



# WORLD WAR 2 SOLDIER STORIES PART VIII

TRUE AIRBORNE STORIES OF THE US PARATROOPERS,  
FROM DDAY TO OPERATION MARKET GARDEN



# **World War 2 Soldier Stories VIII:**

True Airborne Stories of the US  
Paratroopers, from D-Day to  
Operation Market Garden

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# Introduction

Thank you for downloading this book, "WWII Soldier's Stories VII: Airborne - US Paratroopers during WWII".

\*"They've got us surrounded, the poor bastards." These are the words of a medic in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division during the Siege of Bastogne in December of 1944, but they could just as easily have applied to any number of situations in the war. With few exceptions, the paratroopers of the US Army came out on top. The enemy regarded the paratroops as the US Army's best fighting force, and frequently sent the most elite German units to face them. In Sicily, they faced the crack Hermann Goring Division, and in France, Belgium and Germany, the elite German parachute divisions or Fallschirmjäger and the dreaded Waffen-SS. Today, seventy odd years after the end of the war, surviving members of the US airborne units in Europe tell the story with blunt honesty: in much of the fighting, especially between the Airborne and the SS, there was little quarter asked, and little quarter given.\*

In 2001, Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, and HBO broadcast the mini-series "Band of Brothers", from the book of the same name by author Stephen Ambrose. This renewed interest in the paratroops of WWII. The men of Easy Company, 506<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne were (and would be) the first to say that they were but one unit of many in the three US Airborne divisions of the Second World War. They would say that their feats in battle were equal or more than equal by other units in their division and in the others. The British Airborne divisions (the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup>) played a significant role in the war, and did it with equal valor.

For many of you reading this short and introductory e-book, the tales of E Company, 506<sup>th</sup> PIR and of the 101<sup>st</sup> will be quite familiar. While we aim to include an episode from their illustrious history, for this volume, we are going to concentrate on other stories, perhaps not so well known to those of you just becoming familiar with the history of the Second World War.

We hope that this small volume will lead you to further and more in depth study of this fascinating topic and these brave men.

Please feel free to share this book with your friends and family. Please also take the time to write a short review on Amazon to share your thoughts.

# Chapter 1: Origins

During WWI, a number of different men (one being Winston Churchill) put forward the idea of dropping men from parachutes behind enemy lines. This was an example of an idea being beyond the capability of the technology of the time - in somewhat of the same way as men dreamed of sending a rocket to the moon, before there were rockets.

The planes of WWI, even the largest bombers and observation planes, were not large enough to carry a sufficient number of men into battle. The idea of dropping men from the skies behind enemy lines also suffered from another problem - frequently the gains made by the troops on the front lines of WWI were measured in yards, not miles, and any force behind enemy lines would likely be annihilated before relief could get to them, if at all. Finally, parachute technology was in its infancy and not very practical.

It was not until after WWI that a number of countries began to develop practical parachute forces. These nations were: the Soviet Union, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Argentina (yes, you read that correctly - Argentina developed airborne forces contemporaneously with the other countries in the 1920's, '30's and early 1940's.) The first large scale airborne drop of airborne soldiers was performed by the Italians in 1927 and subsequently two Italian airborne units were formed. A few years later, in the mid-1930's the Soviet Union began developing parachute units and experimented with the idea of dropping light tanks and other vehicles as well. Germany followed shortly thereafter, and the first German paratroop units were formed in 1936. Both the British and the Americans experimented with parachute units in the late 1930's and after the success of the German paratroops in

Belgium and Holland in 1940, accelerated their respective programs. Below you will see photographs from the early days of paratroops.



*Soviet Paratroops drop off the wing of a TB-3 transport in the 1930's. Most early airborne drops were performed in this manner*



*First British paratroopers, December 1940*





*First American  
paratroop volunteers, 1940*



*German  
paratroopers prepare for training jump, 1940*

The first nation to use airborne (paratroops and glider-borne troopers) was Germany. During the invasions of Denmark and Norway in April 1940, small units of German airborne descended on key bridges and airfields in those countries. A month later, during the Battle of France, German “commandos” from the Brandenburg regiments landed in small planes behind the lines to secure crossing points for the main body of German troops in the advancing 10<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division. More was to come.

The most famous and influential airborne attacks of war prior to the entry of the Americans in 1942 were German. For all intents and purposes, the United States did not have troops in the European Theater of Operations until long after Pearl Harbor, and the first US airborne troops did not see combat until late 1942 in a small landing in North Africa. At Fort Eben Emael in Belgium on May 10<sup>th</sup> 1940, German glider-borne troops landed on top of and around the massive Belgian fort with its large and dangerous guns, putting them and the men inside out of commission within hours with satchel charges, flamethrowers and specially designed shaped charges (shaped charges are used to penetrate armor and concrete).

Pitched and desperate battles took place between the Dutch Army and the Fallschirmjäger when Germany invaded that country on the same day as Belgium and France. Many Fallschirmjäger were taken prisoner, but within a few short hours, German paratroops had control of many of the key bridges and highway junctions in the country.

The Fallschirmjäger fought valiantly until the end of the war, but were not used as paratroopers again (except in a couple of small raids) after 1941. Against superior numbers, the Fallschirmjäger took the island of Crete from British, Imperial and Greek forces in May/June 1941. Though successful and hailed as great heroes by Hitler and the German people, the Fallschirmjäger were never to be used

as paratroops again, in Hitler's opinion the losses on Crete were too high for these elite troops. Many Fallschirmjäger champed at the bit for the rest of the war for the opportunity to drop from the skies once more, but it was not to be.

Soviet airborne forces made a number of small drops during the first days of the German invasion of the USSR, but these forces were rapidly defeated. Dropping into areas overrun with massive numbers of German troops, with no hope whatever of relief, these airborne units were virtually annihilated. During the war, a significant number of Soviet airborne units were trained, but nearly all of them saw combat solely as infantry divisions – most of them being renamed elite “Guards” divisions instead.

The British had developed airborne capability in some of their famed “commando” units in 1940 after the success of the German airborne units. The first action of British airborne troops - volunteers from No.2 Commando – took place on February 10<sup>th</sup> 1941 in southern Italy. The objective of the raid was two-fold: to destroy an important aqueduct that supplied fresh water to the Italian navy and ports, and to test the viability of airborne operations. Though almost all the men who took part in the raid were taken prisoner, the raid was deemed a success. The objective had been destroyed, and valuable lessons (the prime of which was the need for precise planning for the extraction or relief of airborne troops) were to be learned from the raid which would apply to other raiding operations carried out by the British, as well as to the major airborne operations of the later war years. The Americans too, benefited from these early British lessons. British airborne units were to fight in some of the most famous battles of the war, and were charged with the seizure of key objectives during Operation Overlord, the invasion of Europe.

The first American airborne division was the 82<sup>nd</sup>, which had fought as regular infantry during World War I. One of the most famous soldiers in American history, Sergeant Alvin York, fought with the 82<sup>nd</sup> in France in WWI. The division became known as the “All-American Division” when it was realized that in contrast with many of the American units of the time who were formed from state militias and generally contained men from the same geographic area, the men from the 82<sup>nd</sup> were from almost every state in the Union – hence, “All-American.”

