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THE OPERATIONS OF A MIXED GROUP FROM UNITS OF THE
507TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY (82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION)
IN THE INVASION OF FRANCE, 5-7 JUNE 1944.

(NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: MIXED UNIT OF PARA-
CHUTE INFANTRY ATTACKING IN FLAT SWAMPY TERRAIN

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THE OPERATION OF A MIXED GROUP FROM UNITS OF THE 507TH PARACHUTE
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of a Mixed Group from Units of the 507th Parachute Infantry (82d Airborne Division) in the Invasion of France, 5 - 7 June 1944.

"Flash!"

"Flash, hell, this is Colonel Maloney", not quite the prescribed response to a challenge, but nevertheless one that served to identify a friend in the enemy infested hedgerows of Normandy early the morning of 6 June 1944. Lt. Colonel A. A. Maloney, Regimental Executive Officer of the 507th Parachute Infantry, had assembled about fifty (50) men and the challenging party, Company Commander, Company E, 507th Parachute Infantry, was elated to make the contact.

Asked how things were going, Colonel Maloney replied, "Not so good, we haven't enough people assembled here to take our first objective." That was something that hadn't been anticipated. All objectives in the States had been taken without too much difficulty. For example: there was the jump on and the seizure of an airfield in DENVER, COLORADO, almost without mishap. Was this operation to be so different? It wasn't so different, actually, when things began to unfold. In order to understand the situation at the hedgerow meeting, it is necessary first to discuss events leading up to it. (1)

(1) Personal knowledge.

TRAINING FOR THE INVASION

Early in December 1943, the 507th Parachute Infantry, with the 508th Parachute Infantry, comprising the 2d Airborne Brigade, set sail from NEW YORK and fourteen days later disembarked at BELFAST, NORTH IRELAND. From there they moved by train to the vicinity of PORTERUSH and PORT STEWART, NORTH IRELAND. While here, the Brigade was attached to the veteran 82d Airborne Division, which, less the 504th Parachute Infantry Combat Team, had just arrived from SICILY and ITALY. The 504th Combat Team had remained in ITALY where it was fighting in the mountains north of the VOLTURNO RIVER.

Short, wet days and long, cold nights, along with a complete lack of facilities for airborne training made NORTH IRELAND a most undesirable place to prepare for anything resembling an invasion. So, early in February 1944, the Division was moved to the English Midlands in the vicinity of NOTTINGHAM-LICESTER. (2)

An intensive airborne training program, consisting of a series of battalion jumps and problems designed to prepare the troops for any eventuality, was carried on for the next several months. This training emphasized principles peculiar to airborne units, such as: "(a) speed and initiation of combat immediately upon landing; (b) retention of initiative until mission accomplished; (c) recognition of isolation as a normal battlefield condition; (d) readiness of all units to attack or defend in all directions at any time; (e) improvisation of weapons and equipment; use of enemy weapons and defenses; (f) preparedness to conquer or die." (3) The battalion jumps were culminated by a

(2) A-1, Section I, p. 1; (3) A-2, p. 24.

division jump, which, though no one realized it at the time, was based on a hypothetical situation amazingly similar to the "pay off" a few short weeks away. All of these jumps were made at night. (4)

PLANNING FOR THE INVASION

While training was going on and even long months before, as far back as May 1943, plans for the impending invasion were in the making at COSSAC (Chief of Staff, Supreme Allied Command). The plan, as presented to the Combined Chiefs of Staff in July 1943, envisioned the use of five (5) infantry divisions in the assault on the beaches, supported by three airborne divisions to accomplish missions which will be discussed more in detail presently.

The First United States Army, composed of the V and VII Corps, was to assault astride the CARENTAN ESTUARY with the 4th Infantry Division, VII Corps (Utah Beach), between VARREVILLE and the estuary and the 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions, V Corps (Omaha Beach), between VIERVILLE and COLLEVILLE. VII Corps was to capture CHERBOURG as quickly as possible and the V Corps was to develop operations southwards toward ST. LO.

