ambrose is the fascinating story of the role of British Company D in the Allied invasion of France. Company D was a small detachment of one 181 men under the command of Major John Howard. Their assignment was to secure the bridges over the Orne River and the Caen canal and to hold them until they were relieved by the beach landing forces. The Company D men were the first ones on French soil at midnight, June 5-6, in advance of the invasion by sea. If they failed to capture the bridges or if the bridges were down, the 6th Airborne would be trapped and vulnerable to German armory.

In the book, Ambrose explains the amount of training the men did for the mission. They trained for two years, since that's how long the invasion was planned for. Everyone knew that there would be an invasion. They just didn't know where or when. Howard believed in physical fitness and sports and all of his men did extensive physical training and participated in sports. Howard formed the men the way he wanted to. When the British Army formed its airborne forces, Howard and most of the company volunteered.

The Normandy landing site was decided on two years in advance of the invasion and Howard was

was told that he and his company would have an assignment capturing and holding bridges. He couldn't tell his men of their assignment, but he trained them intensely. He also trained them to fight at night. Most importantly, he wanted all of them to be able to think quickly. Every man was trained to lead in case the officers were hit. They trained in gliders, and the glider pilots learned to land by navigating with a stop watch.

All of this practice and training made Company D one of the most special trained and most fit units in the British Army. They performed very well in capturing and securing the Pegasus Bridge, which contributed to the success of the Normandy invasion.

The men of Company D returned to Bouenville each year on the anniversary of the D-Day invasion. In 1984, on the fortieth anniversary, the event became public and has remained so since then.

Ambrose constructed the events of June 6 by interviewing the different people who were involved. The book is very interesting and informative reading and the reader will consider the time well spent reading the book.



Chapter 1, D-Day: 0000 to 0015 Hours, pgs. 15-29

Chapter 1, D-Day: 0000 to 0015 Hours, pgs. 15-29 Summary and Analysis

On June 5-6, 1944, at 0000 hours, Private Vern Bonck was relieved of duty by Private Helmet Romer on the Pegasus Bridge. The bridge spanned the Caen canal near the French town of Benouville.

Georges and Theresa Gondree ran the cafe in the town. Theresa spoke German and her husband spoke English, which the Germans were not aware of. They provided information to the Allies about German activities in the area of the bridge.

The Germans in the area were commanded by Major Hans Schmidt, who was in Ranville with his girlfriend. At this time, he was more worried about partisans blowing up the bridge than about an Allied invasion. His orders were to blow the bridges rather than allow them to fall into enemy hands, but he hadn't yet placed the explosives.

Colonel Hans A. von Luck, the commander of the 125th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, was working at his headquarters in Vimont. His troops were well trained and combat-ready, unlike those of Schmidt. During the usual bombing of Caen that night, he noticed some very low flying planes and assumed they were dropping supplies to the Resistance. Sergeant Heinrich Heinz Hickman, who was driving near Benouville, also heard the planes and reached the same conclusion as von Luck.

Six of those planes were towing gliders. A few minutes behind the gliders were planes carrying the platoon of Lieutenants H.J. "Ted" Sweeney and Dennis Fox. Wallwork cast off his glider at 0007 hours. This was the beginning of the Allied invasion. D Company led the way into France for the 156,000 British, Canadian and American troops that were preparing to enter France. The bombers went on to bomb Caen as a diversion after releasing the gliders.

The success of Howard's assignment depended on the glider landing within four hundred meters of his objective. There were dangers that the gliders would not safely land. D Company was to capture and hold the bridges over the Orne River and the Caen Canal.

The gliders flew through the dark with the pilots navigating by stop watch, since they couldn't see the ground. At 0014, the occupants of glider #1 prepared for landing. Poett parachuted from his plane at 0016 hours. At 0015 hours, Wallwork spotted the bridge about two kilometers away.



Chapter 2, D-Day Minus Two Years, pgs. 30-45

Chapter 2, D-Day Minus Two Years, pgs. 30-45 Summary and Analysis

The war was not going well for the Allies in 1942. The Germans and the Japanese were triumphant in most parts of the world. This was the year that the British created their airborne forces.

John Howard and others from Company D volunteered for the airborne glider forces in 1942 when the company became a part of the glider borne forces. Company D was formed from some of the regulars who had been with the unit before it became an airborne unit and by others who Howard accepted into the unit.

At this time, von Luck was with Rommel in North Africa. He and the British commander shut down the war every day at five so that everyone had their evenings free.

This was the year that the Gondrees joined the Resistance.

