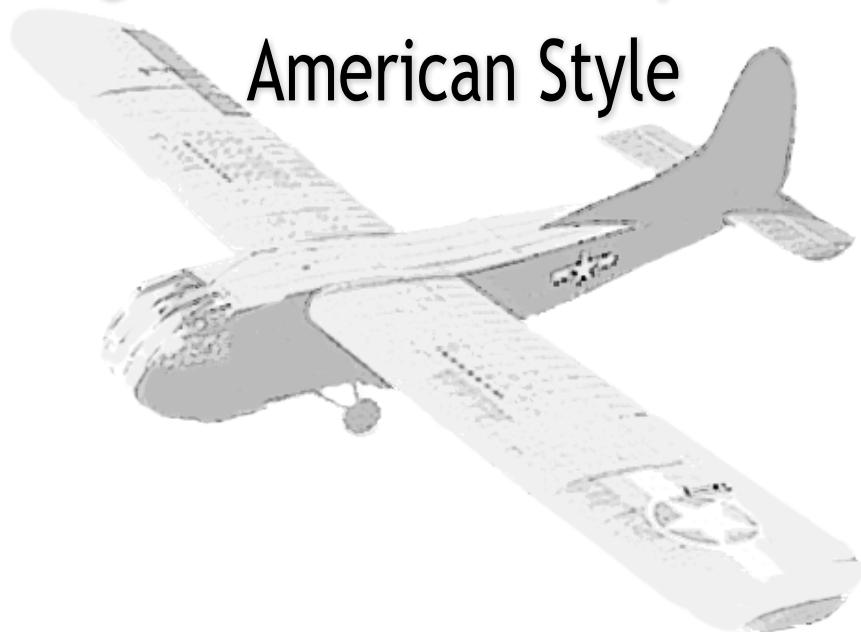


# Langham's Wartime Experiences American Style



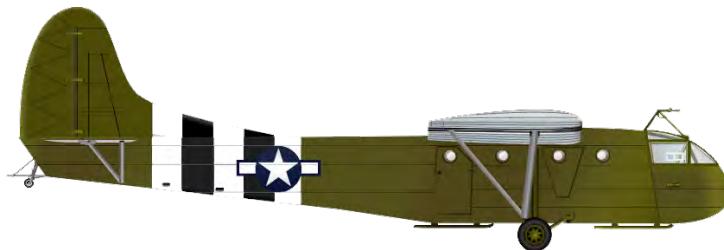
Julian Jenkins

Julian Jenkins was born near Swansea in December 1917 and grew up on a sixty-five acre small holding. At sixteen he left Wales to join the Coventry Gauge and Tool Company attending the local college in the evening gaining an HNC in Mechanical Engineering.

Julian joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve in 1938 and trained as a wireless operator. He was called up full-time in July 1939 and after further training was posted to 113 Squadron in Heliopolis as a wireless operator on Blenheims. In 1941, whilst flying in the Western Desert, his left foot was hit by a shell splinter he subsequently lost his leg to above the knee.

During a period of rehabilitation he met his future wife Ruth, whom he married in 1944. In 1945 he undertook a course at the London School of Economics and pursued a career in personnel management. One of his early roles was as Rehabilitation and Welfare Officer at the Queen Victoria Hospital East Grinstead finding resettlement opportunities for badly burned air crew treated by Sir Archibald McIndoe.

Living in Rutland in the year 2000, Julian was part of the team researching village history for the Langham 2000 exhibition. His chosen research topic was the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne.



MAY THE MEMORY OF THE  
COMRADESHIP SOWN IN THE  
SKIES OF EUROPE FOREVER  
BE AS GREEN AS THE FIELDS  
OF COTTESMORE

Words on a plaque at Cottesmore  
commemorate the period of U.S occupation

**T**his is the story of the 1943-4 ‘invasion’ of Langham and its environs by the American 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division: that short visit of our American allies to Britain’s shores and their contribution toward winning the 1939-45 World War.

An airborne division is made up of highly trained, fighting sky-commandos, whose purpose is to provide a sharp shock at the start of an invasion or battle by dropping behind the enemy lines to seize vital airports, bridges and other tactical features in advance of its army, before the enemy can respond effectively. Its continuing objectives would be to disrupt lines of communication, supplies of ammunition and equipment, intended for enemy defence. In modern warfare this element of surprise often reduces the operational time and creates a bridgehead for further actions.

