

“Flexible Enough to Adapt”: British Airborne Forces’ Experience during Post Conflict Operations 1944-1946

JOHN GREENACRE

University of Suffolk

Email: John.Greenacre@uos.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Either side of the end of the Second World War Britain’s airborne forces were increasingly employed in what today would be termed stabilisation operations. This paper examines the utility and experience of British airborne forces employed in Greece in 1944, Norway in 1945 and Java in 1946, and highlights common features across the three operations. This paper suggests characteristics and traits within airborne forces that enhanced their suitability for successfully contributing to complex stabilisation operations.

Filling the Post Conflict Vacuum

Brigadier C. Hilary V. Pritchard is not a name that regularly appears among the pantheon of British airborne commanders and yet he had a long and illustrious career. He was the original commander of 6th (Royal Welch) Parachute Battalion when it formed in August 1942 and as the commander of 2nd Parachute Brigade he took part in the invasion of Sicily, Operation HUSKY in July 1943. When his parent formation, 1st Airborne Division returned to England Pritchard’s 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade remained in Italy, fighting as conventional infantry around Orsogna, on the Sangro, on the Cassino front and mounting limited airborne operations to harass the German’s lines of communication. In August 1944 he commanded his brigade on Operation DRAGOON, the Allied invasion of the south of France. However, in November 1944 as his colleagues in 1st and 6th Airborne Divisions were recuperating from their experiences in Arnhem and Normandy respectively, Pritchard was in Athens, contemplating among other concerns, the state of the city’s drainage and sanitation.

As the intensity of violence increased in the final year of the Second World War Britain’s airborne forces were increasingly committed to operations that fell short of full war-fighting with British airborne forces involved in such operations in Greece in 1944/45 (Operation MANNA), Norway in 1945 (Operation DOOMSDAY) and in

“FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ADAPT”

Java in 1945/46. This article examines those three disparate operations to try to determine if there were common factors or threads in the operational experience of the British airborne forces employed. It also considers whether the particular capabilities of airborne forces helped them to adapt to the requirements of post conflict operations.

By the latter half of 1944 the Wehrmacht was retreating on all fronts across Europe. In doing so Nazi Germany was forced to abandon territory it had occupied and governed for over four years, leaving behind a dangerous vacuum. Often competing partisan groups and resistance movements struggled to take control of the ungoverned space left behind and create new regimes following the principles of their own brands of communism, nationalism, republicanism or other political ideologies. These struggles, frequently violent, threatened the stability of areas of post war Europe and the Allies looked for ways to ensure a smooth transition to stable, peaceful government across Hitler’s crumbling, former empire.

The Wehrmacht had never achieved full control of Greece but despite this they ruthlessly exploited the nation’s industrial, natural and agricultural resources, with the latter causing widespread malnutrition and famine. While the Germans imposed control in the cities and larger towns, swathes of the rural and often remote interior were controlled by partisans or *andartes*. The most powerful of the Greek partisan groups was the Greek Communist Party dominated National Liberation Front (EAM) and its military wing the Greek People’s Liberation Army (ELAS). Competing with EAM was the National Republican Greek League (EDES) and the National and Social Liberation movement (EKKA). EAM/ELAS maintained the upper hand through a combination of a highly effective ‘hearts and minds’ campaign across the Greek rural population and bloody violence against its competitors. In response, many EDES and EKKA members joined the collaborating Security Battalions, preferring German control to that of the communists.¹

By the late summer of 1944 the Soviet Red Army had driven the Wehrmacht out of most of southern Ukraine and was pressing forward towards Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia. These advances threatened to cut off and trap German forces occupying Greece and in response the High Command in Berlin ordered preparations for a withdrawal to the north. On 9 October 1944 at the Moscow Conference Churchill and Stalin casually agreed the external influence that each would exert over Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Greece. Churchill jotted percentages beside each of these southeast European nations indicating the split in influence between Russia

¹ For detail on the nature and course of Greek resistance during and after the war see Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*, (Penguin: London, 2013), pp.295-314.

and Britain. Greece would be ninety percent British (with American approval); Stalin signalled his agreement with a broad tick.² So, as the Wehrmacht began its withdrawal from Greece Churchill saw it as being in British interests to fill the power vacuum and ensure stability. EAM was a huge and influential organisation. If it was to be prevented from imposing a communist regime on Greece and unleashing violent retribution on its opponents through ELAS, rapid British intervention would be required.

The situations in Norway and Java in 1945 were ostensibly less complicated in that the enemy, the Germans and the Japanese respectively had at least surrendered before any British deployment took place. In Norway the immediate post-war concerns were to re-establish national and local government, maintain law and order, rebuild infrastructure destroyed by the Germans (particularly in the north of the country), ensure the delivery of services and amenities, assess and relieve public health issues including malnutrition, administer returning refugees and to process and repatriate the 350,000 surrendered German service personnel and thousands of foreign forced labourers.³ The tasks facing British military forces in post war Java were similar with additional complications due to major questions on the long term future governance of the islands. Following the surrender of the Japanese the Americans transferred responsibility for Indonesia, including Java, to the British on 15 August 1945. But British forces did not land on the island until the end of October and in the intervening period the power vacuum had been filled by nationalist groups, initially led by Sukarno. The former Dutch colonial masters began to return to the island in the wake of the British with very little concept that the pre-war geopolitical balance in Dutch favour had irrevocably shifted. The reappearance of the Dutch caused a surge in violence that led to a full-scale insurgency. The temporary British occupiers, including airborne forces, had to maintain some form of balance in an unstable environment with a view to their extrication at the earliest opportunity.⁴

The Utility of the Airborne Capability

The utility of airborne forces in operations short of war-fighting had been recognised early during their development. The advantage in their use was surmised to be in their ability to be deployed swiftly over long distances to deal with any rapidly

² Henry Butterfield Ryan, *The Vision of Anglo-America; The US-UK Alliance and the Emerging Cold War, 1943-1946*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.137. The original document is held in The National Archives (TNA) PREM 3/66/7, Spheres of Influence in the Balkans, 9 October 1944.

³ Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe*, (Penguin: London, 2009), pp.278 & 526.

⁴ Christopher Bayly & Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire*, (Penguin: London, 2008), pp.158-189.

“FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ADAPT”

escalating situation that required a rapid military response. In India in particular it was foreseen that airborne forces would be ‘most valuable for employment for the Defence of India and for Internal Security’, moving quickly over the vastness of the sub-continent to quell riots and stamp out rebellion.⁵ The theory was put to the test in July 1942 when elements of 50th Indian Parachute Brigade were dropped north of Hyderabad to help suppress an insurgency by the Hurs in Sindh province.⁶ Two years later it was that operational mobility, intra and even inter-theatre, coupled with the potential for rapid intervention that brought airborne forces into the planning for Operation MANNA.

At the end of August 1944 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade was concluding operations in southern France during Operation DRAGOON. On 20 August Brigadier Pritchard was summoned to Italy for a conference with the Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean, Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, in order to ascertain when his brigade could be ready for operations in Greece. A week later Pritchard and his brigade embarked for Italy and on 8 September they arrived at San Pancrazio, an airbase, twenty miles east of Taranto, to begin planning for operations in Greece.⁷ Pritchard’s orders were to prepare for a short notice insertion by air to a location close to Athens and then to head as the British vanguard into the city in order to maintain law and order. The brigade was to rapidly occupy Athens and prepare for the arrival by sea of a more substantial force. Pritchard was ordered to avoid any major battle with the German occupiers. The British deployment, Operation MANNA would therefore have to be carefully timed to arrive in Athens as close as possible to, but after the withdrawal of the Germans. This requirement for a rapid and critically timed deployment made airborne forces the obvious candidate for the initial intervention force. The method of deployment however, by parachute and glider, had an inherent weakness in that it tended to focus all planning attention on the first phase of the operation, i.e. the deployment. An airborne deployment required such attention to detail that it could predominate the planning process almost to the exclusion of the mission and tasks to be conducted once the deployment was completed.⁸ On 14 September 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade

⁵ TNA, Air Ministry Papers (AIR) 23/5932, Records of Operational Analysis, 22 April – 6 June 1941.

⁶ K.C. Praval, *India’s Paratroopers: A History of the Parachute Regiment of India*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1975), p.27.

⁷ Terence Otway, *Airborne Forces*, (London: Imperial War Museum, 1990), pp.225-226.

⁸ This ‘first phase fixation’ is reflected in the slim historiography of British airborne forces’ contribution to Operation MANNA, most of which focus on the difficulties of the initial parachute drop caused by high winds on the drop zone. See for example

published Operation Order No.1 for Operation MANNA. Most of the document focussed on the formation's deployment and not its likely missions and tasks once in Greece.

In Norway and in Java the airborne forces that deployed did so without using their airborne capability. When 1st Airborne Division was initially warned for immediate employment on Operation DOOMSDAY it was still recovering from its trial during Operation MARKET GARDEN the previous September. The division had lost more than half its strength around Arnhem and its recovery and recuperation had been a slow affair. By 1 May 1945 it was assessed to be capable of undertaking a reinforcing role but not of undertaking a full airborne assault operation. Although the vacuum in Norway needed to be filled as quickly as possible after the German surrender there was no requirement for a rapid intervention to seize key points. It was understood that the Royal Navy would not have the resources available to transport the initial occupation forces to countries such as Norway once the German's surrendered.⁹ Consequently air transport would have to be utilised and the troops to be deployed had to be prepared to operate initially on light scales of equipment. An otherwise unemployed airborne formation was therefore, ideally suited to the deployment requirements of the task.¹⁰ When Major General R.E. Urquhart's 1st Airborne Division was placed on twenty-four hours' notice to deploy for employment on DOOMSDAY on 6 May 1945 it had been preparing for a major exercise in England and so the aircraft required were already assembled and allocated. General Sir Andrew Thorne in command of DOOMSDAY was therefore pleasantly surprised when Urquhart assured him that the division could begin deployment in forty-eight hours.¹¹ 1st Airborne Division was air transported to Norway, its aircraft landing on Gardemoen and Sola airfields near Oslo and Stavanger respectively between 8 and 13 May 1945.¹²

After Germany surrendered Major General Eric Bols' 6th Airborne Division was warned for deployment to South East Asia to continue the war against the Japanese.

Otway, *Airborne Forces*, pp.225-227 and G.G. Norton, *The Red Devils*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1971), pp.86-89.

⁹ For a full account of the British occupation of Norway in 1945 see Christopher Mann, *British Policy and Strategy Towards Norway, 1941-1945*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.199-229.

¹⁰ TNA, WO 219/2485, Operation Doomsday and Apostle: Outline Plans, undated 1945.

¹¹ Christopher Mann, *British Policy and Strategy Towards Norway, 1941-1945*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.200.

¹² TNA, War Office Papers (WO) 106/4437, Alanbrooke to Eisenhower, 23 March 1945.

“FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ADAPT”

Bols was briefed on the plan for Operation ZIPPER to recapture the Malay Peninsula. It became clear that ZIPPER only required a brigade strength airborne force and so Bols and his headquarters returned to England leaving 5th Parachute Brigade under Brigadier Nigel Poett to prepare to seize the causeway between Singapore and the Malay mainland by parachute assault. After the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan however, ZIPPER was cancelled and 5th Parachute Brigade waded ashore on the Morib beaches between Port Dickson and Port Swettenham on 17 September 1945. While Poett's men were employed maintaining law and order in Singapore over the following few months the security situation in Java was deteriorating rapidly.¹³

In November 1945 Headquarters South East Asia Command (SEAC) began to investigate whether airborne forces could be used to assist in Java. The office for the Return of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees (RAPWI) asked if a parachute force could be used to secure the still isolated and vulnerable prisoner of war camp at Malang and then organise the evacuation of the prisoners by air or road. The Commander Allied Forces Netherlands East Indies (AFNEI), Lieutenant General Sir Philip Christison enquired whether parachute troops could be used to seize the town of Mojokerto, which was considered a centre of the nationalist insurrection in the east of Java. The answer in both cases was an emphatic no. There were not enough aircraft in Java, Malaya or Singapore; there were no suitably modified aircraft available or specially trained aircrew; there were no parachute packing or storage facilities so parachutes would have to be sent from India immediately prior to any operation; no members of 5th Parachute Brigade had carried out any parachute training since leaving England.¹⁴ With any plans for airborne operations abandoned 5th Parachute Brigade moved to Java by sea, arriving in Batavia (now Jakarta) to reinforce the already established British forces on the island in December 1945.¹⁵ Through different circumstances therefore the main capability of an airborne force, the ability to deploy rapidly by air directly into battle, was not utilised for employment in either Norway or Java in 1945.

Operation MANNA, Greece 1944-1945

In September 1944 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade was distracted from the situation in Greece and its potential mission and tasks there by the requirements of planning the parachute insertion despite receiving regular intelligence updates prior to deployment. This can be seen in Operation Order No.1 which outlined the lack of

¹³ Terence Otway, *Airborne Forces*, (London: Imperial War Museum, 1990), p.329.

¹⁴ TNA, WO 203/2661, 5th Parachute Brigade Operation Reports, November and December 1945.

¹⁵ For a full examination of British operations in Java at the end of the Second World War see Richard McMillan, *The British Occupation of Indonesia 1945-1946*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

understanding of the conditions that the brigade would have to cope with when they entered Athens.

Upon arrival of the military forces in Athens, the conditions which will obtain [sic] may be one, or a combination of, the following:

- (a) Germans in control but prepared to surrender.
- (b) Fighting between factions.
- (c) Control in the hands of elements who support the Greek National Government.
- (d) Control in the hands of elements who do not support the Greek National Government.

Of the above sets of conditions, the worst would be (d).¹⁶

On top of the lack of clarity in the potential situation Pritchard had very little idea what his tasks might be beyond seizing Megara airfield and marching into Athens. It would not be a simple case of finding a uniformed enemy, engaging and destroying him, although conventional warfighting against the withdrawing Germans was likely to form part of the mission. Implicit tasks were also probable such as conducting a counter-insurgency to combat ELAS, maintaining law and order, ensuring the continuity of basic services, restoration of local government, and humanitarian aid to relieve the famine in the country. It is notable that none of these were touched on in any detail in the operation order.

The parachute landings on Megara airfield, thirty-five kilometres west of Athens, took place between 12 and 14 October 1944. Once concentrated Pritchard's brigade commandeered local transport and marched towards Athens unopposed on 15 October. The paratroopers entered the city as liberators to a tremendous welcome from the Greeks. 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade was joined by 23rd Armoured Brigade (also known as Arkforce), which arrived by sea in Piraeus on 17 October. On the same day Pritchard relinquished command of Athens to the newly arrived Commander Ground Forces Greece, Lieutenant General Ronald Scobie. Scobie's command, known as Force 140 comprised of the Headquarters III Corps, 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade, 23rd Armoured Brigade, supporting troops and special forces elements.

Almost immediately Pritchard and his staff in Athens began to appreciate the complexities of the Greek stabilisation operation as his brigade was presented with four or five disparate tasks to allocate across his small force. Most pressing was the need to establish contact with the withdrawing Germans and harass them as they

¹⁶ TNA, WO 170/518, "MANNA" 2nd Indep Para Bde Gp O.O. No.1 dated 14 September 1944.

“FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ADAPT”

moved north. 4th Battalion Parachute Regiment was selected for the task and quickly sent patrols 150 kilometres north of Athens to try to establish contact with the German rear-guard. Lieutenant Colonel H.B. Coxen's 4th Battalion were constantly held up by German road demolitions but their perseverance paid off. On 27 October 1944 4th Battalion, along with Colonel Lord Jellicoe's Special Boat Service regiment and artillery and mortar support, were in a position to attack a party of 'several hundred' Germans around Kozani, 300 kilometres northwest of Athens. The assault was successful and the Germans were pushed further north with 4th Battalion sustaining around twenty casualties killed and wounded. The following day, with support from 64th Light Battery Royal Artillery ELAS fighters attacked German units in order to keep the enemy off balance and continuing to withdraw. Coxen's 4th Battalion broke clean of the Germans on 3 November 1944 and began the return journey to Athens.¹⁷

Such war-fighting was probably the element of his multifaceted mission that gave Pritchard least concern. While the 4th Battalion were locking horns with the Germans Lieutenant Colonel V.W. Barlow's 6th Battalion Parachute Regiment was handed a diverse and complex set of tasks to carry out. The battalion moved to Thebes (Thiva) where it was first responsible for arresting 1,200 former members of the Security Battalions. This was followed by assisting the local administration with tasks including assessing the water and electricity supplies, using local labour to repair roads and securing the former German food store, which had been taken over by the Red Cross. Captain A.H. Farrar-Hockley in command of B Company later recalled his tasks and the state of the town.

