

MY PARATROOP ACTIVITIES

By Worster M. Morgan

Because of color blindness I was rejected as an aviation cadet. I wanted something different so I volunteered into the Army and the paratroops, not really knowing what I was getting into. It wasn't long before I found out. A boy said he enlisted as a paratrooper for the extra pay, but he didn't realize he had to jump to earn it. I can't cover 3 plus years in thirty minutes so I thought we'd hit some high spots in paratroop training, and airborne activities in the "D-Day" invasion of Normandy in 1944, and in Europe. Once on the ground a paratrooper becomes an infantryman. The transportation is quite different.

My outfit was the first unit to start from scratch as a Parachute Infantry Regiment - the 508th. We opened Camp Blanding in Florida for our 13 weeks of very rigorous basic infantry training. The average age of our regiment was under 19, and those boys were in great physical condition. We could double-time for an hour in gas masks. In February 1943 the regiment was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia for jump training. The school normally took 4 weeks - physical training, parachute packing (I thought it would be safer to pack my own chute), static line hook-up procedures, controlled and freefall drops from 250 foot towers, harness training, landing techniques, and finally 5 jumps to earn [our] paratrooper wings.

This is when some of the boys were weeded out. These jumps were from 1,200 feet. Our combat jumps were from about 800 feet. There is a special routine for a jump. As the plane approaches the drop zone the pilot turns on two lights at the rear door. The red light is the signal for the jumpmaster to start the procedure. He calls everyone to stand up and hook their parachute harness to the steel cable static line running the length of the plane. Each jumper checks the man in front of him to see that his chute is okay, and that he is properly hooked up. Starting from the rear each jumper calls out "18 O.K., 17 O.K." down to the first man. The jumpmaster calls out "Close in the door" and you have never seen a bunch of people compacted in such a small, tight group. As the pilot comes over the drop zone he reduces speed, feathers the left engine and turns on the green light. Everyone screams or curses and jumps out. You fall 300 to 400 feet while counting 1000 - 2000 - 3000, and if your chute hasn't been jerked open by then you pull the reserve. After the initial shock of opening you have a great trip down, very quiet with a nice view. The main back chute was 32 feet across, and the reserve 28 feet. On one practice jump I hit my head so hard I was kept under observation for 3 days. My wife thinks they should be watching me still.

In March we moved to Camp McCall, North Carolina for combat training and airborne maneuvers. When I made my first night jump I was so nervous (scared actually) that I tried to adjust my reserve ripcord to a hair trigger while we were standing in the door. The reserve burst open in the plane and the crew chief helped me barely get it off my chest in time to go out. I should not have jumped without the reserve, but I didn't want to go up by myself the next night. I made 15 jumps and never had to use the reserve.

One day I was called into headquarters and told to keep a close eye on a young boy who had just joined the regiment and my S-2 (Intelligence) Section. He was a Jew who had managed to get out of Germany through Switzerland and Italy, came to America through an aunt, and had enlisted into the army even before being naturalized. We were wary of him, but he became an American citizen while with us, changed his name from Kahn to Kennedy for dog tag purposes, and became a very fine paratrooper. He was especially good on night scouting patrols because of his German tongue. He had some interesting stories about the Nazi treatment of the Jews. Harry had been adopted from an orphanage when he was 4 years old. His adoptive parents as well as his biological family and relatives died in concentration camps. After the war, when we were stationed in Frankfurt, Germany as General Eisenhower's honor guard, I got a jeep and we went to Mannheim to see his former home. The apartment building had been gutted by Allied bombs. He is still a very dear friend.

Another interesting story is about a young German Jew - Werner Angress - who joined the S-2 Section in Nottingham, England just before the invasion as an interrogator. He made his very first parachute jump on "D-Day", was captured and taken to Cherbourg. When the allies took Cherbourg he was freed and returned to us. Immediately after the German surrender he went

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back into Germany and found his mother and brother who had been imprisoned. He brought them back to America, went to college, earned a Ph.D. and taught at Wesleyan College in Connecticut. He is now back in Berlin.

