

# 44<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade

## Background

44<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade (using the lineage of the 44<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade who had in turn used the lineage of 44<sup>th</sup> Parachute Division) was formed at Aldershot on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1996 after the TA were mobilised to give the British Army a fourth out of area capable force<sup>1</sup>. Ironically however the brigade was to spend the entire war in Europe. As a second parachute brigade it also gave the option to form an Airborne Division (it was also planned to incorporate 24 Airmobile Brigade in this division) but this was never achieved, although in March 1997 the headquarters Airborne Forces was created from the existing Parachute Regiment Group Headquarters to give a unit to deal with all the administrative matters for airborne troops.

By late October the infantry units were ready as these used pre-existing units as the base. Support elements were a different matter however, many of these required to support the brigade were in the process of being formed as the fighting units had been intended to be sent to other brigades and initially lacked these. Significant numbers of individuals making up these units were being made up of recalled reservists and this



*Illustration 2: HQ Company Officers Mess Photo - note attached US officer (believed to be Maj Harold Franks, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne) rear row fourth from right, third from right in a blue beret is the attached RAF liaison officer Flt Lt Robin Mason, centre of the middle row is the US Air Force officer Luis De La Santinez, two to his left is an unknown officer who appears to be wearing the standard army dark blue beret. (Para Rgt Museum)*

facilities were now there to get numbers through.

## Composition upon creation

44<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade HQ  
3 RAF Liaison Section



*Illustration 1: 10 Para composite platoon on completion of earning their wings. Many TA recruits who usually served a year before being allowed to attend the course to obtain their wings were rushed through in the first few weeks of training in August and September 1996. (MoD)*

was taking time with training resources at a premium. Many of the Parachute Regiment battalions were quickly put through parachute training as a significant number had not yet qualified or needed to requalify.

All members of the Brigade wore maroon berets (except temporary attachments, RMP and AAC who wore own colour beret<sup>2</sup>). Not all were parachute trained however. The numbers of the Brigade who had completed P Company and then became jump qualified tailed off during war (although all members of the pathfinders and the parachute Regiment battalions were required to complete P Company). Only when the parachute course reduced to balloon jumps in January 2002 did the percentage of parachute troops start to increase as the

<sup>1</sup>The other three units, 5<sup>th</sup> Airbourne, 24<sup>th</sup> Airmobile and 3<sup>rd</sup> Commando Brigade Royal Marines had all been committed to Europe, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> to BAOR and the 3<sup>rd</sup> to Norway as part of ACE.

<sup>2</sup>The RMP wear scarlet and the AAC wear light blue.

71 (Airborne) Intelligence Section, Army Intelligence Corps – war raised  
 666 (V) Squadron, Army Air Corps (7<sup>th</sup> AAC Regiment)  
 163 (V) Provost Coy Royal Military Police – heavily drawn from police who had been members of the TA  
 144 (Parachute) Field Ambulance (V) Royal Army Medical Corps  
 254 (V) Field Ambulance  
 100th (Yeomanry) Field Regiment, RA (V)  
 Headquarters (Home Counties) Battery<sup>3</sup>  
 200 (The Sussex Yeomanry ) field Battery – 105mm light gun  
 201 (The Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Yeomanry) Field Battery – these wore the Pegasus badge usually associated with 5<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade as the unit had fought at Arnhem – 105mm light gun  
 202 (The Suffolk and Norfolk Yeomanry) Field Battery – 105mm light gun  
 102nd (Ulster) Light Air Defence Regiment, RA (V)  
 RHQ & HQ Battery  
 215 (North Down) Battery - 16 Javelin  
 206 (Coleraine) Battery – 16 Javelin  
 4th (V) Bn, The Parachute Regiment (TA) - 4 Rifle Coys plus a wartime raised support Coy – Black DZ flash<sup>4</sup>  
 16 (Lincoln) Company, 4<sup>th</sup> (V) Bn The Parachute Rgt (TA) – 1 Coy – acted as the Brigade pathfinder Coy  
 10th (V) Bn, The Parachute Regiment (TA) - 4 Rifle Coys plus a Support Coy with an extra Mortar Plt – Red X on black background DZ flash  
 15th Bn, The Parachute Regiment (TA) – a Scottish unit with 3 Rifle Coys and a Support Coy – Hunting Stewart tartan was worn behind cap badge and as a DZ flash  
 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Support Bn (RLC) – created to administer RLC units  
 210 (V) Squadron 150 (Northumbrian) Rgt Royal Logistic Corps – transport role  
 240 (V) Squadron 150 (Northumbrian) Rgt Royal Logistic Corps – transport role  
 131 REME Coy – wartime raised unit  
 44 Airborne Ordnance Company, Royal Logistic Corps  
 134 Ordnance Company, Royal Logistic Corps  
 75<sup>th</sup> Engineer Regiment (V) Composed of 2 squadrons – designations not known  
 37 (Wessex and Welsh) Signal Regiment (V)  
 43 (Wessex) Squadron  
 53 (Welsh) Squadron  
 57 (City and County of Bristol) Squadron  
 Queens Own Warwickshire and Worcestershire Yeomanry Squadron



