



**“A” Company, 9th Battalion, 6th Airborne Division
Bois des Monts & Chateau St. Côte, Normandy, France
June 8-12, 1944**



“A” Company before D-Day

Company Roster

- Company Commander: Major Allen Parry (WIA 6 June)
Second-in-Command: Captain Robert Gordon-Brown (Commanding 9-12 June)
Company Sergeant Major: CSM Jack Harries
1. No. 1 Platoon: Lt. Douglas Catlin (KIA 6 June)
 2. No. 2 Platoon: Lt. Hugh Pond (Commanding 6-8 June, WIA 12 June)
 3. No. 3 Platoon: Lt. Hugh Smythe
- Supporting Units:
4. 4th Airlanding Anti-Tank Battery RA—assigned AT guns lost on D-Day drop
(Replaced by AT guns from 5th Black Watch, 51st Highland Division)
 5. 53rd Airlanding Light Regiment RA—211th Battery
(Observer team from No. 3 Section, 2nd Forward Observation Unit (Airborne) RA)
 6. 1st Troop, “B” Squadron, 13th/18th Royal Hussars

The war started for “A” Company just after midnight on June 6, 1944. It was a very rough start. The company was to lead the assault on the 9th Battalion’s first objective—the Merville Battery. The battery was a threat to the forces scheduled to land at Sword Beach that morning. Captain Robert Gordon-Brown, Lt. Hugh Pond, and Lt. Hugh Smythe led 64 volunteers in three Horsa gliders scheduled to land directly on the battery minutes before the rest of the battalion assaulted through the barbed wire and minefields. Due to the battalion’s widely scattered drop, only a quarter of the battalion-- supported by a single Vickers machinegun -- made the assault. Capt. Gordon-Brown’s glider landed several miles east of the battery and did not join the assault. Lt. Smythe’s glider suffered a broken towrope and landed at an RAF base in England. “A” Company’s commander, Major Allen Parry, led the main assault force of 50 men from “A” and “C” companies. They managed to seize and disable the battery’s guns despite heavy resistance and casualties. Among the casualties was Major Parry. Severely wounded, he relinquished command of the company to the senior officer present—Lt. Pond.

Dawn on D-Day found “A” Company widely scattered across the northern half of the 6th Airborne Divisional area. A platoon size force led by Lt. Pond was with main body of the 9th Battalion at Amfreville awaiting the link up with Lord Lovat’s Commandos. Lt. Smythe’s

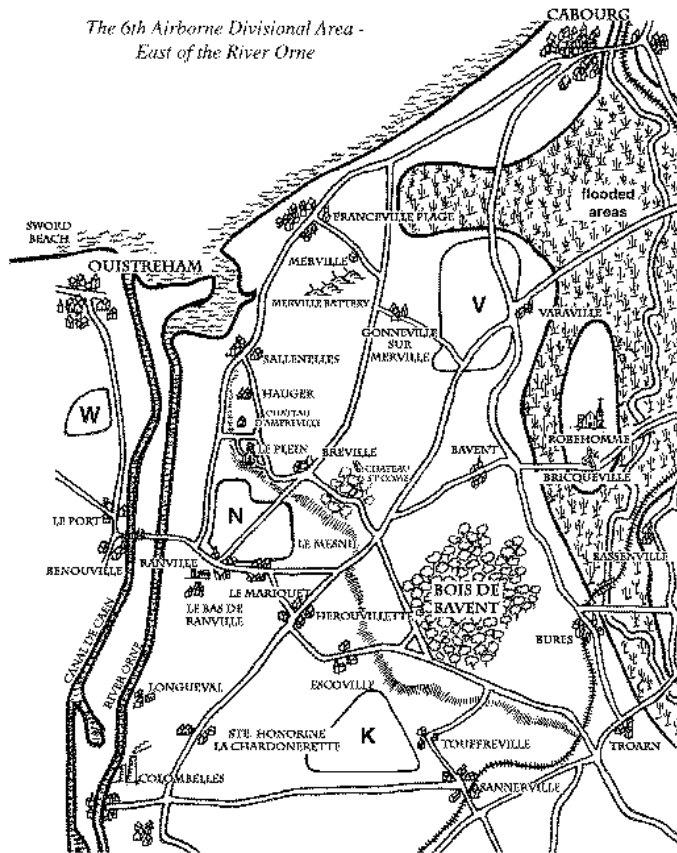


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platoon was trying to catch a ride with the 6th Airlanding Brigade scheduled to arrive on LZ “N” about 2100 hours on D-Day. Captain Gordon-Brown’s platoon landed in the flooded marshes near Varaville. He led his platoon towards the 3rd Brigade headquarters at the Les Mesnil crossroads. Many “A” Company paratroopers landed in the flooded marshes near the River Dives and drowned. One party including Lt. Douglas Catlin, Lt. George Peters, Pvt Emile Corteil and his paralog Glenn were killed by Allied bombers making pre-invasion bombardments.