I took control of the town of Thebes, and was in effect the military governor, where we did a great deal of initial relief work before the official agencies came. There were two villages where they did not have a single blanket between them nor seed to put in for the following year's growth. We were able to obtain relief supplies and ensure they went directly to them.¹⁸

The battalion's A Company moved to Khalkis (Chalcis) and Major L.A. Fitzroy-Smith established a military government with himself at the head despite 1,450 armed members of ELAS having just marched into the town.¹⁹

¹⁷ TNA, WO 170/1341, War Diary 4th Battalion Parachute Regiment, October and November 1944. The modern Greek place names appear in the text in parentheses after the names used in the war diaries and other contemporary documents.

¹⁸ Max Arthur, *Men of the Red Beret; Airborne Forces 1940-1990*, (London: Hutchinson, 1990), p.156.

¹⁹ TNA, WO 170/1343, War Diary 6th Battalion Parachute Regiment, October 1944.

Early in November Lieutenant Colonel D.R. Hunter's 5th Battalion Parachute Regiment was sent by boat to Salonica (Thessaloniki) along with elements of the brigade headquarters. On arrival Brigadier Pritchard chaired a meeting of local civil and military representatives including the Archbishop of Salonica. At the opening of the meeting Pritchard stated that his purpose was 'to assist in the setting in motion of the civil administration of the town in order to introduce foodstuffs and other supplies into the area'. By the end of the meeting Pritchard was clear that as well as bringing in and distributing food while protecting the twelve Red Cross depots in the town, 6th Battalion's tasks would also include restoring the fuel supply, bringing the local flour mill and the docks back to working order and taking over the administration of the old German prisoner of war camp, which still housed 2,000 Italians, Bulgarians, Yugoslavs and Russians.²⁰

A few hours later the situation became more complicated as a report was received that there was fighting in Drama, over 110 kilometres northeast of Salonica. Bulgarian soldiers had clashed with ELAS and the British Military Liaison (ML) mission had been placed under house arrest during the fighting. Despite his only having a sketchy appreciation of the situation Pritchard ordered Hunter to send one of his companies to Drama once conditions in Salonica allowed.²¹

The erratic and evolving relationship with ELAS introduced another layer of complexity to 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade's mission in Greece. When Coxen's 4th Battalion fought the withdrawing Germans in the early stages of the operation it did so with ELAS cooperation and support. Similarly, when Barlow's 6th Battalion took over the administration of Thebes and Khalkis they did so in collaboration with ELAS. As it became clear however, that the British did not intend to allow the EAM to take power in Greece the relationship with ELAS on the ground began to deteriorate. By mid-November, the critical lever of food distribution had been taken over and secured by British troops leaving ELAS to resort to intimidation to influence the people. They moved large groups of armed men into villages and towns being administered by a single company of paratroopers. Farrar-Hockley recalled a 5,000 strong ELAS brigade moving into Thebes intent on wresting control of the village from his company. They began threatening new recruits to the Greek National Army, intimidating the local population into unrest and instigating open clashes with nationalist groups. On 15 November 1944 4th Battalion Parachute Regiment received orders to be prepared to counter an ELAS demonstration in

²⁰ TNA, WO 170/518, Minutes of Meeting held at the Mediterranean Hotel, Salonica, 1030 hours 8 November 1944.

²¹ TNA, WO 170/518, Minutes of Meeting held at the Mediterranean Hotel, Salonica, 1345 hours 8 November 1944.

“FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ADAPT”

Athens and support the police. During the following ten days, the battalion was constantly involved in non-violent clashes with ELAS groups. On 28 November 5th Battalion Parachute Regiment had to deal with an ELAS led mob that stormed the bank in Drama.

On 3 December 1944 the Greek police fired shots during a pro-EAM rally in central Athens killing more than 28 demonstrators and wounding at least 148 others. This precipitated a full-scale ELAS insurgency in Athens known as the ‘Dekemvrianá’; the December Events. 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade had its impending move back to Italy abruptly cancelled and Pritchard’s brigade concentrated in Athens. Over the following six weeks the parachute brigade, along with the rest of Lieutenant General Scobie’s Force 140, fought a full scale, brutal counter insurgency in Athens against a more numerous and determined enemy. Armour and close air support were used by the British during vicious street fighting across the city. The situation was not brought under control until 4th Indian Infantry Division was shipped in as reinforcements from Italy. By early January 1945 EAM forces had lost the battle and Scobie negotiated a ceasefire with ELAS. Shortly after the cessation of hostilities 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade returned to Italy. During operations in Greece between October 1944 and January 1945 the brigade lost over sixty men killed. Farrar-Hockley stated that from 6th Battalion’s strength of 528 all ranks they took 130 casualties killed or wounded while in Greece.