At the end of the war, the unit was essentially demobilized, being named a reserve unit, ready to be mustered in case of war, and scattered about the country. This was the case for the next twenty years. In 1942, the unit was activated and placed under the command of Omar Bradley, a general who would eventually command corps and army groups during the war, and end his career as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Other officers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> who would later rise to fame were Mathew Ridgway (who would later command all Allied troops in Korea and become Chief of Staff of the Army), Maxwell Taylor (who would later command the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne in WWII and later become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, like Bradley), and James Gavin, the fighting general, who would become one of the war's most famous combat heroes, and a visionary in the use of airborne forces after WWII. With these and other accomplished officers in positions of command, it is no wonder that the 82<sup>nd</sup> won itself a record of glory in WWII.

For those in the military that supported the idea of an airborne division, the 82<sup>nd</sup> and its success or failure in combat was to determine the future of the American airborne forces. Most troops were rigorously trained in the heat and humidity of Fort Benning, Georgia, but a number of the units detachments were trained in other areas of the

south, such as Florida and North Carolina. The troops of the 82<sup>nd</sup> set the standard by which other airborne units would be measured. Many of those who volunteered for duty with the 82<sup>nd</sup> washed-out – they could not take the discipline, physical training, or both. Those who remained and got their jump wings considered themselves the “best of the best”, but they would have to prove that in battle.

They would be given that opportunity in 1943. In April of that year, the divisions' four units (at the time), the 505 Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), the 325<sup>th</sup> Glider Infantry, the 319<sup>th</sup> and the 320<sup>th</sup> Glider Field Artillery, arrived in North Africa. Three months later, they would see combat for the first time...

## **Chapter 2: Trials and Triumph:**

### **James Gavin and the 82<sup>nd</sup> in Sicily**

By the time of Operation Market-Garden in Holland in the early fall of 1944, James M. Gavin was the youngest Major General and division commander in the United States Army. That he was so was due to the actions and leadership that he showed during the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne's operations in North Africa, Italy and Normandy.

Gavin was a “soldier's soldier.” Historians have called other generals by that name – in WWII, General Omar Bradley had the reputation of being a “soldier's soldier”, even though he was not – but James M. Gavin surely was, and the men of the 82<sup>nd</sup> knew he would not order them to do anything that he was not prepared to do himself – because he had. They called him “Slim Jim”, or “The Jumpin General”, because of his participation in the combat drops of the division.

Gavin (1907-1990) was determined to live a life of adventure and he joined the Army in 1924. Eighty years ago, America was a different country – Gavin was seventeen and needed his adoptive parents' consent to join the armed forces. Gavin claimed he was eighteen, but an orphan, without parents – or a birth certificate. The recruiting sergeant took Gavin and a few other “orphans” to a local lawyer whom he knew. This lawyer declared himself their “guardian”, signed the necessary papers, and voila, James Gavin was in the US Army.

Gavin's family was poor and he had had to quit school to help support them. While in the army he had the opportunity to further his education, which he did, by reading extensively in his spare time, traveling the

surrounding countryside of Panama (where he was posted), and getting to know his superiors. One of them encouraged Gavin to attend an army school - those who graduated at the top of the class got the opportunity to apply to the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Gavin studied daily for his exams and was admitted to West Point in 1925, graduating in 1929. In the time between his graduation from West Point and the outbreak of WWII, Gavin held a variety of posts. These included time as instructor of tactics at West Point, and under future Chief of Staff George Marshall (one of the architects of Allied victory in WWII) and the visionary Joe Stilwell, who was to lead a joint Chinese-American force in China and Indochina against the Japanese in the war.

Gavin was not satisfied with the state of the Army in the years between the wars. He read the works of military men from other nations, and saw that military strategy and tactics were evolving rapidly, but that the United States, in the midst of the Great Depression and behind the shield of two oceans, was not keeping up. Equipment was out-dated, military doctrine was old, tradition ruled, and innovation looked down upon. Gavin and other officers like him had a hard time in the late 1930's, but when the United States became involved in WWII, it became clear (at high cost, unfortunately) that what had passed for satisfactory in 1931 was not near satisfactory in 1941. When some in the army noticed the success of the German paratroops in 1940 and thought to emulate them, Gavin was one of the first to volunteer.

It was April of 1941, and Gavin was one of the first officers to graduate from the new airborne school at Fort Benning. As captain, he was given command of a company in one of the first airborne units in the US Army, the 503rd Parachute Infantry Battalion (which was later to operate as an independent battalion in the Pacific). The man who was the

impetus of the American airborne program, General William (Bill) Lee (1897-1948), was pressured into letting Gavin write the Army's handbook on airborne tactics and organization, which he did, being promoted to major and to Lee's staff at the same time. Much of what Gavin wrote in that handbook laid the groundwork for airborne operations both in WWII and today.

The successful training of the paratroops at Fort Benning, where they were known as the "Provisional Airborne Group" helped, along with the arguments of Lee and Gavin, to convince the Army staff that an airborne division was both feasible and necessary. This was the birth of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne - the spring and summer of 1942. Gavin was promoted colonel and given command of the 505<sup>th</sup> PIR.



*General Gavin in 1944*

The first combat operation of the 82<sup>nd</sup> in WWII was to drop behind the beaches of south central Sicily to ensure that Axis forces did not reinforce their troops at the beach area, and allow the invasion forces to build-up their strength quickly without fear of significant enemy counter-attack.

Some military axioms are quite famous. Anyone wishing to make a career in the armed forces should know this quote, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century German strategist, Helmuth von



Moltke: "No plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force." A little over forty years later, heavyweight champ Mike Tyson put it a little differently: "Everyone has a fight plan, then they get punched in the face." James Gavin and the 82<sup>nd</sup> were reminded of that in the early morning hours of July 9<sup>th</sup> 1943.

The first thing that Gavin realized was that he was miles from his designated drop zone. He was to learn later that only about 100 of the 3,400 All-Americans were anywhere near where they were supposed to be. High winds off the Mediterranean and poor navigation by aircrews were among the problems. Gavin was able to locate perhaps a dozen men and move towards the sound of gunfire in the distance. They walked all through the night and in the morning, ran into a platoon sized Italian squad. A firefight broke out and a handful of the out-numbered Americans were wounded. Gavin and a half dozen men moved off, having to leave a number of the wounded behind. Gavin, who was supposed to be commanding three thousand men in the first American fight on European soil, had six.

Though they did not know it at the time, the scattering of the 505<sup>th</sup> in a one thousand square mile area actually proved a positive in the long run. As would happen again in Normandy a year later, groups of scattered paratroops engaged German and Italian troops in a small, quick, guerrilla action, striking at them and then moving off to find the rest of their regiment. This caused both the Italians and the Germans to believe that they were under attack by many more Allied troops than they actually were and forced some Axis units, which might have moved toward the beaches, to remain in place.

On the 11<sup>th</sup>, Gavin found a vehicle and set off for Gela, the Sicilian town that was the center of the American invasion plan. On the way, he found two hundred fifty of his men lounging about in a tomato field, including their battalion

commander. After a good chewing out by Gavin, the men gathered together to move out, their divisional commander fuming.

