

**Notes on the organization of the
British Parachute Battalion
1941 to 1945**

and also

**Brief notes on the organization of the
Independent Parachute Company
1942 to 1945**

A www.bayonetstrength.uk PDF

1st draft uploaded 30th September 2019

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Introduction

This piece marks the beginning of the 'second phase' of my study of various British Army unit organizations of the Second World War.

Having begun these studies with the standard Infantry Battalion, there is always a dilemma when trying to apply the same criteria to other unit types. This is because no matter how specialised they may appear to be, the framework of a typical Infantry Battalion is almost always discernible in their organization, and they will in large part use the same weapons and equipment that have already been covered.

This then will be the first of a 'Notes on' series, which will seek to avoid repetition of matters already detailed in the main British Infantry Battalion pages, and instead focus on the differences found in specialised unit organization.

As far as possible, the information included here is obtained from contemporary documents, with a list of sources and acknowledgements given at the end. A quick note on spelling; I have gone with the contemporary Serjeant rather than the modern Sergeant, and organization rather than organisation, as that was how the British Army spelled it in the 1930s and 1940s.

This document gives an outline of the development of the Parachute Battalion and its subunits, as well as the closely related Independent Parachute Company. Complete descriptions of the Parachute Battalions discussed here are available in PDF files accessible from the below linked area of the site.

[British Army organization during the Second World War](#)

This is the next step in replacing my defunct www.bayonetstrength.150m.com site, which had wandered around the internet since about 2000. This new attempt represents the content and detail I would have very much liked to have been able to include from the outset, but has taken a great deal more time, effort and of course expense to pull together than I ever imagined.

Looking back at this subject for the first time in a good many years, I have been reminded just how unsatisfactory much of the information I have gathered is. If anyone reading this actually knows some of the detail that I evidently do not, or at least has an idea of where it might be found, feel free to drop me an email. See the Home page for contact info.

I hope this proves of use to anyone interested in the subject.

Gary Kennedy

September 2019

Organization of the British Parachute Battalion

1941 to 1945

A total of four War Establishment (W.E.) tables were issued for the Parachute Battalion during the course of the war. The first three of these represented a stage in the development of the unit, while the last was effectively a minor rewrite.

Overview

The Parachute Battalion as described herein was to be found as part of a Parachute Brigade. Its parent Brigade could be either part of an Airborne Division or one serving in an Independent role. There were no airborne units in the British Army at the outbreak of war in September 1939; it took two years to assemble 1st Parachute Brigade, and longer still for it to be trained and equipped to perform its new role.

Outline development - 1941 to 1945

The Parachute Battalion, as authorised under the first W.E. issued for such a unit by the British Army, consisted of a Battalion Headquarters, Signal Platoon, Mortar Platoon, Headquarter Company and three Rifle Companies. Headquarter Company contained just the Administrative Platoon, and at this stage none of the Headquarter Company personnel had to be parachute qualified. Each Rifle Company contained three Rifle Platoons, each of three Sections with a Bren light machine gun per Section, while at Rifle Company level there were two 3-inch Mortar Detachments.

In May 1942 the Battalion was reorganized, though overall it still consisted of a Headquarters, Headquarter Company and three Rifle Companies. Headquarter Company now contained an Intelligence Section, a Protective Section, Signal Platoon, Mortar Platoon and Administrative Platoon. Each Rifle Company still had three Rifle Platoons, each of three Sections, and each Rifle Company had two 3-inch Mortar Detachments. Added to the Rifle Company was an Anti-tank Section, which on paper at least was equipped with one of the more bizarre wartime weapons.

In early 1944 the Parachute Battalion underwent its final major reorganization. Headquarter was expanded, consisting of the Intelligence Section, Signal Platoon and the Administrative Platoon, and now two Mortar Platoons and an Anti-tank Platoon. One of the Mortar Platoons could be re-equipped as a Machine Gun Platoon, and the Anti-tank Platoon was armed with man-portable weapons only. Each Rifle Company still had three Rifle Platoons, each of three Sections, but no longer had any Company level support weapons.

