

# ★ ARMY TALKS ★

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## THE STORY OF AIRBORNE TROOPS

**T**HE men who dropped from the skies in parachutes and gliders at Ste. Mere Eglise, Carentan, Arnhem and Nijmegen were tough. They had to be tough to live. But these airborne men aren't rugged individualists. Airborne men work, plan and fight together, depending on each other not only for the success of great battles, but for their lives.

Like an arrow, they are flung deep into the heart of the enemy's defenses. Should they fail to carry out their

job of disrupting enemy communications, securing key roads and bridges, diverting a large part of the enemy's tactical reserves from the established front, and destroying supply dumps, the vast, integrated attack might possibly fail. The bow — the tanks, infantry, artillery, engineers and all other combat and supply organizations — must then seek out the arrow, cutting through enemy lines in a swift lunge to link with the airborne troops

In airborne warfare one rule is that every fighter and all his equipment must initially come by plane. A second is that the airborne force is dropped *behind* enemy lines. The third is that the airborne force, because of the nature of its work, digging always deeper into enemy strength, must be relieved by advancing ground troops or it probably will eventually be destroyed. With these three rules in mind, the difference between airborne and ground troops is understandable.

The paratroopers and glider troopers are really ground troops. They are Infantry, Artillery, Engineers, Signal Corps and the Services of the army—with the difference that, instead of moving into combat by foot, truck and tank, they go by plane, parachute and glider. Once on the ground they employ regular ground tactics. But the kind of fighting that is normal to airborne units is carried on while surrounded and cut-off by the enemy.

All paratroopers and most glider-troopers are volunteers—men who know their job to be dangerous and their training hard. They are taught to be expert in handling each of the light weapons with which they are equipped, for circumstances may require a swift change in the arming of troops, and airborne units cannot expect to depend on reinforcement pools to replace casualties.

Upon completion of regular basic training, men who volunteer and pass rigid physical examinations are assigned to parachute schools. For a month they are subjected to the most rigid training known to military sciences, including, for parachutists, five practice jumps from C-47s at altitudes ranging from 1200 feet to 600 feet. Glidermen take several "lifts" in glider exercises. They attend courses in glider loading and lashing. Every airborne soldier must be able to double-time for miles, to march miles without a halt, to know hand-to-hand combat until it becomes almost second-nature. He must understand that to live he must kill, and

kill swiftly, silently, and with least risk to himself.

Each paratrooper and glidertrooper is required to have certain minimum equipment—which is enough to weigh him down to the point where he can hardly waddle into his plane. After that minimum, however, each man is allowed to add whatever he wishes. Normally, this additional equipment adds up to a strange and deadly assortment: four or five knives, from standard GI type to the most exotic Siamese kris or Persian dagger; hand axes and picks; captured and purchased pistols of various makes and calibers; and anything else which may strike the individual fighter as fitting his needs and tastes. By the time he has fully equipped himself, including parachute and auxiliary chute, a 150-pound paratrooper will weigh from 250 to 300 pounds and a glidertrooper somewhat less, since much of his equipment comes with him in his glider.

## REDS PIONEER SKYTROOPS

The Russians first made major use of airborne troops. Before the war began, newsreels showed great clouds of parachutists dropping at Soviet maneuvers, but most military men discounted their value.

In Crete, the Germans proved the practicality of airborne operations. In spite of their terrible losses, Nazi air superiority paved the way for complete success in the conquest of that island.

Allied leaders studied the lessons of Crete, and in Sicily and Italy our first major airborne attacks were made. Glidermen and parachutists played an important role in Normandy, again proving their importance. After that, the formation of First Allied Airborne Army was a logical step.

The First Allied Airborne Army was formed after American and British Airborne Divisions had broken the crust of the Atlantic Wall in Normandy. In spite of the difficulties and confusion of that attack, the success of this and previous airborne operations convinced Allied leaders



that tremendous possibilities lay in the use of major airborne forces. Therefore, the British, American, Canadian, and Polish Airborne units were organized under a single command — the First Allied Airborne Army.

Lt. General Lewis H. Brereton, former commander of the 9th Air Force, is CG of the first allied airborne army in military history. His command, like SHAEF, is a joint British-American headquarters. The strength of the First Allied Airborne Army is not impressive when compared to such ground armies as the British Eighth or American First Army, but to move a full strength ground army by plane would take more air transport than could possibly be assigned to such a task.