Howard basically developed the training program for his Company D. He emphasized the skills of the light infantry and trained them to think quickly and to be physically fit. He insisted that they all participated in some kind of sports. Howard and the officers followed the same regime as the men did. They became an excellent light infantry company.



Chapter 3, D-Day Minus One Year to D-Day Minus One Month, pgs. 46-62

Chapter 3, D-Day Minus One Year to D-Day Minus One Month, pgs. 46-62 Summary and Analysis

The British airborne forces had grown by the spring of 1943. It was split into two with the 1st Airborne sent to North Africa and the 6th Airborne remaining in England. The 6th Airborne continued their training knowing that there would be an invasion at some time.

Planning for the invasion was already taking place under General Frederick Morgan. They had already decided on Normandy, west of the mouth of the Orne River. The Airborne Division would be required to protect the left flank of the sea invasion. The 6th Airborne was already slated to be east of the Orne River.

Howard drilled his men to the point of physical exhaustion to keep them from being bored. He also trained them at night, not yet knowing that they would be landing at night on D-Day.

Von Luck was assigned to the 21st Panzer Division in Brittany in fall of 1943. He extensively drilled his men, especially with night training.

As General Gale worked on the D-Day invasion plans, he decided that the Orne River and the Caen Canal bridges had to be taken intact. If they were blown, the troops would be trapped in enemy territory. Using paratroopers would give the Germans time to blow the bridges, so Gale decided to use gliders. The glider troops would have to hold the bridges until the paratroopers arrived, and this is the plan he explained to Brigadier Poett.

Company D was given a three day exercise to capture and hold three small bridges. The exercise took place at night. They performed very well and Howard was then told that this would be his task during the invasion. Company D would participate in Operation Mush as a rehearsal for D-Day.



D-Day Minus One Month to D-Day, pgs. 63-76

D-Day Minus One Month to D-Day, pgs. 63-76 Summary and Analysis

Howard received his orders to take and hold the bridges at Benouville and Ranville on May 2. The 5th Para Brigade would drop northeast of Ranville and the 3rd Para Brigade would land south of the Le Mesnil forest while the British Third Infantry would be heading for Caen. The Para Troops would head for the bridges and should arrive by 0230 hours. They would be under Howard's command until the community officers of the 7th Para Battalion arrived. Poett told Howard that he would develop his own plans for training and the capture of the bridges. Howard was not allowed to leave the building with the orders, maps or photos, but could study them whenever he wanted. Nor could he tell his men about the plans.

Howard was able to view reconnaissance photos and topographical reports of the area. He knew that the Gondrees were part of the Resistance and that Vion was the local Resistance leader. He also knew who the collaborators were from the intelligence reports he was allowed to read. He developed his plans and trained his men based on this information. He told his men that they had a special assignment doing bridges and they weren't supposed to talk about it.



Chapter 4, Chapter 4, pgs. 76-87

Chapter 4, Chapter 4, pgs. 76-87 Summary and Analysis

Howard took his troops to Exeter for training since there were two bridges located close together. He tried to anticipate every possibility and trained his men accordingly. Howard decided they had to take out the pillbox and move a platoon across the bridge before firing any weapons. Brotheridge would lead the platoon across the bridge and the rest of the men from the #1 glider would capture the pillbox. Glider #2's men would clear the banks and glider #3's men would reinforce Brotheridge. The other three gliders would do the same at the river bridge. Howard developed the plan and trained his men for it.

Company D moved to Tarrant Rushton at the end of May. Howard told them what their mission was and allowed them to study the photos and available intelligence. The men could study the material whenever they wanted. Their escape aid kits were issued on May 29.

Von Luck was drilling his troops to counter any landing or attack and drilling them in counterattack procedures. They began digging holes for anti-glider poles, which Howard knew about the next day, May 30.

Eventually, they decided that there was too much weight for the gliders, and some men had to drop out. Another had to be dropped when they decided to include a doctor. The pilots were to return to England after releasing the gliders by orders of General Montgomery. They were not allowed to go into combat with the troops.

Montgomery and Gale both visited Howard at Tarrant Rushton. On June 4, the troops were in their battle dress and ready to go, but the operation was canceled due to bad weather. The next day, June 5, they were told the operation was on and that they should rest during the day. That evening, they boarded their gliders. They were given their code words. 'Ham' meant the canal bridge was captured and 'Jam' meant the river bridge was captured. 'Jack' and 'Lord' meant the bridges had been destroyed. They took off at 2256 hours.



