

Richard Lawrence Davidson  
Captain, A Company, 1st Battalion, 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne  
Division



Liam Kellogg

Richard Lawrence Davidson was born on June 30, 1911 (alternate records show date of birth as June 11) to Richard Thomas and Annie Bell Davidson. He was the youngest of three children; his sister, Pauline, was born in 1907, and his brother, Charles Edward, was born in 1909. They lived on a small family farm in the area of Alcoma and Mt. Rush in Buckingham County, Virginia, the geographical center of the state. Richard's mother died on April 26, 1912, when Richard was ten months old, and his father was left to care for the three children while still maintaining the farm, on which he grew tobacco and hay and raised cattle. Richard attended Buckingham County High school through his sophomore year, but dropped out before the start of his junior year, presumably to help support his family. In his late teens he began working odd jobs, and continued working as a laborer until April of 1930, when, at the age of 19, he enlisted in the Army. Records suggest that Richard was sent to Texas for basic training. It was while in Texas that Richard met his future wife, Patricia "Pat" Lewis. After completing basic training Richard was stationed in the Fort Davis Zone of the Panama Canal, where he was promoted to sergeant and served as a machine operator. During his time in the Canal Zone Richard became involved in the local Freemason lodge and was initiated in 1934. The lodge, designated "Sojourners", was attached to the Massachusetts state lodge. On April 8, 1934, Sergeant Davidson returned to the United States, arriving in New York Harbor aboard the S.S. *Cristobal*.

From New York, Sergeant Davidson traveled to Scranton, Pennsylvania, where he attended International Correspondence Schools. On October 24, 1934, he was awarded a diploma in salesmanship, whereupon he returned to the Fort Davis Canal Zone. 1940 census records show that he was still in the Canal Zone as of April 1, 1935, and was part of 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division. In 1940 Sergeant Davidson was stationed at Ft. Hamilton in Brooklyn Borough, New York. Later that year, Sergeant Davidson joined the staff at

the Tennessee Military Institute in Sweetwater, Tennessee, where he served as an assistant to a professor of military science and tactics, and an assistant to the commandant.

It is unclear exactly when, but shortly after World War II began Sergeant Davidson joined the newly-formed Airborne (paratrooper) program of the US Army, and on September 19, 1942, he was awarded a certificate for completing a photo-intelligence course run by the US Army Air Forces at the Army Air Intelligence School. This eight week course only accepted participants who were already air intelligence officers, indicating that Davidson, labeled on the certificate as a 1st Lieutenant, had already completed Airborne and officer training prior to his completion of the photo-intelligence course. Sometime between his completion of this course and September 1943, Davidson was promoted to the rank of captain and given command of Able Company, 1st Battalion, 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 101st Airborne Division of the United States Army.

On September 4, 1943, Captain Davidson and the rest of the 502nd PIR, which had been temporarily stationed at Camp Shanks, New York, boarded the SS *Strathnaver*, bound for England. The ship's freshwater tanks had accidentally been filled with saltwater, forcing her to put ashore at St. John's, Newfoundland, just six days into the voyage. While in port the men of the 502nd, including Able Company, conducted marches and barracks checks, and continued their physical conditioning. The *Strathnaver* left port on September 26 only to strike rocks on her way out of the harbor, forcing her to turn around again. The men once again continued their training in Newfoundland until, on October 4, they boarded the SS *John Ericsson*, arriving in Liverpool, England, on October 18. Each man in the regiment was awarded an American Defense Ribbon due to the remarkable amount of time the journey took.

The 502nd, once in England, was based near Chilton-Foliat. Under Captain Davidson, A Company continued its training, this time with a heavy emphasis on preparing the Company for their mission on D-Day. They practiced using German weapons and capturing mock positions, and participated in company and battalion-sized parachute drops. In early 1944 Captain Davidson also led A Company in several full-scale exercises, including Exercise Beaver in March, Exercise Tiger in April, and Exercise Eagle in May. On June 5, A Company, along with the rest of the 1st battalion and other parts of the 502nd, assembled at Membury Airfield in south-central England, near Hungerford. That evening, they boarded C-47 Skytrains and took off, headed for Normandy.

The 502nd was assigned to drop-zone (DZ) A, slightly northwest of Andouville-La-Hubert, France. Its mission was to destroy a German battery of 122 mm artillery pieces west of St. Martin de Varreville. These artillery pieces were designed to bombard the beaches and pin down Allied infantry who would be storming the beaches in just a few hours. It was crucial that this battery and others like it be neutralized before H-Hour. 2nd Battalion, followed shortly by the 3rd, was to move towards the battery, protected by 1st Battalion on its left flank. After assembling on the northern end of the DZ, A Company was to move east, clearing sets of buildings as they went. From there, a group of A Company men would move north, parallel to the Foucarville/Andouville La Hubert Highway until they reached a bridge to the southwest of Foucarville. Group "W" of A Company would blow the bridge and set up a roadblock on its north side. Other groups, designated "X", "Y", and "Z", would clear buildings and then move north and create road blocks adjacent to group "W"'s road block. 1st Platoon was designated as the reserve unit and would stay behind to protect the company command post. As each building was cleared, it was to be searched for communication lines, microphones, explosives, and mines.