The initial FAAA operation was the Arnhem-Nijmegen-Eindhoven attack. Three divisions were used and the plan was to outflank the major portion of the Siegfried Line so that Allied tank columns could race through the open level plains which extend almost to Berlin without natural defensive terrain.

The First British Airborne Division suffered some of the most severe casualties of this war when they were surrounded and cut to pieces at Arnhem. The American 82d Airborne Division at Nijmegen found itself hemmed in on three sides by superior forces and fought for its very life. In an attempt to help the Tommies, a battalion of Americans slipped across the Waal and secured the northern end of the bridge. Then British Second Army tanks moved across and fanned out toward Arnhem in a fruitless effort to help the trapped British.

The British tank column which was given the mission of striking to Eindhoven to meet the American 101st Airborne Division was delayed for nine vital hours by antitank fire. That short period of time gave the German reserves a chance to split the various airborne divisions and the advancing tank unit. By the fiercest fighting, the 101st held the corridor while the tanks moved up. But the element of surprise was gone,

and what might have been a major breakthrough ended in a limited advance.

The last phase of the Battle of Germany will probably again feel the strength of the First Allied Airborne Army. It is almost as certain that the Japanese main islands will also someday feel the terrific striking power of great airborne armies. Just as in the use of planes, tanks, and the Blitz technique, the Allies have taken another Axis weapon and turned it to their own advantage.

That's one way this war might possibly end. The Germans probably expect a major airborne attack this year and there's no doubt that the formation of the First Allied Airborne Army was planned "with malice aforethought" for the Wehrmacht.

## OPERATION JACKSON

To show the perfect planning necessary before an airborne operation. . . to show what happens to smash the most perfect plans in actual operation. . . to give a clear picture of what the airborne troops are organized to accomplish, an imaginary airborne operation is worked out here. Every detail is true to Airborne training, to incidents of past operations, and the lessons which have been learned. Many interesting details must be left out due to security, but nothing has been altered.

The Supreme Commander knows that a frontal ground attack against the enemy lines would take too long, pushing final victory into the distant future. The air forces have been pounding enemy factories, communications lines, supply dumps, and front line installations for weeks, and it is apparent that serious damage has been done. The drain on enemy manpower is beginning to tell.

The front line runs, with many zigzags, from north to south. The enemy holds a number of strong-points jutting into our lines. Behind these are miles upon miles of artificial fortifications set carefully into the rough, natural, defensive positions. Their supply lines are short, while

ours are greatly extended. Because of their carefully prepared defenses, the enemy is able to keep practically all of his panzers, as well as a large part of his infantry units, in reserve pools. For some weeks the whole front has been fairly well stabilized, with both sides moving up troops and supplies and secretly changing the disposition of units according to plans for future operations as well as to counter enemy disposition.

### ONE BIG PUNCH

The General Staff realizes that there is a choice between a long drawn out series of ground punches — or a gamble for quick victory. If the enemy defense line could be leap-frogged, rear defenses and supplies disorganized, and front-line troops left without support, the Allied Armies could, perhaps, do in a few days what would otherwise take weeks or months.

This is a job for Airborne troops. This is what many thousands of men have been selected, trained, and equipped to accomplish.

The first step is to alert the divisions which will take part in the operation. In this theoretical operation, it is assumed that six divisions will participate, more than have been used by the Allies in any past airborne operation. In the First Allied Airborne Army, part of these divisions would be American, part British, Canadian, Polish, and perhaps others of the United Nations.

When the divisions are alerted, their G-4s check with Army G-4 to determine what specialized equipment will be needed, if any. Then they return to their units and prepare lists of everything their men must have. These requisitions are given top priority at all supply depots, and usually within 48 hours the men will be taking what they need from stock piles in their company areas.

While the equipping is going on, Army G-1, G-2, G-3 and G-4 are busy with their plans. The whole operation must be integrated to a very fine point, to allow for as many sudden changes as possible — and unexpected

changes are quite likely to show up in airborne operations.

Just as in the old recipe for rabbit stew which begins: "First, catch your rabbit," the first job in Airborne operation is to get the men there. Once landed by parachute and glider the men must secure their objectives and dig in until relief comes by land. Also, the problem of landing supplies by air is always of extreme importance.