These were the aims of the American 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, wherever they were required to operate. However, it must be said that although the 82<sup>nd</sup> was an ‘airborne’ division many of its actions were sea-borne and land commando operations. Therefore its combat training had to be comprehensive and the fitness, toughness and sustainability had to be of a high order.

For the record, the 82<sup>nd</sup> was proud of its history. It was the first American Airborne Division to participate in the war overseas; the first to see combat; captured the most prisoners (200,000); made the most airborne invasions (4); had the most combat hours (371); made the first bridgehead in Europe (Sicily); and liberated the first town (in Normandy, Ste Mère Eglise).

## ***82<sup>nd</sup> Organisation***

The Division was made up of different units or companies, to make a cohesive whole: airborne infantry; artillery; engineers; medics; parachute riggers and cooks. Although the latter specialists did not have as much preliminary combat training as the infantry and artillery, they still hurtled down on the enemy with the best of them.

Until a bridgehead had been established everybody fought, or cared for, side by side with the infantry. In one necessary action the para-cooks, faced with advancing enemy pressure, took up their rifles with fixed bayonets and, shouting their company’s battle cry, “Whoa Mohammed” at the top of their voices, charged the enemy and drove them back, holding their ground until support arrived.

## ***Parachute Maintenance Company (Riggers)***

The parachute riggers were an essential component of the 82<sup>nd</sup>. Their prime duties were to pack, repair and maintain all of the parachutes used in the Division. This meant that riggers jumped on every operation, with the infantry and gunners, most importantly to collect used parachutes at the earliest moment possible after the ‘drop’ and store them for future use.

All participants in the drop were responsible for their own chutes but when oppressed it was more important for them to establish their bridgehead than to have to think of packing and storing their own parachutes; hence the necessity to have riggers in attendance. The system with riggers, as with all airborne paratroopers, was to withdraw, unless otherwise ordered, as soon as their army support arrived and their targets had been achieved. This enabled these special ‘shock’ troopers to be used in further operations elsewhere.

Finally, another important function for the riggers was to train paratroopers in all the techniques of parachuting. This was necessary especially when new replacements were drafted in after a battle.

### ***The American Arrival at RAF Cottesmore***

At the beginning of 1943, RAF Cottesmore was chosen as a storage base for Airspeed Horsa gliders. In the main, bomber airfields were considered to be the best storage sites because of their hangar space. As the gliders, with their eighty-eight foot wing span, took up a good deal of room, Cottesmore was a natural choice for housing an airborne division. Therefore thirty-two gliders were delivered by air to the airfield by tug, which was normally an Armstrong Whitley bomber or an Albemarle.

During the autumn plans were made for the Troop Carrier Command of the US 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force to occupy the airfield and the various units of command were soon established in the Cottesmore - Grantham area. The Americans were not long in settling down in their new home. Within a short time the RAF NAAFI became the American Post Exchange (PX), their equivalent. They got on well with the RAF personnel on the station and soon made friends with civilians in surrounding towns and villages. When Christmas arrived it was celebrated with the customary American enthusiasm. Groups of crippled children from London were invited to the station and were given special parties, with the inevitable candy being handed out. The children from war torn, bombed, London loved it.

Busloads of suitable girls from Leicester and Nottingham were invited to dances and parties, and a good time was had by all.

In February 1944, the American 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division arrived at Cottesmore from Scotland, via Ballymoney, Ireland. It had previously 'jumped' in Sicily and Italy, where the 82<sup>nd</sup> had acquitted itself well. Tented camps were set up in the surrounding area, one being at Ashwell camp (now housing HM Prison Ashwell).

### ***Off-duty Activities***

Immediately the 82<sup>nd</sup> arrived, their first off-duty hours were spent purchasing bicycles in Oakham. The dealers sold out every week, including replacement stocks which had to be drawn from suppliers all over the country.

Eventually most paratroopers possessed bicycles and through the winter snow they cycled to the surrounding towns of their choice, attending dances at Oakham and visiting favourite pubs. One haunt of the 'Yanks' was the Black Horse pub at Langham where the landlady's daughter, Miss Pat Wolfe, made them welcome. Almost any night, the soft glow of bicycle lamps could be traced from Ashwell camp to the village of Langham. There the lights would separate, some turning in at the Wheatsheaf pub, some at the Noel Arms and others continuing around the corner to the Black Horse. It was here amid the laughter, smoke laden atmosphere and tinkling of beer glasses, that so many pleasant darts matches were enjoyed by soldier and civilian alike.

