

# THE LOST SOUL OF PEGASUS BRIDGE

by  
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It was described by the Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Air Force as 'one of the most outstanding flying achievements of the war'. Just after midnight on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944 three Horsa gliders, piloted by NCOs of the Glider Pilot Regiment and each containing 30 men of 'D' Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry and some Royal Engineers, crash-landed in a narrow field close to the bridge over the Caen Canal at Bénouville and captured it within a few minutes. Nearby a similar action was taking place to capture the Orne Bridge, which was also successful.

They were the first troops to go into action on D-Day, and the first to suffer any fatal casualties. Two of the party were killed in the first few minutes of the operation; Lieutenant Den Brotheridge was shot and mortally wounded leading his men across the bridge, and Lance Corporal Fred Greenhalgh was reportedly thrown from his glider as it landed and drowned in a nearby pond.

Since then, every year, Den Brotheridge has been honoured by a ceremony; either at the churchyard in the nearby village of Ranville where he is buried or in the grounds of the Musée Mémorial Pegasus, where there is a monument in his memory. This is as it should be; Brotheridge was one of the most popular and respected officers in 'D' Company and was a brave man who died at the head of his platoon. It would be shameful if his memory was not revered.

But what of Fred Greenhalgh? His is probably one of the saddest stories of D-Day, and deserves to be better known. He was born on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1914, the son of Sam and Lily Greenhalgh of Bury, Lancashire, and was 29 at the time of his death - somewhat older than the rest of the Company. He originally enlisted into the Lancashire Fusiliers, then transferred into the Royal Welch Fusiliers before joining the Oxford and Bucks on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1942. He is therefore likely to have taken part in the famous march from Ilfracombe back to Bulford in August of that year.

On the D-Day coup de main operation he was a Bren gunner of Lt Richard 'Sandy' Smith's platoon in number 3 glider, which was piloted by S/Sgts Geoff Barkway and Peter Boyle.

If you visit Pegasus Bridge, as the canal bridge has been known ever since, you will see three stelae or plinths on the Landing Zone beside the bridge, marking the points where each glider finished up. At first glance you might imagine that they indicate gliders 1, 2 and 3 in that order, and for many years this belief prevailed in some quarters. In his famous book *Pegasus Bridge*, American author Stephen E. Ambrose made this assumption, but it is not so.

Glider no. 1, piloted by S/Sgts Jim Wallwork and John Ainsworth, made a good landing at 0016 hours just a few yards from the bridge. Even so, the two pilots were flung through the windscreen by the impact and knocked unconscious, and several of the soldiers, including CO Major John Howard, were stunned for a few seconds. (Glider troops say that any landing you can walk away from is a good one!)

Less than a minute later glider no. 2, piloted by S/Sgts Oliver Boland and Philip Hobbs, touched down equally successfully about 75 yards behind Wallwork's. (Some of the accounts give a much shorter distance, but the evidence shows otherwise.) One must assume that the plinths indicate the final position of the cockpit of each machine, and the transparent overlay of the Google Earth image lines up fairly accurately with the famous aerial photograph taken later that day. A military tactician looking at these pictures might wonder why Boland didn't land closer to Wallwork's glider, but in a later edition of *Pegasus Bridge*, Ambrose supplies one explanation.

He states that on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary the three glider pilots were reunited for the first time since D-Day, and John Howard described their discovery: 'It soon became clear from the exchange of views between Boland (pilot of #2) and Barkway (pilot of #3), plus what Howard had gleaned over the years from surviving passengers in the two gliders, that just before landing, Boland had seen Barkway's glider bearing down on him from behind, causing Boland to swerve right, while Barkway seeing Boland's glider in front of him had to swerve left and then right, turning ninety degrees and finishing up with the glider broke in half and his cockpit in the pond.'



The three gliders photographed later on D-Day

As a result of this testimony John Howard had the bronze plaques marking the positions of numbers 2 and 3 gliders switched around.

Jim Wallwork's account, published on the [britisharmedforces.org](http://britisharmedforces.org) website, is somewhat different.