As these two hundred fifty men drew within a few miles of the landing zones around Gela, they heard firing coming from a nearby ridge. What happened next is legendary.

On the heights - called Biazza Ridge - Gavin and his platoon overran the German positions firing down upon Allied forces in the valley far below. Allied veterans who fought in Europe will almost all tell you the same thing: if you attacked the Germans and drove them off a position, you could count on them coming right back, and that is what happened to Gavin and his men on the ridge. The troopers on Biazza were not equipped for a fight with a heavily armed opponent, but that's what they got.

Instead of the few Germans that had previously held the position, the counter-attacking force consisted of approximately seven hundred German soldiers, elements of a mobile armored battalion and a company of the new German tanks - the monstrous Tiger.



*Men of the 82<sup>nd</sup>  
on Biazza Ridge July 11<sup>th</sup> 1943*

At first the Germans were tentative and did not assault in strength, but when they determined the number of Americans on the ridge, they pressed their attack. A barrage of artillery and mortar fire poured down on the ridge, killing and wounding men, including Gavin, who refused to have his injured leg treated. Then German infantry, accompanied by the Tigers, began their assault.

The Tiger tank was a 60-ton behemoth with four inch armor and a 88mm cannon, in addition to hull and turret mounted machine guns. The only anti-tank weapons possessed by the troopers and the men from the 45<sup>th</sup> were bazookas, and the 3-inch tube fired rockets were useless against the Tiger. A number of Americans, hoping to strike the Tigers in their vulnerable undersides, waited as the tanks crested the small ridges that made up Biazza Ridge entire. Many of these men were crushed in their foxholes, the bazookas useless even against the weakest part of the Tiger. Others were gunned down as they fled, blown into nothing by the guns of the tanks.

As Gavin and his men held off the German infantry and were under assault by the Tigers, the German land forces were joined by Me-109 fighters who strafed and bombed the troopers' position, until a heavy machine gun crew from another unit of the 82<sup>nd</sup> made it to the crest of the hill and opened fire on them. Gavin told his men, "We're staying on this goddamned ridge—no matter what happens!"

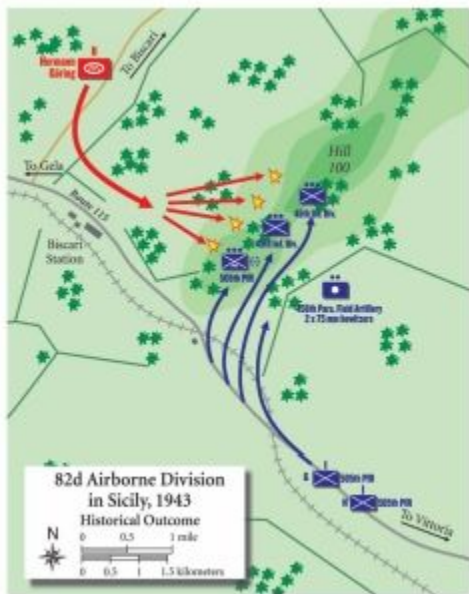
Towards middle afternoon, two 75mm pack howitzers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> were dragged up the ridge and began to open fire at the Tiger's as they reared up over high points in the soil. In this way, a number of Tigers were disabled, and the remainder became hesitant to climb the ground again.

Later in the day, a battalion of the 45<sup>th</sup> infantry joined the 82<sup>nd</sup> on Biazza Ridge, along with Sherman tanks, and artillery support from the beach-head, along with

coordinated naval fire from the invasion fleet offshore. In the evening, the Germans began shelling the position again. The troopers and their commander had had enough. They charged down the ridge at the remaining German infantry, forcing the Germans to retreat in disorder, leaving their dead and wounded on the field, along with many supplies. After an all-day fight, the Americans had won - but at the cost of fifty men dead and one hundred wounded. For his leadership and bravery that day, Gavin was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (the first of two won during the war).

Below you see troopers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> on a disabled German Tiger on Biazza Ridge and a map of the battle.





Unfortunately, for the men of the 82<sup>nd</sup>, not all the hard lessons of war were to come at the hands of the enemy.

An amphibious landing with an airborne component takes an extraordinary amount of planning. Supplies have to be calculated, secured, and transported. Men have to be trained, equipped, and transported – and both have to be packed and shipped in the right order. Secrecy and misdirection have to be employed. Air cover needs to be arranged...hundreds of things need to go right, and any number of things can go wrong, and often do.

The invasion of Sicily was the largest of the war to that point. 170,000 men were to be landed on the island at the British and American beaches. Opposing them was a sizable German and Italian force, with an air force that was still to be reckoned with.

While Gavin and his men were gathering, walking towards Gela and preparing for the assault on Biazza Ridge, a second wave of 82<sup>nd</sup> Division troopers, the 504<sup>th</sup> PIR, under the command of Colonel Reuben Tucker, was scheduled to drop into the beach-head area.

The invasion fleet, under intermittent attack by German and Italian air forces for a day and half, was edgy and nervous in the early morning hours of July 11. There were four formations for a total of 144 C-47 and C-53 transports dropping troopers from the 504<sup>th</sup> in the Gela area. Two flights dropped their paratroopers directly on their designated drop zones.

The next group of planes came over the horizon shortly thereafter. In the semi-darkness of the early morning, an American gunner on the beach mistook the low flying planes for German Ju-88 bombers. The firing and the tracers from the guns started a chain reaction, and soon, gun crews both on shore and in the fleet were firing on the planes.

Twenty-three planes were shot down. Some of them crashed into the sea, on fire, burning paratroopers falling out of the aircraft behind them. Others exploded in mid-air, and still others crashed into the ground around Gela. Some men jumped out of planes only to be dragged underwater by their chutes. Others were shot to pieces while they came down. Three hundred and eighteen men were killed by their comrades, including the deputy commander of the 82<sup>nd</sup>.

Col. Tucker's plane was hit and damaged, as were many others. A quick conversation between a panicking pilot and Tucker convinced the pilot to fly over Gela, where Tucker and the troopers bailed out. The colonel spent the next few moments watching his men being blown out of the sky by their fellows.

An inquiry after the incident revealed a number of errors. Some had to do with lack of discipline on the part of gun crews. Other factors included General Ridgway ignoring warnings from the US Navy about the danger from friendly fire. The entire episode was covered up. Men were ordered to keep silent, and few were disciplined. It was not til long after the war was over that the incident saw the light of day.

An account of from a survivor: “The pilot of my plane gave me the warning twenty minutes out from the DZ. After the red light came on, he had to give me the green light in about one minute, due to the plane being on fire.

We jumped into a steady stream of antiaircraft fire, and not knowing that they were friendly troops. About seventy-five yards from where I landed, plane No. 915 was hit and burned. To my knowledge only the pilot and three men got out. The pilot was thrown through the window. Another plane was shot down on the beach and another plane was burning about one thousand yards to my front.

There were four men killed and four wounded from my platoon. Three of these men were hit coming down and one was killed on the ground because he had the wrong password. After landing, we found out this had been changed to ‘Think’ - ‘Quickly’. The antiaircraft fire we jumped into was the 180th Infantry of the 45th Division. They were not told we were coming.