The British Second Army was to land between ASNELLES and OUISTREHAM (Gold, Juno and Sword Beaches) with the task of engaging German armor and protecting the left flank of the First United States Army. (See Map A) (5)

General Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, felt that the employment of two of the airborne divisions in support of the troops assaulting the VARREVILLE beaches was essential. His opinion was supported by the fact that the terrain behind the beaches was

(4) A-2, p. 24, 25; (5) A-5, p. 33.

traversed by deadly causeways which, if not captured from the rear, could easily be sealed off, thus making the landing area a death trap to the beach assaulters. By seizing these causeways, the airborne troops could contribute to the success of the overall plan by preventing movement of German reserves into the beach area. Staff planners maintained, however, that airborne forces landing in this area would surely suffer from 75 - 80% casualties, but the decision was made, and I quote from the Supreme Commander's Report, "Support by the airborne troops was essential, and I ultimately took upon myself the heavy responsibility of deciding that the airborne operation against the Cotentin be carried out. The decision, once taken, was loyally and efficiently executed by the airborne forces, and it is to them that immeasurable credit for the subsequent success of the western operation belongs." (6)

THIS IS IT

Training and planning continued, with the many hardened troops destined to make the invasion, unaware of what role they were to play, until without warning, on 1 April 1944, regimental staffs were briefed. Even this startling indication of what was rapidly approaching went practically unnoticed because the staff went about its work in the normal way, saying nothing about what they knew. Of course, with the information they had, only a guess could have been ventured as to when the eventful day was going to be. Finally, on 1 May 1944, battalion staffs were briefed which caused some excitement for all felt that the time must be near. Two weeks passed, though, and nothing happened, and just as everyone was beginning to

(6) A-3, p. 4.

relax, company commanders were called into the "war room", sworn to all out secrecy and briefed. Elaborate planning and preparation had gone into the "war room", detailed maps, photographs and sand tables were available in abundance. The company commanders were told everything in the greatest detail, except - when it was going to happen. (7)

MISSION OF THE AIRBORNE

The 6th British Airborne was to land north of CAEN, protect the left flank of the beach landings and seize bridges over the ORNE RIVER and CAEN CANAL in order to block the movement of German troops to that sector of the beach.

The United States 101st Airborne Division was to land north of CARENTAN with the mission of blocking movement of German reserves and seizing crossings of the MERDERET RIVER in preparation for an advance to the west. (See Map A) (8)

"The 82d Airborne Division was to land by parachute and glider before and after dawn on D-Day west of ST SAUVEUR LE VICOMTE; seize, clear and secure the general area ST JACQUES DE NEHOU - BESNEVILLE (both inclusive) - ST SAUVEUR LE VICOMTE (exclusive) - BLANDAMOUR (inclusive), and reorganize; seize and destroy the crossings of the PRAIRIES MARECAGEUSES north of LA SANGSURIERE, at ST SAUVEUR DE PIERRE PONT; destroy the crossings of the OLLONONDE RIVER in the vicinity of ST LO D'OURVILLE and block crossroads vicinity LE CHEMIN; prevent enemy forces moving north between ST LO D'OURVILLE and junction of DOUVE RIVER with PRAIRIE MARECAGEUSES; and protect the south flank of VII Corps north of the same line". (See Map B) (9)

(7) Personal knowledge; (8) A-4, p. 11; (9) A-1, p. 2.

On 26 May, closer to D-Day than anyone realized, just as company commanders were about to become fully familiar with exactly what was to be done, everyone, already briefed, was called into the "war room" only to find all the beautiful sand tables and map displays destroyed, with staff officers and enlisted assistants laboriously preparing new ones.

What did this mean? The answer was soon apparent. The 82d Airborne Division's mission had been changed. A constant study of aerial photographs, being made of the Division's area daily, revealed that the Germans had moved a new division (later found to be the 91st Infantry Division) into the general area of ST SAUVEUR LE VICOMTE and were busily engaged in constructing passive and active anti-airborne defenses. The passive defenses consisted of "Rommel-spargel" (Rommel's asparagus, named for the German Commander in the West), poles spaced 75 to 100 yards apart on all likely landing zones, treacherous obstacles for gliders, and an elaborate system of anti-personnel mines and booby traps to accommodate the paratroopers. The active defenses consisted of prepared gun positions and concentrations to fire observed fire from Hill 110 to cover the entire area). It looked as though intelligence was working overtime for both the "red" and the "blue". (10)

The revised mission of the 82d Airborne Division was to be: "Land by parachute and glider before and after dawn of D-Day astride the MERDERET RIVER, seize, clear and secure the general area within its zone; capture STE MERE EGLISE; seize and secure the crossings of the MERDERET RIVER at LA FIERE and CHEF DU PONT

(10) A-4, p. 12, 13.