Any communication lines that were discovered were to have their terminals disconnected to hinder German communications and delay reinforcements and orders. German slit trenches and fox holes were listed as priority targets.

The C-47s carrying the 502nd approached the Cotentin Peninsula from the west, and the pilots were to give the green light just before reaching the DZ. Heavy German anti-aircraft fire and low cloud cover caused confusion among the pilots, which resulted in most of the regiment being dropped outside the DZ. Two sticks of men from A Company, including Captain Davidson, received the green jump light too late, and by the time they jumped, the plane was over the English Channel. Captain Davidson, along with the rest of the men from the plane, drowned in the English Channel. Captain Davidson's body was recovered three days later, on June 9.

The regiment was so scattered following the drop that Colonel Cassidy, commanding officer of the 502nd, ordered all men who could be assembled to attack the set of buildings, nicknamed "X", "Y", "Z", originally assigned to A Company. These buildings housed a large German force and took most of D-Day to clear. Lieutenant Wallace Swanson, A Company executive officer who would replace Captain Davidson as company commanding officer, was north of Col. Cassidy's position with 44 men. Cassidy ordered Swanson and his men to establish roadblocks around Foucarville, a mission originally assigned jointly to A and B Companies.

Men from different units of the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions assembled in 1st Battalion's drop zone throughout D-Day. By mid-afternoon an assortment of men were working to clear X, Y, Z, and the surrounding barracks and buildings, all of which were heavily fortified and occupied by Germans. By the end of the day most of the roughly 1,000 German soldiers in the area had been killed. While a few men from A Company were engaged in clearing the buildings, the bulk of A Company, directed by Lt. Swanson, was north of Foucarville

establishing roadblocks. Although they encountered several hundred Germans in defensive positions, A Company successfully set up the four roadblocks, as ordered. Shortly after 8 PM 1st Battalion, which had been moved to Foucarville to regroup, received a message from A Company saying that it was “catching hell” and urgently requesting supporting mortar fire. An attempt to provide mortar fire was made, but the mortar crews could not establish sufficient contact with A Company to receive calls for fire; therefore the mortar crews were redeployed. A Company forced a surrender from the German strong point that evening, taking 87 German prisoners. Fighting died down at 11 PM, and the battalion was relieved the following morning.

Although Captain Davidson died before his Company began their fight on French soil, his presence was known on D-Day. His leadership and training in the months leading up to the assault on the beaches of Normandy prepared the men of his company to successfully complete their missions. A Company, along with the rest of the 502nd, experienced heavy resistance on D-Day, and faced difficult odds, and yet its men performed their duties in an exemplary manner. These men played a crucial role on D-Day and in the rest of the Normandy campaign, protecting the infantry on the beaches and stalling the Germans. It was thanks to Captain Davidson’s steadfast leadership and dedication to his Company that they were able to complete their jobs so effectively, and the free world owes him its utmost gratitude.

Special Thanks To

Ruby Flood, Captain Davidson's great niece, for providing many documents and giving so much insight into the personal aspects of Captain Davidson's life.

Dr. Tom Long, for all his guidance and organization in the research and writing.

All the members of the Albert H. Small Normandy Institute for their assistance and camaraderie.

Mr. Albert Small for the tremendous opportunity to research Captain Davidson's life and travel to Normandy to visit Captain Davidson's grave.

#### Online Resources

<https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/VI/AAF-VI-20.html>

<https://www.ablecompany502pir.org/>

[https://www.ablecompany502pir.org/files/A\\_Co\\_1st\\_Bn\\_502nd\\_PIR\\_Unit\\_Rules\\_and\\_ByLaws.pdf](https://www.ablecompany502pir.org/files/A_Co_1st_Bn_502nd_PIR_Unit_Rules_and_ByLaws.pdf)

<https://books.google.com/books?id=X-ht5GngPU8C&pg=PA34&lpg=PA34&dq=ss+strathnaver+september+4+1943&source=bl&ots=paDVQBG3n4&sig=ACfU3U1j85kdtkVXml90-O1H5Iejv15-pw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiyyKWykafkAhXHhOAKHbbfCWsQ6AEwAXoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=ss%20strathnaver%20september%204%201943&f=false>

<http://www.pandosnco.co.uk/strathnaver.html>

<https://www.pararesearchteam.com/502/502-Swanson-01.html>

<http://screamingducks.com/the-division/502-2/502-troopers/>

[https://ww2db.com/images/battle\\_normandy225.jpg](https://ww2db.com/images/battle_normandy225.jpg)

<https://www.dday-overlord.com/en/d-day/beaches/utah-beach>

## Notes

Author contact: Liam Kellogg [lpkellogg03@gmail.com](mailto:lpkellogg03@gmail.com)

The author has copies of documents regarding Captain Davidson's life. All known official Army records regarding Captain Davidson's service were destroyed in the National Personnel Records Center Fire of 1973.