We tried to reorganize, but found we didn’t have but forty-four men, including three officers. We searched all night for the rest of the men. After accounting for them we took care of the dead and wounded and started toward our objective. We arrived at the 504th CP at 2:00, July 12, 1943.”



Two days later, papers in the States carried a United Press story, which began:

## Chapter 3: La Fiere

When the invasion of Normandy was being developed, the planners realized one thing quite quickly. Once off the beach, the invaders would have to negotiate very difficult terrain - marshes, rivers, and lowlands that could be easily flooded by the Germans, who were in control of the flood control systems of the area - locks, dams, and reservoirs. If the enemy made this terrain impassable, the Allied forces, and in particular the Americans, would have a difficult time getting out of the beachhead area, allowing the Germans valuable time to bring up reinforcements.

To combat this threat, planners decided that to seize this area, avoid the threat of German flooding and counter-attacks at the beach as the invasion forces landed and were being built-up, paratroop and glider units would be dropped behind the beaches.

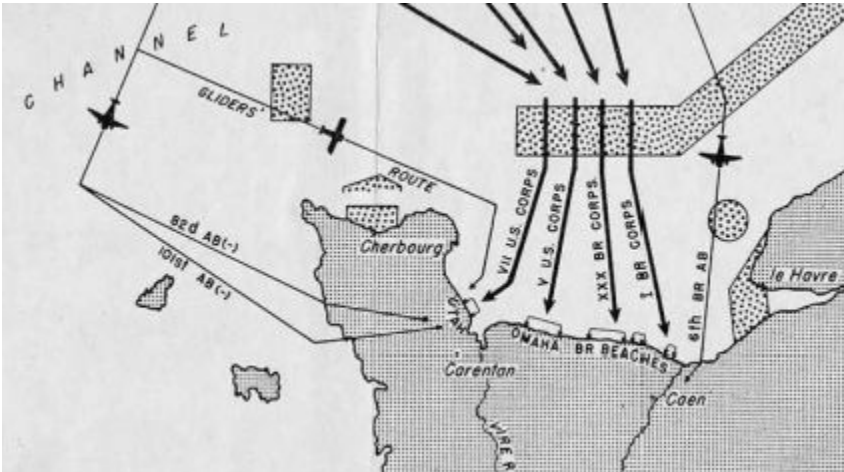
The two American airborne divisions that would be dropping into the Cotentin Peninsula of Normandy on the night and morning of June 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944 were the 82<sup>nd</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup>. The success and promise of the 82<sup>nd</sup>'s actions in Sicily had convinced the US high command that there was a future for the airborne, and for the invasion of Europe, the 101<sup>st</sup>, which had been formed as an airborne division in the summer of 1942, and which had been conducting training exercises in England since 1943.

There were three other airborne divisions being formed and trained in the United States. The 11<sup>th</sup>, which would eventually see combat in the Philippines in 1945, the 13<sup>th</sup>, whose assignments in the latter part of the war kept getting canceled due to the rapid advance of the Allied forces, and the 17<sup>th</sup>, which would see action in the Battle of the Bulge and later in the biggest airborne drop of the war, Operation Varsity.



For a number of days before the invasion, the troops were restricted to base and had to suffer through a number of false alarms before the actual order to proceed came. Weather had delayed the invasion from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup>.

Draftees, patriotic as they may be, are not generally eager to get into combat. Elite forces on the other hand, who have trained for long periods of time, and have hyped themselves up to a fever pitch in preparation for their assignment, usually are quite eager. By the time the “GO” order was given on the evening of June 5<sup>th</sup>, the troopers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup> were nearly climbing the walls with anticipation and eagerness.



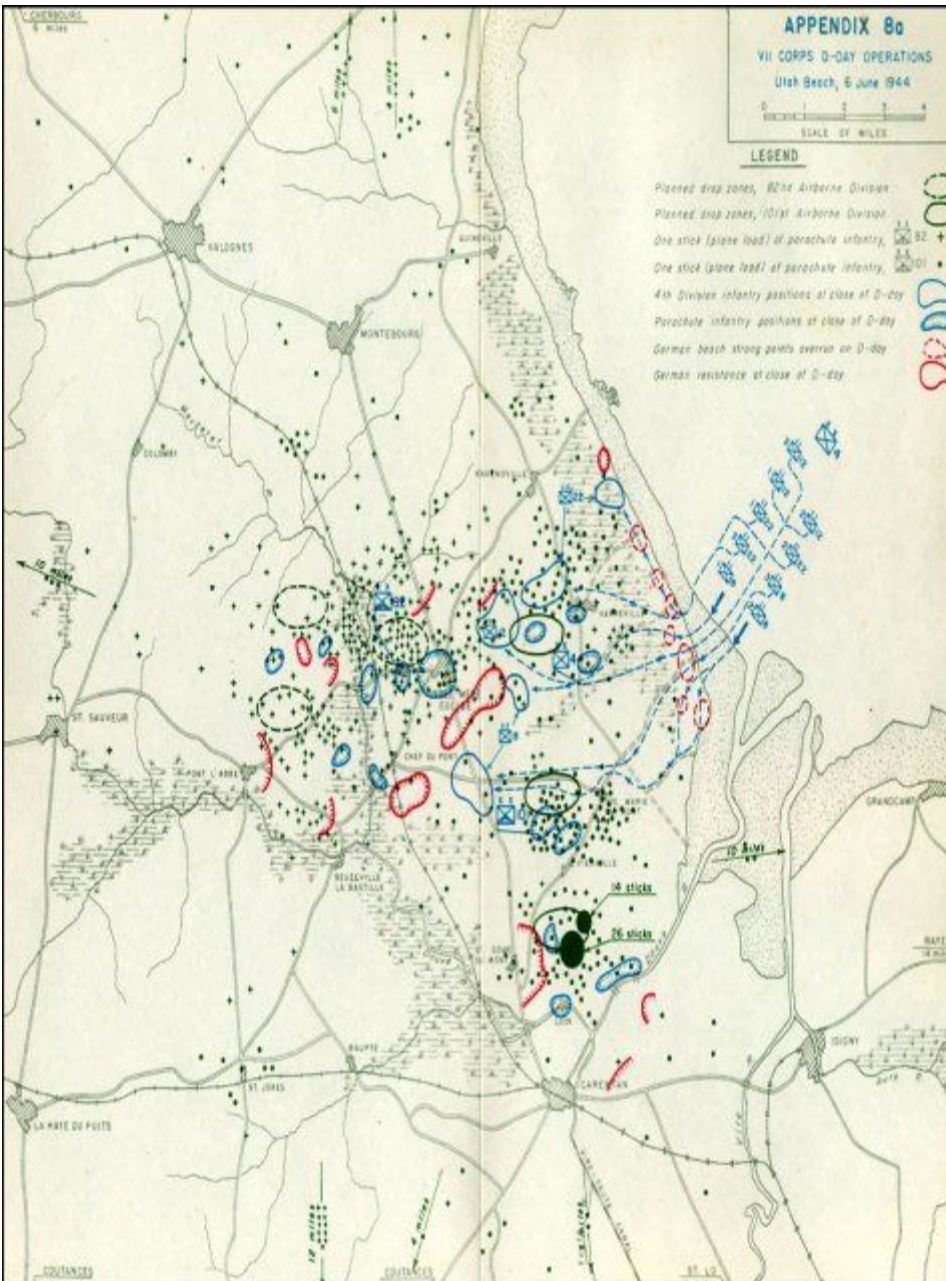
The plans for the drop called for the glider borne regiments of the two divisions to come in over the landing beaches but in front of the fleet. It also called for the C-47's carrying the paratroops to take a longer route, coming from the west over the Cotentin Peninsula to add a further element of surprise to the attack, as German troops would likely expect the Allies from the east.

