

Reflections: When the Old Wound Aches

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By NELSON BRYANT

WHEN the barometer drops, and a cold, wet wind comes out of the northeast, my old wound aches and sometimes reminds me of when my fellow paratroopers and I jumped into Normandy a few hours before dawn on D-Day 50 years ago.

For many years I exploited that wound, made less than a week after my first combat jump by a machine-gunner bullet that entered my chest and exited through my shoulder blade. Until I was in my late 50's, I would contrive to steer post-dinner conversation around to the war, and then, if sufficiently unbroken by emotion and drink, I would tear off my shirt and invite guests to poke their fingers in the fore and aft indentations. There were times when I set fire to the hair on my chest to add a bit of drama.

Of war, heroism and the plain of life; a few second thoughts about D-Day.

ma to my antics and to better reveal the little entrance scar.

"Wear the silver badge of courage, drop like an eagle on your prey," the airborne recruiting posters had said, and the soars were symbols, albeit fading, of my having heeded that call.

Now having passed three score and 10, I have, I believe, put my participation in the Normandy and Holland jumps and the Battle of the Bulge in reasonable perspective. A decade ago, I wrote that taking part in those campaigns with the 82d Airborne Division overshadowed all that followed, including love, marriage, career and children. That is no longer true. I have belatedly come to understand that sloughing across the plain of everyday life with dignity and as much honesty as one can muster calls for as much heroism. If only because the struggle never ends, as assaulting a flaming hill.

Were it not for the old wound aching, months could pass before I thought of lying alongside a hedgerow, condoms taped over the holes made by the bullet, trying to swallow some of the soup a buddy was serving me from his fire-blackened helmet, or before I again recalled the first German soldier I killed as he walked along a dirt road in Normandy on the birdsong days of June 6 not knowing that I had him in my sights from the hillside above, slowly taking up the slack in the trigger and thinking all the while that the act was indecent, that it would

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American paratroopers pictured in flight on their way to landing sites in France on D-Day.

be justified only if he was firing at me.

A few hours later that dangerous reluctance departed in a short, fierce fire fight that took the lives of several of my buddies.

THERE are also recollections of absurd encounters as when, the second morning after D-Day, I headed up a snarling patrol of thrice. I was given that task not because of my rank (I was a private first class) but because I had a smattering of French, enough to allow me to converse with the natives of the region. A mile or so from our own front line we came upon a farmhouse whose occupants greeted us warmly. The daughter of the household, a handmaiden, strapping 6-footers, told me that there were no Germans in the vicinity. She then asked if they could have the silk parachutes (she had petticoats and such things in mind)

that she had found in one of their pasture. I hesitatingly responded, as befitting my fatty rank, that they were hers for the taking.

A big table was carried out into the doorway, draped with white linen and laden with bread, cheese, cognac and wine, and the scouting patrol became a celebration of the invasion. I still wince as I think of what could have happened during our garrulous, lurching return to our little redoubt on Hill 34.

My Normandy endeavors ended the following day on a patrol led by Maj. Shields Warren Jr. The single bullet that buried me in my back was one of a burst that killed my fellow scout who whispered, "Help me, help me," then died.

The patrol surged on, encountered more resistance

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Jumping Into The Dark

Pfc. Nelson Bryant ... Company D, 82nd Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division ... was one of 13,000 American paratroopers dropped behind German lines at 0002Z A.M. (midnight) D+1, 1944. The goal was to open control of the roads leading to the Rhine-Erft gap to prevent German reinforcements from getting to Utah Beach, where Americans would be landing with the tanks.



Most of the paratroopers missed their drop zones by many miles. In some cases, because of this, soldiers were forced to walk miles before linking up with the first Americans they found.

① Private Bryant landed about three hours after the rest of his company. His first concern was finding his commanding officer, Lieutenant Norman McVicar, Louie's dad. McVicar was clinging to trees far above the ground. Private Bryant crawled up the tree trunk and found his father. They crawled out onto the ground, and they continued southeast to Hill 30. ② the rendezvous point for the 82d Regiment. They spent the night there, waiting for some train the next day, during which time they had been missing for 12 hours.

They made radio contact with their battalion commander, Lieutenant John B. Shadling, ③ who had about 30 soldiers with him, and who had been under enemy fire one hour earlier. They had been unable to make radio contact with Lieutenant Michael McVicar, Louie's dad, because he had crashed his plane and was unable to get in touch with anyone. They had been missing for 12 hours.

Lieutenant McVicar's forces stumbled onto those of Maj. Charles Morris Jr., 82d, whom he was with the Germans, they ran up with the Sherman forces, and all gathered on Hill 30. ④ where they spent their first night.

Private Bryant's group took part in a series of reconnaissance patrols. On a daytime patrol led by Major Morris's new deputy after D-Day, Private Bryant and a few others were hit by anti-aircraft fire. Private Bryant was shot through the chest; the anti-aircraft gunner was killed. A few days later, paratroopers picked up the wounded on Hill 30 and took them to land hospitals on the beach. Three survivors were later recuperated back to Normandy.

MAP COURTESY OF THE 82D AIRBORNE DIVISION

Paratroopers Face Death

Major Morris ... 82d Airborne Division

... 1st Battalion, 82d Parachute Infantry Regiment

... 82d Airborne Division

... 101st Airborne Division

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that it could handle, and returned under fire. Major Warren bent over me and said, "Notice, if you can't wait to be taken prisoner, you'll have to get off your butt and get the hell out of here." So I did.