After 6 weeks of war games and maneuvers in Tennessee we were deemed ready to go overseas. The regiment shipped out in December 1943 for a camp in Northern Ireland. The battleship Texas was the lead ship in a convoy of about 65 vessels. We landed in Belfast and moved to a small village on the northern coast. Now, this is only my personal opinion, but I did not appreciate the fact that Ireland remained neutral while England was struggling to survive. The Allies could have used Ireland for naval and air bases against the German navy which was operating freely in the waters around Ireland.

In March we relocated to our base camp in Nottingham, England to prepare for the invasion we knew would involve us. We were attached to the famed 82nd Airborne Division which had already seen combat in Sicily and Italy. Again our training was specialized - night problems, demolition, communication, live fire with mortars and bazookas. My own group in the regiment (about 16 men) was the Headquarters Intelligence S-2, and we were involved in night scouting and patrolling, map reading, interrogation, photo interpretation. We found a favorite pub "The Cocked Hat" that we took over. A pub is the neighborhood social club. Their young men were away in service so the older people adopted us. The beer was warm, but we learned to like it. Just before 10 o'clock the bartender would call out "time please, time please" meaning the pub was closing. We would buy large pitchers of beer and put them under our tables. This kept the pub open and the neighbors would help us drink it up. That's one reason they liked us so much.

In the first week of June the regiment was moved to airdromes from which our planes were to take off, and for security reasons we were sealed in, including visitors and civilian workers. We were ready. I don't think we were scared, but rather, excited. Our morale was very high, and we trusted and believed in each other. We had trained hard for more than 20 months for this event. But I don't think any kind or amount of training can prepare you for your first combat with an enemy trying to kill you. As you know, the invasion - code named "Overlord" - was originally scheduled for June 5. Airborne landings were to take place 4-5 hours before the beach assaults. We had a sumptuous meal, our "Last Supper" on the evening of the 4th before the invasion was scrubbed because of bad weather over the Channel. We got another great meal the night of the 5th. We were told that we were being fattened up for the kill before we loaded into our planes. The jump planes were C-47s, the airlines DC-3, and held a "stick" of 16 to 20 paratroopers. Our squadron group consisted of 36 planes and took off before midnight. Each trooper carried an average of 85 pounds of equipment in addition to his main and reserve chutes. We had to be self-sustaining for 3 days, as we had no back-up or supporting forces. Our jump suits - jacket and pants - had 13 pockets, and they were well filled. The gear included helmets, weapons and ammunition, grenades, gas masks, first aid kits, bayonets and knives, canteen, mess kit, entrenching tool, a musette bag for personal items, a 20 foot rope in case of a tree landing, and special effects such as wire cutters, map cases, binoculars, etc. We carried three days supply of food - "K" rations and a "D" bar of chocolate that you couldn't cut with an axe. A "K" ration was a box a little larger than a Cracker-Jack box, and it contained a small can of meat, egg or cheese, 3 hard biscuits, 2 or 3 hard candies, 3 cigarettes and some instant coffee crystals. The cigarettes and coffee were the most wanted. On top of all this we wore Mae West life preservers. We had to be boosted into the planes. We were even issued toilet paper and condoms. I shocked my wife when I told her I used 2 of these on the first day - 1 over the muzzle of my Tommy gun, and the other to hold my wallet. I also carried a 4 oz. pewter flask of scotch in case things got really rough. I kept waiting for a worse situation, and then ended up taking the scotch back to England, where I enjoyed it.

Our formation flew south over the English Channel, and after a signal light from a British submarine turned east between the Guernsey and Jersey Islands to enter the Normandy peninsula over the western shore. One reason for this back door route was to avoid flying at a low altitude over the naval invasion armada. Our navy shot down many planes, including 6 jump planes, killing many paratroopers during the invasion of Sicily.