On a generally clear night, the last thing the pilots of the transport planes expected was to run across a thick inland cloudbank at the same altitude as their flight path and drop height, but that is what they found. Almost as soon as they entered the clouds, many of the pilots lost their bearings and scattered in different directions. Others had not even

found the cloudbank and had dropped their men miles to the north and east. Some men did not find their units for days - in a couple of cases, weeks.

When they came out of the clouds, German gunners opened up on them. 88Mm guns, 20mm anti-aircraft guns, machine guns...in the chaos of the skies over Normandy, many of the transport pilots panicked, and dropped their men nowhere near where they were supposed to be. In the years since the war, the transport pilots of D-Day have gotten a bad reputation, but the truth is that many (not enough, but many) of the pilots got their men to their designated landing zones under a great deal of pressure, and should be commended for it. That being said, the majority of troopers from the 82<sup>nd</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup> did not drop on their landing zones. Indeed, many of the units which found themselves fighting the Germans were mixed units from both divisions.

The glider-borne troops, nicknamed "Skytrain Boys" by the paratroopers in their divisions, generally were more successful in finding their landing zones, though they too were scattered. A number of them did crash, either into woods, flooded areas or German obstacles, creating numerous gruesome casualties. Nonetheless, the glider-borne landings were considered much successful than those of the paratroops.



The map below shows the designated landing zones for the airborne divisions behind Utah Beach in solid and dotted green circles. The small green crosses represent the real landing points of planeloads of 82<sup>nd</sup> troopers. The solid green dots for the 101<sup>st</sup> (additionally, landing zones and advances for Utah Beach landing forces are indicated).

Scattered all over the countryside in much the same manner as the 82<sup>nd</sup> had been in Sicily (but on a much larger

scale), the paratroopers began to sow confusion among the enemy troops, many of whom were awakened by the sound of gunfire or explosions nearby. The scattering of the troops made it seem to the Germans that they were up against a much larger force than they really were, which caused both caution and confusion.

The 82<sup>nd</sup> had three main D-Day objectives. Capture and hold the town of Ste. Mere Eglise, seize the bridge at Chef du Pont and hold a sufficiently large area on both ends of the bridge, and do the same at the bridge and causeway near the La Fiere Manor.

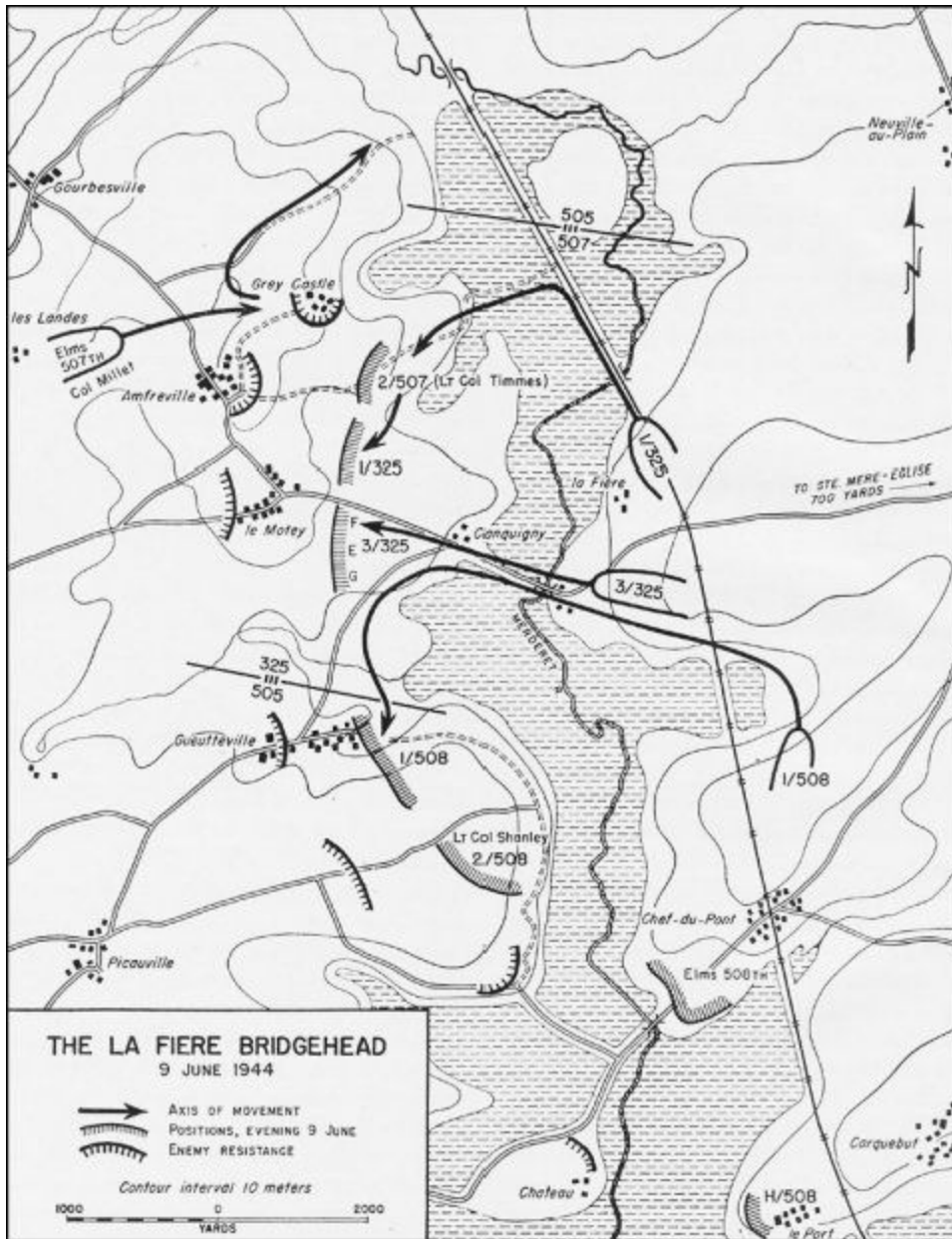
Ste. Mere Eglise housed a small German garrison and sat at a key crossroads. Taking the town and controlling the crossroads would allow for the rapid advancement of troops from the landing beaches inland. The Ste. Mere Eglise battle is legendary – even people who have little interest in history know at least some of the story. Paratroops from both the 101<sup>st</sup> and the 82<sup>nd</sup> dropped into the town at about 0130 on the 6<sup>th</sup>. They were met with stiff resistance from a German garrison that was already awakened by both anti-aircraft fire and fires that had broken out in the town because of flares dropped by the first American planes to pass by the area, illuminating the landing zone. Some paratroops were snagged on trees and telephone wire where they were killed by German troops at point blank range. Others were shot as they dropped into the town square. One of the most famous episodes of the war came when Private John Steele became snagged in the roof of the town church watching as the battle unfolded below him. After the Americans – controlled a fight which was sometimes hand to hand, the town at 0430, the first French town had been liberated.