Operation DOOMSDAY, Norway 1945

At first glance the least complicated of the three missions being examined belonged to Urquhart’s 1st Airborne Division participating in Operation DOOMSDAY, the immediate post-war occupation of Norway. There was no potential insurgency to counter and it was unlikely that full-scale warfighting would be required. Nevertheless, the rapid occupation of the country was a necessity due to ‘political factors’.

The absence of allied troops in NORWAY for a protracted period after German surrender may lead to extremely grave and undesirable political and administrative repercussions, both on the Allies and the Norwegians. We shall certainly be faced with strong political pressure from the Norwegian Government to intervene early, while the SWEDISH and SOVIET Governments may also be interested in the early establishment of Allied control in NORWAY.²²

²² TNA, WO 219/2485, Operation Domsday and Apostle: Outline Plans, undated 1945.

Beginning on 9 May 1945 the initial fly in and build-up of 1st Airborne Division went smoothly and Urquhart was able to quickly focus on the plethora of tasks that required his troops' attention. Road demolitions, particularly north of Tromsø needed engineer repair and snow had to be cleared from the Oslo to Bergen road. Work was carried out to improve the effectiveness of the rail system where German repairs to Norwegian partisan demolitions on the rail network were hampering rail travel. Trains were further slowed by a severe coal shortage that meant wood was the prevalent fuel in use. By the end of May the situation had been improved with more trains running and journey times cut. The clearance of German minefields also required attention from the Royal Engineers.²³

To assist in its mission a Civil Affairs Group was attached to 1st Airborne Division. This group comprised of specialists in areas such as supply, public safety, disarmament, finance, agriculture, law and economics. They liaised with their Norwegian civilian counterparts at a local and national level in order to ascertain what support the British army could provide. The subjects they consulted on were diverse, from the administration of returning refugees to the identification and return of horses and cars that had been appropriated by the Germans. Probably the most pressing matter however, was the requirement for medical assistance. Although the Norwegian population was generally fit if malnourished the conditions in former German prisoner of war camps were dire. Inspection of a camp at Jørstadmoen near Lillehammer revealed only twenty able bodied men out of a population of 600 Russian prisoners of war (PoWs). Severe tuberculosis affected 400, malnutrition 100, 10 were blind and 70 had 'miscellaneous ailments'. All of these would have to be returned to fitness before they could be repatriated to Russia.²⁴ In all it was estimated there were 76,000 Russian PoWs spread across Norway of which some 10,000 required medical treatment. Urquhart's Assistant Director Medical Services (ADMS) was made responsible for the coordination of all medical services, military and civil, throughout Norway. He took control of all hospitals in the country and used his military medical units to set up a new 300 bed hospital in Oslo, one of 100 beds in Stavanger and 50 beds in Kristiansand.²⁵

Perhaps the most testing of 1st Airborne Division's tasks was the identification and extraction of individuals wanted for war crimes from the vast population of German prisoners of war in Norway that were otherwise awaiting repatriation. This was a potentially dangerous process; the prisoners would always outnumber the British soldiers sent in to conduct arrest operations and some of the camps housed over

²³ Airborne Assault Museum Archive (AAM), 2/14/1, Report on Operation Domsday, 1 December 1945.

²⁴ TNA, WO 171/8486, War Diary A(I) Group Civil Affairs, May 1945.

²⁵ AAMA, 2/14/1, Report on Operation Domsday, 1 December 1945.

“FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ADAPT”

5,000 Germans and if the prisoners proved hostile then they could resist. All officers held as prisoners were allowed to retain their side-arms and, for security, camps housing over 1,000 prisoners could hold twenty rifles and ammunition, although some camps were found to hold over twice that number.

A series of meticulously planned operations were launched with code-words such as JORDAN, PAPERCHASE and SALERNO, which met with a certain amount of success. Using counter-intelligence officers and ‘stooges’ - Norwegians or Germans who could positively identify suspected war criminals - the battalions from 1st Airborne Division entered the camps, screened all the German prisoners and extracted those that were wanted. In Nordsetter thirty-one male and seventeen female prisoners were arrested who had been staff at the Grini concentration camp. In Vaaler camp prominent SD member, Peter Gottling was apprehended disguised as an airman in the Luftwaffe and Finn Kaas, the ‘Norwegian Lord Haw-Haw’ was extracted. In Elverum camp Lieutenant General Spottenberg, commander of the Gestapo in Norway was arrested.²⁶ Concurrent to this activity other units from 1st Airborne Division were involved in gathering evidence for war crimes trials and assisting in the exhumation of bodies believed to have been the victims of German atrocities.²⁷

Operations in Java 1945-1946

Late in 1945 in Java Brigadier Nigel Poett’s 5th Parachute Brigade experienced a very particular issue. Units and formations recently arrived from Europe were not popular with British troops who had fought in the Far East throughout the war. As a result, in the otherwise reasonably benign conditions of Batavia there ‘was not a happy atmosphere’.²⁸ Poett requested his brigade be moved to Semarang, 400 kilometres east along the coast where there were still serious security challenges to be resolved. 5th Parachute Brigade arrived in Semarang on 9 January 1946 to find the city, with a mainly Indonesian population of 225,000, had been under the control of violent nationalist groups since the Japanese surrender in August. Upon arrival the brigade found that months of arson, murder and looting had resulted in dire conditions for the civil populace. ‘Business was at a complete standstill, markets were non-existent... and there was no civil administration. The extremists had imposed a complete embargo on the import of foodstuffs into the town and had cut off both

²⁶ TNA, WO 171/8509, War Diary 7th Battalion King’s Own Scottish Borderers, June – August 1945.

