

D+6: ‘Utrunque Paratus’

The Battle of Bréville, Monday 12th June 1944

A ‘Battlefront: WWII’ Scenario

By R. Mark Davies

‘A whole German battalion was concentrated behind Bréville and all indications pointed to the probability that they were going to attack at first light the next morning and drive through to the bridges. This had to be prevented at all costs. Bréville was held at that time by at least two companies of the enemy, plentifully supplied with light automatics, mortars and self-propelled guns. Standing on the high ground, it overlooked the bridges and was an ideal starting point for an attack. We had to get our attack in fast and time for reconnaissance was all too short.’

– Captain John Sim, Second-In-Command of ‘B’ Company, 12th (Yorkshire) Battalion, The Parachute Regiment

‘On June 12th there was the awful Battle of Bréville. The Germans threw in everything they could, with very fierce mortar attacks and a strong attack went in from 5 Para Brigade. The village was soon alight from end to end and it really was like hell.’

– Captain ‘Bob’ Parsons, 150th (South Nottinghamshire Hussars Yeomanry) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery

‘I have become a casualty, but I can rely upon you not to take one step back. You are making history.’

– Brigadier, the Lord Lovat, Commanding 1st Special Service Brigade

Scenario Overview

Following the landings east of the Orne by the British-Canadian 6th Airborne Division on D-Day, the pressure from the Germans has steadily increased. Initial attacks from the south by 21st Panzer Division have been beaten off, however, the 857th Grenadier Regiment (of the 346th Infantry Division) is now firmly emplaced on the Bréville Heights, from where it is directing artillery fire onto the resupply LZs and the Orne Bridges.

In addition, strong attacks have been launched from this area, with infantry and assault guns penetrating as far as Amfréville, and Ranville in the centre of the division's bridgehead. A daylight counter-attack by 5th Battalion, The Black Watch (51st (Highland) Division) went in on D+5 (11th June), but was quickly broken up by accurate mortar and artillery fire. This was soon followed by more German attacks from the direction of Bréville, with control of the Château St. Côme Haras being lost to the Germans.

General Gale, commanding the 6th Airborne Division, feels that the German position at Bréville poses an unacceptable threat to the security of the bridgehead and must be eliminated as soon as possible. Another attack, supported by tanks and large amounts of artillery, is therefore to be put in by Hugh Kindersley's 5th Parachute Brigade on the night of D+6 (12th June).

Historical Bréville

Lieutenant-Colonel Johnson had very little time to formulate a plan, but nevertheless, a creditable plan came together with remarkable speed: H-Hour would be 2200hrs (shortly before last light). The artillery of 51st (Highland) Division and 4th AGRA would commence firing ten minutes before H-Hour and would continue firing for ten minutes after H-Hour, thus hopefully keeping the enemy suppressed until the paras were right on top of them. While this barrage was going in, the tanks of the 13/18th Hussars would fire streams of tracer from their Browning MGs to indicate the axis of advance to the paras and one troop would advance on the right flank to knock out a German strongpoint on the Amfréville-Bréville road. 'C' Company of 12 Para would seize the Bréville crossroads. 'D' Company of the 12th Devons would move through 'C' Company and secure the northern end of the village. 'A' Company of 12 Para would move in to secure the south-eastern approaches to Bréville. 'B' Company would act as the force reserve and 22nd Independent Parachute Company would reinforce as soon as possible. The 1st Royal Ulster Rifles would then relieve the position in the early hours of the morning. Johnson had no doubts that this would be an extremely tough task – his battalion had already lost over one-third of its strength and he was planning to take on a well-supported, well-positioned, experienced enemy unit of roughly equal numbers to his own. He could only hope that the preparatory bombardment, coupled with the tank support and the paras' training and aggression could overcome these potentially fatal disadvantages.

The artillery commenced right on cue, but almost immediately, pre-registered defensive fire from German artillery and mortars and machine guns firing on fixed lines, swept the short stretch of open ground between the two villages. Direct defensive fire from Bréville was largely suppressed by the large volumes of British artillery fire, but 'C' Company lost all its remaining

officers to mortar fire almost immediately upon crossing the startline. High-explosive fire from Marder self-propelled guns was particularly damaging to the attackers. Undaunted, a sergeant took command of the company and pressed on to his objective, arriving there with only fifteen men.

Following behind, 'A' Company had an almost identical experience and suddenly found itself commanded by its CSM, who was himself killed shortly afterwards. 'D' Company of the Devons started taking casualties from artillery and mortar fire even before reaching the startline. Nevertheless, the company pressed on, clearing several houses, though with considerable loss.

Then tragedy struck. The assault force was already suffering casualties from British shells dropping short when one of these suddenly landed smack in the middle of a senior officers' conference. Among the dead were Lieutenant-Colonel Johnson (OC 12 Para) and Major Bampfylde (OC 'D' Company, 12th Devons) while Brigadier Kindersley (OC 5 Para Brigade) and Lord Lovat (OC 1 SS Brigade) were both severely wounded and Colonel Reggie Parker (2 i/c 5 Para Brigade) was lightly wounded. Despite his wound, Colonel Parker attempted to recover control of the situation – he was now not only OC 5 Para Brigade but was also the only officer left capable of taking command of 12 Para! Luckily, he had once been the CO of 12 Para and knew the majority of the men once more thrust under his command.

When the situation could not possibly get any worse, it did so. With Bréville now largely secured by the superhuman efforts of individual sergeants, corporals, lance-jacks and privates, Colonel Parker moved forward with Captain Ward (the battalion's attached artillery FOO) and 'B' Company to co-ordinate the defence of the newly-captured village. In typical Wehrmacht style, the enemy was already mortaring its recently vacated positions and was thought to be forming up for a counter-attack. Captain Ward called for a defensive fire (DF) mission from the 51st (Highland) Division's artillery group. What went wrong with the DF order is not clear, but rounds from British 25-pounders were soon whistling in once again onto Bréville itself and were exploding among the startled paras as the gunners recommenced their initial barrage! 12 Para and the Devons once again suffered terrible casualties, including most of the remaining officers; the commander of 'B' Company was mortally wounded and Captain Ward himself was killed outright. Thankfully, Ward's signaller still lived and was able to stop this 'friendly' bombardment.

To great relief, the feared German counter-attack did not materialise and the position was reinforced; first by the 13/18th Hussars and then by 22nd Independent Parachute Company. The position was eventually relieved by the 1st Royal Ulster Rifles during the morning and Bréville was finally secure.

Lieutenant-Colonel Johnson's plan had been successful, but at a terrible price. German casualties were numbered at 77 dead, while the assault force had suffered 162 men killed. Not one officer or warrant officer was left in 12 Para at the end of the battle – they were all dead or wounded, including Johnson himself. The battalion, which had jumped on D-Day with 550 men, was now reduced to a tenth of its strength only a week earlier and was now effectively a weak company. 'D' Company of the 12th Devons was reduced to the strength of a platoon and similarly had suffered a disproportionately high degree of officer casualties. 5th Parachute Brigade and 1st Special Service Brigade had also lost their commanding officers. Nevertheless, Bréville was an decisive victory, albeit a bitter one. The seizure of the Bréville Heights marked the end of German attacks against Ranville and the Orne bridges and thus saved the entire Allied position in Normandy. For this outstanding achievement, the Parachute Regiment was awarded the battle honour 'Bréville'.

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