To take full advantage of the support given by the air force, tactical command over the necessary air elements is given to the commanding general of the operation. On operations this tactical command takes the form of conferences between the Airborne commander and the air force commander, and their assistants, rather than actual issuance of orders by the former; the initial order from the Supreme Commander covers the air force commander as well as the Commanding General of FAAA.

To move even one division through the air requires a lot of paper work. Hundreds of big C-47s, part of the Ninth Troop Carrier Command, are needed for the job and must be assembled at the proper fields.

### PILOTS BRIEFED

The pilots must know where they are to rendezvous, so that each plane-load of men will arrive over the DZ (Drop Zone) at the right instant. The pilots must know exactly where they are to drop their men, so that when the green light flashes in the cabin, the men will catapult into the air to land within a few hundred feet of where their job begins. The pilots are briefed over and over again until every detail of their job is burned into their minds — for, no matter how hard they try, flak, weather conditions and other factors will always throw off some of the planes.

The C-47 and glider pilots are not the only air men involved. In addition, reconnaissance pilots in their F-5s, F-10s and A-20s must cover the projected landing areas and the paths leading to them, without giving the



tip-off to the Germans that something is planned for that area. Air photos must show the terrain and enemy disposition of troops, ack-ack, and other features up to the very last day before D-Day. The fighter-bombers and mediums must give the area a thorough working over, to neutralize anti-aircraft fire, fighter opposition, and to close supply routes leading into the general area as much as possible without giving away plans.

Fighter planes will take to the air as protection for the troop carriers. They will strafe ack-ack batteries still in operation, as well as take care of any enemy planes left in the area. Allied fighters also make themselves useful by working over any enemy troop concentrations observed close to the DZs as the troops come plummeting from the sky.

The overall plans have been made; the Air Corps knows its part; the men have been completely equipped. The various divisions are then moved to their marshalling areas, adjoining or close to the air fields from which they will take off when D-Day arrives.

Airborne soldiers and pilots once alerted have no contact with the outside world, even by mail. Day after day passes, each much like the rest. Time and again the men are loaded up with their unwieldy equipment and put into their planes on dry runs.

The alert period may last for a few days or several weeks. While the men are taking it easy, resting for the big operation, they aren't idle. Every day, for hours on end, every paratrooper, gliderman and pilot is briefed over and over on every smallest detail of his particular job.

Every soldier who will be involved is given a specific mission to perform. He studies his own job until it becomes almost a part of him. He also learns of alternate missions, in case operations cause sudden changes in plans.

Sand table models are built up of the area into which the men will land. These, reconstructed from hundreds of aerial photos, tourist snapshots, and postcards, show every detail down to

the last bush and gully. Day-to-day enemy troop dispositions, as revealed by constant reconnaissance shots, are shown to the officers who will have command functions. From studies of the terrain, defense lines, and daily movements, these officers try to build up in their minds the tactics of the enemy defense plan.

In the blackness before dawn, one day, the thousands of men are awakened by the mounting thunder of plane engines coughing, starting, and warming up. Sleepily they tumble out of their warm bunks — the last they will probably see for a long time — and work their way into their harness.

A piping-hot breakfast is served and the Airborne troops are taken to the fields in trucks. They struggle into their two 'chutes, which fit over bazookas strapped to the front of their bodies. Most of them have MIs, some carried in special cases, others with muzzles protected. Some have carbines with collapsible stocks carried in scabbards strapped to their legs. Almost every soldier has a knife tied in what he considers a strategic place, anywhere from ankle to neck.

## INTO THE AIR

They are ready. Tough, trained to a fine edge, eager to "get going," and carrying almost all they will need for any emergency, real or fancied, the men file into the hundreds of C-47s lined up along the field. At the far end of the landing strip, the big planes wheel into position and roar down the runway at about 45-second intervals.

Twenty minutes or more before the main elements of the paratroop force land, the Pathfinders have already hit enemy territory. It is their job to find the exact spots selected by the General Staff of FAAA and there set up markers to guide the oncoming armada.

Pilots selected as Pathfinders are those most experienced in night flying, and teamed with them are "veteran" navigators. The Pathfinders drop special paratroopers, small squads who must depend on the initial sur-

prise of their landing to escape annihilation. These squads move quickly upon hitting the ground. On them depends the initial success of the operation.

