

THOMAS J. GINTJEE
2051 Scott Street
San Francisco
California 94115
415/ 346-0151

To: Stephen E. Ambrose, PhD
University of New Orleans

Re: The Road To and On Normandy - 6 June 1944

I was born 15 May 1924 in Oakland, California, and -so to speak-
bred and buttered in Alameda.

At the point of Pearl Harbor, most of my neighborhood cronies
opted for enlistment in the Navy but the idea of the Navy or
Marines tempered my zeal.

I (and a friend, Frank Lyons) opted for the Army and
specifically in the Paratroops -and my friend patiently waited
until I turned the age of eighteen.

We enlisted in September 1942 and were inducted at the Presidio
at Monterey, California.

Being just out of High School and college prepped, I scored high
on the entrance examinations (including the ASTP), which
surfaced later when I became my regiment's West Point Candidate.

After being held an extra day diverting blandishments to join
the Air Corps, my friend and I entrained to Camp Blanding,
Florida, to join the newly formed 508 Parachute Light Infantry
Regiment.

The regiment was one of the first in a new experiment: to fill
the ranks from the beginning rather than the pools made
available from The Parachute School at Fort Benning.

This experience, together with later jump qualifications, came
so close to combat conditions so as to make an Airborne man a
breed apart: you cautiously made friends, at first.

Out of an original complement of about five thousand recruits -
only some fifty percent survived the four months; those
occupying bunks by or across from you could disappear never

to be seen or heard from again.

Some were washed out for attitude or whatever -but most failed during the physical training.

The biggest axe fell at the end of each day when we would run for about an hour; those that fell out were shunted to some other ground unit.

No "Nice try" or pats -just a merciless "Goodbye".

But those of us who remained welded into the strongest of friends which is apparent in the Airborne Community today.

So the regiment went on to complete training at The Parachute School at Port Benning, Georgia.

We qualified as a regiment -every man. No rejects.

Something should be noted about parachuting:

It is fun only for idiots! It is, as someone describing an orgasm, experiencing a "tiny bit of death".

It requires immense discipline to hit that door and not negate the integrity of the exercise -a hesitation could mean a vast separation for the jumpers.

Add to this that you will carry things that can go "snap-crackle-and-pop" offers even less solace.

(I returned to The Parachute School later as an Instructor and, making up some jumps, sans the snap-crackle-pop, found them still as exhilarating [sic] as sharpening a pencil in my ear!)

Many, by no means without great courage, had to be pushed through the door and grateful for it.

These fears, of course, were masked by bravado.

However, the regiment moved up to Camp McCall [sic], North Carolina; since many of our cadre were from the 503, then deployed in the Pacific, speculation was that we would go there. Our regiment, like theirs, was classified as Independent.

So it was a mild surprise to many when we left for New York and on our way to Europe in late December; the most painful plaint, on our final night in New York, was that we were to shed our patches, wings and boots and pose as simple infantry.

Paratroopers posing as "straight legs"?

Someone expostulated that they should give us tutus and we could pose as USO dancers.

In any event -we staged by Port Stewart in Northern Ireland near a veteran (505) regiment just moved up from Italy. Many of them were billeted with us and gave much good advice to us for what was to come. Valuable information.

As an independent regiment of the 2nd Parachute Brigade, we were assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division and dispatched to Nottingham, England. Nottingham! Robin Hood... the Sheriff... Sherwood Forest.

We were greeted most warmly as we settled into our base (before and after Normandy); an English youngster (David J. Pike) was so entranced by our presence that he later became instrumental in erecting and maintaining a 508 museum after the war. Including a book. A plaque in the city reads (not verbatim)[sic]: "Staunch men have walked these streets But none braver ...even in legend."

The subtitle of Pike's book reads "The Impact of an elite American Parachute Regiment on an English City in WWII".

We made our thirteenth jump at night in England since we had not jumped since the States and also, I suspect, to get that "unlucky number" behind us.