Chapter 5, D-Day: 0016 to 0026 Hours, pgs. 88-97

Chapter 5, D-Day: 0016 to 0026 Hours, pgs. 88-97 Summary and Analysis

As Wallwork flew the glider closer to the ground, he could see the bridge and other places on the ground. He came in fast and had to use the chute. Both Wallwork and Ainsworth were thrown from the cockpit by the impact of the landing. They were unconscious, as were the men in the glider. They all regained consciousness within a few seconds and began to exit the glider. They quickly moved to their assigned tasks, as did the men from the other gliders. The only casualty of the landing was that one of the men from glider #2 drowned in the pond.

On the canal bridge, Romer was still on duty. He called to the other sentry about the paratroops and the other sentry fired a flare. He was shot by Brotheridge. At the same time, Bailey and two other men from glider #1 threw grenades into the pillbox. The other men were checking the bridge for explosives.

Hickman and four of men were just about to drive over the bridge when he heard the shooting. He knew by the sounds of the guns that they weren't German. The shooting also alerted the German troops in the machine gun pits and trenches. Brotheridge was hit in the neck by a German bullet on the bridge. Hickman also began firing, then ordered his four privates back into the car and spent the next six hours reaching his headquarters at Caen.

Chapter 5, pgs. 97-105

Chapter 5, pgs. 97-105 Summary and Analysis

Brigadier Poett landed at 0019 hours. He was the first paratrooper to land and he did not know where any of his men were. When he heard Brotheridge's shooting, he walked in that direction.

Fox and his group landed at the river bridge. They rushed the bridge and met with no resistance. The same was true of the others that landed at the river bridge.

By 0021 hours, most of the resistance at the canal bridge had been subdued. After clearing the bunkers, they noticed Brotheridge was missing. Parr remembers seeing someone laying by the cafe. They went and looked and found that it was Brotheridge. David Wood was shot in the leg while clearing the trenches, just as he was about to report the success of the mission to Howard.

Howard set up his command post by the bridge at 0022 hours. The first report they received of the action was about Brotheridge being lost. Then they learned that Wood, his radio operator and Lieutenant Smith were injured. That meant that all three platoon leaders were out of action. They heard nothing from the men at the river bridge. Then Howard was told that the explosives had not been put in place.

Just then they heard from Sweeney's group that they captured the river bridge without any shooting. They now waited for the paratroopers, not knowing that most of them were twenty kilometers away. Only Poett and the one rifleman he found were the closest. and they could not supply much support.



Chapter 6, D-Day: 0026 - 0600 Hours, pgs. 106-118

Chapter 6, D-Day: 0026 - 0600 Hours, pgs. 106-118 Summary and Analysis

Now that the bridges were captured, Howard had to be concerned with defending them. They knew the Germans could attack at anytime. He figured the paratroopers would begin landing at Ranville within thirty minutes. The problems would be the canal bridge. They could hear tanks and didn't have much that they could use against them.

The doctor arrived and Howard had him tend to Brotheridge and Wood. Brotheridge died shortly after receiving a shot of morphine. He was the first Allied soldier to be killed on D-Day.

When the planes flew in to drop the paratroopers, the Pathfinders lit flares to guide them and the Germans lit up the sky with search lights. It would take them a half hour to reach the bridge. Brigadier Poett arrived at 0052 hours. They could hear the German tanks and lorries in Benouville and knew they were going to need help soon if they were to hold the bridge.

The paratroopers were disoriented when they landed since they couldn't find the Ranville church steeple. The ones who heard Howard's whistle headed for the bridge, knowing that a German counterattack could come at any time.

Major Schmidt, hearing all of the shooting, left his girlfriend to see what was happening. He and his driver were injured and captured when driving across the bridge. The driver died.

Howard had completed his defensive arrangements for the bridge by 0115 hours. They had one Piat gun to fend off tanks and they could see the tanks slowly approaching the bridge. Howard knew that there were ten thousand men of the 6th Airborne that could be trapped if Company D could not hold the bridges.

The Germans did not counterattack immediately because they were receiving conflicting reports about the situation. They had enough troops in the area to carry out a counterattack.

Howard's troops watched as the tank approached. Because of their good training, they did not fire and reveal their position. When the tank was in the range of the Piat, Thorton fired. The bomb set off the machine guns, grenades and shells, which provided an orientation for the paratroopers.



Chapter 6, pgs. 119-127

Chapter 6, pgs. 119-127 Summary and Analysis

The display from the tank led the Germans to believe the British had more strength than they really had. As a result, the Germans decided to hold off until daylight before staging another counterattack. Meanwhile, the paratroopers thought that Howard was involved in heavy fighting and were trying to reach the area as quickly as possible.