The Ninth Troop Carrier Command is an important part of the FAAA. It is a major command in itself, being made up of three wings, with more than fifteen groups. Troop Carrier's job is to transport airborne forces and their supplies. In some cases the pilots who fly in the paratroopers make a second trip towing gliders.

When the initial "lifts" and drops have been completed, when the troops on the ground are fighting an aroused enemy, it is absolutely essential that supplies be delivered. Although airborne troops try to utilize captured equipment as much as possible, most of their food and all ammunition for their own weapons must come from their own supply depots. That gives Carrier Command its hardest task. Trying to drop supplies by parachute into poorly-defined areas is a heart-breaking job for the pilots. But the supplies have always arrived.

In addition, Carrier pilots use the most forward air strips in all the Air Corps; as soon as airborne troops clear a field for them, they slice their way through enemy flak to land far ahead of advancing ground troops. Theirs is not an easy life.

**T**HE story of a major airborne operation is a tremendously complex one, with about as many volumes to it as there are men involved. To simplify this story, selected individuals will tell their part in various phases. All stories are completely fictional as are the men and the units. No operation exactly like the one described here has ever taken place, but the general methods are common in each of the big operations of the past, and it is fairly probable that no future operation will differ radically.

Flight Officer Robert I. Dawson of Chicago, Ill., tells of the first phase — getting the men there:

"I was co-pilot of a parachute plane

in about the middle of the group carrying the First Lift. Ahead of us we could see dozens of planes coming around in a big circle to form up a little to the north of the field. Other flights had already formed up pretty tightly and were heading off into the morning sun for our rendezvous with the rest of the Division. I went through the navigator's cabin and looked at the men hunched up along the sides of the plane in the bucket seats. They were grinning, most of them, and trying to yell jokes at each other above the noise: How those fellows expect to get themselves and their equipment off the ground when they land is beyond me.

"We made our circle and fitted ourselves into our flight, then sailed straight on. I've seen it before, but I still think it's one of the most impressive sights in the world — the sky filled with hundreds of planes as far as I could see. In every direction they moved along until, miles away, the morning mist blocked them off.

"About the time we reached our turning point, the fighters began to swarm around. We had already passed a flock of medium bombers taking a short cut to somewhere near our DZ, so we knew we were being well protected. The fighters placed themselves all around us, top, front, sides and bottom. We were still some distance from the front lines, but they were taking no chances. We didn't mind that a bit.

"Before long I saw a jagged line on the ground stretched across from one horizon to the other. It was the 'dragons teeth' beginning of the defense line the Germans had set up to stop us. It hadn't stopped us, for we knew our troops were several miles further into it at that point. There was a lot more to it than that, though: miles and miles of bunkers, ditches, pillboxes and everything else Todt and his workers had been able to build. Our armies hadn't been able to break all the way through up to now, but every man behind me in the plane was probably praying the ground troops could crack it within the next day or so.



"Our passing overhead was the signal to the GIs on the ground to start their big push. The glidermen and paratroopers had one part of the job: to keep reinforcements from getting to the front, so our men could make a breakthrough. Then the ground troops had to get to the Airborne troops in time to keep them from being annihilated. Tricky business — A helps B so that B can save A's neck.

"We could see puffs of smoke and dirt where the artillery was beginning to pick up. It was about 1000 hours and bright as it could be. I felt awfully naked up there, with thousands of friendly and enemy faces turned up to watch us pass.

"We began to tick off the miles into enemy territory. Far ahead we could see puffs of ack-ack, but the fighter-bombers were peeling off and hitting every gun nest still operating. I was hoping that they'd be all gone by the time we got there.

"Flying pretty low, I knew there must be a lot of heavy MG stuff starting up at us, but so far nothing had come close. Then I looked down from my side and saw a spray of white tracer streaking up into my face. Before I could think I ducked back and Jim, the pilot, smiled a little. Not much use ducking in those thin planes. A blur of metal with fire spitting ahead slashed by us, going back to the point where the tracers had come. Those Thunderbolt pilots weren't missing any bets.

"Then came our DZ. All the planes were turning to the left, and we followed. We could see a huge cloud of chutes way ahead, drifting to the ground, and I pushed the red light. The fellows in the rear stood up to hook their static lines to the cable and the plane shifted a little. Then the green light.