and a bridgehead covering them; seize and destroy the crossings of the DOUVE RIVER at BEUZEVILLE LA BASTILLE and ETIENVILLE; protect the northwest flank of VII Corps within the division zone; and be prepared to advance west on Corps order to the line of the DOUVE north of its junction with the PRAIRIE MARECAGEUSES." (See Map B) (11)

The 82d Airborne Division planned to accomplish its assigned mission by dividing the division into three forces: Force "A", commanded by Brigadier General (now Major General) James M. Gavin, Assistant Division Commander, to be committed before dawn of D-Day and to include, in the main, the three parachute regiments, 505th, 507th and 508th, plus such supporting and control elements as were necessary; Force "B", commanded by Major General Matthew B. Ridgway, Division Commander, to be committed by glider before and after dawn of D-Day and to include the 325th Glider Infantry, the bulk of Division Artillery and other supporting elements of the division (General Ridgway actually jumped with Force "A" resulting from a last minute change in plans); Force "C", commanded by Brigadier General George P. Howell, Commanding General, 2d Airborne Infantry Brigade, to be committed by sea, to land between D plus 2 and D plus 7 and to include all elements of the division not air transportable along with attached tanks and tank destroyer units. (12)

Preparation was continued in the 507th in a serious but high spirited way. Equipment bundles were laid out, checked, rolled and marked. Individual soldiers were busy taking care of personal and special equipment that each desired to take along. Trench knives were made razor sharp and everyone equipped himself with an extra

(11) A-1, Section II, p. 2; (12) A-1, Section II, p. 2,3.

knife of his own choosing. Practically every piece of government equipment was improved upon to fit the whims of each individual.

Finally the 507th was ready to go. Where? When? These questions were asked many times, for no one had been briefed below the company commanders. Was it another practice jump or was it the real thing? After all, this had been done many times before. Without warning on 29 May, trucks arrived to pick up the equipment bundles that had been ready for days; the camp was sealed and the order came - "get ready to move". In less than two hours the unit was on its way to the marshalling areas located at nearby airfields. Upon arrival, the fields were found to be completely fenced in and under armed guard. There was no question in anyone's mind now, this was it. Excitement ran high and almost everyone was actually anxious to "get the show on the road". Prior to our arrival, bunks had been set up in hangars large enough to accommodate an entire battalion. As soon as the troops were settled, the company commanders were called in and assigned briefing tents, complete with prepared sand tables, maps and photographs showing our zone of operation in the greatest detail. Despite the air of expectancy that prevailed, company commanders were told that the briefing of the troops must be thorough, as it was of the utmost importance that every man know all there was to know about where he was going and what he was to do when he got there. He should know his mission, his unit's mission, and the mission of every unit in the division, so, if by chance, he was dropped anywhere but on his own drop zone, he could intelligently proceed to the nearest division objective and make his presence felt. As an afterthought, instructions were given to the effect that if a man could do nothing else, he was to cut lines

of communications. These instructions resulted in telephone lines in Normandy being cut in five thousand different places. (13)

The missions of various units of the 82d Airborne Division as covered in our briefing were as follows:

The 505th Parachute Infantry was to land, generally, west of STE MERE EGLISE and east of the MERDERET RIVER, seize bridges at LA FIERE and CHEF DU PONT, clear the town of STE MERE EGLISE and the area surrounding to include the securing of Landing Zone W for the landing of the 325th Glider Infantry and supporting troops of the division. (See Map B)

The 508th Parachute Infantry was to land, generally, northwest of the junction of the MERDERET and DOUVE RIVERS, destroy crossings of the DOUVE at ETIENVILLE and BEUZEVILLE-LA BASTILLE and clear its assigned sector. (See Map B)

The 325th Glider Infantry was to land before and after dawn of D-Day on LZ W south of STE MERE EGLISE and was to assist the 505th Parachute Infantry and to constitute the division reserve.

The 507th Parachute Infantry was to land west of the MERDERET RIVER and north of AMPREVILLE, secure the high ground north and east of GOURBESVILLE, assist the 505th Parachute Infantry in the seizure of the bridge at LA FIERE and to clear the assigned sector. (See Map B) (14)

Each battalion, each company, was given a specific mission. More than that, each platoon, each squad, was told exactly what to do after assembly. These details have long since been forgotten and why not? For as you will see, things didn't work according to

(13) Personal knowledge; (14) A-1, p. 3.

plan. They did work though, and all objectives were taken with none taken ever relinquished.