'One minute after Glider No. 1 landed, Glider No. 2 was down. "I dropped to the ground with an almighty crash," said pilot Oliver Boland, "and we crashed along and managed to stop."

'Directly behind No. 2 came No. 3, which initially touched down behind Glider No. 2 but then shot into the air and sailed over No. 2, crash-landing between it and Glider No. 1. Number 3 broke in half upon the second impact and hurled L/Cpl Fred Greenhalgh into a pond, pinning him there until he drowned. Had the glider not become airborne after its first impact, it would have crashed into the rear of glider No. 2, and two-thirds of Howard's force might have been wiped out upon landing.'

All such accounts must vary because of the circumstances and the passage of time, but the aerial photograph suggests that John Howard's account is the most likely. All the gliders appear to have bounced to a greater or lesser degree, and no. 3 more than the others, but it is unlikely that it actually bounced over no. 2. No.1 came down on hard ground, as there are reports of sparks caused by the metal skids striking flints. The ground towards the pond where no. 3 landed was marshy, and the sudden deceleration caused by it hitting the water may have contributed to it breaking up. The white mark leading up to it on the aerial photograph suggests that it skidded along the ground for some distance.

As Howard's account states, it certainly swerved sharply to starboard and broke up, with the wing and front part of the fuselage pointing more than 90 degrees to the right of the original approach path and the rear part of the fuselage lying parallel to the wing. (If the orientation of the sloping front of each plinth is meant to indicate the direction in which each glider finished up, then no. 3 is 180 degrees out.) The photographs show the other two aircraft looking relatively undamaged by comparison – emphasis on 'relatively'!

The occupants of no. 3 were lucky to survive – Smith and Dr John Vaughan shot straight out through the cockpit; Smith was stunned but the Doc was unconscious for the best part of an hour. Smith later told Howard, 'that they had quite a few casualties in landing, but his boys were all right.' He didn't know about Fred Greenhalgh.

Although some accounts state that he was thrown into the pond, it is possible that Greenhalgh was trapped in the wreckage. Boyle, co-pilot of glider no. 3, later stated, 'I moved round the wreckage, and I can remember seeing a body across the undercart. There was a chap there and I put my hand on him and he was just hanging there.' Dr Vaughan also said, 'I remember next finding myself back at the glider trying to get a man out. He was, however, hopelessly tangled up in the wreckage and after giving him a shot of morphia from a syrette, I attempted to reassure him by promising to go and find a stretcher-bearer.' If this was some occupant other than Greenhalgh, he obviously survived.

Either way, it was the most tragic of accidents. Horsas are made almost entirely of wood, but there are parts that are harder than others, and Greenhalgh must have struck some substantial part as he was thrown out. Had he been rendered unconscious and landed on dry ground, like Dr Vaughan, he would likely have recovered and played his part in the operation. Had he landed in the water while conscious, as the two pilots of his glider did, he would also have been able to carry on. If he was trapped in the wreckage in water, as Denis Edwards of no. 1 glider heard the next morning, then that would have been fatal. It is unlikely that the exact circumstances of his death will ever be known.

With D-Day over the men of 'D' Company moved eastwards, to fight and die in battles in Ranville, Hérouvillette, Escoville and beyond, until by September there were only 40 of the original 180 left. The wrecked gliders were eventually cleared away, and the local people began to rebuild their homes and their lives. But the amazing exploit of capturing the two bridges was remembered and visits to the site, especially by former and current members of the Oxford and Bucks, must have begun soon after the end of the war. One such visitor was Derek Hawker.

Derek joined the Regiment from Sandhurst in 1951 and served in Cyprus, Egypt and Germany; finally becoming Adjutant at the Depot. Because of an accident with a PIAT in Egypt he suffered blast deafness and was downgraded, so in 1958 he transferred to the Intelligence Corps, eventually rising to the rank of Colonel. Sitting on a bench in the grounds of the Musée Mémorial Pegasus on the morning of 6<sup>th</sup> June this year, he told me a fascinating story.

