

BRITISH PARATROOPER 1940–45



REBECCA SKINNER

ILLUSTRATED BY GRAHAM TURNER

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Series editor Marcus Cowper

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INTRODUCTION

On 22 June 1940 Prime Minister Winston Churchill wrote an instruction to his Chief of Staff: ‘We ought to have a corps of at least five thousand parachute troops.... I hear something is being done already to form such a corps but only, I believe on a very small scale. Advantage must be taken of the summer to train these forces, who can none the less play their part meanwhile as shock troops in home defence.’

This simple instruction would lead to the formation of a new British Airborne Force with The Parachute Regiment as its core. Its men would fight some of the most iconic battles of World War II, earning the respect of their enemy for their skill and commitment.

Churchill had observed the growth of German airborne capability and sought to copy the idea for the British Army. The Germans were not the first to come up with the idea: the Russians and Italians had both started trials in the

1920s to consider how airborne troops could be utilized before each began the process of building up a force of their own. Western military attachés reported back to their respective governments on this, having watched demonstrations of their capability. The Germans in particular took note, for they were then still bound by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that restricted the reconstruction of an air force. However, with the rise of Adolf Hitler, the *Fallschirmjäger* began to take form; and it was this force that Churchill watched being used so effectively against British forces in April and May 1940 that led to the small note being written to his Chief of Staff.

Two days after the note was written, Maj. John F. Rock of the Royal Engineers was summoned to the War Office and given the order to begin the formation of British Airborne Forces. By the following month, men from No. 2 Commando were beginning their parachute training at RAF Ringway. This unit of men formed the core of what was to become The Parachute Regiment, which was officially founded on 1 August 1942 and grew to 17 battalions by August 1945.

Two Paras board an Armstrong Whitworth Whitley bomber in clean fatigues, i.e. without kit, in 1940. The Whitley was the first aircraft used by British paratroopers, carrying men for both the Tragino Aqueduct and Bruneval raids, before being superseded by the Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle and Douglas Dakota.





The period 1940–45 is arguably the most significant in the history of The Parachute Regiment. It not only established itself as a unit, but also saw the evolution of the distinct character and ethos of the regiment that continues to the present day. Many of the men from this era became legendary figures whose stories have been long remembered following their deaths. A simple photo of the 2nd Parachute Battalion's officers' mess taken shortly before Arnhem reveals a wealth of famous faces: Lt. Col. John Frost who held Arnhem Bridge for four nights; Lt. John 'Jack' Grayburn who was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross; Maj. Digby Tatham-Warter who took out an armoured vehicle with an umbrella; Maj. John Timothy who won three Military Crosses in the space of 18 months; the list goes on.

Battle was a regular experience for the soldier in The Parachute Regiment during World War II, and over the course of the war the regiment earned 29 battle honours. The first of these came at Bruneval on the northern coast of France in February 1942, with a company-sized attack on a radar station. This early success was essential in proving critics of The Parachute Regiment wrong by showcasing the capability this new force offered. By November 1942, the 1st Parachute Brigade was in action as part of Operation *Torch*, the invasion on North Africa, where it earned a fearsome reputation from the Germans who endured relentless attacks from this new force.

As Airborne Forces grew, so did the size of the battles they were involved in. From brigade attacks during the North African campaign, they progressed to operating at division strength in Sicily in July 1943. Having fought through Italy, the majority returned to the United Kingdom before returning to the Continent and earning battle honours at Normandy, Arnhem, the Ardennes and the Rhine Crossing.

At the heart of the two airborne divisions that were formed by the end of the war were the men. They had to have the ability to think and act for themselves during battle as there was no guarantee that, having jumped into enemy territory, they would land with their officers and NCOs. They therefore had to have the capability not only to find the rendezvous point and see the mission through, but to deal with any situation they might encounter en route.

This photo of the 2nd Parachute Battalion officers' mess was taken shortly before Operation *Market-Garden* in 1944. This small group contains man after man who became renowned for their character and bravery. Men like these formed the identity of The Parachute Regiment.