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The Germans knew we were coming, but not when or where. On one of our night practice jumps in England the Nazi radio talked to the pilots, saying they were waiting for us. When our flight crossed the coast low clouds, a large railroad gun and heavy ground fire broke up the formation and scattered jumpers all over Normandy. Less than 30% of the paratroopers landed in their assigned drop zones.

The 82nd and 101st Airborne missions were to drop 8 to 10 miles inland behind the Utah invasion beaches to cut off roads and destroy bridges and strong points the enemy would use to bring up armor and reinforcements, and to cut the main highway out of Cherbourg. In addition to the heavy coastal fortifications the Germans had also prepared inland defenses against parachute and glider landings - flak guns, machine gun nests, land mines, and had dammed rivers to flood the lowlands. Pointed poles similar to telephone poles were planted in fields as a hazard to gliders.

We jumped about 2:00 A.M. into total blackness. Some planes were shot down, some boys were shot in the air or in trees, and some boys drowned in the flooded marshes because they could not get out of their harness. I pulled one body out. We didn't know where we were, but the enemy didn't either. I came down between a couple of those pointed poles. All but 2 or 3 of the men in my stick assembled by a road into the small village of St. Marcouf, close to the channel coast and a few miles from Ste. Mere Eglise, the first city in France to be liberated. We used toy crickets like this (click) to help get together in the darkness - one click to be answered by 2 clicks. Our password was "thunder" and the countersign "welcome". Germans would have to pronounce them "dunder" or "velcome". A parachute had caught on the church steeple in Ste. Mere Eglise; the jumper played dead and the French got him down in the daylight. A replica of the paratrooper and his chute still hang from that steeple. There was a large coastal gun in St. Marcouf and also a chateau used by the Germans as their area headquarters. Our navy shelled the gun and the chateau even as we moved into the village, killing some civilians and tearing up many homes and buildings. Even so, the people greeted us as liberators.

Lynn and I went back to Normandy for the 50th "D-Day" anniversary celebration, and we were treated royally. Even the very young school children know more about the war and the German occupation than do our high school or college kids. I went back to St. Marcouf, found within a few hundred yards of where I had dropped, and saw the gun emplacement and chateau. They had not been touched since they had been bombed.

Our group joined with other lost groups and moved toward the invasion beaches. Our early combat was really guerrilla warfare. It was 3 days before our regiment was assembled as a unit, and then we were involved in the fighting through small villages and hedgerows to complete our mission. Our largest weapons were bazookas and small mortars, which were not too powerful against armor. Much of our fighting was with rifles, grenades and machine guns. In Normandy the fields are bounded by very thick, tall hedges and had to be cleared one by one. Even tanks had a hard time crossing these hedgerows. You could be on one side of a hedgerow and a German on the other, and neither one would know it. At this time I was a staff sergeant, the NCO head of the regimental intelligence section, and at the age of 27 was called "Pappy". Our regiment was just young boys, but I can assure you they were a tough, well-trained group of men. The regimental staff S-2 officer was killed when his jeep ran over a mine, and I then assumed some of his duties in the command post.

One night I was to lead a scouting patrol across the Douve River to probe the defenses at the end of a blown bridge over the river. Our small boat had been shot full of holes, and it sank with us. The next day I led a patrol across the bridge, but after being fired on we rapidly backed out. Winston Churchill said that being shot at and missed was man's greatest thrill. I can't disagree more. That night a heavy artillery barrage on the bridge failed to completely silence the Germans, and they were still firing as we moved across.

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After 32 days of close combat our regiment was relieved by units of the 8th Infantry. The Airborne had accomplished their missions, and the invasion forces were well inland. Another S-2 member and I took a couple of officers from the new unit along the front lines to show them our positions. A shell came in, and as old 32-day veterans we recognized the trajectory and kept moving. We looked back and the embarrassed officers were flat on their stomachs, hugging the ground. When the next shell came in we hit the ground fast, looked back and saw the officers still standing, quite dusted and shaken by the explosion. They learned quickly, as we had. As you know the German 88 was a marvelous gun that was effective against aircraft and armor. I saw it fired at individuals, and I guess they could have used it for bird hunting.