'In those days it was possible for members of the Intelligence Corps to go to Staff College, but you had to get a competitive vacancy, which I did, and went there in 1961. In my syndicate was James Simmons, who had passed out of Sandhurst into the Regiment with me. In summer of that year we went on a Staff College Battlefield Tour of Normandy together. One of our guest speakers was John Howard, who took us to the glider landing zone, which at that time was not marked out in any way, and he had to point out where the gliders had landed. The position of the one that broke up was fairly vague.

'The ground was very marshy, although it is much developed now. In a pause in the proceedings I thought I would go and search out where the broken glider had landed, because I thought there might be debris about. I was interested because my father had made Horsa gliders and I thought I would have a souvenir, so I went over to where I reckoned the site was. Mind you, it was underwater and full of reeds, a pretty mucky job; but to my amazement I saw, poking about an inch out of the water amongst some reeds, a bit of metal. I looked a little closer and I thought 'I know what that is' and it was the tip of the inverted bipod of a Bren gun. Luckily I had my shooting stick with me and I used it as a scoop to dig this thing out. This proved to be an LMG with a fully loaded magazine in place but no barrel, though the barrel locking lever was down. I found that slightly odd, but at that time I wasn't aware of the story of the Lance Corporal, the first to die, who was drowned, but the location was consistent with that. So it was lucky we had two Regimental officers on hand. James Simmons was right nearby, so I called him over. We thought this would be just right for the Museum and washed it. First we took it to John Howard and said, "We think you lost this." He said, "Ah, yes, thanks very much. That's still on my G1098 charge and the buggers might charge me for it so I'm glad to have it back." I left it with James to take to the Regimental Museum in Oxford - how it arrived at Pegasus Bridge Memorial Museum I do not know. It is nice to see it here, reconnected, particularly when we remember L/Cpl Greenhalgh whose personal weapon it was. I discussed it later with David Wood and with John Howard and James Simmons and we all thought that it almost certainly was his personal weapon.'

We discussed how Fred Greenhalgh might have been rendered so unconscious that landing in the water did not revive him.

'Well, I don't know how he exited, but I imagine the shock of the impact threw him out of the glider, concussed, as was John Howard, though he landed fairly well. And something really serious happened to the Bren gun, because you don't get a barrel off a Bren gun easily. You wouldn't go into action without the barrel, and as the locking clip was down the barrel must have smashed and smashed again to re-engage the locking lever, so I'm a bit puzzled by that. So that barrel must still be down there, with other stuff.'

As Derek says, the Landing Zone is now landscaped and much drier, and the boundary of the pond has receded, but there must be many artefacts there which would repay excavation. As well as the barrel of Greenhalgh's Bren, there is probably Sandy Smith's Sten, which he reported losing when he was thrown from the glider.

The rusty Bren with its magazine is in the Musée Mémorial Pegasus, where I photographed Derek Hawker with it, but what of the unfortunate owner?

Greenhalgh was not buried with the rest of his comrades in any of the villages near the Bridge. Initially he was interred just across the road from the crashed gliders, together with three Commandos of Lord Lovat's Special Service Brigade who had been killed relieving Howard's men. His death was erroneously recorded on the official roll as having occurred on 7<sup>th</sup> June.

After the war all four were re-buried side by side in La Delivrande War Cemetery at Douvres, a town a few miles north-west of Bénouville, where the date of Greenhalgh's death is correctly recorded.

In April this year, conscious that those of us who were intending to travel to Normandy in June were getting nowhere in the matter of passes, I wrote a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, pointing out that the lack of such documents would stop Margaret Brotheridge and the rest of us from visiting her father's grave in Ranville churchyard on the anniversary of his death. A response came from another old comrade, pointing out that Fred Greenhalgh had also died that day but that his sacrifice had been largely ignored.

I discussed this with fellow Lightbob Geoff Day, who was also intending to attend the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemorations, and he agreed that we should do something. So on 8<sup>th</sup> June, after we had checked out of our accommodation at Bénouville, we drove with our partners to La Delivrande cemetery to pay our respects.