*Illustration 3: Members of 15 Para board coaches in Aldershot on 17th March 1997 for transport to RAF Breize Norton. Nearest the camera is Private Hitman Gorak a former member of 2 Para who had left the Army and set up as a chef. The day war broke out he turned up at the nearest Army Careers Office in full kit (including his kukri) and politely asked to be allowed to rejoin his beloved Parachute Regiment and kill Russians. He survived the war and returned to the UK where he ran a Nepalese restaurant for many years. (The Times)*

<sup>3</sup>In World War Two this had been part of the 44<sup>th</sup> Parachute Division

<sup>4</sup>DZ flashes were originally worn only by airborne battalions and were designed to allow quick recognition of units on drop zones. By the start of the war the very tribal British Army had extended the practice to the rest of the army calling them Tactical Recognition Flashes (TRFs). The airborne forces however continued to refer to them as DZ flashes. These are worn on the upper right sleeve and are very useful for identifying British units in photographs.

In March 1997, the Brigade deployed to Europe.

### The Battle of Okciecie International Airport - 12<sup>th</sup> June 1997

The first warning the Polish and Russian defenders of Okciecie International Airport on the outskirts of Warsaw had of the impending assault was the air raid siren sounding. Hurrying to their positions they did not know that June 12<sup>th</sup> would be different from any of the previous days. The lethal electronic cat and mouse game started with the radars of the two sides trying to break through the jamming of the other to get a lock for their missiles (the Wild Weasels had been equipped with jamming pods in an effort to hide their SAM suppression role). First blood went to the Soviets when an SA10 destroyed one of the US 562<sup>nd</sup> Squadron's F4G Wild Weasel aircraft on a SAM suppression role. The defenders did not however live long enough to enjoy their success, the position exploding as it was hit by a AGM-88 HARM missile within seconds of their kill. Within ten minutes the initial SAM suppression had achieved its aim, the bulk of the active radars were destroyed. Those that we not destroyed were forced to close down. Following directly behind the Wild Weasels were F15E Strike Eagles of the US 336<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron and Tornado GR1s of the RAF's 31 Squadron.

*"We were moving from shell hole to shell hole as we approached the terminal. I was changing mags ready to make a last dash when I heard Sgt Harris shouting 'fix bayonets.' That sent a chill down the spine, we might have been the most aggressive troops in the British Army but the thought of plunging that steel into someone still sends a shiver down the spine."*

Pte Rob McKay MM, 15 Para

Quoted in "Forgotten Voices of the Airborne Forces" Hodder 2022



*Illustration 5: 15 Para move to board a Chinook of the first wave. (Conn McVitie)*



*Illustration 6: Nervous faces of 16 (Lincoln) Company of the first wave approaching Warsaw. Note the late model body armour on the nearest figure. (BBC)*

So far the raid had been heavy but not drastically unusual, what followed was different. These normally had concentrated on closing the runways being used by the Polish 49<sup>th</sup> Combat Helicopter Regiment based there. This time the runways were left intact, although the RAF used the Tornados with JP233 to drop bomblets over the taxiways from the hangers to the runway. The F15Es concentrated their attacks on the anti-aircraft defences. Four F15Es were lost as were two Tornados. While the raid was still in progress the defender's radars (or at least those that were left intact) reported a large number of very low slow moving contacts approaching from the west. These were the Chinooks of the RAF's 7 and 18 Squadrons carrying the

16<sup>th</sup> Lincoln Company and 15<sup>th</sup> Bn Parachute Regiment along with support in the form of 206 (Coleraine) Battery, 254 (V) Field Ambulance and the support company from 10 Para. These swooped down on the end of the runway dropping the troops as rapidly as possible. 10 and 15 Paras' support coy quickly set up their Milan missiles and engaged the Mi24s of the 49<sup>th</sup> before they could take off (or in a few cases as they were!). There is at least once case of a Hind being brought down by the command wire of a Milan missile that missed wrapping itself around the rotor blades. Simultaneously Scout helicopters of the 666<sup>th</sup> Army Air Corps engaged targets of opportunity with SS11 missiles. Deconfliction was achieved by these flying no lower than 100ft to avoid the MILANs and operating on the flanks of the Paras.