What was left of our regiment was taken back to England by 2 troop ships. I had not had a bath in 32 days so I took 3 showers on the overnight trip. Arriving back in Nottingham we were greeted by our band and another band from the city, along with cheers and applause from the towns people. It was very heartwarming. The first night back several of us went back to a lot of warm beer at our "Cocked Hat" and were again hailed and treated warmly. Then it was back to rest, reforming, and more training for another combat jump, which we made in September in the invasion of Holland.

Of the 2,056 paratroopers in the 508th Regiment who jumped into Normandy there were 1,161 casualties, including 336 killed in action. Less than 900 of us got back to camp.

HOLLAND - A BRIDGE TOO FAR

When Frank let me speak with you in September, 1999 we talked about paratroop training and the airborne invasion of Normandy on "D-Day", June 6, 1944. After 32 days my outfit, the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment was relieved and went back to our base camp in Nottingham, England. Today we'll talk about the invasion of Holland and the Battle of the Bulge.

We enjoyed our second stay in Nottingham. The people were friendly and treated us nicely, the weather was good, the replacements folded in nicely, and our training was mostly physical hardening and small combat maneuvers. While reforming after our 5 weeks in Normandy the 82nd held a review and parade for General Eisenhower. After thanking us for our combat record he shocked us by referring to larger airborne operations to come. It was announced that all airborne and troop carrier outfits had been placed under one command - the First Allied Airborne Army. This included the American 82nd and 101st Divisions, the British 1st Division and a Polish Brigade.

Two combat jumps into Belgium were canceled even while we were in hangars because the ground forces were moving forward so rapidly. But the Ziegfried Line and the Rhine River were still very major obstacles.

General Montgomery came up with an idea to invade Holland - to get across the Rhine and onto the plains of Holland and Germany, by-passing the Ziegfried Line, to secure level ground into Berlin. The plan was to create a corridor up a super highway running from the front lines into Arnhem - a distance of 65 miles across 5 large river and canal bridges.

The code name for the operation was "Market Garden". Montgomery had a hard sell to Eisenhower, and a ranking British officer called Arnhem "a bridge too far". The Normandy invasion had been planned and prepared for months; this one for a week. Market Garden was a masterful plan, but it didn't quite succeed.

The Rhine is a tremendous river running through Germany to the North Sea. Just below Nijmegen the river splits into two branches forming a "Y" - the lower branch the Waal, and the upper branch the Neder Rijn (Lower Rhine). Nijmegen lies on the south side of the Waal, and Arnhem on the north side of the Neder Rijn. Ten miles south of Nijmegen is another large river - the Maas. These rivers were 400 yards across, so the bridges were huge, and had to be captured intact. The Germans had mined each one. The 101st airborne was to jump below the Maas at

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Eindhoven to clear the highway; the 82nd to take the bridges over the Maas at Grave and the Waal at Nijmegen; and the British 1st division at Arnhem across the Rhine.

On Sunday, September 17, the air armada of some 4,700 planes - bombers, fighter bombers, fighters, troop carriers and gliders began taking off from 24 airdromes at 10:00 A.M. flying due east across the North Sea to Holland. There were 20,000 airborne troops, and the armada took about 3 hours to pass over a given point. My plane took off at 11:00 o'clock, and I jumped at 1:30. As the flight passed over the front lines British forces were to start their attack up the highway. Contrary to the night jump in Normandy these drops were on target. I had a good jump, and landed where the sand table of the area showed we would. The drop zone for my 508th regiment was close to Grosbeek, within walking distance of the German border. I was glad to get out of my plane because the flight formation at such a low altitude ran into flak and ground fire, and our plane was being hit. I knew for the first time in the war that I was going to die, but strangely I felt calm and relaxed. It was comforting to look out the C-47 window and see British fighter planes which were escorting us dive and strafe the German guns.