Orientation and briefing were completed. Every man knew the details of his mission better than he had ever known anything before and there was nothing more to be done, but to relax and wait. Men played ball, told stories, shot dice, attended church and movies. The time passed quickly.

June 5th the company commanders were wanted on the telephone, conference call; "This is Blue 6, have your companies assembled in the hangar in fifteen minutes, it is now 1930." Ten minutes were all that were needed because it was felt that this was what everyone had been so anxiously awaiting. It was. There were pep talks through channels in reverse, Assistant Division Commander, Regimental Commander and Battalion Commander, but they were short and effective. The Battalion Commander ended his by saying, "Be at your planes as previously assigned at 2300." The first sergeants assembled their respective companies and prepared to secure equipment and move to the planes. When the companies were formed and everyone was ready to move, the company commanders suddenly realized that this would be the last time all of these men would ever be together and probably said something like, "We have worked long and hard for this moment. Collectively and individually, you are the best men in the world. This time tomorrow we will be on our first objective and will have made our first contribution toward winning the worst war the world has ever known. We won't all be there, some of us will fall along the way and for those who fall, it will mean a doubling of effort for those who stand. God bless you; right, FACE; forward, MARCH."

When the companies reached their planes, they found the parachutes and equipment bundles already there, so they started loading the bundles and fitting the chutes with a confident spirit that made one feel glad that he was one of them. There were from ten to eighteen men per plane, making a total of nine planes per rifle company. The pilots and crew members of the aircraft had not yet arrived. At about 2330 they came and jump-masters (ranking officer or non-commissioned officer in each "stick") made final checks and coordination as to signals, jumping altitude of the plane, etc. Details had been previously worked out in a pilot-jumpmaster joint briefing, so, actually, anything done now was probably for reassurance and to relieve nervous tension. The pilots did add assurance that there was nothing to worry about. They would hit the drop zone right on the "button". According to plan, the pilot was to warn the jump-masters when the flight was twenty minutes from the drop zone so final preparations could be made. Four minutes from the drop zone, the pilot would switch on a red light, located on the right side of the exit door. A green light, located at the same place, would be the signal to go.

The Pathfinder teams had taken off from a nearby field at 2305 and would be landing to set up a lighted "T", according to plan, at 0156. Little thought was given to the fact that the lighted "T" would never burn and that the pathfinders would only alert the Germans that perhaps they should make ready for the arrival of the rest of the division. (15)

FLIGHT TO THE DROP ZONE

Down the line came the command, "Load up!" There was a bustle. And soon everyone was quiet, settled into their seats for the two

(15) Personal knowledge.

and one-half hour ride to follow. The motors were started and warmed up. The planes were taxied out onto the runway and in turn the leading elements of the 507th took off at 0017, 6 June. The planes assembled and flew in formation V of Vs southwest to NEWHAM headed south to WEYMOUTH, then turned southwest again to a position north and west of GUERNSEY ISLAND where an allied ship was in position to serve as a check-point. Everyone was quiet, many asleep or feigning sleep as the planes turned west about seventy-five (75) miles from the drop zone. As the formation passed north of GUERNSEY ISLAND the pilots notified the jump-masters that they were twenty minutes out. (See Map C) They waited another ten minutes then began to awaken the relaxed troops and some really were relaxed. How did they do it? Everyone got up, checked his own equipment and "shook out the kinks". Without warning, the red light went on, four minutes! The west coast of the peninsula could be seen from the doors, which were open, and there was a heavy fog, making visibility poor. South of BRICQUEBEC some of the planes began to receive anti-aircraft fire (small arms and 20 mm). The formations could be seen spreading and breaking up to avoid the fire. Some of the planes were gaining altitude and the jump was supposed to have been made from six hundred feet. In other words, the "button" that the pilots had referred to was getting larger and larger. (See Map D) Two minutes! Stand up! Hook up! Check equipment! Close up! Are you ready? Green light, let's go! (16)

NORMANDY

Suddenly everything was quiet except for some enemy small arms

(16) Personal knowledge.

fire peppering away in the distance. It was 0232, 6 June. Jumpmasters checked their "sticks" as they floated down, but the fog was still somewhat prevalent and they could not see anyone. Each man checked below to see where he was going to land -ah, nice, a beautiful flat meadow. Seconds and he was down, splash! Water! My gosh! The area is flooded! Those razor sharp knives saved many lives as parachutes and equipment were cut away; many men were drowned. Planes were flying over a short distance away, so as "sticks" assembled they moved in that general direction, having salvaged only weapons and ammunition from the flooded MERDERET, which had been determined to be the area of landing. (The author of this narrative was among the ones moving to the assembly area, so it will be necessary from this point on, for purposes of clarity, to refer to the group in the first person, inasmuch as there was no tactical unity, no organization.) Through the hedgerows we could hear voices, American voices. "Flash" had been designated for the challenge instead of "Halt", so from behind a tree, "Flash!" The immediate reply came, "Flash, hell, this is Colonel Maloney", so we knew we were among friends.