*Illustration 7: "Snapdragon" a Scout of 666 Squadron flown by Sgt Liam Stephenson and Sgt Colin Gallant lifts off on the morning of the battle. Snapdragon was shot down by a ZU23-2 at about 12:16 killing both of the crew. (Army Air Corps Museum)*

Company) when under heavy fire he knocked out a first ZU23-2 with a LAW despite being wounded. He then lead his section into the position clearing it with grenade and bayonet. Reorganising he then lead a bayonet charge on the next position who were unaware of the Para's position. Hit again he collapsed after clearing the position. Evacuated later in the day by helicopter he survived the battle and rejoined his unit in late 1997. The Scout helicopters zipped back and fore engaging the ZU23-2s but taking heavy losses to them.

As the second wave of Chinooks came in the now prepared anti-aircraft guns opened up. The large helicopters started to take hits. Two crashed into the ground killing all on board. Paradoxically the damage caused to the second wave allowed the survivors to push forward as the fire was lifted from the infantry. The survivors of 10 Para (consisting mainly of TA soldiers from London) joined up with the Scots of 15 Para and established the perimeter around the western end of the airfield. Members of 2629 Squadron RauxAF (RAF Regiment) were tasked with guarding the helicopter landing and rearming there while members of 75 Engineers Regiment worked to clear better landing areas. Irish gunners from the 206<sup>th</sup> nervously manned their Javelin missiles waiting for the expected air strikes that never came. English gunners from 201 Battery dug in their 105mm light guns hoping that this wasn't another Arnhem. Welsh signallers from 53 Squadron checked comms and called in the next wave. 16 (Lincoln) Company remained at the Brigade headquarters to act as a reserve.

The first wave was down and the Chinooks departed to pick up the second wave. Not giving the enemy time to regroup the Paras started to push towards the Finnish Hall (the main terminal). As they did so they came under heavy fire from ZU23-2 guns which having no radar were generally not manned during air raids. Casualties started to mount and only the MILANs being used to knock out the guns stopped a massacre of the exposed Paras. The first Victoria Cross of the day was won by Corporal Richard Morton (of 16 Lincoln



*Illustration 8: 15 Para await the return of the Chinooks. Despite the losses and damage to helicopters, the second wave was actually larger than expected as airframe losses were less than expected and many RAF crews flew aircraft that in other operations would have been grounded due to damage. The third wave would not be so lucky. (MoD)*



*Illustration 9: The Soviet counter-attack forms up. (SovPhoto)*

The second wave had barely got into position when a counter attack by the Soviets started. A BRDM patrol edged its way around the terminal building. An SS11 from one of the few flyable scouts scored a quick kill<sup>5</sup>. This however fell to cannon fire from a second BRDM. This was hit by a MILAN from 10 Para. Denied this vehicle recce, Soviet infantry infiltrated the terminal (which should have been within the perimeter but due to the heavy losses remained outside it). Soon

a heavy fire fight was under way between the Soviets and 10 Para. Firing over open sights the guns of 201 Battery helped the Paras but neither side could advance. Realising the terminal was the key to the battle, Lt Col Sidney McAllan of 15 Para got permission to lead an attack on it. Advancing under the supporting fire of the 105mm guns and his support company, he personally lead two companies in a flanking attack. Fighting inside the terminal became vicious and desperate. While this was going on the Soviet plan

became apparent as a Bronegruppa of armoured vehicles appeared from the south. Attacking into the perimeter the Paras fought hard but were hampered by a lack of MILANs. Only a number of tank hunting teams from 16 Company sneaking up to attack at point blank range with LAW80s and M72s held the perimeter intact. In the fighting at the terminal an incident occurred which made international headlines, when the paras encountered a group of Polish nuns tending Polish wounded. Hearing of this the Roman Catholic padre of the brigade CF3<sup>6</sup> Joshua Fox commandeered a Land Rover and made a dash for the terminal. Conversing in Latin he arranged for the nuns (who refused evacuation) to continue in their treatment with both side's medics helping them.