As the paratroopers arrived, they were briefed on the situation. When the 7th Battalion arrived, they took over the patrolling duties. Company D then functioned as a reserve company.

The men began to explore the tunnels under the antitank gun emplacements. They found sleeping Germans in the tunnels. Some of the Germans could not believe that the British were there and they were prisoners.

Von Luck wanted to counterattack but could not do so without permission. All of his plans had been made for such a situation but he could do nothing.

By the time Howard called a platoon leader's meeting, only two of the glider groups had their full number of officers. There had been a dozen Allied casualties and two deaths. They reviewed the counterattack possibilities.



Chapter 7, D-Day; 0600 to 1200 Hours, pgs. 128-141

Chapter 7, D-Day; 0600 to 1200 Hours, pgs. 128-141 Summary and Analysis

The Gondres spent the night in their cellar. They weren't sure who the soldiers were since they couldn't see in the dark and were too far away to hear. When the soldiers knocked on the door, the Gondrees learned the soldiers were British. Georges dug up ninety-eight bottles of champagne from his garden. He had buried them in June 1940. The cafe became a battalion aid post.

The seaborne invasion began at dawn. There were six thousand ships off the coast of Normandy. Five thousand planes provided air cover for the 127,000 soldiers that landed at Normandy that day. The invasion beaches were sixty miles long, from Sword to Utah Beach. There was more sniper activity during the daylight hours and crossing the bridge was now dangerous. People were being hit at the first aid post.

Gardner, Bailey, Gray and Parr were in the gun pit trying to figure out how to use the German antitank gun. When they did, they tried to take out the snipers. Howard stopped them from firing at the chateau and told them to only fire when necessary.

Caen was being shelled with big naval gunfire and the shells were going over Company D on their way to Caen. When the Spitfires flew over at 0800 hours, Howard signalled that the British were in control, and the Spitfires did victory rolls. They dropped the early editions of the London papers, which had no mention of the invasion.

General Gale arrived at 0900 hours. He was walking with Brigadiers Kindersley and Poett. Gale had established his headquarters in Ranville. A German gunboat was taken out on the river and the prisoners taken to Ranville to be interviewed by intelligence. The other gunboat had fled.

Von Luck was in Caen. He was still awaiting orders and knew he could not recapture the bridges now. The Germans decided to destroy the bridges to isolate the 6th Airborne. A German fighter bomber appeared at 1000 hours, but its bomb turned out to be a dud.

Howard's platoons were repositioned to strengthen the line against the Germans and to keep them from breaking through. There was street fighting in Benouville and the Germans were slowly driven out. Company D held the bridges.



Chapter 8, D-Day: 1200 to 2400 Hours, pgs. 142-149

Chapter 8, D-Day: 1200 to 2400 Hours, pgs. 142-149 Summary and Analysis

The injuries increased as the day went on as D Company and the 7th Battalion held the area. They had lost their communications equipment in the drop. As soon as the Panzers began to move from Caen, they were spotted and shelled.

The group at the bridges was waiting for relief from the beaches. The Commandos were already three hours late.

Von Luck's Panzers were moving toward Benouville. The group at the bridge could not withstand an all-out assault. As they are considering the situation, Sweeney says he heard bagpipes. He didn't know that this was a pre-arranged signal between Howard and Lovat. The Commandos had arrived with tanks. Gondree greeted them with a bottle of champagne.

By afternoon, the situation around the bridge stabilized as the German resistance lessened. By 1800 hours, Benouville was secure. By evening, British aircraft dropped supplies and jeeps began crossing the bridge.

When the Warwickshire Regiment arrived, Howard handed over and Company D packed up and began to move east. Their special assignment had ended and Howard was now under the command of his normal battalion colonel.



Chapter 9, D-Day Plus One to D-Day Plus Ninety, pgs. 150-163

Chapter 9, D-Day Plus One to D-Day Plus Ninety, pgs. 150-163 Summary and Analysis

The British forces did not go much beyond the bridge area on D-Day. They went into a defensive mode because of the German resistance and did not reach Caen until August. Company D basically became an infantry company. They marched toward Ranville.

The glider pilots had reported to the beach as ordered. Howard's special unit was shrinking as the troops returned to their regular units. Howard and the Company D troops became lost on the way to Ranville. Sweeney and two others were sent ahead to make contact with the regiment. They met a German armored vehicle.

They finally found the regiment and Howard reported to headquarters. He heard how they landed at the wrong bridge and all that happened. Their men slept for two hours and were moving again by 0630 hours. As D Company moved toward Escoville, they came under attack by the 2d Panzer Grenadiers of von Luck and were finally ordered to retreat. Howard set up headquarters in Herouville.