²⁷ TNA, WO 171/8468, German Atrocities – Norway, 10 July 1945.

²⁸ Nigel Poett, *Pure Poett; The Autobiography of General Sir Nigel Poett*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1991), p.90.

water and electricity supply'.²⁹ The most pressing task was to re-establish security but the urgent needs of the people would also have to be dealt with concurrently.

The majority of the nationalist groups were initially driven from the city by a combination of patrolling, curfews and searches. This task was made more difficult by the plethora of identified political and paramilitary groups, of varying levels of opposition and the general violence that existed in Java at that time. Nearly 150 such groups had been identified, from the League of Bearded Men Muslim Fighting Organisation to the Sword Corps of Indonesian Guerrillas and the Black Buffalo Gangster Group.³⁰ The spread of sympathies within the population led to a change in the tactics for searches in the city. It was found that initial, random searches resulted in little of importance but did antagonise citizens who might otherwise have collaborated with the British. Once better established 5th Parachute Brigade moved to intelligence led searching, which proved far more effective.

Poett's brigade was solely responsible for Semarang and all that entailed. He installed himself as mayor and resisted attempts by Indonesian nationalists to set up parallel administrations in the city. The brigadier's civil administration was departmentalised into four main areas. The police, engineering and medical departments were each headed by a British officer from the parachute brigade, shadowed by a Dutch colonial civil servant. As may be expected, Poett's senior engineering and medical officers took responsibility for their respective departments. Policing however, was handed to the Officer Commanding 2nd Forward Observation Unit Royal Artillery, Major John Bamford. Bamford's task was far from straightforward. In order to maintain an impartial position he had to ensure that the senior positions were spread between the Indonesian majority, the Dutch colonial masters (approximately three percent of the population) and the influential Chinese minority (approximately eighteen percent of the population). He created four police divisions, each commanded by a British officer but with Indonesian, Dutch or Chinese assistants. Each division had twenty British soldiers who established police posts across the Semarang area. Initially these soldiers acted as the police force but as local recruits joined their role became one of training, equipping and monitoring.³¹

Again the Royal Engineers had a heavy workload to re-establish vital services in the city. This included repairing the water supply infrastructure and repairing and building

²⁹ TNA, WO 203/6011, Report on Activities of 5 Parachute Brigade Group in Semarang, January-May 1946, 11 May 1946.

³⁰ TNA, WO 172/9916, War Diary 5th Parachute Brigade, 5 Parachute Brigade Dossier of Information of Situation in Semarang, March 1946.

³¹ Peter Harclerode, *Go To It! The Illustrated History of 6th Airborne Division*, (London: Caxton Editions, 2000), pp.173-174.

“FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ADAPT”

new electricity generating facilities and the network to carry it across the city. The docks, damaged by British and American bombing in the closing stages of the war, required substantial work before they could be used at full capacity and the road and rail network need extensive repairs. In order to assist with these tasks Poett had several specialist units attached, mostly from the Indian Army. These included a dock operating company, a railway operating company and a harbour launch detachment. For public health work the Royal Army Medical Corps had to reopen and man hospitals in the city and re-establish the supply of drugs. A food committee was also established to tackle the urgent problem of feeding the population by rebuilding food stocks, introducing rationing and shutting down the black market. External assistance was provided to these public health works including an Indian anti-malarial unit and a field bakery company.

The fourth area of the civil administration was the Executive Department controlled directly by Poett. This covered a multitude of disciplines from customs to prisons, education to finance and forestry to pawnbroking. To assist him the Allied Military Administration and Civil Affairs Bureau (AMACAB) was formed in Semarang with an experienced Dutch colonial civil servant, Dr Pieter Angenent working alongside Poett. AMACAB worked across the three main departments through the various offices of the Executive Department to ensure that there was a British officer wherever possible working alongside an opposite number who might be Indonesian, Dutch or Chinese.³²

Alongside this activity, and throughout its four months in Semarang, 5th Parachute Brigade had to constantly fight to maintain security within the city. Much of this fighting was conducted in the areas surrounding Semarang in order to keep the problem at arm's length and away from the recovering civil population as following the Japanese surrender nationalist groups took advantage of the ensuing chaos to seize abandoned weaponry. It was not unusual therefore in early 1946 for Semarang to come under sporadic artillery fire. On 5 February 1946 a parachute company was sent to locate and capture two 75mm guns that had been identified through intelligence. The company came up against a force of approximately 400 Indonesian guerrillas although their roadblocks proved ineffective and their tactics were reported as poor. Eighteen Indonesians were confirmed killed with no British casualties. A few days later guns from 6th Indian Field Battery Royal Indian Artillery, attached to 5th Parachute Brigade, opened fire on a small group of Indonesians seen approaching Semarang armed with machineguns.³³ 12th Battalion Parachute Regiment deployed tanks (from 11th Cavalry, Prince Albert Victor's Own), artillery and snipers

³² TNA, WO 203/6011, Report on Activities of 5 Parachute Brigade Group in Semarang, January-May 1946, 11 May 1946.

³³ TNA, WO 172/9916, War Diary 5th Parachute Brigade, February 1946.

to control an area during a search operation and shot and killed one Indonesian who tried to break through the cordon.³⁴ Although security had improved dramatically during its tenure, 5th Parachute Brigade was still conducting counter insurgency operations when Semarang was handed over to Dutch control in May 1946.

