

Voices of War

Life Story



Gerald William Lathbury DSO

1906 - 1978



Name: Gerald William Lathbury

Other names/aliases: “Legs”

Date of birth: 14.07.1906

Place of birth: Murree, in British India

Nationality: British

Date of death: 16.05.1978

Place of death: United Kingdom

Service No: 34384

Unit(s): Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, Royal West African Frontier Force, serving with the Gold Coast Regiment. Commands: 3rd Parachute Battalion, 3rd Parachute Brigade, 1st Parachute Brigade, 16th Airborne Division, Staff College, Camberley East Africa Command, Eastern Command.

Rank: Brigadier

Medals and awards: Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, Distinguished Service Order, Member of the Order of the British Empire, Mentioned in despatches

Education: Wellington College, Royal Military College, Sandhurst.

Life Story

Early Life and Military Career

Gerald William Lathbury was born on 14 July 1906 at Murree, in British India, into a military family. His father was Colonel (Henry) Oscar Lathbury. Following the family's return to England, Lathbury was educated at Wellington College, Berkshire, and subsequently at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst.

He was commissioned as a second lieutenant into the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry on 4 February 1926. Between 1928 and 1932, he was seconded to the Royal West African Frontier Force, serving with the Gold Coast Regiment. After returning to the United Kingdom, he attended the Staff College, Camberley, from 1937 to 1938, marking him out as an officer considered suitable for higher command and staff responsibilities.

Lathbury was promoted to lieutenant on 4 February 1929, and to captain on 21 March 1938. In January 1939, he was appointed brigade major of the 8th Infantry Brigade, part of the 3rd Infantry Division. At that time, the division was commanded by Major General Denis Bernard, who was succeeded in August 1939 by Major General Bernard Montgomery, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Second World War

Following the outbreak of war, the 3rd Infantry Division was deployed to France as part of the initial British Expeditionary Force (BEF), although it saw little action during the early months of the campaign. On 29 February 1940, Lathbury—then holding the acting rank of major—was posted as a General Staff Officer, Grade 2 (GSO2) to the 48th (South Midland) Infantry Division, commanded by Major General Andrew Thorne. This division, a first-line Territorial Army formation, had only recently arrived in France.

During the German invasion of France in May 1940, the 48th Division, together with the bulk of the BEF, was compelled to withdraw toward the Channel coast and was largely evacuated during the Dunkirk evacuation. In recognition of his service in France and Belgium, Lathbury was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). For the remainder of 1940, the division was stationed in south-west England, engaged in anti-invasion duties.

Airborne Service

In September 1941, Lathbury transferred to the British Army's newly formed airborne forces and was appointed Commanding Officer of the 3rd Parachute Battalion. The battalion formed part of Brigadier Richard Gale's 1st Parachute Brigade, alongside the 1st and 2nd Parachute Battalions. In December 1941, the brigade became part of the newly established 1st Airborne Division, commanded by Major General Frederick Browning.

Lathbury oversaw an intensive period of training for the 3rd Parachute Battalion before being posted in May 1942 to the Air Directorate at the War Office as a General Staff Officer, Grade 1 (GSO1)

In December 1942, he returned to field command, being promoted to the acting rank of brigadier and appointed commander of the 3rd Parachute Brigade, succeeding Brigadier Alexander Stanier. The brigade, part of the 1st Airborne Division, comprised the 7th, 8th, and 9th Parachute Battalions, all recently converted from infantry roles. Lathbury oversaw further training and organisational consolidation of the brigade.

In April 1943, Lathbury was selected to command the 1st Parachute Brigade in North Africa, succeeding Brigadier Edwin Flavell, and handed over command of the 3rd Parachute Brigade to Brigadier James Hill.

Sicily and Operation Husky

At the time of Lathbury's arrival, the 1st Parachute Brigade had recently been engaged in heavy fighting during the Tunisian campaign and had sustained significant casualties. During Operation Husky, the Allied

invasion of Sicily, Lathbury's brigade was tasked with the capture of the Primosole Bridge, south of Catania. During the operation on the night of 13–14 July 1943, Lathbury was wounded in the back and both thighs but remained in command until relief forces arrived. For his conduct during the operation, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). The citation noted his leadership in organising and directing the brigade's assault, his presence at the objective despite dispersal during the drop, and his continued command under fire during subsequent German counter-attacks.



Officers of the 1st Parachute Brigade headquarters, May 1944 with Brigadier Lathbury seated in the centre. *(Public Domain photo, taken from Wikipedia, attributed to Paradata UK - <https://www.paradata.org.uk/media/11020>)*

Operation Market Garden and Arnhem

During Operation Market Garden (September 1944), Lathbury's brigade—comprising the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Parachute Battalions—was tasked with advancing from the drop zones west of Arnhem and securing the Lower Rhine road bridge, a key objective for the Allied ground advance.³

The brigade landed on 17 September 1944. As is well documented, the operation suffered from several systemic weaknesses with drop zones located several miles from the objective, inadequate intelligence assessment regarding German armoured formations in the area, and unreliable airborne radio communications.⁴ These constraints significantly limited Lathbury's ability to exercise brigade-level command once the battle developed.

Command Difficulties and Wounding

As German resistance intensified on 18–19 September, Lathbury attempted to move forward to re-establish contact with subordinate units and to clarify the tactical situation. This was consistent with airborne doctrine, which emphasised personal reconnaissance by commanders when communications failed.⁵

On 19 September 1944, while moving near Oosterbeek, Lathbury was seriously wounded by German small-arms fire, generally described in sources as sniper fire.⁶ He was incapacitated and subsequently captured by German forces. His removal from the battlefield occurred at a critical stage, when the brigade was already fragmented and battalion commanders were operating independently.

Urquhart later wrote of the impact of Lathbury's loss:

“The loss of Brigadier Lathbury at that stage deprived the brigade of its only effective coordinating authority.”⁷

With Lathbury wounded and captured, brigade command effectively ceased to function as a unified headquarters. Command devolved to battalion and company commanders, most notably Lieutenant Colonel John Frost at the Arnhem bridge.

Consequences for the Battle

While Frost's 2nd Parachute Battalion successfully held the northern end of the bridge for several days, other elements of the brigade were unable to break through German positions to reinforce him. Historians generally agree that this failure was not attributable to Lathbury personally but to the broader operational circumstances.⁸

Cornelius Ryan, whose account draws heavily on participant testimony, characterised Lathbury as:

*"A competent and steady officer whose misfortune was to be wounded at the moment when his experience was most needed."*⁹

Captivity and Later Career

Following his capture, Lathbury spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner of war, initially hospitalised due to the severity of his wounds. He took no further part in combat operations.

After the war, he returned to military service before retiring from the British Army. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Lathbury did not publish memoirs and rarely appeared in post-war public discussions of Arnhem. As a result, his role has often been overshadowed by more prominent figures such as Urquhart and Frost.¹⁰

Footnotes and Sources

British Army officer service records; see also Otway, *Airborne Forces* (London, 1951).

London Gazette, award citations for the Distinguished Service Order, 1943.

Middlebrook, Martin. *Arnhem 1944: The Airborne Battle* (London: Viking, 1994), pp. 91–95.

Urquhart, R.E. *Arnhem* (London: Collins, 1958), pp. 24–31.

Hibbert, Christopher. *The Battle of Arnhem* (London: Batsford, 1962), pp. 83–85.

Middlebrook, *Arnhem 1944*, p. 254.

Urquhart, *Arnhem*, p. 113.

Ryan, Cornelius. *A Bridge Too Far* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), p. 339.

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