

Prologue

1:45 AM, June 6, 1944 – Aboard a C47 Transport Approaching Lower Normandy, France, 20 km South of the Drop Zone for *Mission Boston*

The lumbering aircraft shook violently as it was buffeted by German anti-aircraft fire. Major Frank Peters sat on the uncomfortable seat next to the open jump door, looking out at the formation of C47s. Every jolt of the aircraft sent a shock wave up his spine. He was terrified, but he carried his fears with a stone-face. *It's what leaders do*, he told himself. His training was his emotional enabler. He would do his duty, as a soldier, as a leader, as a man. He would do it to the very end. As his C47 Skytrain took the skies from Portland Bill on the English coast several hours prior, he fully expected this would be his last day on earth. Somehow that made it all easier. One thing was certain. He was sick of the waiting and the delays. Whatever fate had in store for him, he was anxious to get it over with.

Looking out at the formation in the night sky, the fireworks display from exploding German anti-aircraft fire was mesmerizing. It momentarily took his mind off his fears. His fascination was suddenly disrupted, however, as he saw an exploding shell rip the wing off the aircraft flying next to his, sending it into a death spiral and exploding on impact. Everything was suddenly real again. He felt sickened by the realization that 28 brothers in arms had just experienced what had to be a horrifying death, a death that might shortly be his.

Watching the C47 go down again turned his attention to the ground. He was struck by two things, neither of them good. First, the aircraft was very low. Although his altitude was impossible to gauge precisely, he guessed it had to be no higher than six or seven hundred feet. They expected to jump from an altitude of 1,000, which was still low enough to result in impact injuries like broken ankles or legs, especially given the 85 pounds of equipment he would be jumping with.

The second thing he realized is that he didn't recognize anything. They had all studied landmarks to help identify their landing zone, but all he could see is what appeared to be marshland. That was a bad sign, because it not only meant they were likely lost, but also that they could also be jumping into a flood zone of unknown depth. A paratrooper who landed into water with 70 to 90 pounds of equipment could easily drown trying to free himself from the anchor of his gear.

He turned to the platoon sergeant sitting next to him, an E7 responsible for managing the tactical tasks of the assault team and in many ways more important to the mission than the major and, screaming over the deafening noise, said, "Hey, I don't recognize anything down there!"

"I was thinking the same thing, sir" he screamed back. "I think we're lost!"

"No shit!" was the major's reply. "Everyone's trying to dodge the flack and the formation is all over the place!"

“Yes, sir!” replied the sergeant. “And do you see how low we are? We’re going to sustain a lot of injuries if we jump from this altitude!”

“Well, Ed,” the major said, referring to his Platoon Sergeant by his first name, “I don’t think our pilot plans to climb any higher!”

“No, sir, you’re right about that!”

Suddenly the aircraft was buffeted by an explosion.

“That one was too close!” screamed the sergeant.

A second explosion threw the aircraft into a sharp left bank. All 28 paratroopers on board grabbed the nearest fixed object they could find to steady themselves. Somebody cried out, “We’re on fire!” The second explosion had ripped off part of the C47’s starboard wing, and its engine was in flames. The pilot tried desperately to roll out of the bank, but he was having to muscle the *fly by wire* flight controls by himself. A 1947 C47 Nightrain wasn’t equipped with the advanced hydraulics of modern aircraft. His co-pilot, a 24-year-old second lieutenant, only two years out of West Point and with only 175 flight hours under his belt, had just been killed by a piece of shrapnel from the same anti-aircraft shell that had blown off the tip of the wing.

The pilot, who had all of 225 flight hours to his credit, managed to reduce the bank to about 15 degrees by grabbing the left side of the control yoke with both hands and pulling down as hard as he could while bracing his feet against the bulkhead. As he did so, however, he knew he was fighting a losing battle. As he was pulling the yoke with all his strength, he felt the bank slowly begin to increase once again and realized he was seconds away from losing control. He briefly let go with one of his hands, reached down and threw a switch.

“Green light!” Peters shouted, alerting his men they had been cleared to jump. He turned to the Platoon Sergeant as he stood up and calmly said, “OK, Ed, let’s go do this.” The entire platoon stood, and the soldiers from the back of the line began the brief pre-jump drill of checking the parachoot of the man in front of him, slapping it, and calling out *ready!* Peters was the last man to have his rig smacked by the man behind him. He then became the first to exit the aircraft through the jump door, leading his men from the front.

The pilot held the yoke with all his strength for as long as he could, continually praying for the strength to hold on until the last paratrooper had exited the aircraft. Finally, as his strength gave way several seconds after the last man had jumped, the C47 banked sharply left again and began its own relentless death spiral. Just a few seconds later, it crashed, killing the pilot.

Peters heard a loud splash as he hit the ground and found himself immediately underwater. *This is it*, he thought, convinced he was about to drown. *What an ending.* But as he pushed up with his feet, he broke the surface and discovered the water was only waist deep. Many of his men were not so lucky. Numerous paratroopers landed in a flood zone 8 to 10 feet deep. The seventy-plus pound equipment packs strapped to their jump

rigs anchored them firmly to the bottom, bringing their lives to an abrupt and cruel end before they could fire a single shot at the enemy.

Once freed from his rigging, Major Peters gathered the paratroopers who survived the jump, including some from the 101st who also dropped far from their target, and organized them into a fighting force. Improvising, their objective would be the town of Graignes, close to where they landed and under German occupation. They would initially succeed in freeing the townspeople from their German captors, but the success would be short lived. On June 10, a mechanized patrol approached the Ranger's defensive position. The Rangers allowed the German soldiers to get close, then killed four of them. One of the German's escaped. He returned to his lines and gave word to elements of the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division that the town was now in American hands. Shortly thereafter, 2,000 highly motivated SS stormtroopers attacked Graignes and regained control of it.

The paratroopers who dropped behind enemy lines on June 6, 1944, were some of the most highly trained and elite soldiers to participate in the D-Day invasion. They had uncommon courage, stamina, and initiative. None were under any illusion about the risks of their task. Nevertheless, heading into an existential unknown, they rose above their fears with a sense of purpose and pressed forward. Too many of them paid the ultimate price. Their actions, however, and the actions of the townspeople of Graignes, over the period June 6th to June 11th, would echo through the coming decades and reach down through three generations in a manner they could not have imagined.