Overleaf is a chart showing the overall development of the Parachute Battalion from 1941 to 1945.

Evolution of the British Parachute Battalion, 1941 to 1945

Detail	1941	1942	1944	1945
i). Personnel				
Officers	25	25	29	29
Warrant officers	6	6	6	6
Staff-serjeants	4	4	4	4
Serjeants	56	57	55	55
Corporals	42	50	53	53
Privates	403	471	466	466
Total, all ranks (including attached)	536	613	613	613
ii). Transport				
Bicycles (folding)	12	13	16	16
Bicycles	13	13	16	16
Motorcycles	0	2	2	2
Motorcycles (125-cc)	0	0	18	18
Cars (4-seater)	1	1	1	1
Cars (2-seater)	5	5	1	1
Cars, 5-cwt	0	0	1	6
Trucks, 15-cwt	1	1	5	5
Lorries, 3-ton	8	8	8	8
iii). Weapons				
Pistols	162	175
Machine carbines	67	93
Rifles	298	345
Light machine guns	27	29	39	39
Medium machine guns	0	0	4	4
Anti-tank rifles, .55-inch	10	10	0	0
Projectors, infantry, anti-tank	0	0	19	19
2-inch mortars	0	28	28	28
3-inch mortars	10	10	8	8
Discharger cups	14	32	0	0
Smith guns	0	3	0	0
Signal pistols (issued as required)	27	27	19	19

Note

Allocation of individual weapons not given in 1944 or 1945 War Establishments

The elements of the Parachute Battalion, 1941 to 1945

Below follows a more detailed examination of each subunit (defined as Sections, Platoons and Companies) within the Battalion.

Battalion Headquarters (1941 to 1945)

Headquarters was small compared to the standard Infantry Battalion, initially containing the command staff and Regimental Police section. The former included the normal posts of commander (a Lieutenant-colonel), Second-in-command (Major), Adjutant (Captain) and a Subaltern. The latter consisted of the Provost Serjeant and six Regimental Police.

Other key personnel in Headquarters were the Regimental Serjeant-major (Warrant Officer, class I), Orderly Room Serjeant and initially the Intelligence Serjeant.

A major difference between normal Infantry and Airborne units was the provision of medical services. The Parachute Battalion had attached to it a Medical Officer from the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), as normal, but rather than infantrymen turned stretcher-bearers he was joined by RAMC personnel proper. The RAMC complement of one officer and eight men in 1941 increased to one officer and 18 other ranks by 1944, with medical orderlies being attached to each Rifle Company.

Headquarters transport was minimal, with none allocated in 1941, then just two motorcycles in 1942. By 1944 there were six motorcycles, two cars and a single Jeep. From 1945 at least the number of Jeeps was increased to six.

Under the original Battalion Headquarters there was only an Intelligence Serjeant. In 1942 an Intelligence Section was created in Headquarter Company, with a Serjeant and ten men. By 1944 it consisted of the Intelligence officer (a Subaltern), a Serjeant and seven men: from this date its armament included eight sniper rifles.

Signal Platoon (1941 to 1945)

I have not been able to uncover anything on the internal structure of the Signal Platoon. In 1941 it was a very brief subunit, with an officer, Serjeant and 18 signallers, ten of who were wireless operators and eight 'visual signallers'. From 1942 this increased to 24 signallers and added a batman for the Subaltern.

3-inch Mortar Platoon (1941 to 1945)

As mentioned, there were relatively few infantry weapons that were unique to airborne units. The 3-inch mortar used by the Parachute Battalion was the same as that in the Infantry Battalion proper, and similarly the fire unit was the Detachment of a single weapon. Each Detachment was initially eight strong and in the absence of motor vehicles they carried the mortar and its ammunition.