At Chef du Pont, James Gavin (who by now was a general and the assistant division commander) and seventy-five men arrived from north of the bridge and were in control of the area in short order. A glider carrying more 82<sup>nd</sup> men and

an anti-tank gun came down nearby, and the men dug in to defend against German counter-attacks which were sure to come. General Gavin and other officers went back in the direction of La Fiere to the north, to rendezvous with his commander and troops there and help to coordinate the attack to seize that bridgehead. This left Captain Roy Creek in charge of the men at Chef du Pont, who held off repeated badly coordinated attacks by German troops the rest of the day.

Seizing the last objective of the 82<sup>nd</sup>, the La Fiere Causeway and bridge, was going to be much more difficult. Away from the coast and the towns, Normandy is mostly rolling farmland. Though the later campaign in Normandy was marked by a struggle in the “boscage” or “hedgerows, the first few days of the battle, especially behind Utah Beach, were fought in the relatively open countryside between the beach and the heavy boscage. ” Boscage was erected as ancient property boundaries and erosion prevention, the boscage were thick, tall overgrown barriers comprised of trees, roots, rocks, dirt, brambles - all very old, very deep and very tough.

With ranges in the hundreds of yards, modern weapons would make the fields of Normandy a very deadly place to be and one of the last places on Earth that a soldier wanted to charge through. On the next pages, you will see a map of the battle area and an aerial picture that will help you to envision the events to come.



*This map is oriented so that the top of the page is north. The shaded area represents flooded land*





*West is at the top, north to the right. The bridge itself is just a few yards from the orchard at the bottom of the frame just after the manor house on the left of the road. The tiny village of Cauquigny sits to the right of the road near the center of the photo. In 1944, much of the surrounding area on both side of the road was flooded as shown upper left. Gavin's foxhole*



*was/is at the point of the orchard  
The bridge today, looking west towards Cauquigny*

By June 9<sup>th</sup>, three days after the invasion, the bridge was contested and the causeway area still in German hands. Unless it was taken, units from Utah would be held up, exposing the whole beachhead area to counter-attack. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 505<sup>th</sup> PIR established defenses on the eastern side of the bridge over the Merderet River on June 6<sup>th</sup> and taken heavy losses. They were relieved by a force made up of stragglers around a core of men from Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 507<sup>th</sup> PIR, under Captain Robert Rae, who had held the ground since then against repeated German attacks and constant shelling.

The area around La Fiere was so important that the Corps Commander for the area, VII Corps, which included the 82<sup>nd</sup>, 101<sup>st</sup>, four infantry divisions, two armored battalions and two squadrons of mechanized infantry (4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group), Major General J. Lawton Collins, the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division commander Raymond Barton, Major General Ridgway and General Gavin (commander and deputy commander of the 82<sup>nd</sup>), met in a sunken road about five hundred yards to the east of the bridge to discuss what they would do.

General Collins wanted to move the 90<sup>th</sup> Division forward and have them assault the bridge, believing that the 82<sup>nd</sup>, having fought all night, and lacking much of the equipment they left England with (much of it in sunken or partially sunken gliders throughout the landing zone), was too exhausted and disorganized to assault the bridge and clear the area. He asked Ridgway what he thought should be done. Ridgway was unequivocal: La Fiere was his division's objective. He knew they could take it, and he was not about to ask other men to fight and die for an objective that his unit could not take. He looked at Collins and said, "This is the only mission this division has not accomplished and we will complete it." The officers and men of the 82<sup>nd</sup> standing nearby, beginning to feel downcast with the thought that their mission was going to be taken from them, heard their



commander's words and suddenly felt as if a wave of restorative energy had passed through them. General Barton of the 90<sup>th</sup> told Ridgway, "Whatever you need, Matt, it's yours. Trucks, guns ammunition." Ridgway went to Gavin and said, "You are in charge. We attack at 0930." An artillery officer from the 90<sup>th</sup> Division, whose guns had already been assigned to the 82nd's efforts, told the generals that he needed an extra hour to get his guns in position from the beach. The attack would begin at 1030, three hours hence.

For the next three hours, Gavin was everywhere, giving orders, making plans, organizing men and equipment. The first thing he did was assign the assault across the bridge to the 325<sup>th</sup> Glider Regiment. Though this unit was now thirty percent under-strength, these losses in dead and wounded had come from crash landings in the night, not battle, and the rest of the men of the 325<sup>th</sup> were relatively well rested and equipped. Gavin ordered them from Ste. Mere Eglise where they had assembled earlier in the morning, to the bridge area. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR, 82<sup>nd</sup> would follow close behind.

The men would force their way across the bridge and establish a position to the south of the causeway as a unit under Lt. Col Thomas Shanley to the south (2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 508th) was relieved by one battalion. Another would relieve or reinforce Lt. Col Charles Timmes and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 507<sup>th</sup> PIR to the north and take a position to the north of the causeway. Both of these units had been fighting the Germans since D-Day. The Germans had them penned in, but could not take their positions. That was the plan. Of course, the Germans had plans of their own, and they were not the ones that had to mount an assault down a narrow causeway in broad daylight, exposed to enemy fire.

At 0900, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 325<sup>th</sup> arrived in La Fiere from Ste. Mere Eglise. The 3<sup>rd</sup> would lead the assault - by chance they arrived first. Though they undoubtedly had

heard artillery and small arms fire throughout the night, the closer that they got to La Fiere, the louder the sounds of war became. At the place where the main road from Ste. Mere crossed the railroad track, just off the bottom of the aerial picture on a previous page, the 325<sup>th</sup> stopped and took cover, waiting for the appointed time. It was not a quiet wait. The Germans were firing machine guns, mortars, and artillery from across the bridge and near Cauquigny at the troops defending the eastern side of the bridge and assembling beyond it. Dead men lined the road, covered in tarps or blankets where the 325<sup>th</sup> assembled. The wounded were interspersed with the dead, overwhelmed medics making their way from one man to another. Most of the men in the 325<sup>th</sup> had never been in combat. They had an hour and a half to think about it.

Some men are not made to withstand combat. Unfortunately, this is often not found out until the last moment. When General Gavin gathered the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Lt. Col Charles Carrell, and the commander of G Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Captain John Sauls. Standing so close together that their shoulders touched, so they could be heard over the roar of German artillery, the three men came together to discuss the plan, but before he could speak, Gavin was interrupted by Carrell who told the general that he “felt ill”, and did not think himself physically capable of leading the attack. He also suggested that there was an alternative to the assault, which Gavin took as a sign of - if not cowardice, then a lack of much needed confidence. Carrell was relieved immediately. Sauls asked to reconnoiter the jumping off area, and was told , “OK, you have thirty minutes. At 1030, you go.”



