THE FLIGHT AND LT. MATHIAS

By Mark Eckenrode

Most Americans think of the Normandy Invasion on June 6, 1944 as an American operation. The U.S. conducted amphibious assaults on Utah and Omaha Beaches with supporting airborne operations. The invasion also included three other amphibious assault beaches. Canadian units augmented by British troops landed at Juno Beach. Additionally, the British were solely responsible for landings on Gold and Sword Beaches, to include a combat jump by the British 6th Airborne Division. In fact, the opening shot of the invasion was delivered by glider infantry of the 6th Airborne shortly after midnight when they landed within 47 yards of their objective.

One must think of the ultimate Allied objective, the defeat of Germany, and work backwards. To accomplish this Operation Overlord was created, the large-scale lodgment of Europe. To accomplish Overlord, Operation Bolero was instituted which was the build-up of men and equipment in England. To secrete and confuse the German’s of this build-up, Operation Bodyguard was needed. Operation Neptune was the code name for the initial assault of occupied France to accomplish Operation Overlord. Operation Neptune was subdivided into Force A as the airborne component, Force B for the glider element, and Force C as the amphibious arm of Operation Neptune. The 82nd Airborne Division’s role became known as Mission “Boston.” Mission “Detroit” was the follow-on glider assault for the 82nd, and there would be an additional glider landing named Mission “Elmira.” Mission “Memphis” was the name for a parachute resupply drop.

Normandy is located on the Cotentin Peninsula, jutting out from the French coast in a northwesterly direction. Force C, the amphibious assault element, would approach the landing beaches from east to west, while Force A, the U.S. airborne component, would approach the peninsula from west to east.

In October 1943 the IX Troop Carrier Command

(TCC) was formed for the express purpose ofproviding airlift capacity for Force A and B. The IX TCC consisted of three Troop Carrier Wings (TCW), containing 14 Troop Carrier Groups (TCG) and one Pathfinder Group. Only four of the Groups were combat tested by D- Day. By May 1944, the IX Troop Carrier Command consisted of 1,207 C-47 Skytrain aircraft, 1,118 CG-4A Waco gliders and 301 Airspeed Horsa gliders. The 313th, 314th TCG’s, plus an element of the 1st Pathfinder Provisional Group were tasked to the 508th PIR for a total of 135 C-47’s carrying 2,056 paratroopers of the Regiment.

The aircraft and units were broken down into serials, chalks, and sticks. The 508th consisted of five serials: one for each battalion, one for the HQ and B Company of the 307th Engineer Battalion, and one for the pathfinders. A serial is a tactical group of two or more aircraft. Chalks designated the position of each aircraft within a serial flight. The chalk position was literally chalked on the sides of each aircraft allowing the aircrews to quickly identify the aircraft. The men

were broken down into sticks of 15 to 18 paratroopers per plane.

The Pathfinders departed from the Royal Air Force Base at North Witham at 22:30 hours on June 5 with a Time Over Target (Drop Zone ‘N”) of 01:38 on June 6th. The first serial was to arrive 30 minutes later and each successive serial arriving over the DZ at six-minute intervals. The Regiment itself departed from the RAF Base’s at Saltby and Folkingham, England.

Upon taking-off, the planes circled overhead until all the planes were airborne and then formed-up by serial and then each aircraft fell into chalk order. Each chalk consisted of a nine plane group consisting of three - three plane cells arranged in a “vee” pattern within a larger ‘vee” flying in trail. The serials flew southwest across Southern England to the departure point code named “Flatbush” before turning east over the English Channel towards Nazi occupied France.

Once over the Channel the jump commands began in the event a plane should have to ditch. The air armada also dropped down to 500 feet MSL to avoid German radar and all aircraft lights, except navigation

lights, were turned off for operational security. In the English Channel, a submerged submarine, code named “Hoboken,” lie in wait for a predetermined time for it to surface. Aboard was a Eureka beacon to send a signal for the flight to turn left and fly on a southeasterly direction. The aerial armada threaded its way between the islands of Jersey and Guernsey where a fighter escort joined the “Skytrain” as they headed for their initial point near Les Pieux on the Cotentin Peninsula code named “Peoria.”

Upon reaching the Normandy Coast the air armada encountered a cloudbank, which would spell disaster for flight cohesion. Coupled with German antiaircraft artillery, the flight formation became scattered. The chances of landing with unit integrity were dashed. The 508th was to become the most widely scattered regiment within the 82nd’s area of operations on D-Day.

First Lieutenant Robert M. Mathias was the Platoon Leader of the Second Platoon, E Company, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Lt Mathias was the stick commander of 16 men in his C-47. Once feet wet, Jumpmaster Lt. Mathias gave the jump commands. Upon reaching landfall machine gun fire ripped through the aircraft with the men calling-out “Let’s go!” Lt Mathias refused to give the command until the green light came-on. A German shell exploded next to him and shrapnel tore through his reserve chute and into his chest knocking him down. He got up as the jump light turned green. As blood streamed from his body he gave the command to “Follow me!” as he went out the door with his stick following. Lt Mathias was later found that morning still strapped into his chute, hanging from a tree. Lt Mathias is documented as being the first American officer to be killed on D-Day June 6, 1944. First Lieutenant Robert M. Mathias was Airborne All The Way and a Paratrooper to the end!

On July 12, 1944 the 508th completed Mission Boston, boarded two LST’s on Utah Beach and returned to their base in England. Of the 2,056 paratroopers from the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment who took part in D-Day only 939 returned to Nottingham for rest, refitting, regrouping and training for their next combat mission. After 37 days on the line, the Regiment suffered 1,161 casualties (56% of Regimental strength) with 307 killed in action, 487 wounded in action (26 later died from wounds), 173 injured in action (3 later died from injuries), and 165 missing in action, though a number of these later turn-up as prisoners of war.