I got out there, put my left arm over the shoulder of a fellow paratrooper and managed a stumbling run back to Hill 39 where, dressed with a pair of shorts, I joined the other wounded. I don't remember her whether we spent two or three days there. We were so weak that we could not assault troops from 10th Armored division as he recovered. I passed out and was being loaded into an ambulance that took us to a rear hospital on the shore of the English Channel. I was lucky because I was lying on the opposite side of a wet sand dune when water was falling.

An older man's face, gaunt and stoic, peered down from the dark clouds above me.

"Poor fellow," he said. "How long have you been here?"

"I don't know," I replied, wondering how long I've lay here, wondering if I would ever get out. I had torn off all of the medical identification tags, that hung from my neck.

The attack ended when he told some passing G.I.'s to take me into a large tree, where a weary soldier placed me down and covered my chest wound.

Recovering in a hospital in Ypres, I was at first unable to move because of my body, but by early July I was walking, and, nine afterwards, jogging. In the months that followed, I wanted to get back in shape, to make the shamed shadow effect caused by my deformed body go away. As my body healed, my desire to avoid further conflict began to fade.

When rumors reached that my outfit was preparing to jump into Normandy, I desperately wanted to participate in it. I signed myself wherever I felt the hospital formally, but by late summer I was back with my company — many now facing among them — no less than 100 missing men. On Aug. 17, 1944, I landed in a soft, standing landing as a wide umbrella-like canopy of X paratroopers in the Netherlands. Part of the reason for the double landing was that, not yet fully recovered, I had to jump again. This time, however, my equipment was little M3 carbine, a pouchful of shells for it and a couple of grenades. I soon regretted the choice of the carbine, which was useless at distances over 100 yards.

The Holland jump took the starch out of me, and when the Battle of the Bulge erupted a few months later, I would have been content to sit on the sidelines. But this was not to be.

Right after the Bulge, our platoon did wonders, however, at a skirmish for one more. Turned up of newspaper headlines, a New York Times story in Germany in December 1944, it reported that the company had 100 paratroopers and requested permission to be transferred to the Pacific Theater, where the war had not yet ended.

The commandant said, "Well, we're going to go back to the barracks and rest in good health."

The old mental aches and most of the new ones merged with all the other physical indignities to which my body was subjected. I was never able to get rid of nothing save the attrition of the passing decades.

Of this, however, I have been living on D-Day, and I am grateful that I was part of it. The experience of the war, however, has been a continuous pain cut to the bone. It has been a constant reminder of a life that I never had.

I remember with great fondness the days of basic training at Fort Benning when we learned how to shoot and march and do all the other things that made us soldiers. I vividly recall the day I stood in front of the class because my right eye had been hit by a bullet during the war. That bullet still sits in my eye socket — covering the lost eye vision. And with my right eye closed, I have to turn my head to the left. I used to complain of pains in the ribcage, but I now realize that it was just a muscle cramp. If you want it short, I'll say nothing. The point is, I'm grateful to God because I'm still alive.

I had responded to the call that I heard. In the days weeks of the postwar civilian life, I would often wonder what the call to service had done to me. I was a civilian, because we were supposed to be a leisure class. And although I might not feel the responsibility of caring for my family, I knew that their lives were not enough or meaningful if the greater, that life sense may at least, I was a man.

The old wound aches, and I am an old man filled with wrinkles as they have been given so much time to侵蚀 my skin. I am unable to move, to stand, to walk, to climb, to climb on top of the highest hills, to sit in a chair, to walk or move or do anything with whom I did not have through caring concern of those bullet holes are mostly submerged. And I have no energy, as the anniversary of D-Day approaches, and I am a soldier once again, jumping in the Maine wilderness as sight in his looking wad over shoulder, thinking of the love-hate bond in which I have a shortened relationship.

A Paratrooper's Load

Troops parachuting into Normandy on D-Day carried over 100 pounds of equipment. The standard kit included:

- 1 helmet with liner
- 1 rifle or other gun, bayonet and scabbard (shown is a Thompson submachine gun; Private Bryant carried an M-1 Garand semi-automatic rifle)
- 20 rounds of ammunition
- 2 hand grenades
- 1 anti-tank grenade
- 1 entrenching tool and cover
- 2 parachutes (backup on chest)
- 1 small automobile (attached to chest pocket, used to cut paratrooper lines)
- 1 complete uniform
- 1 field cap
- 1 change of underwear
- 2 pairs of socks
- 1 canteen and cover
- 1 pair of leather gloves
- 6 packages of K-rations
- 1 spoon
- 1 toilet kit
- 1 first aid pack
- 1 packet of sulfur tablets
- 1 escape kit (map of France, compass, money for bribes)
- 1 small clever "cockpit" (to signal other G.I.s)
- 1 field bag with suspenders (to carry on back)
- 1 trench knife and leg scabbard
- 1 pair of boots
- 1 impregnated jump suit (protection against chemical warfare)
- 1 gas mask, with 2 filters

Paratrooper climbing into a transport plane for the flight to Normandy

U.S. Army photo



Nelson Bryant during World War II.



Nelson Bryant in Cape Cod, 1994.