From 1941 to 1943 the W.E. for the Parachute Battalion included a single Mortar Platoon with four weapons. Additionally, each Rifle Company had two Detachments of its own, so overall the Battalion mustered ten 3-inch mortars, compared to the six of a standard Infantry Battalion. From 1944, the Rifle Companies lost their 3-inch Mortar Detachments, and in turn a second Mortar Platoon was created in Headquarter Company, giving a reduced total of eight 3-inch mortars in the Battalion.

At the same time, the Battalion added four Vickers medium machine guns, described as being "*for one platoon only, as an alternative armament to four 3-inch mortars*". This at once added an important weapon to the Battalion, but only at the expense of another, namely its mortars. Despite this trade off it does appear that the majority of Battalions opted to field a single 3-inch Mortar Platoon and a single MMG Platoon, each with four weapons of the relevant type. This move did coincide with the change in handling of the 3-inch mortars in the standard Infantry Battalion, from Detachments being seconded out to Rifle Companies to the Platoon becoming the principal fire unit, which may have influenced this development.

Protective Section (1942 to 1943), then;
Anti-tank and Anti-aircraft Platoon (1944 to 1945)

The 1942 organization included a small Protective Section with just six riflemen (one a Corporal) armed with a veritable arsenal that included two Bren guns, one Boys anti-tank rifle, and two rifle discharger cups to launch the No.68 anti-tank grenade.

With the 1944 reorganization a new Anti-tank and Anti-aircraft Platoon was formed, which effectively centralised the Protective Section and the Anti-tank Section of each Rifle Company (see later) into a single subunit. I have not seen any outline of its internal structure, but this can be reasonably surmised from the roles of its members, which were 30 anti-tank personnel, 7 LMG numbers and riflemen, a Serjeant, and a Subaltern with batman. Its primary armament was two Bren guns and ten projectors, infantry, anti-tank (PIATs).

On this basis I would suggest the former Protective Section became an Anti-aircraft Section, now seven men, with two light machine guns and a PIAT in place of the Boys. That would allow the 30 anti-tank personnel to be deployed in three Sections, each of a Corporal and nine men, with three PIATs per Section.

Administrative Platoon (1941 to 1945)

As might be expected the Parachute Battalion had little in the way of organic transport. The Administrative Platoon contained the bulk of this, which was made up of one 15-cwt water truck and eight 3-ton lorries. These formed part of the 'seaborne tail', the airborne term for those vehicles that would re-join their units following operations. Also in the Platoon were the usual cooks, storemen and repair personnel, to which were added parachute packers and physical training instructors.

The Rifle Company (1941 to 1945)

The Rifle Company used the familiar format of a Headquarters commanding three Platoons, each with a Headquarters commanding three Rifle Sections. Unusually for the British Army, the Company also included fire support elements, at least until the reorganization of early 1944 when they displaced to Headquarter Company.

One constant was the Rifle Section, which throughout the war consisted of one Serjeant, one Corporal and eight men. Platoon Headquarters was initially the Platoon commander (a Subaltern), Platoon Serjeant and an orderly. In 1942 a batman was added for the officer, bringing the Rifle Platoon strength to 34 all ranks. It is in the important area of weapons that things become less than straightforward.

In 1941 the weapons allocated to the Rifle Section were detailed in the W.E. table as two pistols, two machine carbines, six rifles and one light machine gun. There is no indication as to which weapon was intended for which man. On the above basis I would suggest pistols for the No.1 and No.2 of the Bren gun, machine carbines for the Serjeant and Corporal, leaving rifles for the remaining six men. This is only supposition though I do think pistols for the Bren gun team seems highly likely. There is no way to ascertain whether both NCOs would be authorised machine carbines, however the Section commander would normally be so armed.

The 1941 Platoon Headquarters had a pistol, machine carbine and rifle, which likewise I would suggest were for the Subaltern, Serjeant and orderly respectively. Also provided was a grenade cup discharger, for use with the No.68 grenade, and a Boys anti-tank rifle, which was normally allocated to one of the Rifle Sections.