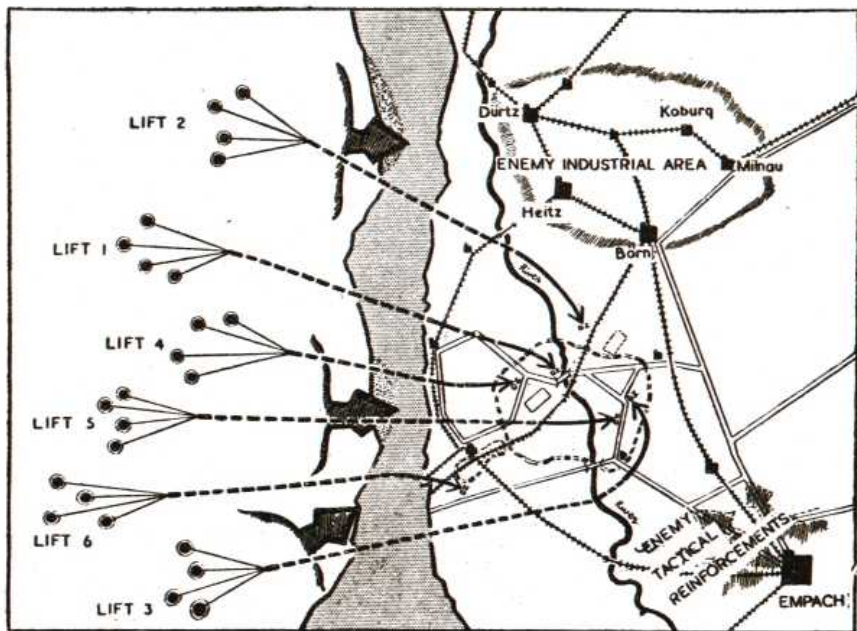
"I hated to see them go. We'd had an easy trip of it, but I knew they were dropping into a hot future. I felt a little responsibility for them, even though I'd never even seen any of their faces clearly. But they were gone behind us, the plane bucked a little and we began our swing around.

"Then it hit. The whole tali assembly must have been blown off at once, for we were in a spin before we really knew we had been hit. Jim and I both started kicking our way out, and the navigator, Alex Smith, came too. I remember wishing I'd strapped a Tommy gun on me before I started this trip, but I was too glad to hear my chute open to worry much about anything else. I had time to see where the main body of chutes were dropping before I hit the ground. After that, it was just a job of hoping we could get to the main body without the enemy catching us. Luckily, they were too busy trying to get organized for the airborne attack, and we made our lines. We'd done our part, anyhow. Twenty-two fighters had gone from our plane to help carry out Operation Jackson."

**S**ERGEANT John Allison came out of Operation Jackson a hero, though at the time he claims to have been too scared and mixed up to know it.

"It wasn't so bad coming over in the plane. We were all so excited and glad to get into it that we didn't have time to think about the danger. But when I felt someone pushing behind me as I hit the door, I yelled what I'd heard of others yelling: 'Who Pushed Me!' Most people think the paratroopers' battle-cry is 'Geronimo!' but only the 501st Regiment uses that. Most of us don't really realize what our first combat jump will be like until we get right to the door of the plane. Then my only reaction was to wait and look for a second, like diving into cold water. I wanted to stick my foot out first, to see if it was cold. But the guy behind me shoved, and out I went.

"We jumped from about 500 feet, I guess, but it was the fastest 500 feet I ever want to travel. When I hit the ground I felt as if all that stuff tied on me was going to jam me six feet farther. My chute collapsed easily and I started to get it off. It seemed like it took an hour, though



## OPERATION JACKSON

Imaginary sketch of terrain showing lifts, drop zones and known enemy installations mapped by aerial photo reconnaissance. To the right is the German-held fortified zone. Strategically important roads and railroads connecting the industrial centers of Durtz, Koburg, Milnau, Bôrn, Heitz and Empach are shown. Arrows depict direction of airborne and land attacks by Allies from the west.

I was probably up and hidden in a bush 50 yards away inside of two minutes. No one had shot at me yet, but I could hear shooting going on to my left as I started moving cautiously toward a road. I knew I was supposed to get to this road and move down it to the left, which didn't make me very happy. That shooting sounded like heavy machine guns, rifles and pistols — too many for my taste.

