BAND OF BROTHERS

E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne

From Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest

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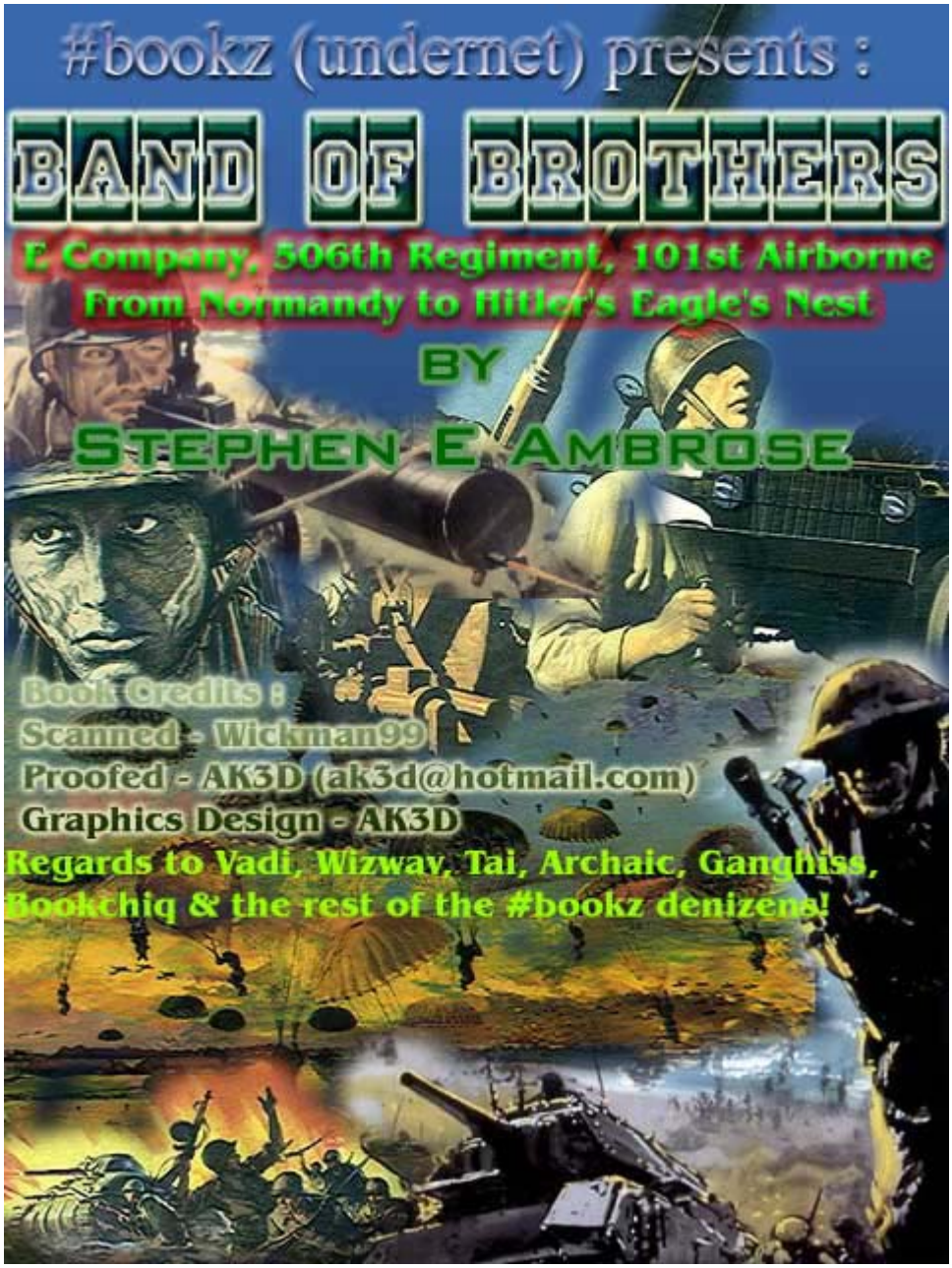
To all those members of the Parachute Infantry, United States Army, 1941-1945, who wear the Purple Heart not as a decoration but as a badge of office.
"From this day to the ending of the World, ... we in it shall be remembered ... we band of brothers"
Henry V William Shakespeare



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1 - 'WE WANTED THOSE WINGS'

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CAMP TOCCOA

July-December 1942

The men of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, U.S. Army, came from different backgrounds, different parts of the country. They were farmers and coal miners, mountain men and sons of the Deep South. Some were desperately poor, others from the middle class. One came from Harvard, one from Yale, a couple from UCLA. Only one was from the Old Army, only a few came from the National Guard or Reserves. They were citizen soldiers.