*Illustration 10  
4 Para arriving at about 16:00. (Conn McVitie)*

<sup>5</sup>REME technicians were frantically working with the technicians of 666 Squadron to keep as many in the air as possible, cannibalising damaged Scouts to keep as many flying as possible. Some REME technicians were seen in commandeered airport vehicles driving to shot down Scouts to recover parts under fire.

<sup>6</sup>CF stands for Chaplain to the Forces. CF3 is equivalent to a major.



*Illustration 11: Unknown Para posing after the assault on Warsaw's airport with a captured AK. Many Paras towards the end of the battle were reduced to using captured weapons as ammunition stocks neared exhaustion. Note the explosion just visible in the background left of the photo as I (British) Corps pushed into Warsaw (private collection)*

As 15 Para finished clearing the terminal the sound of rotor blades again filled the air as the third wave arrived. 4 Para quickly pushed outwards to secure the eastern end of the airfield and by 18:00, other than small pockets of resistance the airfield was in British hands.

At 21:00 a final wave of troops arrived carrying the members of the third wave that had not been able to be airlifted due to damage to the helicopters.

The battle was by no means over, the troops were still waiting for III German Corps to reach them but the airfield was secure. A nervous night ensued but



*Illustration 12: 14th June, Paras pose outside the Finnish Hall (BBC)*

nothing more than small probing attacks occurred. At 13:00 German Leopard I tanks of the 3<sup>rd</sup>

Reconnaissance Battalion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Panzer Division were sighted and a cheer went up from the survivors of the brigade. When the battle honour Okcie was awarded few doubted it was deserved.

## **The Battle of Warsaw**

On 14<sup>th</sup> June the brigade reverted to the command of I (British) Corps as a Corps level asset. It was left at the airport to reorganise and prepare for future operations. Despite not being refitted, on 22<sup>nd</sup> June it was given orders to move into Warsaw as a Corps reserve in a light infantry role. As the fighting for the city intensified the brigade was involved in the fighting in Sielce for the Ogrod Botanical Gardens. Finally, taking these on the 7<sup>th</sup> July the Brigade was withdrawn to rest. As the month ended the brigade was attached to the 4<sup>th</sup> (UK) Armoured Division and elements again prepared for a helicopter assault although this time the scale of the operation was much smaller, mainly due to the limited lift capability.

16<sup>th</sup> (Lincoln) Company was tasked with seizing the bridge over the Vistula connecting Sielce and Siekierki in Operation Winter. This was to be achieved by the company flying in and abseiling from helicopters to seize the east end of the bridge while the remainder of the brigade made a dash for the west edge lead by a combined company of the three Parachute Regiment reconnaissance battalions in Land Rovers supported by C Squadron 4/7<sup>th</sup> Royal Dragoon Guards in Challengers. At 00:29 on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August the peace of the night was shattered by the arrival of Lynx helicopters at the bridge's east end, dark shadowy shapes dropped from them and ran for the demolition charge cables. Simultaneously further Lynx helicopters fired TOW missiles at the bunkers protecting the bridge. By the light of the explosions, the paras cut the wires and captured the few ORMO troops that were protecting the east edge of the bridge. At 01:12 the signal was received at Brigade



*Illustration 13: Colonel of the Regiment King Charles III presents a Military Medal to Private Rob McKay (15 Para) (BBC)*



headquarters “Hello 0 this is W10A Oxford Street, I say again Oxford Street, over.” This was the signal that the bridge had been taken intact and the charges had been neutralised.

Now the relief operation started, the M107s of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Heavy Regiment Royal Artillery started to lay down a barrage on two lines parallel to the route of the relief column. Land Rovers and Challengers (covered with members of 4 Para who had hitched a lift rather than await the planned role of a follow on force on foot) shot forward punching a narrow gap through the ORMO line. By dawn the force had fought its way three quarters of the two kilometres to the bridge. If a clear view could have been obtained it would have been within range of the bridge.