"Then I saw some GIs moving in rushes across the road. I had been walking beside it about ten yards to one side and they didn't see me. I called out, low, and one of them swung his carbine at me. I got ready to

duck, but he recognized me and I joined them.

"We were almost at the place picked out to be the battalion CP and still we hadn't run into any Germans. The shooting was on down the road and beginning to die out. When we got to the CP, Colonel Johnson was there and quite a few of the others, so we started off right away to the landing field nearby, which was our first objective.

"The Germans knew all about our being there, by that time, and their troops at the field were ready for us. But we came from all directions, and after a lot of shooting on both sides, we soon had the biggest part of it.



Since there was a rise to the center, our gliders could land close to the woods we held without being in direct fire from enemy MGs. The colonel signaled on his radio, we set up some smoke pots as screen and went to work to pin down the Germans around the hangars and shops. It wasn't a big field, but at that our carbines couldn't reach all the way to them effectively — about 500 to 600 yards. Mortars and machine guns did the trick, though, and by the time the first gliders banked low over the woods and skimmed down, there wasn't much fire headed their way.

"We were really glad to see the jeeps and pack howitzers unload. As soon as a glider slowed down a bunch of us would grab it, swing it to the trees and have it near cover before the first glider men could get out. We had to work fast, and we really did.

"Glanders kept swarming in, some of them bumping into the parked ones before they could be cleared away. A couple sheared their wings off on trees at the edge, but there didn't seem to be much damage except a lot of bruises and scratches. We started pumping 75 HE at the hangars and a bunch of the men began working their way over there. I was still so anxious to get all the help I could that I nearly grabbed the CG-4s before they hit the ground.

"A big line of C-47s was still dropping paratroopers a few miles away at DZ-2 even after most of our gliders were landed. I could just see them circling as they started back.

"Four hours after someone first shoved me out of the plane, about a regiment and a half circled the hangars and other buildings and rushed them. I made a dash into the first building I came to, a machine-shop, and with bullets zinging all around me, found myself blinded after the bright sunlight. I dived into a corner and started throwing lead in every direction. I heard a couple of men cry out, the firing stopped and a very British accent said, 'We surrender.'

"He sounded British, but he sure

wasn't. He was a Luftwaffe lieutenant and brought thirty odd men with him, most of them mechanics without guns."

**P**PRIVATE John B. Ellis, Brooklyn, New York, took his first glider flight on Operation Jackson. Before that he had been in the infantry. His frank reason for transferring was the extra pay.

"I'll need more money when I get out to start my own store. The gliders pay 50 percent more than I was getting in the infantry and I couldn't see that it was much more dangerous. Maybe that's true, but I know I was a lot more scared in that glider than I had ever been on the ground. Those motorless planes are pretty rough on a man's stomach in practice 'lifts', but when your dinner is already upset with excitement it's a lot worse.

"The morning we took off I watched some of the paratroopers get pushed into their planes and was darn glad I wasn't in their place. But when I climbed into my glider, I felt pretty scared. We don't have to wear all the 150 or 200 pounds of stuff they have, but we are a lot more heavily loaded than an infantryman on the ground. And we don't have parachutes for emergencies.

"The first part of the trip was just about like practice 'lifts' and I began to doze off — the altitude or something. Then the glider started swinging from side to side and I was sick. Peeking out the little portholes, all thirteen of us were trying to figure out what was happening. The copilot yelled back at us that we were ducking flak. Ducking! We were swimming in it! One piece came up through the floor and out the ceiling right between us, and the tail section, which is open from the cabin, suddenly looked like the top of a salt-shaker.

"We all just sat there, hoping first that none of us were hit and next that the tow rope wasn't hit. The flak kept getting thicker. I guess the Germans had time to move a lot of guns in when they saw the para-

troopers dropping and we were getting it full force. In a way it seemed we were taking forever, but when the co-pilot reached forward and pulled the tow rope release I was surprised that we were really going down.

"In practice the glider pilots take their time about coming to a stop. This time, though, we'd hardly hit the ground before the nose dug in and we slammed to a stop. Paratroopers outside were trying to move us off the field before we could get out, and I could see why: Gliders were coming in so thick that a few had already crashed together. Holding my rifle I started running to the woods off to one side, but gliders were coming in so fast that I had to dive to the ground several times to keep from being knocked down by their wings. It was really fast work.