Pat Wolfe remembers them well, and has on occasions been visited by 'old hands' from the States, who returned after the war, with their wives and families, for a nostalgic look at the area.

To many of the paratroopers, Ashwell camp was the finest camp they saw overseas, and the liberty enjoyed whilst there was unsurpassed in any land. The camp had steam

heated showers, electricity and running water, which had not been previously available. But life did not pass without the odd incident. On a notable Halloween night, October 1944, at Ashwell at 9.30pm, a mighty blast broke windows and sent men diving for cover. After the smoke cleared, it was found that a nearby English pillbox had been destroyed by pranksters using explosives. The whole camp had to suffer for the pranks of a few villains, but eventually the guilty confessed, and paid for their high spirits by doing some extra duties. These lads had probably read about our own Guy Fawkes, who unfortunately paid for his misdeeds with his life!!

### ***Combat Training***

One cold morning jump training began. Such training was an on-going thing. The Division already had combat experience, as referred to earlier, but even these paratroopers needed to be kept up to scratch in their training techniques. This training was the first to be carried out by the 82<sup>nd</sup> in England. From that time onward, jumping at Cottesmore was a regular thing. The paratroopers had daily jump training, dropping on 'Big Hubbards' and 'Rylands' fields, Burley Road, Langham; the villagers had much experience of incidents and accidents involving paras landing in hedges and trees. The jumps were made from Douglas Dakotas, (the DC-3 or C47, commonly known as Daks), mainly because they offered the best exit. The first twenty-two aircraft arrived in February 1944, from Sicily; and these were followed soon after by fifty others. These aircraft came from the Italian war zone in preparation for the offensive against Germany.

Accidents will happen during these training periods, and one in particular happened between the Ashwell camp and Langham.

It started when an unfortunate jumper plunged to his death on the jump field at Langham. Indeed - many people, including men from the camp, witnessed the chute's failure to open and went over to view the body. Evidently it left a strong impression, for only a few days passed before his ghost was sighted by moonlight along the lonely hedgerows. He stood, so the many that saw him said, wavering, white, wearing his blood-spattered harness and holding his gore-filled helmet at his side. This was enough to make the superstitious carry Colt forty-five revolvers on their hips and go to Langham by another route. Can you imagine it? Just like the Wild West on a Hollywood "B" film.

But this training was leading to sterner stuff. These pre-invasion practice missions culminated in an exercise Operation Eagle on the evening of the 11<sup>th</sup> May 1944. A small number of aircraft from each group of Troop Carrier Command carried paratroopers to a drop zone near Devizes. They were ordered to assemble over March in Cambridgeshire before proceeding to their destination. The return trip required this process to be repeated and as the Dakotas circled over March, disaster struck. Two of the aircraft collided and crashed, killing all on board. Among the dead were the Group Commander and another pilot; and the Chaplain, who had only gone along for the ride.

### ***Invasion, D-Day, 6th June 1944, Operation Overlord***

During the evening of 5<sup>th</sup> June, 1,256 paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division filed across the airfield and boarded seventy-two Dakota transport planes; their destination was to drop near Ste Mere Eglise, Normandy.

The aircraft began to take off at 10pm. It was part of the biggest invasion force ever assembled. The operation went well. The Division dropped all of its paratroopers, with the exception of two who were wounded en route.

The group of planes arrived back at Cottesmore at 4am on 6<sup>th</sup> June, having kept excellent formation all the way. The following day, 7<sup>th</sup> June (D+1) a resupply mission called 'Freeport' was mounted to support the embattled troops, and 208 aircraft dropped supplies and ammunition over the designated drop zone. While forming up on the ground at Cottesmore, two aircraft ran into each other in the dark and one of the pilots was killed. Despite this tragedy, the mission went ahead and was successfully carried out.

### ***British Parachutists***

The unit was also programmed to drop elements of the British 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, but Operation Wild Oats was cancelled; the Germans had placed 88mm guns on the drop zone near Caen.

This British 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne section had also helped the 82<sup>nd</sup> to settle in at Cottesmore, and now they were about to drop on the left flank of Overlord beachhead, whilst the 82<sup>nd</sup> American dropped on the right.