They came together in the summer of 1942, by which time the Europeans had been at war for three years. By the late spring of 1944, they had become an elite company of airborne light infantry. Early on the morning of D-Day, in its first combat action, Easy captured and put out of action a German battery of four 105 mm cannon that were looking down on Utah Beach. The company led the way into Carentan, fought in Holland, held the perimeter at Bastogne, led the counteroffensive in the Battle of the Bulge, fought in the Rhineland campaign, and took Hitler's Eagle's Nest at Berchtesgaden. It had taken almost 150 percent casualties. At the peak of its effectiveness, in Holland in October 1944 and in the Ardennes in January 1945, it was as good a rifle company as there was in the world.
The job completed, the company disbanded, the men went home.

Each of the 140 men and seven officers who formed the original company followed a different route to its birthplace, Camp Toccoa, Georgia, but they had some things in common. They were young, born since the Great War.

They were white, because the U.S. Army in World War II was segregated. With three exceptions, they were unmarried. Most had been hunters and athletes in high school.

They were special in their values. They put a premium on physical well being, hierarchical authority, and being part of an elite unit. They were idealists, eager to merge themselves into a group fighting for a cause, actively seeking an outfit with which they could identify, join, be a part of, relate to as a family.

They volunteered for the paratroopers, they said, for the thrill, the honor, and the $50 (for enlisted men) or $100 (for officers) monthly bonus paratroopers received. But they really volunteered to jump out of airplanes for two profound, personal reasons. First, in Robert Rader's words, "The desire to be better than the other guy took hold." Each man in his own way had gone through what Richard Winters experienced: a realization that doing his best was a better way of getting through the Army than hanging around with the sad excuses for soldiers they met in the recruiting depots or basic training. They wanted to make their Army time positive, a learning and maturing and challenging experience.

Second, they knew they were going into combat, and they did not want to go in with poorly trained, poorly conditioned, poorly motivated draftees on either side of them. As to choosing between being a paratrooper spearheading the offensive and an ordinary infantryman who could not trust the guy next to him, they decided the greater risk was with the infantry. When the shooting started, they wanted to look up to the guy beside them, not down.

They had been kicked around by the Depression, had the scars to show for it. They had grown up, many of them, without enough to eat, with holes in the soles of their shoes, with ragged sweaters and no car and often not a radio. Their educations had been cut short, either by the Depression or by the war.

"Yet, with this background, I had and still have a great love for my country," Harry Welsh declared forty-eight years later.

Whatever their legitimate complaints about how life had treated them, they had not soured on it or on their country.

They came out of the Depression with many other positive features. They were self-reliant, accustomed to hard work and to taking orders. Through sports or hunting or both, they had gained a sense of self-worth and self-confidence.

They knew they were going into great danger. They knew they would be doing more than their part. They resented having to sacrifice years of their youth to a war they never made. They wanted to throw baseballs, not grenades, shoot a .22 rifle, not an M-l. But having been caught up in the war, they decided to be as positive as possible in their Army careers.

Not that they knew much about airborne, except that it was new and all volunteer. They had been told that the physical training was tougher than anything they had ever seen, or that any other unit in the Army would undergo, but these young lions were eager for that. They expected that, when they were finished with their training, they would be bigger, stronger, tougher than when they started, and they would have gone through the training with the guys who would be fighting beside them.

"The Depression was over," Carwood Lipton recalled of that summer of 1942, "and I was beginning a new life that would change me profoundly." It would all of them.

First Lt. Herbert Sobel of Chicago was the initial member of E Company, and its C.O. His executive officer (X.O.) was 2nd Lt. Clarence Hester from northern California. Sobel was Jewish, urban, with a commission from the National Guard. Hester had started as a private, then earned his commission from Officer Candidate's School (OCS). Most of the platoon and assistant platoon leaders were newly commissioned graduates of OCS, including 2nd Lts. Dick Winters from Pennsylvania, Walter Moore from California's race tracks, and Lewis Nixon from New York City and Yale. S. L. Matheson was an ROTC graduate from UCLA. At twenty-eight years of age, Sobel was the old man in the group; the others were twenty-four or younger.

The company, along with Dog, Fox, and Battalion HQ Companies, made up the 2nd Battalion of the 506th PIR. The battalion commander was Maj. Robert Strayer, a thirty-year-old reserve officer. The regimental commander was Col. Robert Sink, a 1927 West Point graduate. The 506th was an experimental outfit, the first parachute infantry regiment in which the men would take their basic training and their jump training together, as a unit. It would be a year before it was attached to the 101st Airborne, the Screaming Eagles. The officers were as new to this paratrooping business as the men; they were teachers who sometimes were not much more than one day ahead of the class.