### **JEEP ATTACK**

"We assembled a few hundred yards away, the captain giving us the word to start on the missions we had been practicing for. I was assigned to the job of capturing the railroad and car bridges at the river and had to find the jeep I was supposed to ride in. Everything was pretty mixed up, though, so I jumped in the first one I found and off we went.

"The bridges were about a mile away and I heard others say that the main part of the local German troops were in the way. But we had to make it, though, for that was the big part of the Second Lift job. By the time we hit the road there were hundreds of jeeps all running full tilt toward the river. We ducked low, for bullets were snapping around us all the way.

"On up ahead there was the sound of an 88 banging fast and I thought that we would be in for a bad time if it was trained down the bridge like the one at Arnhem. That one had been too tough to handle, this one would be just as hard for us. I knew the Third Lift was to land on the other side of the river, but they couldn't help us now for they had their own objectives in the opposite direction.

"Then I heard a shell drop off to one side and I knew the 88 wasn't firing straight down the bridge. Intelligence had told us there were some batteries several miles away, but I guess they moved this one over here to avoid the fighter-bombers. Anyhow, we didn't have to ride right into the mouth of a fast-firing field gun.

"Quite a few jeeps had been hit along the way and some others crashed when their drivers were hit. It wasn't like anything else I've ever seen, but it had to be done that way. We moved so fast and suddenly that we caught the enemy by surprise and so had fewer casualties than a regular foot attack would have suffered. The enemy was all along the road, but the blockhouses at each end of the bridge had been knocked out by our planes before we landed, and there was no defense set up to take its place.

"That left us the job of disconnecting the German demolition charges and setting up our own defenses. For the rest of the day a couple hundred of us sweated away at each end of the railway bridge and the car bridge with picks and shovels to build bunkers for our little mountain howitzers and machine guns. One battalion started working along each side of the road, flushing out the Germans hidden there, while a couple of other battalions crossed the bridges to work on that side.

### **KRAUTS HIT BACK**

"When night came I was dog-tired. We had K-Rations for supper, taking them out of our musette bags. For once I didn't waste anything, figuring it might be a long time before we got reinforcements and supplies.

"It wasn't bad that day and night. We had caught the Germans in a bad position and it wasn't until the second day that they began to hit back. Our planes still covered the air but there was ack-ack all over the sky. Shells came in more and more throughout the morning and by the middle of the afternoon we were living in what seemed like a continual barrage.



Then we got orders to form up and move out to the little perimeter we had set up. Our general was there and told some of us that we had to push our lines back to get Lebensraum — said the Germans ought to understand our point of view.

"German armor and artillery were picking out spots and hitting hard to break in. They didn't know how strong we were, though, and we were able to hold their punches and slam back at other points. It was a hard day and night, but we kept moving out regularly. I was messenger for our Battalion and could see most of what was happening along our regimental front and the next battalion, and I heard enough to know that we were a little ahead of schedule.

"The Fourth Lift poured in to the west of us the afternoon of D plus 1 and their gliders had a lot more artillery than we had. Also, we could see C-47s dropping supplies to us all day long. Those pilots certainly must have taken a lot of punishment from flak and lack of sleep and rest. I think they take their jobs more seriously than any of the rest of us. I remember, during our stay at the marshalling area, seeing the pilots going around with paratrooper and glider officers talking about nothing else but their routes, drop zones, and so on. They'd sit around in operations rooms, drawing diagrams all day long. I was glad they had been so worried."

The battle was on. The weather began to close in after the three perfect days promised by the meteorologists, and there was less air activity. Our fighter-bombers had little chance to watch the enemy's movements and to hit him hard before he got to the surrounded airborne men. Many of the supply planes were unable to keep up their deliveries and some planes which got into the air couldn't always see the Allied troops, so part of their supplies fell into enemy hands. But enough planes did get through — they delivered the goods. The ground armies were steadily punching their way further through the fifteen-mile defense zone but were

still twenty-five miles from link-up with airborne lines.

"A lot of us began to feel that we were caught in a trap," Lt. John Thompson said. "I had brought gliders down in Normandy on top of a German division and into Holland within a hundred yards of a German MG nest, so I know things were a lot better this time, with several more divisions involved and a lot of supplies already dropped. But German fire kept getting heavier, we had less and less sleep, and ammunition finally began to get low.