There were a total of about fifty men present and Colonel Maloney assigned the senior officer, next to himself, a company commander, the job of organizing a perimeter defense while he tried to contact someone on the only means of communication available, a very wet SCR 300 radio. It didn't work.

Troopers kept drifting in and our force was growing. Men came from all units of the 82d Airborne Division and some from the 101st Airborne Division, what a hodgepodge of personnel. We learned that among those present was General Gavin. This meant that we would soon

be moving to attack someone because he wasn't one to let grass grow underfoot. Nothing happened of consequence and soon it was dawn. We knew nothing of what had happened to anyone outside our own small group. There was no tactical unity, no supporting weapons, just a group of invaders who were wondering what had happened to all of their thorough planning.

Just before dawn the first gliders began to come in. One landed in a flooded area about one hundred and fifty yards from where we had our perimeter set up. As the man started to come out of the glider, enemy machine gun fire opened up from the hedgerow on the other side. We hadn't known they were there. Had they been there since our landing, or had they just moved in? Maybe they had located our position and were attacking us when the glider distracted them. Anyway, they were there and men were being hit as they left the glider. Fire was placed on the general vicinity of the machine gun and it seemed to be effective, causing a temporary cessation of fire which enabled a few men to make the hedgerow behind which we had cover. A sergeant informed us that there was a towed 57 mm anti-tank gun in the glider. We notified General Gavin and told him the situation and that there was little chance of getting the gun. A message came back from Colonel Maloney to the effect that we should make every effort to get it. The force in the immediate area consisted of twelve men and two officers and plans were made to split it in half. The first half would cover the second half by fire as they dashed to the glider, got the gun, and dashed back. (17)

The plan worked perfectly until the retrieving group started back, then everything went wrong. They couldn't tow the gun through

(17) Personal knowledge.

the flooded area and as they were trying, they came under fire from another corner of the opposing hedgerow. Two men were hit; the rest made it back, bringing with them the breech-block of the weapon. Just as they were reaching cover two more were hit, one dead, one wounded through the chest. Colonel Maloney was notified that getting the weapon did not appear to be practicable at the time, but that we had taken the breech-block.

About 0900, Lt. Colonel Ostberg, commanding First Battalion, 507th Parachute Infantry, came down from General Gavin's command post and informed us that General Gavin was moving, with everyone, toward LA FIERE to the south and that we were to follow. This meant fording the flooded area which we had already struggled through once earlier in the day. We pulled out of our position, leaving the wounded marked and as comfortable as possible and started across the marsh. As we waded water, sometimes chest deep, we were sniped at, from what appeared to be long ranges because of the inaccuracy of fire. We made the other side without mishap and marched south until we reached high ground overlooking LA FIERE BRIDGE. When we arrived, we were met by General Gavin, who informed us that there were enough people there and that we should proceed south, along the railroad, to CHEF DU PONT where we were to seize the town and then the bridge across the MERDERET one thousand yards west of the center of the town. A few men, who had been able to get some automatic weapons from some of the bundles dropped as we jumped, were attached for this mission and, under the command of Colonel Ostberg, we proceeded down the railroad toward CHEF DU PONT. There were about one hundred men and officers altogether, equipped only with what the

men could carry; rifles, sub-machine guns, three machine guns and grenades of various types including the British Gammon grenade^{*} which packed a terrific wallop. We had been told that it would knock out tanks. (See Map E) (18)

ELSEWHERE IN NORMANDY ON D-DAY

While we were on our way to CHEF DU PONT we were all probably wondering how the war was going elsewhere in the peninsula for our survival was certainly dependent upon the success of the others making the invasion. As we found out later, by this time things were really happening on the beaches a few miles away. We could hear the big guns and every man was praying for a quick break-out. But where were the other people, (not units, there didn't appear to be any units) of the 507th Parachute Infantry? How were the other units of the 82d Airborne Division doing?