The main body of the British Airborne Division had dropped on 6<sup>th</sup> June, and this first-hand recollection of the event by Lt. Richard Todd (actor, who subsequently starred in the film 'The Longest Day', depicting this very scene):

*"We were flying in four-engine Stirlings. A short time before the drop we were warned to line up. The old green light came on and out we went, with me in the lead. Incidentally, the exit hole in the bottom of the Sterling was very big, with enough room for two men to straddle it, and on the word 'go' we would pull our legs together and drop through the hole. The man behind me had to hang on to me because the aircraft was jinking a bit. I could easily have fallen out over the sea because I hadn't a hand to hold on with, as I had bundles attached to each of my legs, on long leads. One bundle was full of a rubber dinghy and the other had picks and shovels for digging in. Out I went. We dropped from 400 feet, which didn't give much time in the air, about seven seconds. In the flurry of all this, I let the bundle on my right side slip, instead of letting it out hand over hand. That gave me a very nasty burn all down my right hand."*

(The British had devised a technique in which a kitbag was attached to each man's leg by a length of rope, up to seventy feet long. After jumping from the aircraft, the kitbag was released to dangle below the man, accelerating his descent.

When it touched the ground the weight came off and the parachutist slowed down to hit the ground himself at normal speed. This expedient was arrived at after numerous instances of supply containers being blown off course and behind the enemy lines; there was no way of controlling where the containers would land).

*"Then I thumped down. We got in, with an element of surprise. A certain amount of light flak went up and I could see tracers floating up, the big stuff hadn't really started. As I was getting out of my chute on the ground, looking up at the other aircraft, they started getting shot down; by that time the ground defences had wakened up to what was happening and the ack-ack had got into action. The aircraft coming over then were getting it all and it was just my luck that I went out first."*

Back to the 82<sup>nd</sup> American Airborne, who dropped on the right flank of Utah beach. It should be noted that the beaches of significance during Operation Overlord were all given a code name referring to an American State.

The following is an account of a rigger, about to jump:

*All jumping riggers are sent to load equipment bundles on the planes and to paint fluorescent strips (that can be seen in the dark) on the bundles. We've got an hour to put on all combat equipment, draw our parachutes and assemble for the major to make a short speech. When all is ready, we go to the planes, climb aboard and the transport thunders off. The planes circle, getting into formation and our officer gives us our first knowledge of the objective. Each man is given a map of the terrain".*

*"Within fifty minutes of the drop zone, we are ordered to put on our parachutes. I get my reserve chute and stand to let my mate buckle me up. It is a difficult job, the plane is swaying and bumping and the harness is tight. Everyone is ready. We are told to stand and hook up. We see the first tracers spiralling slowly upward, seeming to bore into the plane. We are high, too high for the jump. The formation is travelling over water, parallel to the shore. It turns suddenly and thunders across the coast. Our plane dives, trying to lose altitude. The night is streaked by tracers; a blue searchlight shines through the open door, cutting each man out of the darkness. The plane levels off with a jerk, almost upsetting us. The green light comes on and the cable leaps as the men begin to leave the plane. I step off into space; the screaming wind and noise of the engines strike me. My body plummets under the tail with explosive speed; a terrific opening shock."*

Digressing for a moment, it is inevitable that a drop can spread over a large area of enemy country. There are several reasons for this, that are worth a thought: if a strong wind is blowing over the Dropping Zone (DZ) the chutes can be scattered far off target; if the signal to go is given too early or too late; or the transport plane is flying at the wrong altitude, the landing will not be spot-on; sometimes the flak at the DZ is so great that the pilot will deviate slightly to a quieter spot (he has been known to panic!). Whatever the cause, not all dispatches drop on the target. When that happens, each paratrooper has to line up with his company at the DZ, which can present a difficulty in the dark, with enemy forces around the area. How does he do it?

When we were children we used to be able to buy little metal, clicking toys known as 'crickets' because when pressed between thumb and finger they made a clicking noise. Little did we know that they would later be employed in the war effort. It was on landing after the drop, that strayed paratroops found each other in the darkness by clicking the toy crickets they had been issued with before take-off. They then coalesced into larger groups by the time-honoured method of 'marching on the guns', i.e. heading toward the sound of gun fire.

## ***Gliders***

Before going further with this narrative, the use of gliders should be introduced. Immediately after paratroops have been dropped they are often followed by gliders carrying infantry soldiers, engineers and others, in support of the paratroops.