After two more moves, they remained in one spot for two months. All they could do was to send out patrols and take prisoners. The morale of the men was low because they had always believed they would return to England after their bridge assignment. Howard tried to keep them occupied and made sure they had adequate rest. They did not have adequate weapons to fight the Panzers. By August, Howard was the only remaining officer.

Howard sustained a shrapnel wound and was taken to an aid post. When it was shelled, he left and returned to his unit. Official records showed he had been evacuated to England. The Army lost him for two weeks before the records were corrected.

Von Luck's Panzers were spotted and shelled every time they tried to move. He did manage to hold off on Operation Goodwood when Montgomery tried to break through to Caen and then to Paris. On August 21, von Luck and his division were moved out of Normandy and moved to southern France.

The Allies broke through in early September. Company D was withdrawn from the lines on September 5. They returned to Bulford. Company D began D-Day with 181 men. They now numbered forty.



Chapter 10, D-Day Plus Three Months to D-Day Plus Fifty Years, pgs. 164-173

Chapter 10, D-Day Plus Three Months to D-Day Plus Fifty Years, pgs. 164-173 Summary and Analysis

After arriving in Bulford, Company D was given leave. There were a lot of planes and gliders at Oxford that were headed to Arnhem. Wallwork was with them, as was Thornton. After his leave, Howard began rebuilding D Company. One day when traveling to Oxford, he was in a car accident and was hospitalized until March 1945. The war in Europe was over by that time. He tried to retrain for a mission in Asia but was reinjured. By the time he recovered, the war in Asia had ended.

The French renamed the canal bridge Pegasus Bridge and the road over it Esplanade Major John Howard. Howard went on to work in the Civil Service and served as a consultant to Darryl Zanuck on *The Longest Day*. He retired in 1974 and every year returns to the Pegasus Bridge on June 6. Others from Company D also make the trip.

Von Luck was eventually called to help defend Berlin. He was supposed to break through the Russian lines so the Ninth Army could surrender to the Americans. Von Luck was captured by the Russians and spent five years in a POW camp. He became a successful coffee importer in Hamburg.

Many of the people involved, like von Luck and Howard, became friends after the war. Some remained in the Army, others went into other occupations.

There have been few changes in the villages of Benouville and Ranville. There are stone markers on the spots where the three gliders landed.



Chapter 11, D-Day Plus Forty Years to D-Day Plus Fifty Yeats, pgs. 174-180

Chapter 11, D-Day Plus Forty Years to D-Day Plus Fifty Yeats, pgs. 174-180 Summary and Analysis

There was a big celebration and a lot of publicity on the fortieth anniversary of the capture of the Pegasus bridge. Until this time, the yearly anniversary had only been attended by the participants. Since 1984, the occasion has been public.

The Pegasus Bridge was eventually replaced by a bigger bridge to allow the passage of bigger ships. Howard was instrumental in saving the Gondree cafe and received numerous awards and citations from the French.

There have been numerous movies depicting the action at the bridges. Some of these depicted the accounts of the Germans Romer and Hickman and Erwin.

Howard no lives in Surrey and travels around Europe and the United States giving lectures to cadets.



Epilogue, The Significance of Pegasus Bridge. pgs. 181-183

Epilogue, The Significance of Pegasus Bridge. pgs. 181-183 Summary and Analysis

The full significance of the Pegasus Bridge can never be known. The only way it could be known is if Company D had failed. If the bridges had been blown, Howard's men probably would not have held the area. If the 6th Airborne had been lost, this could have affected the outcome of the invasion.



Characters

Major John Howard

Major John Howard was thirty-one years old and a former regimental sergeant major and an ex-cop. He was on one of the gliders that landed in Normandy in the early hours of June 6, 1944. This would be his first time in combat and this was the first flight on which he had not experienced air sickness. He was married to Joy and had a two-year-old son and baby daughter who were living in Oxford. Howard had picked his team for the #1 glider in which they were riding. Howard led Company D, which basically led the way for the Allied invasion of France. Company D was basically functioning as an independent unit. Howard would not report to anyone or take orders from anyone until he completed his assignment. His assignment was to seize the bridges over the River Orne and the Caen canal at Benouville and Ranville and to hold them. Intelligence reports indicated that they would have little trouble capturing the bridges but would have problems holding them until the 6th Airborne arrived.

Howard was born to a working class family on December 9, 1912 in the West End of London. He enlisted in the Army in 1931, left in 1938 and joined the Oxford City Police until the war began. He was awarded a DSO by Montgomery in Normandy and worked for the Civil Service after the war.