The time table called for the British ground forces to reach Arnhem in 2 days - the British paratroops felt they could hold out for 4 days without help - but the German resistance along the attack route was so heavy the ground forces ran into delays and could not get to Arnhem to help the British 1st Airborne take the bridge. The 82nd and 101st captured their assigned areas and bridges within a few days after hard combat. Unknown to the Allies the Germans had 2 newly formed panzer divisions in Arnhem. After valiant efforts over a week's time the British and Polish paratroopers were forced to withdraw back across the Rijn. Of the 10,000 men involved at Arnhem only 2,000 came back. The British considered Arnhem a second Dunkirk. A book and movie "A Bridge Too Far" by Cornelius Ryan tells very well the story of Market Garden.

After the jump as we moved into the Nijmegen area we were greeted by Dutch citizens waving small American flags, and with cheers and flowers. The people were so joyful to see us as their liberators, for they had been terribly maltreated by the Nazis. The Germans stole everything they could take back across the border - food, bikes, cars, cattle; and they even forced the Dutch to work for them. I felt then that my being there for them made my army service worthwhile.

When the British failed to capture the bridge at Arnhem both the Allies and the Germans dug in, and the heavy fighting in that area slowly ground down to sporadic artillery fire, small skirmishes and patrolling. Our line of defense was midway between Arnhem and Nijmegen. The 508th had suffered 681 casualties, including 146 killed, during the opening stages of the operation, and we did not receive many replacements.

My S-2 Section had little to do, but we did continue probing and night patrols. One night when I was leading a 4-man patrol across a levee I almost stepped on a German outpost in his foxhole. He heard me, called out "Ver ist da?" (Who's there?) and threw a potato masher grenade at me. I dove down the bank while one of the patrol covered me with gunfire. When I got up I threw a grenade back at the outpost, but I don't know if I hit anybody. Our foxholes were quite deep and cozy at times with light and running water - flashlights and rain. There were a few dead cows in our field, so one of the boys decided we would have a steak dinner. He cut some slabs of 3-day aged beef and tried to grill them. They were awful, tough enough to resole our jump boots. So we stuck to K-rations.

One week the S-2 section was withdrawn from the line and sent back to Nijmegen to rest and clean up. The 10 of us were housed with a very nice family - mother, father, 2 teen-age daughters and a teen son. They moved into the basement and gave us the rest of their home. I managed to get a big bag of coffee from the regimental kitchen for our hosts. They had not had real coffee for years, so it was a treat for them. I gave the father some cigars -again a rare luxury. The way his face lit up as he smoked was a deep pleasure to watch. For years after the war I kept in touch with the family, and in 1994 when we went back to Holland I had a nice telephone conversation with the older daughter now living in Arnhem.

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Our regiment was relieved on November 14 after 58 days. We marched 22 miles back to a transportation center to be trucked to a base camp at Sissone, France. The Germans had occupied this camp before we did. Sissone is in the champagne country, close to Reims and its beautiful cathedral. We enjoyed excellent champagne until the French got greedy and raised prices out of sight. We had a month of rest and easy training until December 16, when all hell broke loose.

THE BULGE

On the 16th of December a powerful German army of 250,000 had smashed through the thinly held Allied lines into the Ardennes Forest in Belgium. This was Hitler's last gasp, and he committed all his reserve troops and supplies to the attack, with a goal of capturing Liege and Antwerp on the North Sea. Liege was a very large Allied supply depot, and Antwerp was an important supply port. The 82nd and 101st airborne divisions were the most ready available units to throw into a defense line. My 508th Parachute Regiment was alerted at 10:00 P.M. on the 17th, and by 9:00 A.M. the next morning we were loaded into trucks and moving into Belgium.