*The 6th Airborne Divisional Area -
East of the River Orne*



On the afternoon of D-Day, Lord Lovat’s commandos successfully linked up with the 9th Battalion paratroopers at Amfreville. Lt. Smythe’s platoon arrived the evening of D-Day with the 6th Airlanding Brigade and joined Captain Gordon-Brown’s force at the Les Mesnil crossroads. The two halves of “A” Company spent June 7th fighting off German attacks in their respective areas. At 2130 hours, Lt. Col. Otway was formally relieved at Amfreville by the Commandos and received orders to immediately move to Chateau St. Côme and hold it at all costs. There was a large gap between Breville and Les Mesnil that would allow a German attack towards the Orne River bridges. The 9th Battalion was tasked with plugging the gap. The battalion headed for Chateau St. Côme at 2330 hours with Lt. Pond and “A” Company leading the column.

The 9th Battalion column arrived at the chateau area at 0130 hours on June 8th. The Paras decided to defend a wooded

area south of the chateau called the Bois des Monts. The woods offered better cover and the chateau was a likely target for German bombardments. The Paras sent regular patrols through the chateau grounds to prevent the Germans from occupying the buildings. At dawn the military significance of the position became obvious. From the southwest corner of the woods, the Paras had an unobstructed view all the way to the Orne River bridges. If the Germans occupied the woods they would be able to direct artillery towards the bridges and use the woods as cover to launch a counter attack towards the bridges and into the left flank of the invasion beaches. Lt. Col. Otway placed “A” Company on the north side of the woods facing the chateau grounds, “B” Company on the west side of the woods facing Breville, and “C” Company on the south side of the woods forming the battalion’s reserve. The battalion also received three Vickers machineguns and three 3” mortars enabling the formation of a machinegun platoon and mortar platoon under Sergeants McGeever and Hennessey respectively.



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Throughout June 8th and 9th, the Paras faced probing attacks in platoon strength, increasing artillery fire, and constant harassment from snipers as the Germans reacted to the Paras presence in the woods. On June 9th Captain Gordon-Brown brought the elements of “A” Company he had collected at Les Mesnil crossroads to the Bois des Monts and assumed command of the company. By evening the battalion numbered about 270 men—about half strength but the strongest it had been since its arrival in Normandy.

On June 10th the Germans launched three attacks on the 9th Battalion positions that steadily increased in intensity over the course of the day. Between attacks artillery bombardments and snipers created a steady flow of casualties. A second attack included two Mk IV tanks. The last attack at 1900 hours was beaten back by naval gunfire support called within 500 yards of the Paras’ position. The final stages of the battle included hand-to-hand fighting. Late in the day, Lt. Col. Otway learned that the next day the 5th Black Watch Regiment of the 51st Highland Division would launch an attack from his position in the woods to take Breville. In support of their attack, the 9th Battalion’s “C” Company was ordered to occupy the Chateau St. Côme to protect the Highlanders flank during the attack. Lt. Col. Otway also ordered Lt. Pond to lead an “A” Company patrol towards Breville since the Highlanders would not have time to make a reconnaissance before their attack.



Chateau St. Côme Grounds



13/18th Hussars tanks destroyed at Bois des Monts.

At 0430 hours on June 11th, HQ and “D” Companies from the 5th Black Watch relieved the 9th Battalion’s “C” Company at the chateau. The Paras watched the assault by “A”, “B”, and “C” Companies of the Black Watch on Breville. The Highlanders were stopped well short of their objective suffering over 300 casualties. The survivors fell back to the Paras’ position in the woods where the 9th Battalion’s officers and NCOs rallied the Highlanders. The survivors were sent to the chateau to establish a defensive position. Later in the day the 5th Black Watch placed several 6 lb. AT guns in the Bois des Monts and were reinforced by an HMG platoon from “C” Company of the 1/7 Middlesex Battalion.

On the morning of June 12th the 9th Battalion’s sea borne contingent arrived and brought much needed ammunition, medical supplies, food, and water. The re-supply came in the nick of time. At noon the heaviest bombardment to date started falling on the chateau and woods. The bombardment was soon followed by a heavy attack supported by six tanks or assault guns on the 5th Black Watch positions at the chateau. As the Highlanders started to waver and fall back,



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several Para officers including Lt. Smythe moved into the position to steady the troops and provide ammunition. As the Highlander AT gun crews were killed or wounded, the guns were manned by Paras who successfully drove off the German tanks. The fighting was so intense that the 3rd Para Brigade commander, Brigadier Hill personally organized and lead a relief force of 30 soldiers from the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion and 20 sappers from the 3rd Para Squadron, Royal Engineers into the Bois des Monts. The Paras also finally received armor support from three troops of “B” Squadron, 13/18th Royal Hussars. German AT guns quickly destroyed the first three tanks. The remaining tanks beat a hasty retreat. The German attack was finally halted at 2000 hours by naval gunfire support from the *HMS Arethusa* fired within 100 yards of the Paras’ position. During the attack Lt. Pond and Sgt. McGeever were wounded.

On the morning of June 13th the 9th Battalion was relieved in the Bois des Monts by the 2nd Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. The 9th Battalion had suffered over 150 casualties during their five days in the Bois des Monts and left with a fighting strength of 126 men. The battalion moved to the Les Mesnil area and stayed in combat until August.



9th Battalion graves at Bois des Monts

Sources:

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