The 507th and the 508th had been dispersed on the drop. The 505th had fared somewhat better, but the 325th Glider Infantry had been the victim of some bad crashes, and was having some early difficulties with its assembly. The 507th had the poorest drop; instead of a twenty-five hundred yard drop zone, troops were scattered a distance of forty miles. Some had hit their objective, however, and were cut off from the rest of the division. This group, consisting of several hundred men and officers, was fighting for its life at AMFREVILLE with Colonel Millet, 507th Regimental Commander. Other small groups, varying in size from ten to two hundred men, were here and there, fighting Germans where they found them. (19)

The wide dispersion actually proved advantageous to the in-

(18) (19) Personal knowledge.

** See have been explained in footnote.*

vaders. The Germans did not know where to turn nor whom to try to dispose of first. Their anti-airborne defenses were of no use to them because they were never able to locate enough American troops to commit their mobile striking force. There would be a report of located paratroopers; they would send patrols out to dispose of small groups and the patrols would be ambushed enroute. The Germans actually expected airborne troops to be used and were prepared for them, but they had anticipated an organized drop. They had three infantry divisions on the peninsula, the 91st, 709th and the 243d, all trained in anti-airborne defense. (See Map A) General Falley, Commanding General of the 91st, had the right idea; he chose to influence the battle in the early hours by going out to see what was going on. General Falley was among the first Germans to die in Normandy. (20)

The 505th, referred to previously as having fared somewhat better on the drop, had taken STE MERE EGLISE and was fighting to hold it. The city had been occupied just before daylight by the 3d Battalion. Other elements of the 505th were engaged at LA FIERE BRIDGE where the Germans had the benefit of an almost ideal defensive position. Inasmuch as it does not differ greatly from the position at CHEF DU PONT we will move back there for more detailed descriptions. (21)

CHEF DU PONT

By now, 1000, 6 June, Colonel Ostberg and his force, comprised of men from all units of the 507th and some from the 508th had reached the railroad station at CHEF DU PONT without opposition. The railroad station was the center of the town and the all important bridge was about one thousand yards southwest. A squad was sent to

(20) A-4, p. 18, 19; (21) A-4, p. 17.

clear the section of town northeast of the station, which they did without incident, while the remainder of the force, preceded by Colonel Ostberg and about a squad, started a race through the part of the town leading to the bridge. This group was fired upon from several buildings simultaneously. Four of the men were hit and the remainder were forced to hold until the town could be systematically cleared. This took about two hours, and at that, most of the Germans had withdrawn ahead of us, apparently headed for the bridge. Speed seemed to be the answer. It was felt that the bridge must be taken before the Germans could organize their defense, so we made a semi-organized dash for it. We were too late. Two officers reached the bridge and were both shot, one toppling off the bridge into the water, the other falling on the eastern approach. The officer toppling into the river happened to be Col. Ostberg. He was rescued shortly afterwards by the heroic action of two soldiers of the 507th and lived to fight again. The other officer was dead. Lt. Col. Maloney, previously referred to, arrived with about seventy-five more men shortly afterwards and we set about to dislodge the stubborn enemy.

To appreciate the difficulties confronting us, an analysis of the terrain and approaches is necessary. The railroad split the town and the bridge lay to the south and west of the railroad station. Houses lined both sides of the road leading to the bridge and a short distance before reaching the bridge (250 yards estimated from memory) and on the left side of the road was a large creamery which was quite high and afforded good observation from an upstairs window. South of the creamery and on three sides of the bridge there were obstacles

(flooded areas). For practical purposes, the only approach to the bridge was the one we had chosen, through CHEF DU PONT. The approaches from the west were not approaches, in a military sense. They were causeways, long and straight and completely flooded on both sides. We were in an ideal position if we could clear the west side of the river; we could hold that bridge until the river froze - and bear in mind, this was June. The few Germans remaining there were fighting "with their backs to the wall". No one could hope to attack successfully or withdraw along these causeways without a preponderance of supporting fires. These we did not have, but nevertheless, we were in the outskirts of CHEF DU PONT with one hundred and seventy-five men. "What are we waiting for, let's take the bridge!" Two attempts to storm the bridge were unsuccessful; there must be a better way. We did succeed in clearing the eastern side of the bridge, however, by killing about twenty-four Germans occupying positions along the shoulders of the road. Positions along the edge of the road east of the bridge were almost untenable now, however, because of rifle and direct artillery fire coming from our right flank. (22)

