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Holland - Operation Market Garden

John: Let's talk about the jump into the Netherlands now.

Bill: Holland. Market Garden. That was the name of it. We were under British command. Montgomery was over the operation but Gen. Dempsey was the commanding General.

On September 17, a Sunday afternoon, we went to the airport and boarded our airplanes. It was a Sunday, 1:30 in the afternoon.

John: So you jumped in broad daylight?

Bill: Yeah. That's what they agreed with that English bastard.

John: You're talking about Montgomery.

Bill: Yeah, that son of a bitch. Anyway, we jumped into Holland on a Sunday afternoon. Boy, that was beautiful. I never did see a bunch of guys jump. I was in about the ninth plane that jumped and I landed in a bed of flowers, tulips, and I lay there looking up. It was beautiful. We got two divisions. This was the 82nd. The 101st was to the south of us. I just lay there and watched them. It was beautiful. There were about 12,000-13,000 men who jumped. It was beautiful. But it didn't last long. When those Germans got wind of it, boy, we had to stop quickly.

John: So when you hit the ground you were basically in combat real quick.

Bill: Yeah. We were under English command up there, General Dempsey. The 101st kept our supply lines open. That was their job. Then we fought and then they fought. We got there that night. We held our positions. . . We had lines set up. We got our time set. Boy, our line was thin. I think I had a machine gun that was about 200 yards from me. I was a mortar and didn't have much protection at all. They drove us out. I think it was the third or fourth night they drove us out. They drove us back about a half mile. Then "D" Company, "E" Company, and "F" Company counterattacked and drove their ass back where we started. That was the next day.

John: So it took them three or four days to drive you back but you then drove them back in less than a day.

Bill: Yeah. When we were driven out of our position I was firing my mortars, 60mm. I loved that sixty, boy. I didn't have the base plate. I just used the tube. The guys said I couldn't do it. I said, I could do it and I did it.

One night I ran out of shells and that tube was sticking about that far out of the ground. I told the guy, "Shells! Shells! Shells!" I could see those damn Germans coming, tanks and everything.

He said, "There aren't any more."

I said, "What's over there?"

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He said, "Those are gray. I don't know what they are."

I said, "Bring them over here."

I put one in the barrel and it was a flare. It went out pretty far. I told those guys to load those in increments. I made daylight out there. You could see "F" Company fine.

John: So you were firing the flares to light it up.

Bill: Oh, yeah. And then they were coming my way. They ran us out. They overran us. But we only lost one guy, Joe Redina. He was in the 3rd Platoon. I was in the 2nd. He was the nicest guy. He was funny, too.

John: So you had to back out.

Bill: Yeah. We had no choice. We didn't have enough to stop them. Joe got killed. He was in the 3rd Platoon. I had buddies all over. I hated to see him go. Boy, he was a good guy. He was one of the nicest guys you'd ever want to meet. "F" Company. We were counter attacking and drove them right back out. The Germans fired those Screaming Mimi's at us. You could see them. They came off a ramp like a rack. "Whoosh," like that. They weren't fragmentation. They were concussion. They were demoralizing. When they went off, boom, boom, boom, boom. If they hit close enough to you, they would bust you. Well, they hit close but not that close. We lost about five guys who were all blown to pieces. That's as far as I'll go. I didn't know who they were. I couldn't hear. My ears were ringing. They're still ringing. And the ringing gets louder all the time.

(The concussions made you) look like you had measles. And they gave us some kind of white pills. In two days it was cleared up. But boy those guys that had a lot of red on them, they weren't even moving. Then we got together again and relieved the English on their lines. It was quiet.

Lieutenant Lloyd Pollette was our Company Commander. He was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. He said to me, "Sergeant, do you have any targets?"

I said, "Yeah, I got a few out here."

He went with me out to our post and took some binoculars with him and asked me where. I showed him. A machine gun, a couple others, I didn't remember for sure what they were.

He said, "Take your binoculars and go out to the left."

I went out there and yeah boy, Germans. There were Germans out there. I said, "What are we gonna do?"

He said, "Get the 81's."

I got one from headquarters. Boy, we loaded up on them. First thing you know the Germans had their ambulances backing up and Pollette came down and said, "Fire."

I said, "No. No." I wouldn't do that.

He said, "I want you to fire on them."

I said, "I don't want to fire on them. Probably a lot of them killed over there now. I don't know."