Staff Sergeant Jim Wallwork

Staff Sergeant Jim Wallwork was twenty-four years old and a pilot in the Glider Pilot Regiment. When he cast off the first glider at 0007 on June 6, 1944, the Allied invasion officially began. Wallwork was the pilot of the #1 glider. He was flying by a stop watch since he could not see the river, canal or the bridges. He made the necessary turns based on the stopwatch.

Wallwork was from Manchester and had joined the Army when he was nineteen, in 1939. His father had served in World War I and told him not to go into the infantry, which is what he was assigned to. In 1942, he volunteered for and was accepted into the Glider Pilot Regiment. In May, he was sent to flight training school. After this he trained with gliders at Brize Norton. He trained on the Horsa, an all wooden glider. He is impressed with the glider when he first saw it and he was one of the first to qualify on the glider. That June, he learned to fly Waco gliders in Algeria. He participated in the invasion of Sicily flying a Waco and in Operation Deadstick in preparation for the D-Day invasion. After the glider landing at the bridges, Wallwork made his way to the beach and was returned to England for future flight assignments. After the war he immigrated to British Columbia and became a farmer.



Colonel Hans A. von Luck

Colonel Hans A. von Luck was the commander of the 125h Panzer Grenadier Regiment of the 21st Panzer Division with his headquarters at Vimont. He had fought in Poland, Dunkirk and Moscow and was with Rommel during the North African campaigns in 1942-43. After the war, he became a coffee importer in Hamburg.

Private Wally Parr

Private Wally Parr was with the Company D of the 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, which is part of the British Army's 6th Airborne Division's Air Landing Brigade. He was married to Irene, who was in England, and was in the lead glider on June 6, 1944. After the war, he opened a window cleaning business.

Brigadier Nigel Poett

Brigadier Nigel Poett commanded the 5th Para Brigade of the 6th Airborne Division. On June 6, he was flying in a plane a few minutes behind Howard's gliders and would join D Company at the bridges. He went on to a distinguished military career and then retired to Salisbury.

Lieutenant H.J. 'Ted'

Lieutenant H.J. 'Ted' Sweeney was a platoon leader flying in a plane a few minutes behind the gliders on June 6, 1944. Sweeney remained in the army after the war and retired at the age of fifty-five and then became the director of the Battersea Dog's home.

Lieutenant Den Brotheridge

Lieutenant Den Brotheridge was on the #1 glider on June 6, 1944. He had a pregnant wife, Margaret, who was living in England and was twenty-eight at the time of the invasion. Brotheridge was killed soon after the gliders landed at the canal bridge.

Lieutenant David Wood

Lieutenant David Wood was in the #2 glider in June 6, 1944. He was in his early twenties and was shot in the leg soon after clearing the trenches along the canal bridge. Wood remained in the army until retirement.



Lieutenant Dennis Fox

Lieutenant Dennis Fox was flying in a plane a few minutes behind the gliders on June 6, 1944. He remained in the Army for ten years after the war and then became an executive with ITV.

Corporal Jack Bailey

Corporal Jack Bailey was in the #1 glider on June 6, 1944. He remained in the Army after the war and then became head clerk for a London business firm.

Corporal Billy Gray

Corporal Billy Gray was in the #1 glider on June 6, 1944. After the war he returned to England.



Objects/Places

Benouville

Benouville is a town in northwestern France in the region of Normandy.

Ranville

Ranville is a village in northwestern France, two kilometers east of the Orne River.

Vimont

Vimont is a town east of Caen in northwestern France. It is the location of Colonel von Luck's headquarters.

Caen

Caen is a city in northwestern France.

Bulford

Bulford is where Company D was stationed in England.

The Pegasus Bridge

The Pegasus Bridge is the bridge over the Caen Canal located near Benouville.

Exeter

Exeter is an English city with bridges that are close together. Howard trained his troops there.

Tarrent Rushton

Tarrent Rushton was a secure British base where Company D moved in late May.

Le Port

Le Port was a small village in the bridge area.

Herouvillette

Herouvillette is a small village near Ranville in Normandy.



Themes

Strategy

Strategy is a recurring theme of the novel. Strategy is very important to the success of military campaigns and the Normandy invasion was one of the biggest military campaigns the world has ever seen. The planning for the invasion began two years in advance of the event under the direction of General Frederick Morgan. They selected the beaches of Normandy as the invasion site by the spring of 1943. The 6th Airborne would land between the Rivers Orne and Dives and would protect the left flank of the landing forces. It was up to General Gale to work out the details for the success of the 6th Airborne and how to protect the bridges over the Orne and the Caen canal. Gale decided to put troops in advance of the actual invasion by gliders. The men were intensely trained for a mission involving bridges and gliders. Howard was given his orders for D-Day on May 2. It was left to him to devise the strategy for capturing and holding the bridges and to train his men accordingly. Howard tried to plan for every contingency in his training so his men would have the best chance of success. Their strategy and planning paid off and paved the way for the success of the Allied invasion.