The original NCOs were Old Army. "We looked up to them," Pvt. Walter Gordon of Mississippi remembered, "as almost like gods because they had their wings, they were qualified jumpers. But, hell, if they knew how to do an about-face, they were ahead of us, we were raw recruits. Later, looking back, we regarded them with scorn. They couldn't measure up to our own people who moved up to corporals and sergeants."

The first privates in Easy were Frank Perconte, Herman Hansen, Wayne Sisk, and Carwood Lipton. Within a few days of its formation, Easy had a full complement of 132 men and eight officers. It was divided into three platoons and a headquarters section. There were three twelve-man rifle squads plus a six-man mortar team squad to a platoon. A light infantry outfit, Easy had one machine-gun to each of the rifle squads, and a 60 mm mortar in each mortar team.

Few of the original members of Easy made it through Toccoa. "Officers would come and go," Winters remarked. "You would take one look at them and know they wouldn't make it. Some of those guys were just a bowl of butter. They were so awkward they didn't know how to fall." This was typical of the men trying for the 506th PIR; it took 500 officer volunteers to produce the 148 who made it through Toccoa, and 5,300 enlisted volunteers to get 1,800 graduates.

As the statistics show, Toccoa was a challenge. Colonel Sink's task was to put the men through basic training, harden them, teach them the rudiments of infantry tactics, prepare them for jump school, and build a regiment that he would lead into combat. "We were sorting men," Lieutenant Hester recalled, "sorting the fat to the thin and sorting out the no guts."

Pvt. Ed Tipper said of his first day in Easy, "I looked up at nearby Mount Currahee and told someone, I'll bet that when we finish the training program here, the last thing they'll make us do will be to climb to the top of that mountain.' [Currahee was more a hill than a mountain, but it rose 1,000 feet above the parade ground and dominated the landscape.] A few minutes later, someone blew a whistle. We fell in, were ordered to change to boots and athletic trunks, did so, fell in again—and then ran most of the three miles to the top and back down again." They lost some men that first day. Within a week, they were running—or at least double-timing—all the way up and back.

At the end of the second week, Tipper went on, "We were told, 'Relax. No runs today.' We were taken to the mess hall for a tremendous meal of spaghetti at lunchtime. When we came out of the mess hall, a whistle blew, and we were told, 'The orders are changed. We run.' We went to the top of Currahee and back with a couple of ambulances following, and men vomiting spaghetti everywhere along the way. Those who dropped out and accepted the medics' invitation to ride back in the ambulances found themselves shipped out that same day."

The men were told that Currahee was an Indian word that meant "We stand alone," which was the way these paratroopers expected to fight. It became the battle cry of the 506th.

The officers and men ran up and down Currahee three or four times a week. They got so they could do the six-plus-mile round trip in fifty minutes. In addition, they went through a grueling obstacle course daily, and did pushups and pull-ups, deep-knee bends and other calisthenics.

When the men were not exercising, they were learning the basics of soldiering. They began with close order drill, then started making night marches with full field equipment. The first night march was eleven miles; on each march that followed a mile or two was added on. These marches were made without a break, without a cigarette, without water. "We were miserable, exhausted, and thought that if we did not get a drink of water we were certain to collapse," Pvt. Burton "Pat" Christenson recalled. At the end of a march Sobel would check each man's canteen to see that it was still full.

Those who made it got through because of an intense private determination and because of their desire for public recognition that they were special. Like all elite units around the world, the Airborne had its unique badges and symbols. Once through jump school, they would receive silver wings to wear on the left pocket of their jackets, a patch for their left shoulder, a patch for their hats, and the right to wear paratrooper boots and "blouse" their trousers (tuck the trousers into their boots). Gordon said that "it doesn't make much sense now [1990], but at the time we were all ready to trade our lives in order to wear these accoutrements of the Airborne."

The only rest came when they got lectures, on weapons, map and compass reading, infantry tactics, codes, signaling, field telephones, radio equipment, switchboard and wire stringing, demolitions. For unarmed combat and bayonet drills, it was back to using those trembling muscles.

When they were issued their rifles, they were told to treat the weapon as they would treat a wife, gently. It was theirs to have and to hold, to sleep with in the field, to know intimately. They got to where they could take it apart and put it back together blindfolded.

