On 22 June 1940 Churchill ordered the War Office to form a corps of 5,000 parachute troops.\(^1\) He did so having read reports of the startling successes of Germany’s airborne campaign in Norway, the parachute assault on The Hague and the glider enabled capture of Fort Eben Emael on the Albert Canal just a few weeks earlier. However, with the battle of France going badly and the prospect of a battle for Britain on the horizon it was difficult to discern the utility of such a clearly offensive orientated capability. Therefore, with no obvious operational imperative on which to base development, it was left to the central staff to reverse engineer a concept of employment for the Prime Minister’s latest initiative. In October 1940 the Joint Planning Staff published its paper, “Joint Plans: Basic Requirements”, which detailed Churchill’s future aspirations for major offensive operations including a large-scale invasion of mainland Europe from the north, west or south. It listed the military capabilities required to enable the seizure of a bridgehead on an enemy-held coast and stated that the future utility of British airborne forces lay in assisting such deliberate offensive operations. In fact the Joint Planning Staff was certain that “unless a proportion of airborne troops are included in the proposed Invasion Corps, the difficulties of certain operations we are considering might be considerably increased.”\(^2\)

The official concept for British airborne forces thus came to reflect the German doctrine as observed in Norway and the Low Countries just a few months before: the use of an airborne force as an enabler to a wider land operation. The views of the Joint Planning Staff were endorsed by the more prescient members of the airborne community, such as Colonel J.F. Rock of the Central Landing Establishment, who wanted to concentrate on equipping and training a force to take part in large-scale operations. It was argued that:

\(^1\) Churchill to War Office, 22 June 1940, The National Archives: Public Record Office [TNA]: CAB 120/262.
\(^2\) Future Plans: Basic Requirements, 18 October 1940, TNA: CAB 84/20/212.
... both parachute troops themselves, the aircraft which carry them and the aircraft crews are too valuable to be used up on minor operations not directly connected with an offensive against Germany or Italy. British parachute troops should not be used for anything less important than say the capture of Channel ports, as a preliminary to an invasion of France or in a major offensive against the Italians in North Africa.³

Despite Churchill’s aspirations, in late 1940 there was very little chance that a major offensive would be launched in either northwest Europe or the Mediterranean within the foreseeable future and Britain’s burgeoning airborne establishment could not afford to wait for such an opportunity. The airborne experiment was beginning to consume valuable resources, particularly in terms of manpower and aircraft, and some areas of the military hierarchy, both khaki and light blue, had become uncomfortable with this diversion from their core expansion programs. As early as August 1940 the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir John Dill, lamented that the paratroops under training consisted of specially picked men and contained a high proportion of officer material. The army was badly in need of such men and, if there was no immediate prospect of them being used for offensive operations, he wanted to have such high-quality manpower be returned to their original units.⁴ The RAF was also institutionally opposed to any further airborne development. Without suitable transport aircraft available, bombers had to be converted to drop paratroops and tow gliders, a policy which would divert aircraft away from the RAF’s core doctrine: the strategic bombing offensive. The attitude of the Air Ministry was typified by staff officers such as Air Marshal Sir John Slessor, who argued: “We do not know if we will ever have to use a[n airborne] force of this nature, and certainly at the present time it would be wasting a lot of valuable effort to attempt to produce one.”⁵

Under such pressure, a visible return on the investment of men and equipment was required. It was clear that if Britain’s airborne forces were to survive beyond infancy they could not isolate themselves and conduct only training and experimentation while waiting for the opportunity to assist a large-scale invasion. Simultaneous with this realization, Combined Operations Headquarters (COHQ) began to recognize the potential benefits that airborne warfare could contribute to its own offensive operations. In late 1940 combined operations were essentially a naval affair with amphibious maneuver being the sole

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³ Training and Organisation of Air-Landing Troops, July 1940, TNA: AIR 32/2.
⁴ Chiefs of Staff Committee, 6 August 1940, TNA: CAB 120/262.
⁵ Director of Plans to Vice Chief of the Air Staff, 16 November 1940, TNA: AIR 20/3732.