Sauls crept around the manor house to the positions occupied by the men of Company A , 507<sup>th</sup>, near the bridge. The troopers had placed a burned out truck at the end of the road as a roadblock against any German advance. Three small French tanks captured by the Germans in 1940 and used in occupation duty had advanced up the causeway in the early hours of the battle. Troopers with bazookas positioned on the side of the road had knocked them out one by one. Anti-tank mines had been strewn about the area afterwards, and still lay on top of the ground where they had been hurriedly placed. Men moving across the bridge would have to dodge the mines and the wrecks of the tanks, and would be channeled into a small area. The trees on the side of the road hid the fact that there was only twenty feet of dry ground on either side.

*Captain Sauls' view of the causeway. Distances are greater than they appear.*

The commander of the 82<sup>nd</sup>, along with Barton and some staff officers who were designated by Ridgway to rotate into the battle should their peers fall and should the advance falter, took positions in the La Fiere Manor area. Captain Norris of the 90<sup>th</sup> had gotten his guns into position. Gavin went to Captain Rae of the 507<sup>th</sup> and told him, "I don't think these guys can take the causeway. At some point they will falter. I need your people to be prepared to carry it. When I give you the sign, move out, and take over. We must take this causeway." Sauls scouting trip, the commanders' establishing an HQ at the Manor and Gavin's conversation were all done under the unrelenting German shelling and machine gun fire coming from the other end of the road.

The Americans on the far side of the road were not exactly sure how many Germans faced them on the other end of the causeway. If they had known, they might have waited and attacked in greater strength. A regiment of the 91<sup>st</sup> German Infantry Division ( approximated at 1,500 men, originally trained as paratroopers themselves) held the wide area on the other side. Machine gun nests equipped with a number of the dreaded MG42's lined the water in front of Cauquigny and were positioned at the end of the causeway. Behind Cauquigny were numerous mortar and artillery positions, which were and would be constantly firing, as were the MG's near Cauquigny. Both sides had the causeway itself under fire. American and German machine gunners kept up a running duel throughout the morning, and as the assault troops readied themselves, this fire increased.

Norris began a short but intense artillery barrage before Sauls and his men were to move out. As this barrage began, the men of the 325<sup>th</sup> crept around the manor, using its bordering walls for shelter and creeping down to within thirty feet of the road. The fog of war crept in when Sauls waited for a smoke screen he thought would signal his order

to attack. Norris received no orders about smoke, and no smoke shells were available at any rate.

As silence fell over the battlefield, the Americans could see Germans in Cauquigny stumbling about in a daze from the barrage. At that point, General Gavin who was near Sauls' men, started yelling "Go! Go!" - Sauls and his lead platoon moved onto the road. Thirty-one men. His second platoon began to move from the wall to the road. As the troopers moved into the road from their positions on its banks, the Germans began to shake off the effects of the American's barrage and started firing again. The first man from the second platoon had his head torn off by machine gun fire, his body crumpling into the hole in the wall his men were to pass through and delaying their advance.

Saul's men split into two groups advancing down the road and through the trees. German positions within were assaulted with grenades and machine guns. On the other end of the causeway, German troops could fire from positions perpendicular to the road, and casualties mounted.

From the photo above, it is difficult to see, but at the location of the second tank (where the road begins to turn away from the manor), there is a slight turn and dip in the road that made it impossible for the Americans on the east side of the causeway to see Sauls and his group any longer. Not knowing exactly where these men were, American fire from the east side began to slacken.

Taking cover behind the second and third tanks, Sauls two columns (now down to twenty five men) had cover from fire coming straight at them, but were still under fire from their flanks. Tree branches, rocks, bullets, and shrapnel flew through the air. Sauls believed that the rest of his force was following him, but at that point, they were still at the jumping off point.

Back at the main American position, the roadblock truck was now just blocking vision and the road from an American advance. While under fire, the division commander, General Ridgway, shouldered a tow cable and tried to fasten it to a nearby tank. The commander of the 325<sup>th</sup> was guiding a Sherman onto the causeway, out in the open like a stooped traffic cop. Ridgway sent a staff officer, Lt. Col Maloney, whose face and neck was covered in blood from a serious head wound, out to get the rest of the 325<sup>th</sup> moving. Maloney began literally grabbing and throwing men out onto the road. Other officers and NCO's began grabbing and kicking the rest of the 325<sup>th</sup> and moving them out onto the road to continue the attack.

In the photo of the causeway above, you can see part of a Sherman tank tread. While the men of the 325<sup>th</sup> were being pushed into battle, a Sherman began to advance down the road, but hit one of the anti-tank mines and lost that tread. While this was going on, General Gavin was observing the scene - what he saw was chaos. Men were still being hit - those in the existing defensive positions, and those moving into the road. At this point he was not sure if Sauls was even alive down the road, much less moving forward. He went to Captain Rae and said "You have to go. Go. Go."

Captain Rae yelled at his men "Let's Go!" and ran out to the bridge, his men behind him. When they got past the disabled Sherman, Rae's ninety men spread out, running down the length of the causeway, under German fire which was beginning to slacken. Still, Rae took a number of casualties to add to the total he had taken in the previous days.

Sauls did not know Rae was coming and Rae did not know if Sauls and his men were even still alive. A heavy weapons company followed Rae and began to lay down fire on the Germans concentrated in Cauquigny and the surrounding area.

At the other end of the causeway, Rae's men and Saul's men were unaware of the presence of the other - Saul to the left, Rae to the right. A machine gun sat in the road on the west side, just before the split in the road, laying down fire and taking a toll. Fire from American mortars put a stop to it, and the Americans began to advance, Saul's group clearing the southern part of the causeway area and Rae's men clearing the buildings and German positions in Cauquigny.

As these men had reached the far end of the causeway, General Gavin had run the gauntlet of fire down the road to catch up with Rae, whose troops he thought were the only survivors of the assault. As Rae's men cleared Cauquigny, the rest of the men of the 325<sup>th</sup> arrived, and attacked the retreating Germans to seize the area around La Motey - the bridgehead had been taken. Colonels Timmes to the north and Shanley to the south were relieved, and the 90<sup>th</sup> Division began to organize itself for the advance through the area.

The causeway, bridge and the areas at both ends were covered with dead, both American and German. When the battle ended, Saul's had 12 men still on their feet on the other end of the causeway. When his unit, G Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 325<sup>th</sup> Glider Infantry had moved to La Fiere, there were 148 men. By June 10, 35 were dead, 102 wounded. Of Captain Rae's 90 men, 20 were dead and 35 wounded.

Of the units which had landed in the area on D-Day, A Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 505<sup>th</sup> under Timmes suffered 46 dead and 81 wounded out of 147 men. 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 507<sup>th</sup> PIR started with 142 men. By the 10<sup>th</sup>, 65 were dead and 45 wounded. The 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 508<sup>th</sup> under Shanley began with 206 men. On June 10 there were 58 dead and 82 wounded. The Battle at La Fiere was to be the most costly small unit action of the 82<sup>nd</sup> in WWII.

Many years after the war, as an old man suffering from the last stages of Parkinson's disease, General Gavin was asked to attend a dinner hosted by veterans of the La Fiere battle. He was asked why he came. His reply: "I can never say no to someone who crossed the Causeway."