Complexity

Although the three examples examined differed in character the operations that faced British airborne forces in Greece, Norway and Java had common traits, the chief among which was complexity. That complexity derived from the breadth and array of tasks that were required to be undertaken concurrently in order to achieve the broader mission. In Greece in 1944 war-fighting was layered upon assisting in the restoration of governance, the restoration of essential services and humanitarian aid, all being conducted concurrently by a single parachute brigade. That brigade then had to rapidly switch to high intensity counter insurgency operations while still sustaining elements of its other tasks. As the official history summarised,

The scope of the brigade's activities may be illustrated by the fact that at any one period during serious rioting they were feeding 20,000 Greek civilians, and on one day during the final battle in Athens they killed 170 rebels, wounded 70 and took 520 prisoners at considerable cost to themselves.³⁵

In Norway the more benign tasks of restoration of governance and essential services were superimposed on the complex challenge of identifying and extracting suspected war criminals. The latter was a task with a wider political resonance as Norway was enthusiastic and efficient in its post war 'denazification' efforts, arresting Norwegian as well as German suspects while leaving lower level collaborators to local justice.³⁶ In Java humanitarian aid and the restoration of governance and essential services had to be balanced against the requirement to maintain law and order and counter an ongoing, multi-faceted insurgency.

For Pritchard, Urquhart and Poett (and his successor) this complexity meant they had to be capable of a high level of mental dexterity in the way in which they exercised command and control. The challenge for the three commanders was to be able to coordinate the entire mosaic that faced them and not to focus on a single piece. If it was challenging for senior commanders it was potentially bewildering for junior commanders and soldiers faced with the pieces of the mosaic at ground level.

³⁴ TNA WO 172/10222 War Diary 12th Battalion Parachute Regiment, February 1946.

³⁵ Terence Otway, *Airborne Forces*, (London: Imperial War Museum, 1990), p. 226.

³⁶ Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent; Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*, (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 154-155.

“FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ADAPT”

Similar to Charles Krulak’s influential thoughts on ‘Three Block War’, a paratrooper involved in such operations might have to decide if he should feed the people he was faced with, arrest them or co-opt them into local government.³⁷ Or to put it more bluntly, ‘The main problem, as far as we could gather, was that on landing we would not have the faintest idea who to embrace or who to knife’.³⁸

The single characteristic that could help overcome complexity was the exercising of initiative at all levels. Initiative was a quality that was trained, nurtured and practiced in airborne troops of all ranks. The requirement for initiative stemmed directly from their method of deployment. An airborne soldier dropped by parachute at night could well find himself isolated from the rest of his troop for hours before joining up with them. A junior officer might be cut off from his chain of command for days. Both had to exercise initiative and make decisions based on what was in front of them in order to remain effective on the battlefield.³⁹ Major General R.N. Gale, commander 6th Airborne Division explained his approach to the issue.

Of all the characteristics... initiative is probably the most important... Suppose a subaltern had just landed and hears the approach of what he thinks is an enemy tank, what would he do? The answer so often was that he would get on the blower and tell his company commander; to the question what would he have done had he been a company commander in similar circumstances came a similar answer. This tendency to hang decisions on the next superior should have no place in the mental attitude of an airborne officer, for in nine cases out of ten he might never make contact; but, even if he did, it was action that was wanted and this was where initiative came in.⁴⁰

The initiative required by airborne troops on a conventional, war-fighting battlefield was equally, if not more relevant in dealing with the complexity and uncertainties encountered during stabilisation operations. Even when the ability to deploy directly from the air was not utilised it was a characteristic in individuals that was a direct result of the airborne capability that equipped its troops to be effective during stabilisation operations.

³⁷ Charles C. Krulak, ‘The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War’, *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol 83 Issue 1, Jan 1999.

³⁸ Nigel Riley, *One Jump Ahead*, (London: John Clare Books, 1984), p.101. Riley parachuted into Greece with 4th Battalion Parachute Regiment in October 1944.

³⁹ John Greenacre, *Churchill’s Spearhead; The Development of Britain’s Airborne Forces during World War II*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010), pp.94-97.

⁴⁰ Richard N. Gale, *Call to Arms*, (London: Hutchinson, 1968), p.116.

Dispersion

There were other characteristics common to the examples examined that were likely to be more familiar to airborne forces than to their conventional counterparts. Dispersion was a factor in the operations in Greece, Norway and Java. The huge areas of operation in Greece and Norway forced Pritchard and Urquhart to separate their subordinate formations and units by great distances. In Greece separate battalions from 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade were operating concurrently in Athens and Drama, 200 kilometres apart. Urquhart had brigades operating in Oslo, Stavanger 300 kilometres to the west and Lillehammer 150 kilometres to the north. These operations had to be sustained against the backdrop of disrupted or destroyed local communications and infrastructure and using the very light communications scales with which airborne forces were equipped.⁴¹ At the lowest tactical level dispersion could also occur between individuals and units due to the breadth of tasks being conducted in a congested environment such as the cities of Athens or Semarang. As one junior officer explained, 'it was not easy to be sure about the activities of even the other companies in 5 Para, as we all seemed to function as separate entities. This, oddly enough, seemed to apply to our other battalions, 4 and 6 too!'⁴² Again, this characteristic of separation was an expected and accepted feature of airborne warfare. From the earliest days of development of Britain's airborne forces it had been recognised that they would often 'have to fight with open flanks and an unguarded rear' and they trained and exercised specifically to operate in such situations.⁴³

Cooperation with Irregular and Indigenous Forces

A further feature of the operations examined was the requirement to work closely with unconventional allied units and irregular indigenous forces. In Greece a degree of cooperation was initially required with ELAS before the open insurgency developed in Athens in December 1945. Major Terence Kitkat was a regular attendee of Brigadier Pritchard's conferences during Operation MANNA. Kitkat, a member of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) was part of Force 133 in Greece whose task was to work with the Greek resistance movements including EDES and ELAS. Members of Force 133 worked closely with 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade to help coordinate the approach to ELAS and other groups following the

⁴¹ AAMA 2/14/1, Report on Operation DOOMSDAY, 1 June 1945. Urquhart would eventually have attached formations operating as far away as Tromsø, 1,100 kilometres to the north of Oslo.