We were finally staged (and sealed) to our airfield in early June and housed in the hangers; the people of Nottingham sensed that this was something more than an exercise as many lined the streets waving flags as we were bussed (not trucked) by.

Our briefings, to my mind and this day, were devised by some unbalanced people: We were shown maps with names cut out for "security reasons" which rendered it a sheet of paper with a bunch of lines - no reference points.

At the eleventh hour when the complete map was shown - it became

exotic but with not much more meaning.

Next came an inane order that we were to drop with our weapons broken down or otherwise unloaded —the theory being that, if we were only using knives and bayonet, any firing could be presumed to be enemy. MiGod! Any fool could figure that out!

Airborne smarts, green or veteran, can take over:

Area maps meant not so much because we had often jumped clean off them. An atlas would be more desirable.

(Earlier on a night jump in the States near Gallatin, Tennessee, my group missed our drop zone by some fourteen miles!)

Some heeded the weapons order but most ignored it.

Our regiment, being green in a veteran division, was dropping further in, not in assault, and more or less a reserve; to straddle key approaches and stop anything with mines and might. So each of us carried in a landmine which is about the size of a six-inch deep hubcap.

Besides the mine addition —we carried in our usual accoutrements with extra socks (Athlete's feet is norm for a paratrooper), extra ammo, smokes, grenades and other things in our musette bag —anyone hanging grenades exposed in a parachute landing is someone to avoid at all costs.

We also carried a Gammon grenade: a British concoction which was a plastic explosive wrapped around a detonator and bound with a black tape.

It looked like a water canteen —more so because you twisted off the cap to activate it. It was supposed to be effective against armoured tanks.

Our jump suits were anti-gas impregnated which made them look like something dipped in a light-colored mud: they were stiff, wrinkled and hot.

Being with the Heavy Weapons Company, I wrangled a last minute assignment to take in a team of 81mm mortars —namely because my closest friends (Hesse, Johnson, Alexander) dated from our Blanding days.

(We earlier had an opportunity to write last letters home including one really last letter -to be mailed only in event you were killed.

I declined.

Otherwise my Mother would have gotten it when I would later be reported KIA on Normandy this first day.

I was carrying an M-1 Garand rifle in addition to a folding-stock carbine which was holstered to my web belt; the rifle would be encased in a padded canvas bag slung diagonally across my chest. I intended to go with them locked and loaded.

Our heavy weapons (mortars and light machine guns) would be dropped by separate equipment bundles.

My three friends were delighted that I would lead them - they weren't sure how good I was (nor I) but they knew that I was lucky.

We enplaned about dusk on 4 June and were ready to go when the recall reached us.

Frustration? Rage? Hell, yes!

Relief? Nuts!

We were ready and eager to go! Just quit horseing [sic] and jerking us around and just get us there! Normandy sounds like a red French wine!

We boarded the planes the next night about eleven o'clock as dusk was falling and this time left the ground; the mood was sober and somber as on any other routine jump as we had all learned to mask our private fears -and the only diversion was when someone, on this long flight, had to finally relieve himself -usually at the last minute...the bulk of our equipment and the simple mechanics of relief would require the greatest or desperate urgency beyond belief.

This is not a casual stroll to the John and I am not sure how they managed it or even want to know.

I was jumping #3, with #4 (Hesse) #5 (Johnson) #6 (Alexander) directly behind me in a stick of about sixteen. Preceding me

was the Jumpmaster (#1, Harry Higgins) and #2 (Pence, a radioman).

The takeoff was uneventful but grew spectacular as the flight droned on.

The plot was that, after assembly, the serials would feint towards Spain traveling over water -turn sharply on a signal from a submarine -and come between Jersey and Guernsey Islands on the West Coast and cut across the Cotenton [sic] Peninsula from left to right.

We're were much too far back in the flight to see any subtle maneuvering much less submarine lights.

But we were to hug the water about 600 feet -go to 1000 over the beaches to avoid small arms fire -come back to 800 feet for our drop. So said the briefing.