Meanwhile 16 (Lincoln) Company were fighting for their lives. Dug in in the houses to the east of the bridge the paras were now fighting off a Soviet counter-attack. A scratch force of cooks, clerks and labourers was piled into a collection of APCs being repaired at the depots and thrown at the bridge. Lead by Major Gregori Kurskov in a captured Fox scout car<sup>7</sup>, the Soviets made a dash for the bridge, lead by faulty information that the British were on the west end of the bridge. Very quickly they were disabused of this notion by the paras who held their fire until the Soviets were within 100 metres of their positions. Having inflicted heavy losses on this force and forcing it to withdraw, a second attack was made by the troops of the 809<sup>th</sup> Punishment Battalion<sup>8</sup> who were being moved forward for an attack the following day supported by as many elements as the commander could round up at such short notice. Fighting was becoming very heavy at close ranges as the penal troops with their light weapons desperately tried to infiltrate the positions and the paras gradually moved back toward the last houses before the bridge. An attempt by the Soviets to use a BM21 in a direct fire role was stopped by a sniper LCpl William “Spud” Murphy who used his L42 to shoot four of the six crew before the remainder ran off leaving it abandoned in the street.



*Illustration 14: LCpl Murphy and his spotter Private Harry "Kenny" Everett engaging a Soviet sniper on 10th August. (BBC)*

At 10:05 a Land Rover shot across the bridge, covered by the members of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion that now held the houses on the western bank. Half way across it drew fire from a Soviet machine gun and riddled with fire crashed into the central barrier. Two crew members were seen to jump out and return fire before both being hit by the same gun. A second

attempt to reach 16 Company was now made with two Challengers driving across the bridge accompanied by members of 4 Para moving from pillar to pillar or using the tanks as cover. This succeeded in crossing the bridge and gradually more paras and tanks pushed across. By the evening a perimeter of about 100m from the bridge was held. Overnight fighting was hard with the Soviets

<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested that this was part of a deception operation to get closer and this often is found in published histories. Conrad Johnston however in his book “Para!” quotes Russian soldiers present at the depot who stated that this is incorrect. They stated that the main reason was that it was available and ready to go having been captured a few days before.

<sup>8</sup> Unusually this unit contained not only Soviet but also Polish soldiers.

being reinforced by ZOMO and police units.



*Illustration 15: Private Alex "Cookie" Cook of 15 Para mans an L7A2 GPMG in the light role on the east bank of the Vistula on 9<sup>th</sup> August. Notable in the picture are the paras sleeping behind the barricade while he keeps watch. (Parachute Regiment Museum)*

By 8<sup>th</sup> August the perimeter had increased to 200 metres but the paras were suffering badly and ammunition was running low as the bridge was under constant fire restricting resupply<sup>9</sup>. A decision was then made by I (British) Corps to hold in place and place the emphasis on the 1<sup>st</sup> (UK) Armoured Division's drive from the north. The remainder of the month saw the paras gradually push slowly onwards but the advance was a crawl with daily progress measured in metres and the casualty percentage being more reminiscent of Verdun or Stalingrad than more modern conflicts.

By 1<sup>st</sup> September it was obvious that the Soviets were pushing hard to relieve Warsaw using troops from the Chinese Front. The 4<sup>th</sup> (UK) Armoured Division's commander requested permission to abandon the bridgehead which was granted and on the night of the 5/6<sup>th</sup> the brigade withdrew across the bridge under cover of artillery fire and using FV432s of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Queen's Regiment to provide armoured protection.

It was intended that the brigade would now be withdrawn for rest and refit but the Soviet offensive changed this. The brigade was now acting as a mobile blocking force attached to 2<sup>nd</sup> (UK) Armoured Division. It was using the Chinooks of 7 and 18 Squadrons to drop them in a location and then evacuate them when the pressure was too much. As lightly equipped paratroops this meant that they were usually used to attack not the armoured spearheads of an attack but the hold choke points such as bridges where they could concentrate their heavy weapons. The nuclear strikes in September and October did not inflict much damage on the brigade with this role but by the time the line stabilised the brigade was a spent force As I (British) Corps launched Operation

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<sup>9</sup>The few remaining Scout helicopters of 666 Squadron supported by Lynxes of 669 Squadron attached to the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade made a number of rapid runs to supply the most essential items, swooping low over the river and throwing loads out of the doors on carboard and soft wood pallets designed to reduce the impact.



Highwayman to the south towards the Czechoslovakian border the 44<sup>th</sup> was moved to Padderborn under the direct control of BAOR.

