

Five Days on the Run

(Abridged from Lt. Col. Malcolm D. Brannen's Personal Papers)

"I just couldn't get myself free of the parachute. Every other minute someone would run by me on the ground, and it was impossible for me to identify them. I had to quit struggling to free myself. I thought I might drop from the frying pan into the fire." [said] Lt. Malcolm Brannen, 3rd Bn.

Brannen who had landed in an apple tree and was suspended above the earth by only a foot, finally cut himself loose from his harness and found four other paratroopers in the ditch close by — two from the 2nd Bn. 508 and two from the 307 Engineers. Their first task was to escape the machine gun spitting death about 100 yards away. They wanted to go northwest — the direction they expected to find their units, but because of that machine gun and other machine guns in their way, kept moving northeast.

The five paratroopers soon found some wires running beside a main north-south road. "I cut them in several places, took several yards of the wire and hid it. Anyway we figured we disrupted their communications for awhile." said Brannen.

Continuing on, the troopers came across two tents and two motorcycles. They figured it was a German CP. They punctured the motorcycle tires and moved on.

Across another field and another road they found Lt. Harold Richards and Sgt. Hall, both of A Co. 508. By this time the group had grown to 12, with two officers. After a conference they decided to ask directions at a nearby farm house. Brannen pounded on the door and a very excited Frenchmen rushed out of the house. At every window heads appeared, with several "wild eyed kiddos" starrng from the upstairs at the strange American uniforms. From French guide books and maps they learned they were about midway between Picauville and Etienville.

While at the farm house a car came up the road. Brannen went to the road, held up his hands and yelled, "Stop". The driver increased his speed. Brannen jumped out of the way and all the paratroopers fired at the car as it passed. The driver crashed into a stone wall.

Brannen noticed the driver, a corporal, trying to get in the cellar of the house. He shot and wounded the corporal in the shoulder. An officer was crawling toward a luger pistol in the middle of the road. Brannen described the scene. "At the same time he was

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crawling, he was looking at me, and saying in English, 'DON'T KILL! DON'T KILL!' I thought, if he gets to that luger, it's either him or me. So I shot him in the forehead. The blood spurted just like from a fountain, and then gradually died down to nothing.

The officer in the road was identified from documents in his brief case found in the car, and from his hat band, as Lt. Gen. Falley, 91st Infantry Division. A major riding in the car was also killed and the wounded corporal captured.

"The sooner we can get away from here the better," Brannen and his men decided, and set off toward Etienville, the town which the 508 2nd battalion had planned to attack.

Soon they came upon a small settlement where the rear guard picked off a German just as he was aiming to shoot. The shot aroused others. Brannen and a corporal were standing next to each other beside a hedgerow, when the corporal said, "Who shot me?"

At the same time two more shots rang out. Brannen described the corporal, "I saw a stream of blood actually gush from his mouth, and saw him fall straight down, arms outstretched and his heels wide apart painting to the skies. That was the first American I had actually seen killed - a paratrooper from our own 508."

Other shots were fired and the band of troopers ran around the house and barn back down the road from whence they came. The firing stopped, but they could hear the voices following. At a crossroads they met a young Frenchman who directed them toward Etienville. Here they decided to lighten their load. They hid their extra gear, and were off running again. Finding a small wooded area, they stopped for a short rest, but were aroused when they spotted a group of German soldiers in an open field near the woods lined up for noon day chow.

When the paratroopers tried to move away from that area, the Germans detected their movement. Brannen described what happened next:

"Some of the Germans from the chow line headed for our position. We moved as quickly as we could and got into a ditch, covered ourselves and stayed as quiet as possible. The Germans came into the woods, running and jumping ditches. They hunted systematically, taking routes a few yards apart going to one edge of the woods and then doubling back. When they got to the

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ditch we were in, they had to get a running start to jump the ditch. We were lucky they looked at the ground where they were to land and not into the ditch. They actually jumped right over me and one or two others. After about half an hour the searchers returned to the area where the chow line had formed.

We then crawled away from the hunted area through ditches, over mud, rocks, fallen trees and thick underbrush. In a few minutes we came to a nice grove of trees – well cleared, quiet and cool. I called a halt. We were tired, hungry and thirsty and needed a break. We set up a defense with guard points. All this time we had our German prisoner, Gen. Falley's chauffeur. I didn't trust him. I tried to cat nap, but my eyes wouldn't leave the prisoner.

Voices! Shots! – right near us, on the trail by which we entered the grove. We began to move out through a ditch. When the voices got very close and the bullets snapping over our heads lowered, we would lay still hardly daring to breathe. The moment the voices got a bit faint, we would move on again. Finally we got away from the voices and took another short rest, only to hear voices again in about ten minutes."

