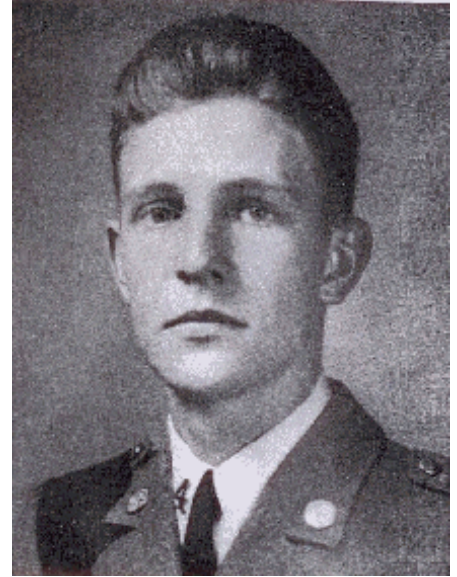


## D-Day Paratrooper

When William Snowden Gaillard, Jr. arrived in England in February 1944, he joined up with one of the United States Army's elite units, the 505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. The regiment had already made combat jumps—a new tactic for the Army—in Sicily and at Salerno, Italy. Now, the regiment was resting and reorganizing for what would be its most challenging operation yet, the invasion of France.

Gaillard, a member of Clemson's Class of 1940, was an animal husbandry major from Eutawville in Orangeburg County. He was a member of the Animal Husbandry Club and Block and Bridle, where he participated on the judging team. In the Cadet Brigade, he was a second lieutenant, having completed ROTC summer training at Fort McClellan.



Gaillard was commissioned as an infantry second lieutenant. After he reported for active duty, he volunteered for the parachute infantry. Parachutists had first been employed during World War I, when an Italian lieutenant was dropped behind Austro-Hungarian lines by Canadian and British pilots. The Germans were the first to use larger formations of paratroopers, or *Fallschirmjäger*, during World War II. Seeing German successes in Belgium and Crete, the United States Army in August 1942 converted its 82<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division into America's first airborne division.

By the time Gaillard reached the 82<sup>nd</sup>'s 505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, the paratroopers had proven their worth. D-Day planners intended to drop airborne units behind German lines in the early hours of the invasion to secure the flanks of the seaborne landings and prevent the Germans from moving reinforcements to the beaches.

The D-Day plan for the use of airborne forces was not without critics. Air Vice Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory was Supreme Commander Dwight Eisenhower's tactical air commander. At the end of May, just days before the scheduled invasion, Leigh-Mallory told Eisenhower that dropping the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Divisions into Normandy would result in paratrooper casualties of fifty percent even before the men reached the ground. Leigh-Mallory warned of "futile slaughter." Eisenhower, according to historian Stephen Ambrose, retired to his trailer



*US Paratroopers prepare to jump on D-Day.*

near invasion headquarters in the south of England to consider Leigh-Mallory's advice. "It would be difficult to conceive of a more soul-racking problem," Eisenhower later wrote. He considered the airborne divisions crucial to the landings planned for Utah Beach—and without Utah, the whole invasion would be endangered. Eisenhower ordered the airborne operation to proceed.

In the dark of night, the C-47 transport planes carrying the 505<sup>th</sup> climbed into the sky and headed south toward Normandy. First Lieutenant Gaillard was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon leader of I Company. By 0300 hours on June 6, the paratroopers were landing, some of the first Allied soldiers into France. The 82<sup>nd</sup> liberated the key town of St. Mere-Eglise, and by nightfall on the sixth linked up with elements of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division which had come ashore on Utah Beach. On D-Day, the two American airborne divisions suffered approximately ten percent casualties, vindicating Eisenhower's difficult decision.

Over the following days, the 82<sup>nd</sup> attacked toward the west, to seal off the Cotentin Peninsula and isolate German forces defending the port city of Cherbourg. By D+11, June 17, the 505<sup>th</sup> had pushed west to Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte where it continued to attack and eliminate German pockets of resistance. First Lieutenant Gaillard was killed in this operation.

By the time the 82<sup>nd</sup> was pulled out of the fight on D+33, it had suffered fifty percent casualties, even more among its junior officers like Gaillard. But the airborne had contributed greatly to the success of the invasion by choking off German reinforcements and preventing them from rushing to the sea where they might have repelled the landings.

William Snowden Gaillard, Jr. was awarded the Purple Heart and was buried in the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, France. He was survived by his parents, a brother serving in the Army in Texas, and two sisters. He is memorialized by a marker in the Eutawville Cemetery.



See also *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* by Stephen Ambrose, 1994.