However, "spectacular" is not sufficient to describe the sights that unfolded: #1 and I spent much of the time in the door watching as the aerial rendezvous developed: serials of planes - one ours hooked onto- another tacking onto us. Others circling and waiting.

Flying in Vees, the formations held tight and the hopes were growing that... this time someone knew what they were doing and doing it right! Overhead, we could see our fighter escorts circling lazily.

There was little turbulence [sic] since we were soon over water and the visibility was excellent and the formations swept on just as it was choreographed.

There was something almost majestic in this scene: the awesome display of disciplined military might -each of these planes carrying eighteen paratroopers eager and armed to the teeth. Who could stop us?

The fervor and eagerness to jump this mission was so strong that our Company Cook was on one of these planes!

After about three hours in the air -we could see the dark shapes of Jersey and Guernsey. Supposedly the Air Corps or the RAF had knocked out any searchlights or Anti-Aircraft on the islands because we passed serenely between them.

We rose up over the beaches but could detect nothing but dark and silence.

The ride then began to get a little turbulent and some low clouds came in view -thickening at times to obscure the other planes.

But the ground below remained dark and silent -no flashes of gunfire whatsoever. Could we be catching them asleep?

After some minutes the warning (red) light went on.

#1 and I could see something through the clouds, like a light show, far ahead of us on the horizon.

I quickly resumed my #3 position -assuming we would jump before or after all that light.

The ride seemed to be more turbulent and the plane appeared to bank to the left -then leveling... the Go (green) light on! We hit the door.

(The pilot, in theory, should come to a near stall of about ninety miles an hour and, above all, lift the tail -or we would jump right into it. This guy did lift his tail but was barreling it!)

The "opening shock" of my parachute was the hardest that I have ever encountered! I felt every pound of my extra weight.

Quickly and automatically checking my canopy overhead, I could see the sky and knew that I had blown out some panels. But I could only see half of my canopy because the American helmet won't allow it: it tips forward when the back of it hits the nape of your neck.

But that wasn't my immediate problem -things were going zip zip zip through what remained.

I had no time to study the terrain or try to pick out any landmarks as my attention was focused on the lightshow below me -all kinds of tracer bullets arcing up at you... coming up as fireflies then zipping past.

Thankfully, I was coming down like a bat out of hell!

Two guns did finally isolate on me as I was coming down on a field about 50 x 100 yards -each straddling a corner of the

field and holding me in a shallow crossfire as I headed directly toward them.

I desperately tried to maneuver my landing position so I could come in frontally but still had the presence of mind to flip back my bolstered carbine and entrenching tool before I hit. (Unless you are about 6'4" -the carbine and similarly bolstered entrenching tool extend a few inches below your knees... and, hitting the ground before your knees, can do grievous [sic] things to you. I am 5' 10".)

I came down between both guns which continued to track me all the way down ...about thirty feet from them ...but I hit like a sack of shit for which I am eternally grateful.

Shit will splatter on impact.

If I had bounced so much as six inches there would have been terrible things done to my head. Providing, of course, that I still had one.

Just then, another paratrooper was coming down (the only other) on the field and the two guns began tracking him. He simply blew up in the air.

They must have hit his landmine or Gammon grenade for that explosion -but he just went "boom!" about 75 feet off the ground.

Mortar fire began to fall in the field -one near enough to scatter some sod on my legs. But none were closer because they would also have taken out the two machine guns.

The field suddenly lit up with what I thought was a flare - but it was a plane whining overhead on fire. And I saw for the first time the "Rommel Asparagus" planted in the field -stakes to break up glider landings but also to catch an unwary paratrooper as I saw the ends were pointed. Then everything went dark again.

The two guns again gave me a few bursts which were passing but a few millimeters over my head; the guns were evidently zeroed, like ours, to cut someone a few inches above the knee in the

middle of a field.

One damn thing for sure —those gunners were sure that they had taken me out on the way down.

I lay dead.

I was lying there facing a gun on my right and left —lying some twelve inches above the ground over a landmine and other snap crackle and pop.