Training

Training is another dominant theme of the book. The men involved in the bridge operation began their training two years before the invasion, not knowing what they were training for. The British airborne forces were formed in 1942, when Jim Wallwork volunteered. He trained on small planes and on gliders. They trained to fly and land in the dark using a stop watch to navigate by. They would not have any use of landing lights or be able to discern any landmarks in France until they were just about to land. They needed their experience to rely on, and this was what all of their training missions and rehearsals did. The same thing is true of the rest of the men. Howard trained them for every contingency he could think of. He was a firm believer in physical fitness and sports and insisted his men do the same. He trained them to hike carrying heavy weights and trained them at night. Howard wanted them to think quickly and to be able to take over if anything happened to their leaders. They were trained to the point of being the most physically fit unit in the British Army. They won the majority of athletic competitions. The training contributed to the success of their mission, especially since most of them had never been in battle before. They did things automatically without having to think first, as when the glider first landed, and this contributed greatly to the success of their mission.

Determination

A third dominant theme of the book is determination. It takes determination to succeed, and the men of Company D certainly had determination. They had to endure long and



hard years of training to be as physically fit as they were. Howard would drive them to the point of physical exhaustion to keep them from being bored and mentally dull. The men went through Howard's training and drilling program because of their determination to succeed and to be good at whatever they did. When they were training, they pushed themselves no matter how tired they were. This was the same thing they did after the invasion began. They were determined to succeed because the welfare of the 6th Airborne and possibly the invasion depended on them. They risked their lives and took chances and went on very little sleep. Howard pushed himself so much at one point that he went four days without sleep. He and some of the others went on fighting, even with injuries. They were determined to make it work no matter what the situation. It was their determination that resulted in their good physical fitness and rigorous training and this contributed to the success of their mission.



Style

Perspective

The book is written in the third person point of view with the author, Stephen Ambrose, acting as the narrator. This allows him to provide the necessary background and other information that the reader needs. The author constructed the events from interviews with the various participants - British, French and German. He lets them tell the story of the capture of the bridges on D-Day. The author became interested in the story of the bridges when he was there with a group of American veterans on a tour of the battlefields when he met Major John Howard. The author, who led tours of the battlefields, arranged for Howard to talk to the groups he brought to the area in succeeding years. The author had just completed a lengthy book on Dwight D. Eisenhower and decided to write a book on one day in the life of Company D. He traveled to Canada, Germany, France and Britain to conduct the interviews with the survivors. Each survivor told his story to Ambrose and he shaped the information into the book, Pegasus Bridge.

The author is a history writer and has authored numerous books. He founded the Eisenhower Center and is the President of the National D-Day Museum in New Orleans. He had conducted numerous tours of the World War II battle sites and is well qualified to write a book of this kind.

Tone

The tone of the book is very objective. The author tells the story of Company D and their D-Day mission from interviews with the participants. He interviewed not only Howard, who he met at the site in 1981, but also the French Gordrees, who were members of the Resistance and owned the cafe across from the bridges. He interviewed the surviving members of Company D in addition to some of the surviving Germans, like von Luck. He traveled to England, Canada, Germany and France to interview the different survivors and lets them tell the story of the events of that momentous time. Since the book is about Company D, most of the book is devoted to their activities, but he also obtained information from the surviving German soldiers. The reader, therefore, learns of the events from both sides with the British telling what they did and thought and the Germans doing the same. This gives the book a very balanced approach that the reader will appreciate. The author writes the book as if it is a story with excerpts from the various people giving their perspective of the different events. The reader will appreciate the depth of Ambrose's research and his style of presentation in the book. He presents the events without forcing any issues.



Structure

Pegasus Bridge consists of eleven chapters and an epilogue. The chapters are titled with the time relative to D-Day, June 6, 1944. The first chapter covers the first fifteen minutes, when Company D landed their gliders in France, and introduces most of the characters. The next chapters goes back two years before D-Day and shows how Company D was formed and trained. As a result of their training, Company D was a well trained and elite unit, and these chapters show why. The next four chapters cover the events on D-Day itself. The remaining chapters cover the period in the days and years after D-Day.