Just as it was beginning to look as though we might have a stalemate, Colonel Maloney was called back to LA FIERE with all men available, leaving only about thirty-four men at CHEF DU PONT. Almost with his departure three things happened: (1) direct fire on our positions around the creamery reduced our strength to twenty men; (2) from an observation ^{PONT} in the creamery, about a company of Germans could be observed moving around our left rear; and (3) an

(22) Personal knowledge.

officer delivered a message from General Gavin, "Hold at all costs." It was pretty obvious that it couldn't cost too much, but at the same time, it was doubtful if we could hold something we didn't yet have. Reinforcements were asked for and almost as from heaven C-47's began to appear, dropping bundles of weapons and ammunition. One bundle of 60 mm mortar ammunition "dropped right in our laps". We could use this for we had a sixty mortar but no ammunition.

Within thirty minutes the officer who had previously delivered the "hold at all costs" message returned with 100 men and a towed 57 mm gun which was pulled into position on our side of the bridge and we started shooting at where we thought the enemy field piece to be. We didn't hit it, I'm certain, but we stopped its fire and that was our primary desire. Strong positions were organized to the rear in the neck of our position and along the flooded areas on either side of the road just east of the bridge. There defenses were tied in with the natural obstacles on three sides of us. We opened fire with every weapon we could get into position, including our 60 mm mortar which we now had ammunition for, on the western approach to the bridge. On a prearranged signal, a shot from our 57 which we now felt so secure with, all fires lifted and ten men and one officer stormed the bridge and went into position on the western approach to guard the causeways. (See Map F) Five Germans made a run for it down the death trap causeway, and as sudden as the death of these five Germans, the battle was over. The bridge was ours and we knew we could hold it, but like all victories in war, we shared a let down feeling. We knew it was still a long way to BERLIN. We began to organize and improve our position and tend to such pressing things as first aid to the wounded, twenty-

five in number, who could not be evacuated for a lack of any place to evacuate them. We gathered the bodies of the dead after darkness, all we could find, eleven Americans and forty-three Germans, and covered them with parachutes.

D-Day was about over and it had gone fast. In a little while it would be D plus 1. When would the beach forces contact us? They should have already done so. Maybe the whole invasion had failed. After all, we knew nothing of the situation except as it existed in CHEF DU PONT, and CHEF DU PONT is really a very small town. At 2400 hours, our fears were dispelled; reconnaissance elements of the 4th Infantry Division wheeled into our creamery yard, complete with rations and everything. "The landings had gone well", the Lieutenant said, "Thanks to you fellows."

"No sleep last night, Captain". This came from Lieutenant Charles Ames, who had been around most of the day, having come in with the Pathfinders at 0156 hours. "We are in good shape here", he continued. "Why don't we start taking some shifts on sleep?"

As Lieutenant Ames made himself comfortable for a short sleep, the smell of death that was to be with us for a long time to come had begun to permeate the night air. It was D plus 1 in Normandy.

(23)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making a study of this operation, it is my opinion that the decision to use Airborne Troops in support of the invasion of France was a wise one. There is no doubt that the German forces in the Cotentin were confused and disorganized and were not able

(25) Personal knowledge.

to resist the beach landings as they otherwise would have been.

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→ The training and preparation for the invasion were thorough and very effective. It is questionable however, whether the advantages gained from a night drop outweigh the confusion of our own troops resulting therefrom. Of course the situation will dictate the answer, but where there is a preponderance of air power favoring the invaders, it is my opinion that a well coordinated day drop, supported by air strikes into the area immediately before and during the drop would have a better chance of overwhelming success.

Briefing was well planned and the facilities provided were excellent. Security was maintained throughout, contributing materially to the element of surprise, so essential to the success of this operation. There did seem to be a lack of knowledge concerning the nature of the terrain among small unit commanders, however. For example, the flooded MERDERT RIVER and the hedgerows were not planned for and consequently handicapped movement initially. There was a tremendous amount of equipment and some personnel lost in the flooded waters. It is doubtful that the advantages gained from dropping so near to assigned objectives justified these losses. In many cases it resulted in a splitting of units and made reorganization more difficult; these cases being, where a part of a unit dropped on the east bank of the river and a part on the west bank. (24)

Aerial reconnaissance and photography are the best sources of information concerning changes being made in proposed landing areas.

(24) Personal knowledge.

A constant study of aerial photographs of the 82nd Airborne Division's area resulted in a complete change of plans ten days prior to the invasion. Of course no one knows what would have happened had the Division dropped on the bristling anti-airborne defenses around ST SAUVEUR LE VICOMTE, as originally planned, but such a drop could have easily been disastrous.