CHRONOLOGY

1940	
22 June	Churchill calls for 5,000 airborne troops.
13 July	First experimental parachute jumps are carried out.
25 July	First fatal casualty following a parachute jump.
21 November	No. 2 Commando changes its name to 11 SAS.
3 December	First parachute exercise takes place in the presence of the Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces.
1941	
10 February	11 SAS raids the Tragino Aqueduct.
9 July	Sqn. Ldr. Maurice Newnham DSO takes over command of the Parachute Training School at RAF Ringway.
12 July	Lt. Col. Ernest Down takes over as CO of 11 SAS.
31 August	1st Parachute Brigade formed.
15 September	11 SAS changes its name to 1st Parachute Battalion.
1 October	Training school authorized to be set up in New Delhi, India.
1942	
27–28 February	Operation <i>Biting</i> , the raid on Bruneval.
17 July	2nd Parachute Brigade formed.
29 July	Army Council Instruction 1596 authorizes the wearing of the maroon beret.
1 August	Parachute Regiment formed.
5 November	3rd Parachute Brigade formed.
8 November	Operation Torch begins in North Africa.
12 November	3rd Parachute Battalion attacks Bone Airfield.
24 November	1st Parachute Battalion fights the battle of Soudia.
25 December	The War Office approves War Establishment for Depot at Hardwick Hall.
29 December–3 January	2nd Parachute Battalion fights the Battle of Oudna.
1943	
3–6 January	3rd Parachute Battalion fights the battle of Djebel Azzag.
3–4 February	1st Parachute Battalion fights the battle of Djebel Alliliga.
26 February	1st and 3rd Parachute Battalions fight the battle of El Hadjeba.
5–15 March	1st, 2nd and 3rd Parachute Battalions fight the battle of Tamera.
20–24 March	1st and 3rd Parachute Battalions fight the battle of Djebel Dahra.
27–29 March	1st, 2nd and 3rd Parachute Battalions fight the battle of Kef El Debna.
23 April	6th Airborne Division formed.
10 July	Allied forces begin attack on Sicily.
13–18 July	1st Parachute Brigade attacks Primosole Bridge.
9 September	1st Airborne Division lands at Taranto, Italy.
1944	
6 June	Allied Forces land at Normandy. 7th Parachute Battalion later awarded battle honour for Pegasus Bridge; 9th Parachute Battalion awarded battle honour for Merville Battery.

10–13	9th and 12th Parachute Battalions fight at the battle of Bréville.
17–20 August	7th, 8th, 9th, 12th and 13th Parachute Battalions fight at the battle of Dives Crossing.
15–28 August	2nd Independent Parachute Brigade takes part in Operation Dragoon in Southern France.
22–23 August	7th, 8th, 12th and 13th Parachute Battalions fight at the battle of La Touques Crossing.
17–27 September	Men of 1st Airborne Division fight the battle of Arnhem. Lieutenant John 'Jack' Grayburn and Capt. Lionel Queripel are each awarded the Victoria Cross for their part in the battle.
12 October	Men of 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade paratroop into Greece.
2 December–15 January	Men of 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade take part in the battle of Athens as civil war breaks out in Greece.
1945	
3–14 January	13th Parachute Battalion fights at the battle of Ourthe, Ardennes.
24 March–1 April	6th Airborne Division takes part in Operation <i>Varsity</i> , the Rhine Crossing.
8 May	Nazi Germany formally surrenders.
9 May	The first men from 1st Airborne Division land to liberate Norway as part of Operation <i>Doomsday</i> .
2 September	Japan formally surrenders.

RECRUITMENT

Having made the decision to form an Airborne Force of 5,000 men, the question was how was it to be done? This led to two important decisions being made during the early stages that would impact upon recruiting. Firstly, all men joining would be volunteers; no man would be forced to jump from an aircraft. Secondly, the new force would be stocked with experienced soldiers; each man would learn the basic skills and drills of soldiery at his original unit before transferring. During World War II, soldiers could not enlist directly into The Parachute Regiment; this option did not exist until the 1950s.

The first step for the recruiters was to advertise the need for volunteers. Posters went up around barracks across the country calling for those interested to apply to transfer to the new Airborne Forces. Later, publicity stunts were used to advertise The Parachute Regiment as an opportunity for soldiers. For example, CSM Stewart of the 2nd Parachute Brigade and his team, complete with ball, parachuted in to play a game of football in Italy, which was well covered in newspapers.

This advertising was seen by men like Pte. Ronald Gear, who was serving at the time in 1st Battalion the Hampshire Regiment, and who soon requested permission to transfer. Private Gear had already shown interest in doing something different as his application to join shows that he had previously volunteered for the Special Services Brigade.

There were a great variety of reasons why a soldier volunteered to become a paratrooper, and each man coming forward needed to be assessed to ensure