The Platoon underwent some changes to armament with the introduction of the May 1942 establishment. Each Rifle Section had the same small arms as before, plus a 2-inch mortar (modified) and a grenade discharger for one of its rifles. Platoon Headquarters added a second rifle with the arrival of the officer's batman and deleted its grenade discharger.

The machine carbine in 1941 was the Thompson submachine gun but by 1942 the authorised weapon was the recently introduced Sten gun. Despite its many flaws, the Sten had the advantage that it could be broken down into its component parts (body, stock and magazine) which could then be slipped under the numerous straps that constituted the parachute harness, meaning a man could jump with a weapon on his person other than a pistol. Rifles and support weapons were originally landed in containers, which could become separated from troops, particularly at night.

The 1942 Parachute Battalion W.E. included a pool of 429 Sten guns 'for parachutists' with no indication of how this odd number was reached. If you take the 613 all ranks of the 1942 Battalion, then deduct the 35 attached, 93 for Sten guns already issued, 29 for Bren gunners, and 27 for the Bren No.2 in each Rifle Section, you are left with 429.

This may simply be a mathematical coincidence and I make no claim it is correct. However there were certainly more than enough Sten guns available to rearm a significant proportion of the men of the Rifle Platoons and Sections with a machine carbine instead of a rifle.

As parachute equipment underwent rapid improvement new means were devised of delivering weaponry, among which was the valise. This was a case which was initially attached to the wearer's body so that the hands remained free while exiting the aircraft. Once the parachute was deployed the valise was detached and lowered down on a strap so that it impacted the ground before the man. This was the same method used for the equipment bag, which could also be used to carry a disassembled Sten gun.

The use of the 2-inch mortar in the Rifle Section also raises questions. This weapon has already been discussed in the [Organization of the British Infantry Battalion](#) section of the site. In the standard Infantry Battalion it was issued one per Rifle Platoon and was provided with both smoke and high explosive ammunition, the ratio of which underwent a number of revisions. The Parachute Battalion W.E. of 1942 however showed each 2-inch mortar as being provided with nothing more than six smoke rounds. The reason for this restriction is unclear to me, which is appropriate given the purpose of a smoke screen.

A revised model of the 2-inch mortar was produced for airborne forces, the Mark VIII, also referred to as the 2-inch mortar, modified. This eliminated the long, narrow baseplate in favour of a small, slightly curved, rectangular base that could be pushed into soft ground for stability.

The Rifle Company of 1941 and 1942 included two 3-inch Mortar Detachments, each of a Sergeant and seven mortar numbers. These were armed and equipped in the same way as the Detachments in the Mortar Platoon of Headquarter Company. Also included in the 1942 Rifle Company was an Anti-tank Section, which adds another confusing weapon to the discussion.

Appearing in the aftermath of the Dunkirk evacuation, the Smith Gun was a weapon of the most expedient nature. In the towing position it looked reasonably conventional, being mounted between a pair of solid metal wheels. To be brought into the firing position, it was simply turned through 90 degrees, so that the right hand wheel became its base, also serving as a turntable on which the gun could be rotated through 360 degrees. It was of 3-inch calibre and could fire both armour piercing and high explosive ammunition.

Offhand it might sound an ideal choice for airborne troops however it proved to be an undeniably poor weapon. By 1941 it was in service with Home Guard units and acquired a bad reputation (deservedly or not) for accidents during training, sometimes fatal. Nevertheless, by 1942 it was on the Parachute Battalion W.E.

It seems safe to say that, while authorised, it was never fired in anger by airborne troops. For a quick summary of the Smith Gun, see the below link;

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30025246>

The Anti-tank Section of the Rifle Company consisted of a Corporal and six men, and in the absence of the Smith Gun they were limited to a Sten and six rifles, one of the latter being fitted with a discharger cup to fire the No.68 anti-tank grenade.