In 1931, a young woman in Britain, in collaboration with two RAF officers, designed a towed glider capable of carrying cargo. The young woman was Barbara Cartland and the glider, specially built for the project, was air towed from RAF Manston to Reading on the 20<sup>th</sup> June 1931, where it landed to deliver mail.

Later that year the glider (the Barbara Cartland), carrying a passenger, raced an express train from London to Blackpool, winning easily. While a number of nations were soon to see such flights as the opening of a new epoch in air travel, the air-towing of gliders was banned in Britain as being too dangerous.

Churchill's order in 1940, to raise a force of 5,000 British Airborne troops, in which powerful parachute and glider-borne men would be used, was what began it all. The techniques of delivering troops on to the battlefield in towed gliders or dropping by parachute were now developed with vigour.

The Air Ministry and War Office together drew up specifications for four types of military gliders, namely: they should be made of wood because the towed glider must be as light as possible, and they should be large enough to carry twenty-five men, artillery equipment and ammunition. It was recognised that the glider was expendable as, once it had landed, it would be of no further use. The Horsa was eventually chosen as one of the most suitable, and an order for 400 was made in February 1941.

## Selection of Glider Pilots

It was difficult to choose the source from which to select potential glider pilots. Firstly, the RAF said it was their job. The towing of a large craft required substantial training and experience, and could only be done by bomber pilots. They did not consider that the Army could train, in the time available, all of those personnel needed. The Army had been trained as fighting men etc. The Army replied that once the glider had landed, the pilot, if he were an airman, would be useless. What they wanted was someone capable of joining in the fighting in a skilled, organised way. Eventually it was decided that the towing-plane pilot should be an efficient bomber pilot, skilled in navigation and all-weather control of powered flying. The glider pilot, however, could be specially selected from any volunteer servicemen. (New RAF pilots were initially chosen but after a short while they applied to return to their normal RAF duties because glider piloting was too restricted). Each glider was to carry a second trained pilot.

## ***Training of Glider Pilots***

Suitable army volunteers were selected and were given a twelve weeks' pre-glider training course, using the following programme: eighty hours' day plus eight hours' night-flying, on light aircraft, doing dual and solo flying, including: dual cross-country flying; aerobatics and ground subjects. This was followed by a glider training course of four weeks: made up of general dual flying practice; towing; formation flying; dive approaches and timed approaches. This included live loads. These two periods, totalling sixteen weeks, were deemed to be sufficient for a glider pilot.

After completion of training the successful candidates were given the rank of sergeant and, after a further six months of experience, a selected number were made up to staff sergeant. The idea of integrating the functions of pilot and combat soldier proved successful at the battle of Arnhem; the 82<sup>nd</sup> was to take bridges over the Maas, north of Grave and the Waal at Nijmegen, during daylight. A sergeant glider pilot recounted his experience:

*"When we got down, I acted as loader of the six pounder anti-tank gun, which was pumping shells into a pillbox strong point on the northern end of the bridge. When that was put out of action, I spent the remainder of that first night manning a bren gun."*

## ***Towing Aircraft***

The aircraft chosen as best suited to act as towing tug in these operations was the Dakota. It had been used effectively as a paratroop carrier because it had suitable exit doors and accommodation for men and equipment; and, as a tug, it was well able to pull a fully loaded glider with a suitably short take-off. There was a line of communication between the tug and the glider.

Just as it was imperative to navigate the paratroop transport over the chosen DZ at the correct altitude, the same attention needed to be given to towing a glider, allowing for wind and drift at the target. Whilst the towing line could be unhooked at both the tug and the glider, the general rule was that the towing rope should be detached by the glider before it was dropped from the tug. An incident which occurred in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, when it was invading Sicily, caused a near disaster and explains that rule. The tow was cast off far too early by the tug whilst over the sea, when there was no hope at that distance from land, of reaching the target.

The pilot of the glider had no engine power to manoeuvre his machine and with the glider's weight in the air his range was limited. A passenger in the glider was the commanding Officer of the battalion leading the attack and he was not too pleased when he had to swim ashore.

## ***D-Day, 6th June 1944***

On D-Day the proper use of airborne forces, where the 82<sup>nd</sup> was to be involved, had to show their ability to vault the formidable defences of Germany's West Wall to prepare the way for the sea-borne forces. Three hundred and fourteen Horsas and thirty Hamilcars (another type of large, heavy-duty glider favoured by the Americans) were used during the night preceding the sea-borne landings, in three waves. Another wave was used during the next evening. The bridges they attacked had to be captured and held. Weather conditions are never ideal during such operations, and this proved to be the case on these nights.