But, more importantly, I was atop my rifle still in its canvas container. I could not, in my position, draw my holstered carbine —and could only reach a knife strapped to my boot.

With this knife, I watched (with rising panic) these gunners who now had my full attention: I was afraid they would come out and bayonet me for more practice.

I continued to lay dead and I will never know why, so close, my hand movements did not give me away: that fickle helmet kept blocking my view and I had to keep tipping it up to see! Why my movement was not detected is one of the many questions I intend to address My Maker ...later.

In any event, those Germans would never have believed that they could have missed me.

I was not conscious of any firefights around me as the two guns sent a few more bursts over my head the next hour —but no one came out —even to search me for valuables. Then it became very quiet.

I knew it would be light too soon and that I had to get my ass off that frigging field.

Awhile later, I flipped over on my back.

A parachute is not the easiest thing to get out of: unlike other Airborne troops with a single button release, we had a series of snaps, hooks, buckles —all compounded by the attaching gear we were wearing.

And when a paratrooper can somewhat waddle about because the weight is somewhat compensated by the bulky parachute on their back —once landed, you become a super Dolly Parton.

Flipping over on my back I was flat on Normandy soil

with everything now extended about twelve inches above me.

I could no longer see the Germans (if they came) but I saw above me the constellation Orion.

(As a kid, I became interested in Astronomy –but what I know could be fit into a gnat's ear and still have room for a watermelon seed or two. But I knew Orion and his "Belt of Courage". Courage! Boy, could I use some!)

Not emboldened enough to stand up and get out of this gear – I unsnapped some things and knife-gnawed my way though the others with minimum movement –staring at Orion.

It took awhile.

Dawn was coming up when I sufficiently freed myself. Grabbing some grenades and carbine clips (the ones on my belt were for the rifle) from the bag holding the mine – I screwed up enough courage to make a dash for the nearest hedgerow that held one of those damn guns. I probably made that thirty feet in .9 second!

But they had gone.

To make sure, I tossed a grenade over the hedgerow and was rewarded with a facefull [sic] of dirt and scratches from branches.

The procedure for a jump is for the first man, upon landing, to follow the direction of the plane –the last man to follow the plane's opposite direction and meet somewhere in the middle. Hugging the hedgerow, I began in the direction of the plane – most difficult in this bocage country; the thick hedgerows were too high to see over and would have revealed irregular patterns – some long and narrow, some square, some large, some small – no pattern whatsoever.

Unlike other jumps, parachutes were widely scattered, many only one to a field ...and I came across only, probably, about fifteen parachutes in my search: some were dead –other parachutes empty as if someone had carted off the dead. It was quiet.

My compass told me direction but my route was directed more by the zigzags of the hedgerow. I felt it was crazy to cut openly

across a field – so my path was more circular than a straight engineering line.

I found no one alive. I saw no one.

The weather was fine and warm and the total environment was deceptively idyllic: cows were grazing and, other than a few shots, nothing like a major firefight. Scattered shots, sometimes at you, that you couldn't trace the source.

You learn some things quickly and many you would never need to again apply: you don't go through gates to enter a field unless you wish to draw some fire. Look for some kind of hole along the hedgerow that offers egress to the next.

Do not completely trust what you hear – I heard some short bursts from a machine gun which I recognized as one of ours. I made my way to them close enough to realize that they were speaking German!

Don't place much trust on the natives –and this is not a denigration of the French, but those in this area were pro-German or at least waiting to see which way the ball bounced: the bets were that the Germans would kick our butts back into the English Channel.

I spotted a Frenchman carrying a staff and cautiously made my way towards him ...until I saw him talking to about a dozen Germans; he was making some gestures towards a field, away from me, and I saw the "staff" was a rifle.

I know of no paratrooper that went "to ground" and was sheltered by a French family until any linkup.

There were notable exceptions such as Mme. Simone Renaud of Ste. Mere Eglise – who is beloved by the American Airborne Community.

Still hugging the hedgerows, I began cutting across more Germans –some less than fifty yards and often startling us both! I drew some heavy fire as I scampered back into another field. But they did not pursue. This happened several times.