## Reforming

Initially the plan was to amalgamate the 5<sup>th</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigades but the commanders of both lobbied against this. They argued that as elite units they were having no problem obtaining



*Illustration 16: New recruits are put through their paces November 1998 (Parachute Regiment Group Archives)*

replacements and could be rebuilt separately. A high profile PR exercise by the British media argued against the amalgamating of such heroic units (although there was no plan to amalgamate the battalions) and the King was also believed (especially by members of the Parachute Regiment) to have been involved in behind the scenes lobbying. As a result of this the brigade remained a separate body. Despite receiving replacements a number of changes in the structure of the brigade occurred and from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1998 the organisation was officially changed to the following:

### 44<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade HQ

- 44 RAF Liaison Section – renamed from 3 RAF Liaison Section

- 71 (Airborne) Intelligence Section, Army Intelligence Corps

- 666 (V) Squadron, Army Air Corps (7<sup>th</sup> AAC Regiment) – now equipped with 8 Gazelle helicopters

- 163 (V) Provost Coy Royal Military Police

- 144/254 (Parachute) Field Ambulance (V) Royal Army Medical Corps

- 100th (Yeomanry) Field Regiment, RA (V)

- Headquarters (Home Counties) Battery

- 201 (The Sussex, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Yeomanry) Field Battery

- 202 (The Suffolk and Norfolk Yeomanry) Field Battery

- 102nd (Ulster) Light Air Defence Regiment, RA (V)

- RHQ & HQ Battery

- 215 (North Down) Battery – now equipped with captured ZU23-2 guns

206 (Coleraine) Battery – now equipped with Blowpipe  
 4th (V) Bn, The Parachute Regiment (TA) – reduced to three rifle companies and a support company plus:  
 16 (Lincoln) Company, 4<sup>th</sup> (V) Bn The Parachute Rgt (TA) – still in the pathfinder role  
 10th (V) Bn, The Parachute Regiment (TA) - reduced to two rifle companies and a support company  
 15th Bn, The Parachute Regiment (TA) – retained at full strength but lacking support weapons<sup>10</sup>  
 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Support Bn (RLC) – created to administer RLC units  
 210/240 (V) Squadron 150 (Northumbrian) Rgt Royal Logistic Corps – transport role  
 131 REME Coy – wartime raised unit  
 44/134 (Airborne) Ordnance Company, Royal Logistic Corps  
 75<sup>th</sup> Engineer Regiment (V) – reduced to 1 squadron  
 37 (Wessex and Welsh) Signal Regiment (V)  
 43 (Wessex) Squadron  
 53 (Welsh) Squadron  
 57 (City and County of Bristol and Queens Own Warwickshire and Worcestershire Yeomanry) Squadron<sup>11</sup>

The brigade now undertook rear area security operations.

### The 1998 Fighting

In June 1998 with the Soviet offensive inflicting massive losses, the 44<sup>th</sup> was given the task of guarding the rear area of II (British) Corps to which it was now attached. A number of nasty little encounters with Soviet Spetznaz units occurred with one platoon from 10 Para being wiped out to a man when the Soviets initiated a RA-115 nuclear demolition charge.

By August, NATO prepared to go on the counter-attack with Operation Vista and 44 Airborne Brigade was attached to I (British) Corps. With limited aviation assets, as the British prepared to launch Operation Mornington Crescent, it was not possible to drop the full brigade simultaneously by helicopter. As a result the Brigade prepared to undertake the largest British paratroop of the war in Europe using a mix of British, German and US transport aircraft. Under an umbrella of fighter aircraft using fuel stripped from the whole theatre, the paras boarded the aircraft on the evening of the 29<sup>th</sup> August.

Dropping on numerous small drop zones around the vital Czechoslovakian bridges, the paras quickly assembled. Losses were lighter than expected and the bridges were quickly seized. Paras started to dig in around the bridges. The move took the Soviets by surprise and to the surprise of all concerned the spearheads of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigades of the 1<sup>st</sup> (UK) Armoured Division reached the paras



*Illustration 17: Lt Col Paul White commanding 10 Para prepares to drop at the start of Operation Morning crescent. Note that the light would imply a day drop but this was actually caused by an explosion outside the plane. Note the static lines and the reserve parachute on the chest (although this is really of dubious value at the heights involved in many of the later war drops). Also of note is the scrim net worn over the top of the helmet with the straps for holding foliage removed (this is typical of the Parachute Regiment and rarely seen outside it) (BBC)*

<sup>10</sup>This unit retained its full strength by playing on the Scottish nature of the battalion. It was around this point that it unofficially acquired its pipers that were made official in 2005.