"I had joined a platoon of men assigned to capture an enemy depot before they could destroy it, but we finally had to call in almost a battalion. When we did clear it out we found a lot of ammunition but not enough guns to use all of it. A couple hundred machine guns helped a lot.

"With these machine guns we set up along the railroad line running from the south-west. My Lift, the Fifth, had the job of linking up with the Sixth when it landed on D-3 right on the edge of the German defense line. We had to keep the rail line and the road running beside it clear. Where a branch rail line cut down to the front, we were supposed to meet the Sixth. Actually, it took us four days to make contact, and then we found it almost impossible to stay within shouting distance of them. The Germans were giving all they had to seal us off from our advancing troops and almost succeeded several times.

"For three days we couldn't see any planes. We could hear German bombers above the overcast dropping bombs by guess into our perimeter but I don't think much damage was done. It kept us a little more on edge, though, for it proved to us that all our flight strips were closed in by the weather and that we couldn't expect much help from them for quite a while.

"D plus 8 was the turning point. Everything seemed suddenly to swing in our favor. The weather cleared up during the night, and before the sun was all the way up, Thunderbolts

and A-20s were swarming all over the place. Just before noon a very exciting sight appeared: a huge armada of C-47s, about half of them pulling gliders.

"Our fighters were swarming around them and there was very little flak, for the first time. Far off in the north there were some vapor trails made by German jet planes but they stayed out of the way.

"By the middle of the afternoon we were getting supplies and the Sixth picked up most of the stuff dropped to it. With plenty of food and ammunition we were all to give the Sixth more support. They needed it, for I don't think I've ever seen such a beat-up bunch of men. They had the highest casualties of the whole operation, I heard later, and claim holding off two infantry and one panzer division all by themselves. We had our troubles, too.

"At supper that night we heard rumors that cavalry patrols from one of the armies had met patrols working from the western tip of the Sixth. We couldn't find out for sure, though, until the next morning. Then it wasn't a rumor — the cavalry recon scout vehicles passed us on their way to FAAA headquarters. Boy! Were we glad to see them!"

**M**AJOR David Ness, a G-3 executive of an Airborne unit, summed up the successful operation:

"The operation wasn't easy. The enemy had been prepared for it as much as possible, for past experience on the Western front indicated that the Allies were planning to throw massive forces of airborne troops wherever we might decide to strike. The only German problem had been to dispose their reserve troops so that they could take immediate action to split the Allied airborne troops from the advancing ground armies, reroute their supplies to avoid the bottleneck held by the airborne, then destroy the troops piecemeal while building new defenses to hold back the advancing ground units.

"This enemy plan was good. With anything like equality of troops,

they might well have carried it out, but in this case the air and ground power was overwhelming. The air force, taking advantage of every moment of clear weather, smashed against Luftwaffe attempts to interfere with airborne reinforcements and harried the advancing reserve divisions unmercifully.

"On the ground, the advancing Allied armies found that they could break through the stubborn defense lines which had held them for months. Unbelievable artillery concentrations, continual shields of fighter-bombers and the disruption of the enemy's rear combined to give the foot-slogging infantry a head start which they never relinquished. Once beyond the maze of the defense zone, tank columns began to nose out, encircling and isolating enemy armor before it could group itself into counter-offensive action.

"As in every past operation, airborne losses were far below estimates. In spite of the heaviest kind of fighting from almost the instant they landed until the first infantry-loaded tanks raced inside the perimeter, bearded, dirty, unshaven paratroopers and glidertroopers had fought doggedly on, regrouping their strength as German punches threatened first one side of the oblong perimeter and then the other. Bad weather, during the fifth, sixth and seventh days they were surrounded, held up parachuted supplies until ammunition reached the dangerous stage and the men were nursing one box of K-rations per man per day.

"It was the most conclusive victory ever won by airborne troops, the first time an airborne army had taken to the field in full strength and challenged the enemy in the heart of his stronghold. Moving wearily back to the rear to rest and regroup after staying in the line with the ground troops almost a month after they had plummeted from the skies, the Airborne men listened to radio news of Allied armor racing ahead to meet Russian armor plunging from the east. We all believed that the end of the war was in sight."

**LISTEN:** Tune In your American Forces Network for a dramatized version of the week's ARMY TALKS.  
Time: 1030 Saturday, 31st March, 1945.

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