



Chapter 1

PLANNING THE ATTACK

It was the night of June 5, 1944. Darkness was falling in southern England. But thousands of **paratroopers** were awake and alert.

The paratroopers were from the 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army. At about 10:15 p.m., they left for a very important mission.

◀ **U.S. paratroopers played an important part in many World War II battles.**

World War II had been raging for five years. Britain, France, Canada, and the United States were all part of the Allied Powers. They were fighting against the Axis Powers. These included Germany, Italy, and Japan. In May 1940, Germany invaded France. German forces captured entire cities. Bombs devastated neighborhoods and villages. Eventually, France surrendered to Germany. The country was under German control.

The U.S. paratroopers were preparing to fly to the French region of Normandy. They would land behind enemy lines. Their mission was part of a secret attempt to **liberate** France. This plan was called Operation Overlord. The first day of the operation, June 6, would become known as D-Day. On this day, Allied forces hoped to capture French cities or towns. They also wanted to take control of roads and beaches. These locations would help them bring supplies from Britain into France.

This plan took years of preparation. Allied military leaders wanted to trick Axis leaders. They made false messages about the movements of **troops**. They even set up phony 24-hour radio broadcasts. German spies reported the false information. They believed that the Allies would attack Pas-de-Calais, France. German leaders sent many of their troops to defend this area.

The Allies really planned to attack Normandy. The Normandy region is 150 miles (241.4 km) southwest of Pas-de-Calais. By launching an unexpected attack, the Allies could catch German forces by surprise. They could capture cities in the Normandy region. Then the Allies could retake France.

For months, more than 150,000 Allied troops trained for the battle. The troops came from Britain, Canada, and the United States. Normandy was across the English Channel from their training ground. American General Dwight D. Eisenhower was leading the D-Day attack. An experienced military commander, Eisenhower knew that the plan was risky. If German leaders found out about it, they could send more soldiers to Normandy. They might defeat the Allied troops. Stormy weather could also ruin the Allies' plan. And even if the plan succeeded, many men could die. But Eisenhower also knew that D-Day could be a turning point in the war. It could help the Allies finally defeat the Axis Powers. Before the invasion, Eisenhower spoke to the troops. "The eyes of the world are upon you," he told them.¹


Jim Martin, a U.S. Army paratrooper, understood the importance of the mission. "We knew that the success was going to hinge on us," he said. "We were absolutely certain of that. Eisenhower was too. That's why he made the decision to send us in."²



▲ General Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke to Allied troops on D-Day.

That night, the skies were cloudy. Rain poured down on the paratroopers. Many wondered if the attack would happen. But finally, they got the order to leave. Pilots and paratroopers slogged through mud to get to the planes.

Near midnight, the planes reached Normandy. Aircraft gliders dropped more than 6,600 paratroopers into northwest France. The paratroopers landed in Normandy. Many of them landed near an area with the codename Utah Beach. They did all of this

 "The rain kept falling harder and harder. . . . We thought for sure the whole operation would be called off. Suddenly a runner poked his head through the tent opening and said, 'This is it, let's go.'"

—Donald Burgett, 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army³

in the dark. A larger attack was planned for later in the morning of June 6. The paratroopers would help the Allied forces prepare.

Strong winds caused many paratroopers to land far from their targets. Some were killed making the jump. German soldiers shot them down with rifles. Martin's unit lost radios and other equipment. They struggled to communicate with each other. Those who survived the jump bombed bridges, railroads, and vehicles. They cut telephone lines. They wanted to prevent German forces from sending more troops to the coast. Despite some losses, the paratroopers succeeded



▲ U.S. paratroopers prepared to fly into France.

in their goals. Allied forces prepared for the next stage of the attack.

By early morning on June 6, the Allied troops were ready. Planes would drop bombs. Warships would bring soldiers, tanks, and other equipment. The soldiers would land on the beaches of Normandy. In that first day, they hoped to get past German defenses on the beaches. Then they would secure land near ports and roads. This would help them continue to make gains in France.