Eventually, I began to return some fire while running because, if I'm killed, I won't be found with a weapon unfired.

Also that it might attract some friendlies or let someone know I was there.

Lord knows I didn't need any more Germans.

So it went for some time in a surrealistic mode: pastoral sights ...then Germans. A silence serene without firefights ... then Germans. The air clean and devoid of gunpowder.

You come across a wire -cut it! (Actually, you cut out a section so that someone has to bring out more wire to splice it.)

Just keep running.

And with it, the nagging and dooming thought that you are the invasion!

You and that carbine is all that is left!

(Years later, I spoke with a fine Company Commander of the Battalion (Jonathan Adams) who had assembled about three hundred men who told me:

"Hell, Gintjee, after three days I thought they had called the whole invasion off!")

Sometime in the late afternoon I spotted two paratroopers coming towards me whom I recognized as riflemen from "A" Company... I could have kissed them!

Since we had come from opposite directions and had not seen any of our group -which direction now?

I had cut across a narrow paved road sometime earlier -and now emboldened by company and more firepower -led the way back: my reasoning was that the "'briefing" said we could expect to meet our own armour coming up from the beaches about noon.

It was well past that but they would have to come up a road such as this and not through the bocage.

There was a semi-covered hollow in a corner of a field by the road -high embankments around us but open to the front with a clear field of vision and fire. (It had, alas, no "back door" or escape.)

So I made my stupid decision!

We would hold there and observe the traffic -and if the beach armour didn't get there -to cut across that road at night moving East.

There was a lot of traffic -all German.

Armour and men started down that road about an hour later and continuously; some even supped with us (five feet of hedgerows separating us) as we could hear their mess gear.

I kept waiting for the column to pass - I was certain that we should get the hell away from there. But they kept coming.

This impasse continued for some time... then about six Germans - two officers with noncoms -came onto the field with their backs to us. They were pointing to the other end of the field.

Turning, they saw us trying to huddle into invisibility. But we had those six cold. They also had us cold.

My instinct was still to open fire when one of the riflemen grabbed my barrel ("It's useless! They'll kill us!").

He was right without question.

But the tussle was academic as a horde of Germans flooded onto that field and we stared into, by my frenzied count, about umpteen-and-three barrels!

The Germans were very slick: they went immediately to a hidden pocket on the chest which held a switchblade knife -not a weapon as much as something to cut parachute shroud lines if you were hung up in a tree.

I was amazed at how many Germans were there: they moved us down the road about 5000 yards, lined with them, to some sort of Command Post.

Here I found their "bag" of six paratroopers -among them Hesse, Johnson and Alexander -who had been "rolled up" immediately upon landing.

Hesse had been shot in the back but upright and stable, Johnson was intact; Alexander had been shot through the wrist but most

important! he landed waist deep in the flooded fields. Anything deeper, you drown!

The weight and sheer impact of landing would keep you on the bottom -compounded by our anti-gas impregnated suits which let water in (collar, sleeves) but no water out!

I could then finally piece together what had happened to our plane:

#1 probably caught it in the air, #2 on the ground -and then everyone after #7 going into the drink ...a hell of an ending for that long road from Camp Blanding, Florida!

Everything we knew was purely empirical: only what we had seen and -for all we knew -the whole regiment was blown away!

Coming dusk, about the same time we had taken off from England, we were ordered to stand.

I was sure that they were going to gun us down.

We faced them with stoicism.

But the Germans turned us around and put us on a truck.

I was one of the best map readers in the Battalion, even giving classes on it, but I still to this day do not know precisely where we landed or probed.

I do know that we were about twenty minutes away by truck to Saint Saveur le Vicompte where we were taken for possible interrogation.

So began a new role as a Kriegsgefangener (prisoner of war). But that is another story...



Headquarters Company, First Battalion,
508th Parachute Infantry Regiment
82nd Airborne Division

Second Academic Company
The Parachute School
Fort Benning, Georgia
20 April 1988