There is a Preface that the reader should read because Ambrose discusses how he met Major John Howard and how he became interested in Company D and the story of the Pegasus Bridge. In the Epilogue, Ambrose discusses why the bridges over the Orne River and Caen canal were significant. There is also an Appendix, with Poett's orders to Howard. The book also has sections on Acknowledgments, and there is a Sources section as well as an Index. Maps and charts are presented in various places and there is a section with photos that allows the reader to associate names with faces.

The book is well written and very interesting. It is quick and easy reading and well worth the reader's time.



Quotes

"Although the Germans expected the long-anticipated invasion at any time, and although Schmidt had been told that the two were the most critical points in Normandy, because they provided the only crossings of the Orne waterways along the Norman coast road, Schmidt did not have his garrison at full alert, nor was he in Ranville on business." Chap. 1, p. 17

"By July, Howard was pretty much on his own, allowed by his colonel to set his own training pace and schedule. Initially, he put the emphasis on teaching the men the skills of the light infantryman." Chap. 2, pp. 40-41

"But one COSSAC decision that remained unchanged was the one that placed 6th Airborne on its own, east of the Orne River, with the task of holding off armored counterattacks. How to do it was left to General Gale." Chap. 3, pp. 47-48

"To carry out his assignment, Howard was given his own D Company, plus two platoons from B Company, a detachment of thirty sappers, one wing of the Glider Pilot Regiment, and six Horsa gliders. Poett's May 2 orders also gave Howard the general outline of how he should proceed." Chap. 4, p. 65

"Howard asked the topographical people to search the map of Britain and find him some place where a river and a canal ran closely together and were crossed by bridges on the same road. They found such a spot outside Exeter. Howard moved the company down there, and for six days, by day and by night, attacked those Exeter bridges." Chap. 4, p. 76

"They were coming at Romer at a steady trot, as determined a group as Romer thought he would ever encounter. Romer could see in a flash, but the way the men carried their weapons, by the look in their eyes and by the way their eyes darted around, all white behind the black masks, that they were highly trained killers who were determined to have their way that night. Who was he to argue with them, an eighteen-year-old schoolboy who scarcely knew how to fire his rifle." Chap. 5, pp. 93-94

"I just looked at him and thought, 'My God.' Right in the middle of that thing I just knelt there and I looked at him and I thought, 'What a waste!' All of the years of training we put in to do this job - it lasted only seconds and he lay there and I thought, 'My God, what a waste'". Chap. 5, pp. 101-102

"With the bridges captured, Howard's concern shifted from the offense to the defense. He could expect a German counterattack at any time." Chap. 6, p. 106



"The German officers decided that they would have to wait until dawn and a clarification of the situation before launching another counterattack. John Howard had won the battle of the night." Chap. 6, p. 119

"Shortly after dawn, the seaborne invasion began. The largest armada ever assembled, nearly six thousand ships of all types, lay off the Norman coast." Chap. 7, p. 129

"Lovat met Howard at the east end of the bridge, piper Milin just behind him. 'John,' Lovat said as they shook hands, 'today history is being made.'" Chap. 8, p. 147

"From the experience, Howard learned a lesson. He got regular, if short, periods of sleep for himself, and he saw to it that the platoon leaders, 'as far as possible, try to arrange for regular stand-down periods for everyone in turn and see that they got their heads down. Especially when they were under attack or shell fire'". Chap. 9, 157

"D Company went on to fight in the Battle of the Bulge, then to lead the way on the Rhine crossing, and participate in the drive to the Baltic. The glider pilots were at Arnheim, then flew again in the Rhine crossing." Chap. 10, p. 166

"Since 1984, the annual occasion has been crowded with people and covered by television lights. John Howard comments, 'In many ways, the veterans and Gondree family now regret the occasion has become a public affair rather than the private one'". Chap. 11, p. 174

"What did it all mean? At a minimum, then, failure at Pegasus Bridge would have made D-Day much more costly to the Allies, and especially to the 6th Airborne Division. At a maximum, failure at Pegasus Bridge might have meant failure for the invasion as a whole, with consequences for world history too staggering to contemplate." Epilogue, p. 183

Topics for Discussion

Why was the Pegasus Bridge considered the most critical point in Normandy?

What was the background of Company D? How did it become an airborne unit? What role did it play on D-Day?

How did Howard train his men for their assignment?

What problems did Howard and Company D face after they captured the bridges?

Why was the morale of Company D so low after they accomplished their mission?

What kind of injuries did Howard sustain before the end of the war? What effect did this have on his service?

How was the anniversary of D-Day celebrated in Benouville? How did it change in 1984?