We went thru Bastogne to the north side of the break-through (the Bulge) the Germans had created. The 101st was following the 82nd, and they stopped at Bastogne to begin their epic stand. The enemy needed the small crossroads town to continue their drive. My 3rd combat jump was out of a truck. Our first contact was on the 21st. The weather was bitterly cold, with almost 2 feet of snow on the ground. We were not equipped for this kind of winter, and it was several days before we received overshoes, blankets, overcoats and gloves. It was almost impossible to get any rest, maybe an hour or two at a time before you had to move around to try to get warm. Christmas Eve was one of the bluest and most discouraging times of my life. It was a beautifully clear night, freezing cold, with a full moon shining on the snow. We didn't know where we were, where the enemy was, or what was going on. An officer helped by passing around a bottle of Johnny Walker.

We had a strong defensive position and were in constant fighting with the enemy. The bad weather was favorable to the Germans for Allied bombers and supply planes could not give us much support. Early in January when the German advance was halted and the skies cleared, we went on the attack to close the Bulge and restore the original front lines. It was still cold and snowy. One night my S-2 section moved into a home to get some rest. I went to sleep on the 2nd floor. Most of the boys slept in the living room, taking turns on watch. An artillery shell burst against a window frame and shrapnel killed two of the newest S-2 members who had only joined us after Holland. That hurt. Another nighttime we held some prisoners, including an arrogant, obnoxious Nazi officer. The Germans were using captured American clothing and supplies, and had committed many atrocities, especially the slaughter of at least 50 unarmed American prisoners at Malmady, which was in our sector. When a couple of the S-2 men asked me if they could shoot the Nazi, I told them to do it. Thank the Lord headquarters S-2 took the officer away. I was tired, angry, bitter and non-caring, but I should not have given permission, and I'm glad it didn't happen.

Although Hitler's gamble had failed, the Germans fought fiercely as they were pushed back. We saw one B-17 shot down and tried to count 10 parachutes of the crew when they bailed out. The S-2 carried on with our scouting and patrolling duties even in the bad weather. It wasn't pleasant. On January 29 as we took a short break a piece of shrapnel from a German gun burst hit me in the head. (I was sitting on my helmet.) Because it was a head wound I was treated as a top casualty. After being stitched up in a rear medical facility I was shipped back to a hospital in Paris. It wasn't a bad wound, and it got me out of the weather. That was the good part. The bad part was that when I managed a night away from the hospital with only two 2-dollar bills I couldn't do much playing around in Paris. I was released after 3 weeks and sent back to the 508th camp in Sissonne where the regiment had returned after 65 days in the Ardennes. We had suffered 828 casualties, including 134 killed. About 40% of the casualties were weather related. Again we reformed and resumed tactical training.

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In March we had another practice jump in preparation of our next mission, which was rumored to be drops on concentration and prisoner-of-war camps to prevent any killing of the inmates. I had a good jump. One of the planes lost its right engine propeller, and the pilot should have pulled out of the formation. Instead, his stick got out, but the plane flew into another stick of troopers, catching chutes on its wings, and carrying 7 boys into the ground. The 4 crew members also died. I did not see the crash, but as I was getting out of my chute a woman came running and screaming by me. It was Marlene Dietrich - the actress - who was with a U.S.O. group at the camp. I caught and held her until her people came. I think now that I should have hugged and squeezed her harder. From Sissonne the regiment moved to Chartres, France, where we were when the war in Europe ended on May 8.

The 82nd Division was sent to Berlin as the American representatives in the occupation of Germany. My 508th Regiment was assigned to Frankfurt, Germany as the honor guard at General Eisenhower's E.T.O. headquarters. In addition to guard duty at the I. G. Farben building we also acted as greeters and escort for the many dignitaries who came to Frankfurt. We were billeted in homes and apartments, and though there was a strict non-fraternization rule it was a pleasant duty. As a fitting end to my army service the Victory ship taking me home grounded in the English Channel for two days.

At times I feel that I really didn't do too much, but I was there, and I am very proud of that.

We all lost family or good friends and buddies.

An English poet wrote these lines during World War 1, and I think they are very appropriate today for all those who answered and gave their all:

They shall not grow old, as we who are left grow old, Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, We shall remember them.

Thank you. I have enjoyed being with you.