The original intention had been to land the main glider force during the night of 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> June, but the weather postponed the invasion for twenty-four hours. Conditions were little better the following day, with thick, low cloud, but the vast assemblage was set in motion. So many individual happenings were experienced that day that it may be best to confine reporting to one operation.

The capture of the two bridges in the sector was vital in that they carried the only road linking the east side of the river with the west, where the main assault force was to land. It was decided that only gliders could achieve the necessary element of surprise to bring it off.

The operation required that the three gliders, which were to attack the river bridges, would have to be released at 6,000 feet and lose height as rapidly as possible. Unhooking at this altitude was necessary to deceive the Germans into thinking the aircraft were taking part in a bombing raid. In fact, once the gliders had cast off, their tugs were to go on to bomb Caen. The pilots heading for the river bridges therefore applied full flaps from the moment they were in free flight. This made navigation extremely difficult. A rapid 45° descent in darkness, dropping at a rate of 2,000 feet per minute and navigating on various courses in the process, required an immense amount of skill and nerve.

The pilot of the glider last in the line astern sequence said he applied full flaps after reducing speed but was unable to get his speed below ninety knots, even with the joystick fully back.

The weight of the personnel appeared to be greater than had been allowed for; more than their quota of grenades and ammunition perhaps, so the pilot shouted to the officer in charge of his passengers to send two men from the front of the glider to the back. This was done promptly, correcting the glider's trim.

Nothing had yet been seen of the ground, so they continued for ninety seconds and then changed course for a further two minutes, followed by the final run in. His second pilot had a light strapped to his hand to read the altimeter, map and stop watch without interfering with his pilot's night vision which, in the next few minutes, was going to be of vital importance for all of them. Suddenly, at a height of 1,200 feet, the canal and river were seen shining like silver, with the two bridges instantly recognisable from the elaborate sand-table model of the area which they had studied during training.

The pilot raised flaps for a moment to slow their headlong descent and to ensure that he would be left with sufficient height.

There was no room for error now; if he overshot they would all be crushed by the weight as the glider hit the embankment at the end of his landing run. If he undershot he would hit the line of trees over which he had to scrape in order to get into his small field. He deployed the arrester parachute and rumbled to a stop a few minutes after midnight in exactly the correct spot. The second glider landed in the field just behind the first. The third glider had landed at a bridge seven miles away. It had been towed to the wrong cast-off point but by a remarkable piece of airmanship the glider was landed safely in the dark. Having captured the bridge, the glider party fought their way back to the correct one and re-joined their friends there, who found that both of the bridges they were scheduled to take were not heavily guarded and, what was more to their satisfaction, the bridges had not been prepared for destruction. The Germans were quickly dispatched.

The main body of 82<sup>nd</sup> paras was encountering high winds and much flak, and many of its troops were scattered miles from the objective. Their task was to land in a broad triangle inland from the 'Utah' beach where the US 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division would come ashore at daybreak, secure the four causeways leading up from the beach, and seize and hold road junctions and river bridges to prevent German reinforcements from interfering with the amphibious assault. That they succeeded was due more to individual acts of guts, determination and initiative than to anything else. Only part of the operation went to plan. One battalion landed on its correct DZ, just outside Ste Mère Eglise, and promptly captured the town. A few of the paratroops dropped into the town square, thereby awakening the defenders to this attack; they were machine-gunned and eliminated. This scene was watched by one paratrooper who was hung-up by his chute to the church steeple. He expected to be shot any moment but was still there to be cut down when his fellow troopers arrived.

In preparation for the glider troops to arrive, the droppers found the fields full of stakes, driven in the ground, capped with mines and linked together to cause further destruction. As quickly as possible 'Rommel's asparagus', as it was called, was cleared but not before the first wave of gliders came in.

Much of the equipment and vehicles were recovered without too much damage, and the casualties were relatively few. The second wave was luckier and landed almost without incident. Unfortunately the Second in Command of the troops was killed. Next morning, D+1, the third wave of gliders brought in the remaining men of the Glider Infantry Regiments almost without loss.

## D+2

As further airborne operations had been planned, it was intended that all the glider pilots taking part in the invasion should immediately be withdrawn to England, and this was carried out the following day. Thirty-four glider pilots had lost their lives, and more were injured.