<sup>11</sup>This unit quickly claimed it had the longest official unit name in the British Army.

ahead of schedule on the afternoon of the 31<sup>st</sup> August having brushed aside the Soviet 51<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division and Czechoslovakian border guards. In the aftermath of the operation the paras took on the role of rear area security for I (UK) Corps. In late September after the failure of the Serbian troops to move north to link up with the American offensive by I (US) Corps into northern Czechoslovakia, the British withdrew through the Hoff Gap into southern Germany and the 44<sup>th</sup> again reformed as the corps reserve.

Now it was organised as follows:

44<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade HQ

71 (Airborne) Intelligence Section, Army Intelligence Corps

163 (V) Provost Coy Royal Military Police

144/254 (Parachute) Field Ambulance (V) Royal Army Medical Corps

44 (Parachute) Field Regiment, RA (V)

Headquarters Battery

100 (Warsaw) Field Battery - with a mix of 105mm light guns and mortars

102nd (Ulster) Light Air Defence Battery RA (V) – actually equipped with mortars

4th (V) Bn, The Parachute Regiment (TA)

16 (Lincoln) Company, 4<sup>th</sup> (V) Bn The Parachute Rgt (TA)

10th (V) Bn, The Parachute Regiment (TA)

15th Bn, The Parachute Regiment (TA) – now only two rifle companies

44 (Parachute) Support Weapons Battalion (V) – made up of the remnants of the infantry battalion support weapon companies

6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Support Bn (RLC)

210 (Mounted Volunteer) Squadron 150 (Northumbrian) Rgt Royal Logistic Corps – horsed transport role

240 (V) Squadron 150 (Northumbrian) Rgt Royal Logistic Corps – transport role

131 REME Coy

44/134 (Airborne) Ordnance Company, Royal Logistic Corps

75<sup>th</sup> Engineer Regiment (V) – reduced to 1 squadron

37 (Wessex and Welsh) Signal Squadron (V)

*“There was a German frau who adopted our section. She had lost all three of her sons in the fighting and I think she saw us as surrogates. The fact that the British had been in the area pre-war I think also helped as she told us that her third son had actually been delivered by a British Army doctor when she went into premature labour. I wrote to her for many years after the war.”*

Corporal Trevor York, 10 Para

Quoted in “Forgotten Voices of the Airborne Forces” Hodder 2022

The remainder of 1998 was spent in anti-marauder operations in the vicinity of Osnabruck and in building work, in particular the rebuilding of local infrastructure. A significant number of locals were employed by the brigade in support work.

1999 was a quiet time for BAOR as a whole and 44 Airborne Brigade in particular. Anti-marauder operations became the main activity and soldiers and civilians were often seen working together in the area.

In October 1999, II (British) Corps moved to take part in Operation Atlantis in the spring. I (British) Corps was left to guard the rear area previously covered by both corps. 44 Airborne Brigade expanded its area but as it had little organic transport it was given a much smaller area to cover than other brigades. In

November a draft of replacements arrived with BAOR and some of these were assigned to 44 Airborne Brigade where they undertook P Company training and selection but not jump training.

With II (British) Corps being prepared to act as the follow up force for the planned NATO offensive in Poland, 44<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade was due to transfer to 3<sup>rd</sup> (UK) Mechanised Division to act as rear area security but the suddenness of the Pact counter offensive stopped this transport to move the brigade to the front was not available. As a result the brigade remained under the control of I (British) Corps.



The remainder of 2000 was spent quietly in Germany. Administratively the brigade was placed under the command of 4<sup>th</sup> (UK) Infantry Division it is effectively BAOR level asset. Without aircraft however it was not capable of fulfilling any role other than light infantry.

In August 2002, 44 Airborne Brigade returned to Harwich in the UK and was moved to Portsmouth where it paraded through the capital before a memorial service in the cathedral. After this the brigade was gradually demobilised with those who wished to remain in the Army transferring to units in 5<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade and the remainder taking their discharge.