*In 1997, this memorial to the men of the 82<sup>nd</sup> was erected on the hill overlooking La Fiere Manor and the Causeway*





# Chapter 4: Action during Operation

## Varsity, 1945

Most Americans are familiar with the shoulder patches of the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. They may not be as familiar with that of the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, the third American airborne division to see combat in WWII.



The 17<sup>th</sup>, along with the British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne, was to take part in Operation Varsity, the last and largest of the WWII combat drops.

The 17<sup>th</sup> was formed in 1943, but did not see combat until the winter of 1944, when it took part in the fighting at the Battle of the Bulge. While in the United States, the division, along with the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne, took part in the “Knollwood Maneuver”, which took place in December 1943 as a way for the Army to determine the usefulness of airborne tactics after Sicily and before Normandy. The success of these maneuvers played an important role in ensuring a future for all US airborne forces.

Though the 17<sup>th</sup> did not take part in the initial stages of the Battle of the Bulge (bad weather kept them from being transported in), the division distinguished itself in the latter stage of the battle in fighting to the west of the famous town of Bastogne, in the drive to push the Germans back to

their starting point. At the beginning of January 1945, in heavy fighting at an area that became known as “Dead Man's Ridge”, near the town of Flamierge, Belgium, the 17<sup>th</sup> engaged large numbers of German infantry and armor, with a cost of 1,000 casualties. The divisions' first Medal of Honor winner (Isadore Jachman) was posthumously awarded the citation for actions at this battle. The contemporary “Stryker” armored vehicle is named after another 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Medal of Honor hero.

After coming out of the line in late January, the unit took on replacements and prepared for a number of jumps that never came to fruition (including a drop on Berlin, which was made moot by political considerations). It was not until late March that the unit would jump into combat for the first time (having been driven to the Bulge).

Operation Varsity was the airborne segment of Operation Plunder, British Field Marshal Montgomery's plan for a joint air/land assault to secure a bridgehead across the Rhine River at the city of Wesel. The 17<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> (which had seen action on D-Day) were to fight side by side on the eastern bank of the Rhine River, to prevent German reinforcements from attacking the beach-head that was to be established by two Scottish Divisions (15<sup>th</sup> and the 51<sup>st</sup>) and No.1 Commando Brigade.

Due to the almost total destruction of the British 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne during the Operation Market-Garden action in September, when British land forces were unable to relieve paratroopers on the other side of the Neder Rijn (Northern Rhine) River at Arnhem, Holland, the paratroopers and glider-borne troops of Operation Varsity would not be dropped until *after* the infantry divisions had secured small beach-heads on the east side of the river. The job of the airborne was to destroy the forces caught between them and the infantry, and to prevent German reinforcements attacking the bridgehead from further east.



Over 16,000

Airborne troops would descend on the area, and engage the defenders north of the city of Wesel and in the city itself. Because the drop was to take place during the day over a strategic area into the heart of Germany, casualties were expected to be high.

For a number of reasons – surprise, overwhelming strength, the growing weakness of the German army – Operation Varsity was a success from the point of view of missions accomplished and a much lighter casualty figure than expected (17<sup>th</sup> Airborne sustained 1,400 killed and wounded. The British 6<sup>th</sup> approximately the same).

That does not mean that there was not some hard fighting during the battle. What follows is a brief account of one trooper's experiences during the battle.

Jack Travato was a replacement waiting for an assignment in a replacement depot in France. He and a buddy saw a notice asking for volunteers for the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne, which had been depleted in the Bulge battles. Given condensed parachute and glider training - very condensed, Jack and his buddy got their wings and within three days were looking at maps of the Operation Varsity area.

Before he really even had time to digest his new reality, Travato found himself in a plane flying over the Rhine River. He and his fellows did not realize they were under fire immediately - the bumpiness of the ride and nervousness of the men caused many of the new recruits to get sick, which caused a chain reaction. The sickness stopped when someone said "Hey, they're shootin' at us!"

Before he knew it, Travato and the others had jumped out of the plane and were in their designated drop zones. The drops of Operation Varsity were markedly better than that in Sicily, Normandy, and even Market Garden (which were considered very accurate). This did not mean that planes were not hit. Many of the casualties during Varsity occurred when planes and gliders were shot down or crashed in the heavily fortified area.

In Travato's drop zone (area "S" on the map above), the men of the 17<sup>th</sup> were pinned down, crawling to cover under enemy mortar and small arms fire. Some C-47's and gliders crashed nearly on top of the men. The picture below, while not of Travato's unit, is from Varsity and shows a crashed glider which had nearly piled into the foxholes scraped out by the 17<sup>th</sup> men in the photo.



Gliders were coming down around them and German fire was heavy. A man next to Travato had enough – he had been shot in the face, and had his cheek blown off. He stood up screaming, shooting his sub-machine gun into a house 100 feet away, until he was torn apart by German small arms fire. This was Travato's baptism of fire.

Soon, experienced non-coms and officers were rallying the men, who began to move out and assault nearby German positions. Travato kept hearing a snapping sound go passed him. Asking his sergeant what the sound was, he was told that a German sniper was trying to “Blow your freakin' head off. Get down!”

In trees outside of a village, Travato experienced tree bursts – artillery shells and their shrapnel made even worse by the explosion and splintering of trees at hundreds of miles per hour. A large tree branch impaled one man next to Travato.

Artillery exploding in the open was not any better. German shells would go off fifty feet or so above the ground, raining shrapnel down on the men below. Taking cover in a shell hole, a number of 17<sup>th</sup> troopers stayed there until a veteran sergeant kicked and screamed at them to get out and assault the area where the guns were firing from rather than let them fire freely.

In the evening, Travato and the men with him were in a rural area near some farmhouses, trying to make their way to a glider that had crashed in a field, to check for survivors when they came under fire from nearby. The veteran sergeant who had led them out of the shell hole and a number of other close calls during the day went to investigate the glider and was shot between the eyes by a German rifleman. Travato happened to have seen this man pop up and fire. The next time the man raised his head, Travato shot him - though he had been in action all day, firing his weapon at where he thought the Germans were, this was the first person he knew he had killed. Others in his unit saw this and began treating Travato less like a replacement and more like a comrade.

That night, Travato and his men took shelter in a German farmhouse with a terrified woman and her young son. They realized that they had gotten seriously separated from the body of the division and needed to make their way back. Crawling under tracer and machine gun fire intended for American troops further afield, Travato and the men with him finally made it back to American lines in the early morning, where they joined their unit and others in the 17<sup>th</sup> in repelling a serious German counter-attack.



*Jack Travato after getting his wings*



*Trooper from Travato's unit, the 155<sup>th</sup> Airborne AA Battalion, during Operation Varsity*



## **Conclusion**

The exploits of the American airborne divisions during WWII are legendary, and comprise many more battles and tales of heroism than has been told in this short introduction.

The epic fight of the 82<sup>nd</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup> during Operation Market-Garden alone has filled volumes, and will be discussed in future additions to this series.

The airborne units of the United States Army, as can be seen from their actions in Sicily, Normandy and Germany, led the way many times during WWII. A whole new generation of Airborne heroes did the same in Vietnam, and yet another has taken the lead in American campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. The tradition lives on.

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