Rifle Company Headquarters was initially two officers (a Major and a Captain) and seven men. It included the standard posts of Company Serjeant-major, Company Quartermaster-serjeant, clerk, storeman, and three orderlies (messengers). The 1942 re-organization added two batmen and three RAMC personnel.

Changes of 1944

The Rifle Company of the 1942 Parachute Battalion looked a little unwieldy compared to standard version, with two separate 3-inch Mortar Detachments and an oddly equipped Anti-tank Section, along with the normal three Rifle Platoons.

A new War Establishment was issued for the Parachute Battalion in early 1944, under which the Rifle Company was slimmed down to a simple Headquarters and three Rifle Platoons. By this date British W.E. tables no longer showed individual weapons, but a few details do appear on the 1944 document.

There was no change to the strength of the Rifle Platoon, which remained as a Headquarters of one officer and three men, and three Rifle Sections each of a Serjeant, a Corporal and eight men. Each Section still had a Bren gun and a 2-inch mortar (airborne). Included in the weapons of the Section now was a sniper rifle. There was no mention of discharger cups for use with the No.68 grenade.

Platoon Headquarters added a light machine gun marked as 'pool reserve'. There was also a PIAT for each Rifle Platoon, though curiously these are shown under the Administrative Platoon noted as being 'for issue to rifle platoons as required'.

There was still a pool of Sten guns for issue to parachutists, now set at an even 300 weapons for the Battalion. All this makes it difficult to establish just what the typical armament of a Rifle Section was likely to be.

The W.E. for a Canadian Parachute Battalion was based heavily on the British equivalent. This showed the individual weapons for the Rifle Section, which in 1944 consisted of two machine carbines, six rifles, one light machine gun, one pistol, one sniper rifle and one 2-inch mortar. That compares well with the last detail available for the British Parachute Battalion in 1942, the only difference being the replacement of one pistol by a rifle, while also reflecting the addition of a sniper rifle, as found in the British version. Given the pool of Sten guns available however, there seems to be infinite room for variation within units.

Notes on the Independent Parachute Company, 1942 to 1945

Each of the two British Airborne Divisions raised during the war included an Independent Parachute Company. The primary role of these Companies was to land ahead of the main force and mark out the dropping zones and landing zones for the following waves of their Division. Once this task was completed they undertook the normal combat role of a Rifle Company.

The organization of the Independent Parachute Company was very similar to that of the Rifle Company of the Parachute Battalion. Under the 1942 W.E. the Independent Parachute Company consisted of a Headquarters, two 3-inch Mortar Detachments, an Anti-tank Section and three Rifle Platoons. Of these elements all except Company Headquarters were organized in exactly the same manner as the Rifle Company of the Parachute Battalion.

There were some differences in weapons, in that the Independent Parachute Company added a 2-inch mortar to each 3-inch Mortar Detachment and the Anti-tank Section, as well as to Company Headquarters and each Platoon Headquarters. Again these were listed as only having smoke rounds on the 1942 W.E. table. In each Rifle Section two of the six rifles were identified as being the sniper variant.

A new War Establishment was issued for the Independent Parachute Company in late 1943. This actually made very few changes, as the overall structure of the Company remained as before. The three Boys anti-tank rifles (one per Rifle Platoon) were replaced by the same number of PIATs, and a reserve Bren gun was shown under each Rifle Platoon Headquarters. There was also still a discharger cup in each Rifle Section and the Anti-tank Section.

Company Headquarters was much larger than a Rifle Company, at 48 all ranks. This increased strength was mostly due to the addition of personnel for administrative duties and also the inclusion of seven signallers.

Annex A - Signal equipment Notes

I have found no detail whatsoever in British documentation regarding the number and type of wireless sets issued to a Parachute Battalion. The below is taken from the War Equipment Table for a Canadian Parachute Battalion dated August 1943.