This ended the airborne part of D-Day, but the 82<sup>nd</sup> remained in the line until 8<sup>th</sup> July 1944, during which time they lost 4,000 casualties. They then returned to England for a well-earned rest and replenishment of trained men.

The unexpected speed of the final victory in Normandy took the Allies off balance and soon the supply lines were outstripped. This slowed down, and eventually halted, the advance until ports could be captured (particularly Antwerp) so that supplies and sufficient trucks to transport them could once again be got moving.

It was in this atmosphere that Operation Market Garden was conceived: the audacious and at the same time the most ill-fated of all Allied airborne operations.

General Montgomery urged that the time was ripe for a rapid thrust to be made through Belgium and Holland and around the right flank of the Siegfried Line, and he decided to make use of the massive airborne force to pave the way for him.

The airborne divisions were growing impatient with the many cancellations of operations, caused mainly by the already speedy progress of the land forces which always seemed to overrun the proposed landing zones planned, and they eagerly anticipated the operation. The drops would involve three airborne divisions, one of which was the American 82<sup>nd</sup> which was to take the bridges over the Maas, north of Grave, and the Waal at Nijmegen.

The operation would take place during daylight because insufficient aircraft were available to carry the entire force involved in one lift. It would be necessary for three lifts to be made, over three consecutive days. The risk inherent in this was primarily that the second and third lifts would not have the benefit of surprise.

The aircraft to tow the gliders were again to be provided by the RAF squadrons which had been used in Overlord.

Many people of Langham remembered vividly the Sunday morning of 17<sup>th</sup> September 1944, when 'Operation Market Garden' was launched. Just before ten in the morning, the airfield reverberated with sound as the aircraft started their engines, at a given signal from the control tower the armada of planes began to roll down the runway in close order, and made an impressive formation take-off. The first batch circled the airfield while waiting for a second wave to get airborne. The sky seemed to be full of aircraft, creating an awesome spectacle.

In all, ninety Dakotas took off from RAF Cottesmore, carrying 1,362 paratroops of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. Among those on board were the Deputy Leader of the 82<sup>nd</sup>, Brigadier General James Gavin, and the well-known American war correspondent Ed. Morrow. Apart from the parachute infantry, the planes carried 200 parapack bundles and 36,850lbs. of equipment.

The flight was without mishap. On the next day eighty-two aircraft took off, each towing a Waco Hadrian glider. It was a resupply, carrying 384 troops, thirty-eight Jeeps with five 75mm Howitzers and 43,958lbs. of equipment, to the hard pressed forces battling it out behind enemy lines.

The Waco glider (Hadrian was the name given by the British) was of American manufacture and came over to Britain in crates. It was mainly of metal construction and was originally intended to carry equipment rather than troops. This specification was changed to suit future requirements. It was well favoured by American towing pilots.

That was the last operational fighting assault from Cottesmore. From then until the end of hostilities, all airborne operations would fly from airfields in Holland.

### ***Leaving RAF Cottesmore***

At the end of 1944 Ashwell camp was beginning to close. Two weeks before Christmas the advance detail of riggers flew across the English Channel to prepare their new camp, while the majority of men left behind worked night and day packing up at Ashwell. Each rigger packed eighty-five parachutes a day, in preparation for airborne activities soon to be carried out in Europe. When all of the packing was completed, the equipment was loaded on to the train in Oakham. It was bitterly cold and snowy loading 100 cars a day. Then that was done, and the last remains of the Division left Ashwell forever. The 82<sup>nd</sup> American Airborne Division had gone.

This chronicle has emphasised the part played by the 82<sup>nd</sup> American Airborne Division. Side by side with them, at RAF Cottesmore and through Europe, our own British 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division was equally prominent and took the brunt of the airborne commando battles in Holland leading up to, and at, Arnhem.

In Langham church there is a plaque which expresses our own men's contribution to this aspect of the War - Photograph below.



## **Writer's Note**

I was in Crete, in the hills above Suda Bay, on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1941. I was in the RAF and was about to be taken off by a Short Sunderland flying boat during a lull in the attendance of German fighter planes. I did not know then that in a few days the sky would be full of enemy paratroops on their way to take the island by force. Ever since then I have been fascinated by airborne actions, although I have never seen one.

## **Acknowledgements**

For the detail of information in this booklet I have relied on the following books. With them I have been able to get a picture of the actions and environmental activities surrounding the people and aircraft involved in this Langham story.

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