⁴² AAMA 2/2/2, Account of Operation Manna, Captain R.A. Corby, B Company, 5th Battalion Parachute Regiment.

⁴³ TNA, Cabinet Papers (CAB) 120/262, Provision of an Airborne Force, 1 November 1940.

“FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ADAPT”

German withdrawal.⁴⁴ In Norway members of 1st Airborne Division worked alongside MILORG, the main wartime Norwegian resistance movement. MILORG units came under Urquhart’s operational command and were used as interpreters, guides and to guard important infrastructure thus freeing up airborne troops to conduct more complex tasks.⁴⁵ Perhaps however, the most remarkable example of unconventional coordination occurred in Semarang where Poett took an entire Japanese infantry battalion under command for the duration of his operations. This 500 strong unit under Major Kido, known as the Kido Butai, had disarmed and placed itself in a concentration area when Japan surrendered and in line with the orders of its high command. Kido Butai rearmed itself however, when it became clear they were about to be massacred by Indonesian nationalists and successfully fought a running battle with superior numbers of insurgents until the British arrived in Semarang when Kido was subsequently placed under Poett’s command. The Kido Butai was used to defend the key terrain of Gombel Hill, thus freeing up one of Poett’s parachute battalions while keeping the Japanese battalion outside of Semarang city and therefore not offending the legitimate sensibilities of the Indonesian, Chinese and Dutch inhabitants.⁴⁶ Perhaps with the exception of the Kido Butai example airborne forces, due to the expectation that they would be the first regular allied troops to arrive on a battlefield, expected, trained and prepared and had experience of working with allied unconventional and local irregular forces. This included previously working alongside SOE and Jedburgh Teams and resistance groups in Italy, France and the Netherlands.

Conclusion

Complexity, dispersion and cooperation with irregular and indigenous forces were all factors common to a greater or lesser extent during post conflict operations in Greece, Norway and Java. Did the particular capabilities of Britain’s airborne forces help them to adapt to coping with those factors? The primary capability, being able to deploy by air directly into operations was only critical to success in Greece, a useful factor in Norway and not utilised at all in Java. Airborne operations however, did produce individuals, units and formations with characteristics and experience which proved useful in adapting to the requirements of post conflict operations from 1944-1946. Soldiers and commanders were trained to act on their initiative. Units

⁴⁴ TNA, WO 170/518, War Diary 2nd (Independent) Parachute Brigade, Minutes of Meeting held at the Mediterranean Hotel, Salonica, 1345 hours 8 November 1944.

⁴⁵ TNA, WO 171/8468, War Diary 1st Airborne Division, 1 Airborne Div O.O. No.12, 15 May 1945.

⁴⁶ TNA, WO 203/6011, Report on Activities of 5 Parachute Brigade Group in Semarang, A Short History of Defensive Fighting in the Area of Semarang – Kido Butai, 11 May 1946.

were prepared to operate isolated from the rest of their formation. Commanders had experience of working alongside irregular and indigenous forces.

Poett's successor as the commander of 5th Parachute Brigade during the Semarang operation, Brigadier K.T. Darling, considered that the civil affairs and military governance aspects of post conflict operations had become,

too much of a specialist affair surrounded by an unnecessary amount of 'mumbo jumbo', and whether most of the problems arising out of such duties cannot be solved by the use of a modicum of common sense and tact.⁴⁷

Airborne forces certainly could not claim any monopoly on common sense and tact if that was a prerequisite for success in these types of operation, and in some areas, they were not as capable as conventional formations. Parachute battalions were far lighter in terms of manpower than conventional infantry battalions, a distinct disadvantage when trying to control a densely populated city such as Athens or a large rural area of operations as in Norway and Java.⁴⁸ Airborne formations lacked the heavy weapons that were crucial in ending the insurgency in Athens, having to rely on armoured support from 23rd Armoured Brigade. They were also deficient in the engineering and logistic support critical to supporting humanitarian missions and the restoration of civil amenities. In Greece and Java much of the heavy work involved in those tasks was undertaken by the engineers and logisticians of British-Indian Army formations.

Nevertheless, the DOOMSDAY post operational report concluded that an airborne formation was suitable 'to carry out administrative tasks apparently in excess of its capabilities' and that an airborne force was 'flexible enough to adapt itself to this role with success'.⁴⁹ The experience gained in Greece, Norway and Java would be invaluable during the similar operations that followed in the twenty year period of British decolonisation, and beyond.

⁴⁷ TNA, WO 203/6011, Report on Activities of 5 Parachute Brigade Group in Semarang, Conclusions, 11 May 1946.

⁴⁸ An airborne division in 1944 was established at 12,215 officers and soldiers as opposed to a regular infantry division's 18,347. George Forty, *British Army Handbook 1939-1956*, (London: Chancellor Press, 1998), pp.165 & 168.

⁴⁹ AAM 2/14/1, Report on Operation DOOMSDAY, Conclusion, 1 June 1945.