1st Canadian Parachute Battalion served as an integral unit of 3rd Parachute Brigade from this same date, and fought with 6th Airborne Division throughout the campaign in Northwest Europe. The War Establishment for a Canadian Parachute Battalion was almost identical to the British equivalent and went through the same organizational variations.

The Canadian War Equipment Table uses the establishment for a Parachute Battalion based on the British organization introduced in May 1942. I have not seen any later versions and do not know what amendments were made to wireless equipment with the change to the new establishment in early 1944.

No.18 set distribution 1942 to 1943

Subunit	No.
Battalion Headquarters	1 1 (spare)
Mortar Platoon	1 1 (spare)
Rifle Company (each)	1 1 (spare)
Total, Battalion	10

No.38 set distribution 1942 to 1943

Subunit	No.	Comments
Headquarter Company		
Mortar Platoon	10	2 per Detachment* 2 for Platoon Headquarters
Rifle Company (each)		
Company Headquarters	1 2	(spare)
Mortar Detachment (each)*	2	
Anti-tank Section	1	
Rifle Platoon (each)	1	
<i>Total, each Rifle Company</i>	<i>11</i>	
Total, Battalion	43	

*Two No.38 sets per Mortar Detachment would allow each 3-inch mortar to operate as a fire unit with a forward observer reporting back to the baseplate.

There were doubtless changes to this allocation from 1943 onwards. In the Infantry Battalion each Rifle Company dropped to just two No.38 sets, as it was found the routine issue of one per Rifle Platoon made the commander too conspicuous. Whether this was reflected in Parachute Battalions I do not know.

One obvious omission from the Canadian War Equipment Table is any mention of line equipment. It was no doubt thought that airborne units would have little opportunity to lay wire as they were envisaged for fast moving operations. In reality the Airborne Divisions found themselves involved in more static situations on occasion, where radio was normally supplemented by telephone communication.

Annex B - Ammunition allocation Notes

The May 1942 War Establishment for the Parachute Battalion was the last to include not only full detail on weapons but also their allocation of ammunition.

Weapons	Rounds (on man or with gun)	Rounds (per weapon, reserve)	Rounds (total per weapon)
Pistols, .45-inch, automatic	21	14	35
Rifles, .303-inch	50	100	150
Machine carbines, 9-mm Sten	256	64	320
Light machine guns, .303-inch	1000	1000	2000
2-inch mortars, modified	6	-	6
3-inch mortars	48	54	102
Anti-tank rifles, .55-inch	50	50	100
No.68 grenades (rifle)	2 boxes for Protective Section; 1 box per Rifle Company Anti-tank Section 1 box per Rifle Platoon Total 14 boxes (17 grenades per box) = 238		
No.36 grenades	2 per man (excepting 35 attached and 63 non-jumpers) = 1032 Reserve = 500		
No.69 grenades	30 per Rifle Platoon = 270 Reserve = 150		
Smith guns	20	20	40

Notes

1. Not included in the above was the Projector, infantry, anti-tank, which had yet to be issued. Normal allocation was six bombs per PIAT with 12 in reserve.
2. There is no split given for smoke and high explosive for the 3-inch mortar, which would assume it was all HE. The six rounds for the 2-inch mortar are smoke, with a further 12 signal rounds held as a Battalion reserve.

Sources used and Acknowledgements

War Establishment Tables

A Parachute Battalion, ref III/127/1, notified in Army Council Instructions 24th September 1941, effective date 12th September 1941

A Parachute Battalion, ref X/127/2, notified in Army Council Instructions 3rd June 1942, effective date 13th May 1942

A Parachute Battalion, ref I/241/1, notified in Army Council Instructions 22nd March 1944, effective date 28th February 1944

A Parachute Battalion, ref I/241/2, notified in Army Council Instructions 28th March 1945, effective date 15th March 1945

War Equipment Table

War Equipment Table for a Canadian Parachute Battalion, Militia Form ref M23-229, August 1943