They sure as hell were backing their ambulances in there getting them out. They didn't attack. Then the Germans got replacements in there.

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The English came up to relieve us and they said, “Hey Yank, what’d you do to the bloomin’ lines? It was nice when you came up. Now it’s all stirred up again. You bloody blokes got it all stirred up again.”

I was sitting up there by my little mortar position and there came one of the Bren Carriers. I don’t know if you ever heard of them or not. This truck pulled up right where my mortar position was. I had other mortar positions because when I fired one I moved to another. Because the Germans had some kind of device, I don’t know what it was, that would scan them and wherever that thing crossed, that’s where that position was. They would pick you up and, boy, the artillery was on you quickly. I knew that, so I had three or four different positions. I’d fire this one and go to that one. They brought that Bren Carrier up there. Womp, womp, womp, womp, womp, womp, womp. Firing.

I said, “Hey buddy, you move that son of a bitch out of here.”

He said, “We’re protecting you guys.”

I said, “You ain’t protecting me, buddy.” I pulled my .45 and said, “You move that thing out of here or I’m gonna blow your damn brains out. And buddy, I ain’t kidding you. You’re gonna have those artillery shells on us. Get it going, man. Get it going.”

We attacked up there. Headed for the big bridges. We got them.

But here we were fighting and the English were making tea on the back end of the truck. One of those trucks of theirs. Making tea!

“Hoy yank. Have a bloody sip of tea.”

I said, “You English sons of bitches you, you’re gonna get your asses blown off.” Crazy. But, boy, that tea was bitter. I asked one time if they had any sugar and they liked to went crazy. Sugar? Hell no. . . It didn’t have to be a certain day. It was any day.

“Hey mate, have a spot of tea?”

I said, “You dumb bastards, there are bullets flying around here.”

I can talk just like them. They believed in that cone of fire. All I could see was that being a waste of ammunition. If there were troops or something in that area, fine. But they didn’t know. They were just firing. Boy, those guns really went. But the Germans had a contraption, I don’t know what it was, it set up on the front lines so they could scan, and get your position. That’s why, as a mortarman, I would fire from four different places. I would fire a mission here and then get the hell out of there. When I would come back, that place would be blown all to hell. I would fire about a half an hour or an hour and then move. Then I’d get the hell out of there because I knew there would be some stuff coming in. Especially one of those Bren Carriers. The Germans could see them fire one of those things.

I went into a convent up there before we got to the bridges. I knew it was a convent, a church and everything but it was all boarded in. I went in there and I opened the gate and there were about fifteen or twenty nuns. They were walking around praying. It wasn’t very far from that bridge, I’d say about half of a mile anyhow. And I said, “Sisters. You better get in where it’s covered because there’s gonna be a lot of hell here. Gonna be bullets flying.” They didn’t even know I was there. They just kept right on praying. Boy, there was hell around there. After we got to the bridge we got settled. The Germans tried to bomb the bridge with their fighters

John: What happened after that?

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Bill: We replaced the English. They had some lines somewhere. We made a big push toward the bridge. Nijmegen, in Holland.

John: So you were pushing for the bridge.

Bill: Yeah. One of those bridges that was too far. I didn't think it was too far. It was pretty close.

John: And you got that bridge.

Bill: We captured the bridge. We got one end and I don't know who got the other end. They went over in boats. I had orders from Pollette to take my 60mm mortar and put shells on that bridge to keep the Germans from blowing it up. They didn't blow it up. . . We had other mortars. "D" Company and "F" Company, they had mortars. Lloyd Pollette, our Company Commander, said, "Put mortars on that damn bridge. Keep those bastards down." He was killed during the Battle of the Bulge.

One funny thing happened. I challenged a weed one night. The Germans were pretty active and I was in my hole there. The second night we were there, I said, "What is that?" I thought it was man and I was ready to blow his head off. The longer I looked at it, it looked more like somebody was crawling up toward me. I was ready to shoot it. But it was a weed. I learned something there. I learned to not fix my eyes on any certain thing. Move them. Move them. The longer you look at something, the bigger it gets and looks like it's moving. That's what's in your mind, somebody's crawling. I was waiting for him, but he never got close enough. I didn't pull the trigger, though.

One time in Holland we were relieved for rest and recreation. We went back about four miles. And the guys said, "Hey Sock, you were a baker, weren't you?"

I said, "Yeah. I was a baker."