### Famous Members of the Brigade



*Figure 1: Davina Hunter inspecting the state of Chilwell Barracks in Nottingham after it was taken back from marauders. At this point she was serving with 5<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade.*

Davina Hunter was a member of 163 (V) Provo Company, Royal Military Police from before the war when she joined the TA. As a serving police officer she gravitated towards the RMP and with the outbreak transferred to 44 Airborne Brigade. Leaving the Army as a major in 2002 she returned to the police where she later became the head of the South East England Police, a post she held until she retired in 2030.

Despite not being a member of the unit, Conn McVitie will always be associated with the brigade having been a journalist who was attached to the unit. A former member of 3 Para during the Falklands War, McVitie had left the Army and drifted before trying his hand at writing articles for survivalist magazines. Surprised at the success of these articles he was even more surprised to be offered a job as a staff writer for “Survival World” magazine. As an accredited journalist when the war broke out he applied to attached to British forces. Fortunately for him, his former platoon commander was now at the MoD and quickly arranged for him to be attached to a parachute unit. McVitie was popular with the soldiers with his background and with the Army for his positive articles. After the generous donation of a few bottles of whiskey and the promise of a mention in an article he was in the first wave in the battle



*Illustration 18: Iconic photo by Conn McVitie of the first wave preparing to assault Warsaw Airport (Conn McVitie)*

for Warsaw Airport. Unfortunately few photos survived the battle as his camera was damaged by a shell fragment but his article on the battle was soon a major best seller, reproduced in many countries. McVitie also was in the first wave of Operation

Winter alongside the pathfinders. Finding the perimeter in severe danger of being over-run he soon found a discarded rifle and set about fighting his second war, this time as a civilian. Wounded twice on the 4<sup>th</sup> August (once by a shell fragment in the calf and once by a bullet that severed two fingers of his left hand) he was not evacuated until the 7<sup>th</sup> when he finally agreed not to give up his place to yet another wounded para. With the leg wound becoming infected he was eventually evacuated to the UK where his leg had to be amputated. Returning to his cottage in Sussex he survived the nuclear exchanges and using the skills learned over the years in training and from his journalism he quickly ended up as the leader of the village council. He was refused permission to join British forces for the Saudi War but did get permission to join the HQ (Middle East) where his minders eventually had to threaten to return him to the UK if he did not stop trying to sneak away to join a combat unit. In 2008 he started writing what would become a classic of war reporting “They Said

We Were Heroes, They Said We Were Fine, We Were Kings in Command, We Had God on Our Side<sup>12</sup>.” This was later filmed by director Paul Bold who had been a member of 10 Para during the battle. McVitie still writes columns for The New Sun newspaper.

The future Director of Special Forces, Grant Southerly served with 44 Airborne Brigade, initially as a TA officer with 15 Para, joining it in mid 1998. In 2002 as a Lieutenant he tried for SAS Selection and passed. Serving a three year tour with the Regiment, he then returned to the airborne forces before a second tour as a squadron commander with 22 SAS. After more time with the headquarters of 5<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade he then went on to command 27 (Polish) SAS before a tour of duty at the MoD resulted in his appointment. Other than his career path, little is known of this elusive figure.

The classical pianist Ivan “Red” Calver also served with the brigade, having been posted to 131 REME Coy after he was commissioned in March 1998. Serving with distinction during Operation Mornington Crescent, he was awarded the King's Gallantry Medal for his actions in repairing under fire an FV510 Warrior of 1<sup>st</sup> Bn Staffords which had broken down on the exit ramp of the bridge blocking further crossings. While he was based in Osnabruck he was billeted with the German pianist Oscar Werner who taught the young officer how to play the piano. On his discharge in 2002 he attended the New Royal College of Music where he refined his skills before joining the Portsmouth Symphonia.

### **Brigade Commanders**

August 1996 – October 1997

Brigadier Terrence Douglas (late Parachute Regiment) - killed in action

October 1997

Colonel Ronald Lyle (late Royal Irish Rangers) – killed in action

October 1997

Colonel Steven Greig (late Royal Artillery) – missing believed killed

October 1997 – October 1998

Colonel (late Brigadier) Oliver Francis – transferred to I Corps staff

October 1998 – March 2001

Brigadier John Palmer – died of disease

March 2001 – August 2002

Colonel (later Brigadier) Barnaby Fortune – retired

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<sup>12</sup>This was a quotation from the Chris de Burgh song “Last Night” about soldiers returning home from a war. The quotation continues “they said nothing could make us change in any way. Since yesterday, nothing has changed but there's a new kind of hunger inside.”