The cemetery is not a large one; it contains the graves of 942 Commonwealth servicemen mostly from the landings on Sword beach, but also some brought in later from the battlefields between the coast and Caen, which explains Greenhalgh's presence. His grave is number V.C.4, just inside the entrance on the left.

Geoff and I each laid a small wooden cross bearing a red poppy on the grave and had some photographs taken. By chance, some veterans from the Royal Ulster Rifles were holding a small ceremony at the Cross of Sacrifice, which included the lament for the dead of another battle - *The Flowers of The Forest*. We were invited to join them, and as we listened to the mournful sound of the pipes we were glad that we had rectified an omission that had gone on for far too long.

We hope that future visitors to commemorations at Pegasus Bridge will make the short journey to Douvres and honour the Regiment's neglected D-Day casualty – Lance Corporal Fred Greenhalgh. He deserves it.



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Probably the best picture of the three gliders. The canal bridge is just visible behind the trees beyond glider no. 1, and the Café Gondrée can be seen behind the wing of the machine in the centre



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Two views of the badly-damaged glider no. 3

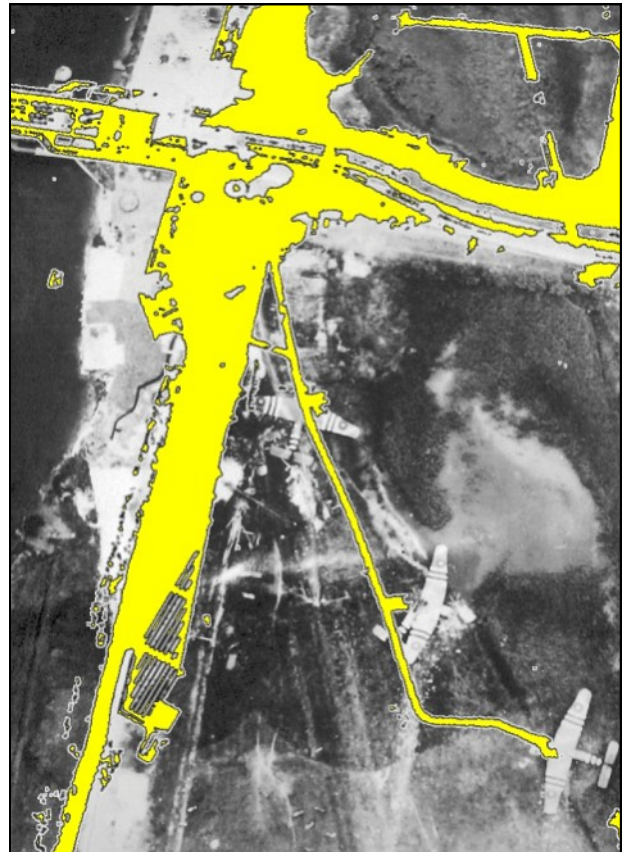




A rare photo taken from the direction of the bridge, showing the damage to glider no. 1



The Google Earth image of the landing zone, showing the three plinths and the connecting path

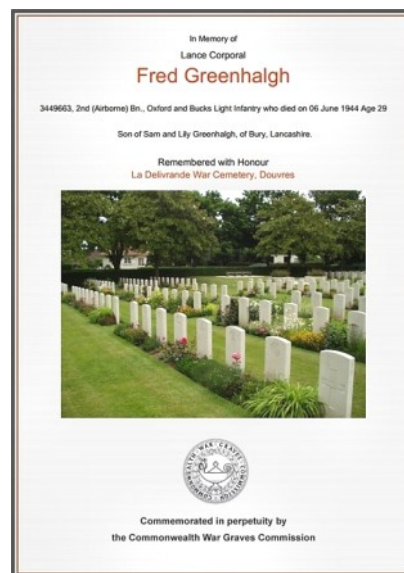


The aerial photograph of the gliders with the transparent copy of the Google Earth image scaled and overlaid



Derek Hawker inspecting the Bren gun in the Museum





The temporary graves of Fred Greenhalgh and the three Commandos opposite the Landing Zone - stills from a newsreel film shot on 27 July



Geoff Day and Roy Bailey at Fred Greenhalgh's grave at La Delivrande