They said, "Make us something."

I said, "Make something of what?"

They said, "We'll get something." Seven of them went out into bombed out houses. They were gone for about two and a half hours. When they came back they had big baskets of whatever. And they said, "There it is."

I said, "What is it?"

They said, "We want you to bake us something."

I couldn't even read the labels. They had glass jars of meat. I started getting my mind working. I thought that would be good for shortening. A lot of jars of that. And they had fruit: plums, apples, peaches, cherries. They had everything. I liked that. Then I started opening the boxes and wondering, "What is that?" I opened it up. It was red. Open another, green. I tasted it. It was sweet. I said that might be Jell-o. Had plenty of it. I started getting into the other boxes. That can't be flour. It was too damned coarse. I tasted it and it didn't have any taste. Flour doesn't have any taste either. I said well that's flour. So what did I do. I had all kinds of that stuff. And I told them I had to have a bowl to mix it in. I don't know where they got the bowl. They found a big steel bowl.

I said, "I'll tell you what you do. Dig a pit there. And I want you to put a piece of steel over the top of it and put charcoal in it. I'm gonna put it under there, light it, and get going."

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They did. A big old hunk of steel and this big bowl. I started mixing that stuff. I had water and my dough turned out green. And I started making . . . and that bowl, it was big enough I could take a ball and flatten it out and put cherries and make it like a triangle because I made a lot of those things in the bakery. I put them on there. I worked all day making those things. And they were good, I didn't get to eat any of them.

John: Still don't know what they were, though?

Bill: They didn't care. It was so good. The green stuff came from whatever it was. But it was real flaky and those guys loved them. Then we started getting company from "F" Company. I quit baking. I was tired. I didn't get to eat any of them. I'd go in there and those guys would say, "Boy, they were good. They were good."

Green pastries. I didn't know what the hell it was because I couldn't read the boxes because they were in Dutch.

I didn't get any. I had to work. I'd have ten or twelve of them on that steel plate. I had to watch them and turn them with my bayonet. I told old Aaron, I said, "Red, before you get down tonight put that bayonet on my rifle and turn it with the bayonet on the end of it. I wouldn't be getting close to them. They didn't care. They loved them. And I was hoping when we got into Germany the other guys didn't find out about it. Hope they don't want to go find something and want me to bake something else for them.

John: Where did you go next?

Bill: We got relieved. That was November 11th when we got relieved. We started to go back. I don't remember leaving up there, to tell you the truth.

Our First Sergeant, I didn't know this, they had him marked dead. Damn near lost him. The English were taking us back to France. He was in one of the English trucks. Some of those English trucks were top heavy. One upset on him. Sgt. Thomas. I just saw him at a reunion about two or three years ago, 1999 I think it was. He looked all right to me.

Infanger called me ahead of time and said, "Be sure to be there, Sgt. Thomas is going to be there."

And I said, "He got killed."

He said, "Nope."

And I got to see him and talk to him. Lord.

He said, "You know, Sack, he called me Sack, you're still a crazy son of a bitch. They had me tagged as killed in action."

But he never did come back to the Company.

Aaron and Infanger, he's up in Queens, New York, said, "You're the craziest bastard we ever saw."

But you know, when you lose one of those guys it's like losing a brother. It tears you to pieces.

When we came out of Holland we headed to Camp Sissonne near Rheims, France. That was our new base camp. From D-Day we went back to Nottingham. Here we went back to Rheims.

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I was on a furlough down in Nugesko, down in southern France. Man! They had bikini's then. It was the place where they made perfumes. You couldn't drink it but you sure could smell it.

I got up to Brussels on a four day furlough. I went in to this one place, there's a lot of buildings there. There were deaf mutes there. I knew sign language. I learned it from John Milillo. I didn't know they were deaf. Well hell, I knew what they were talking about. I started signing to them and they got all around me. I had a hell of a time getting away from them. I had a good time. I had four good days there. I loved the people: Luxembourg, Holland, Belgium, nice people.

In Holland I asked them why they didn't grease the windmills. Day or night, you could hear them squawk, squawk, squawk. I asked one of those Hollanders why they didn't grease them. They told me they do that for a reason. To let them know the things were working. And they wore wooden shoes. Four o'clock in the morning and you heard clop, clop, clop. Like horses running.

Continued – see Part 4: Belgium - The Ardennes The Battle Of The Bulge