The chase continued, and at one point Lt. Brannen and his scout Quigg (from 505 PIR) took one route around a field and the rest of the group with Lt. Richards were to go around the other way. They were to meet at a road they could see up ahead. Brannen and Quigg made it to the designated place. They hid in the opening of a hedgerow, covered themselves and waited. There was about five minutes of shooting in the area where the rest of the group would have been, and then silence.

Brannen and Quigg discussed their situation, "Were their friends killed or captured? Would they ever find out?"

They concluded, "We are on our own. We will wait until dark and then head northwest."

When darkness fell they had to turn southeast to avoid a German 88 crew, and after some progress found another hiding place. During the night they could hear coughing on the other side of their hedgerow. When daylight came they investigated and found Pvt. Russell Nosera, 507 PIR. Now they were three. The three hid all day and waited for darkness to travel again.

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Brannen recalled that day, "We watched all day long from our hiding place, hardly daring to breathe or move, as horse drawn vehicles loaded with shells traveled past us toward their gun positions."

Darkness came at midnight and the troopers started again to find friendly American forces. By daylight it had been 24 hours since they had eaten or had water, so they decided to approach a small village to find water and directions. As Brannen stepped into a manure shed, Quigg painted out German soldiers setting up a machine gun. They could not be seen from their position, but when Nosera moved into the shed, the Germans noticed the movement and pointed toward the shed. They decided they would have to run for it.

Brannen led the way. As he ran from one machine gun, he ran face into another, and did a football players spin without around breaking stride, and headed in another direction. Bullets were whistling by him and one hit his trenching shovel hooked to his pistol belt.

Brannen described the rest of his escape;

"I ran into an orchard, then cut a 90 degree angle to the left and crossed a forty yard field in nothing flat, dove into a ditch and started crawling. After about 10 yards, I stopped and crawled back to where I hit the ditch and camouflaged my trail. Once in a spot where I thought I could rest and hide, I covered myself with dead briars. I lay there thanking God that I was small and had made it to safety.

In just a short time I heard voices, excited, high pitched, nervous voices, German and American. The German voices were half English. They were saying, "Come out! Come out! Hans oop!"

Then I heard one of my companions say, "No! No! I don't want to die."

Then "Brrrrrrrr—Brrrrrrrr", a machine pistol.

"I knew what had happened. The voices like a pack of hounds came into the orchard where I was hiding. I prayed — asked forgiveness— asked blessing for my folks and my dearest friends (human and canine). Yes, I prayed and really felt like I had seen the last of life on this earth.

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They came for two hours and more. They shot in every nook and corner, in every house on the border of the orchard. They shot that high velocity machine pistol, Brrrrrrrrrr. Then one German walked through the briars 5 feet from me. I think my heart stopped beating.

More Germans came shooting over my body. I could feel the breeze from the bullets. Some of the bullets buried in the bank behind me, and the dirt kicked up by the bullets fell on me. Twelve times I counted they walked past me shooting at every step. I waited for the thirteenth time. It never came. They went away.

I entered my hide out at about 0800 hrs, Thursday, I knew I had to stay there until darkness. All afternoon our artillery fell around me, and then the P-47s and P-51s, did a beautiful job of bombing, but I was right in the middle of it all. Then the German artillery and mortars would go off. It was a very poor place to be. I waited for dark, praying for it to come soon. Then the Germans started moving in the field around me. They brought 88s, mortars, machine guns and rifles. By dark the field was alive with Germans and their fire power. I couldn't move. I just laid there. My binoculars were cutting into my chest. My carbine had numbed my right hand. I was hungry, I was thirsty. I had no food or water.

Daylight came, and then the fire landing around me was ours, not German, which meant that the Jerries were pulling back and the Allies pushing forward. I waited for what I thought was a Eternity, and then I heard voices. I couldn't make out if they were American or German. Then I heard someone say, "Hear that gun, that's for yar."

Then I heard a German machine pistol and the voice said, "That gun's agin yar."

No German ever said "That gun's agin yar"

Then I yelled, "Hey American -- Hey Soldier!"

"In a moment two privates came over to me and I saw the 90th Div. insignia. They pushed through the briars and bushes picked me and up, and gave me a drink of water. I started to move and my legs were like rubber. The soldiers helped me up and I soon got on my way under my own control.

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Then I went to the manure shed to see what happened there. I found an M-1 rifle which was all the evidence that Americans had been there."

Brannen located a CP of the 82nd Airborne a few hundred yards from his last hiding place. From there he reported to Col Louis G. Mendez, commander of 3rd Battalion, 508 PIR.

1st Lt. Malcolm D. Brannen ended his story by saying, "I thanked God for his guidance and comfort."