The Germans had a sound plan for anti-airborne defense in Normandy and probably would have been more successful against an organized drop. Their plan did not differ greatly from our own present doctrine of anti-airborne defense and they made the same mistakes that we might conceivably make under similar circumstances. Their selection of probable landing areas and objectives was uncanny. Their use of passive defense measures was relatively successful in that many gliders were crashed upon landing. Where their plan fell down, however, was in their inability to determine when to commit their mobile striking force, the crux of the whole anti-airborne defense. The mobile striking force is a reserve and the same principles governing the commitment of any reserve should govern here. The invading airborne forces cannot be looked upon as anything but a penetration and should be dealt with accordingly. The Germans whittled down their striking force in an effort to eliminate scattered resistance. They did not fix the enemy before launching a counterattack. They offset the tremendous advantage that they should have gained by the airborne invader's dispersed drop by dispersing their own forces, thus neutralizing their own supporting fires and affording small groups of determined invaders an opportunity to seize lightly held key objectives. (25)

(25) Personal knowledge.

A more complete understanding between airborne forces and air force personnel transporting them is essential. The drop zone of the 507th Parachute Infantry should have been 2500 yards across at the widest point. Instead, troops of this regiment were scattered over an area 40 miles across at its widest point. There is no reason why techniques could not be developed to improve upon this and in my opinion such techniques must be developed before organized night parachute drops can be made. The use of pathfinder teams might be the answer, but as demonstrated in this operation, their use probably will mean a loss of the all important element of surprise.

Assembly was difficult but was effectively accomplished considering the poor drop. It was not carried out according to plan, however, and resulted in groups of men from different units banding together initially. This was somewhat confusing in that there was no tactical unity, no organization and no coordination.

There was no attempt made, on the part of many of the officers commanding these hodge-podge groups, to organize them into fighting units. These same officers, to be commended for their bravery, foolishly were killed or wounded trying to lead squad attacks.

Resupply of airborne troops is essential as soon as possible to offset equipment lost on the drop. This resupply probably would be made prior to any link-up and therefore will have to be made by air. The drops should be planned near unit objectives to compensate for a lack of transportation. (26)

A well planned, well executed airborne operation cannot be denied initial success. Any airborne operation cannot be denied

(26) Personal knowledge.

sustained success unless it is properly dealt with by the defenders. Airborne troops must substitute aggressiveness for supporting arms and equipment and must utilize obstacles to the fullest in holding objectives once taken.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. Valuable training time can be lost if troops are not stationed where training facilities are available.
2. Training should be designed to anticipate probable combat eventualities so that troops will be prepared for them.
3. Many of the advantages gained in a night airborne operation are offset by the confusion resulting among participating airborne personnel.
4. Airborne units can be employed very effectively to assist in the establishment of beachheads.
5. Security is essential to the success of an airborne invasion.
6. Every man must be briefed thoroughly for an airborne operation, therefore detailed briefing facilities are needed.
7. Flooded areas are very effective as passive anti-airborne defenses, resulting in losses of personnel and equipment.
8. Daily aerial photographs of probable zone of operations are essential in planning an airborne operation.
9. Passive defense measures of the "Rommel's pargel" type are very effective against glider landings.
10. A thorough knowledge of the terrain, over which operations will be made following an airborne landing, is essential.

11. Anti-airborne defense striking forces should not be committed piece-meal to destroy small groups of groping invaders.

12. A quick link-up with beach forces is important for most effective use of airborne troops on such an operation as described in this monograph. (27)

13. There is a need for a quick release on parachute harness to enable the parachutist to free himself quickly especially if he lands in water. (Developed as a result of this operation.)

14. Air force personnel (pilots) transporting airborne troops should be thoroughly indoctrinated with the importance of a "close drop".

could be better stated
15. There should be some armor protection on troop carrier planes so as to reduce the number of pilots taking evasive action upon encountering anti-aircraft fire.

16. Airborne troops must be prepared to fight upon landing without tactical unity or supporting weapons.

17. The best place for an anti-airborne defense commander is at his command post where he can best receive reports and control anti-airborne defenses. If he leaves his command post to try to influence the fighting he is only one more of many.

18. An officer should be an aggressive leader but not foolish. He should "fight his unit, not himself".

19. Resupply of airborne troops is essential as soon as is practicable after a drop to compensate for equipment lost or damaged. (28)

(27) (28) Personal knowledge.