To prepare the men for jump school, Toccoa had a mock-up tower some 35 feet high. A man was strapped into a parachute harness that was connected to 15-foot risers, which in turn were attached to a pulley that rode a cable. Jumping from the tower in the harness, sliding down the cable to the landing, gave the feeling of a real parachute jump and landing.

All these activities were accompanied by shouting in unison, chanting, singing together, or bitching. The language was foul. These nineteen- and twenty-year-old enlisted men, free from the restraints of home and culture, thrown together into an all-male society, coming from all over America, used words as one form of bonding. The one most commonly used, by far, was the f-word. It substituted for adjectives, nouns, and verbs. It was used, for example, to describe the cooks: "those fuckers," or "fucking cooks"; what they did: "fucked it up again"; and what they produced. David Kenyon Webster, a Harvard English major, confessed that he found it difficult to adjust to the "vile, monotonous, and unimaginative language." The language made these boys turning into men feel tough and, more important, insiders, members of a group. Even Webster got used to it, although never to like it.

The men were learning to do more than swear, more than how to fire a rifle, more than that the limits of their physical endurance were much greater than they had ever imagined. They were learning instant, unquestioning obedience. Minor infractions were punished on the spot, usually by requiring the man to do twenty push-ups. More serious infractions cost a man his weekend pass, or several hours marching in full field pack on the parade ground. The Army had

a saying, Gordon related: "We can't make you do anything, but we can make you wish you had." Brought together by their misery, held together by their cadence counts, singing, and common experiences, they were becoming a family.

The company learned to act as a unit. Within days of the formation of Easy, the 140 men could make a one-quarter or one-half turn, or an about-face, as if one. Or set off at double-time, or on a full run. Or drop to the ground to do push-ups. Or shout "Yes, Sir!" or "No, Sir!" in unison.

All this was part of the initiation rites common to all armies. So was learning to drink. Beer, almost exclusively, at the post PX, there being no nearby towns. Lots of beer. They sang soldiers' songs. Toward the end of the evening, invariably someone would insult someone else with a slurring reference to his mother, his sweetheart, his home town, or his region. Then they would fight, as soldier boys do, inflicting bloody noses and blackened eyes, before staggering back to their barracks, yelling war chants, supporting each other, becoming comrades.

The result of these shared experiences was a closeness unknown to all outsiders. Comrades are closer than friends, closer than brothers. Their relationship is different from that of lovers. Their trust in, and knowledge of, each other is total. They got to know each other's life stories, what they did before they came into the Army, where and why they volunteered, what they liked to eat and drink, what their capabilities were. On a night march they would hear a cough and know who it was; on a night maneuver they would see someone sneaking through the woods and know who it was from his silhouette.

Their identification worked downward, from the Army to the Airborne to the 506th to 2nd Battalion to Easy Company to platoon to squad. Pvt. Kurt Gabel of the 513th PIR described his experience in words that any member of E Company could have used: "The three of us, Jake, Joe, and I, became ... an entity. There were many entities in our close-knit organizations. Groups of threes and fours, usually from the same squads or sections, core elements within the families that were the small units, were readily recognized as entities. . . . This sharing . . . evolved never to be relinquished, never to be repeated. Often three such entities would make up a squad, with incredible results in combat. They would literally insist on going hungry for one another, freezing for one another, dying for one another. And the squad would try to protect them or bail them out without the slightest regard to consequences, cussing them all the way for making it necessary. Such a rifle squad, machine gun section, scout-observer section, pathfinder section was a mystical concoction."(1)

Philosopher J. Glen Gray, in his classic work The Warriors, got it exactly right: "Organization for a common and concrete goal in peacetime organizations does not evoke anything like the degree of comradeship commonly known in war. ... At its height, this sense of comradeship is an ecstasy. . . . Men are true comrades only when each is ready to give up his life for the other, without reflection and without thought of personal loss."(2)

(1. Kurt Gabel, The Making of a Paratrooper: Airborne Training and Combat in World War II. (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 142.

2. J. Glenn Gray, The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 43, 45, 46.)

The comradeship formed in training and reinforced in combat lasted a lifetime. Forty-nine years after Toccoa, Pvt. Don Malarkey of Oregon wrote of the summer of 1942, "So this was the beginning of the most momentous experience of my life, as a member of E Company. There is not a day that has passed since that I do not thank Adolf Hitler for allowing me to be associated with the most talented and inspiring group of men that I have ever known." Every member of Easy interviewed by this author for this book said something similar.

The NCOs came up from the ranks, gradually replacing the Old Army cadre types who quit as the training grew more intense. Within a year, all thirteen sergeants in Easy were from the original group of privates, including 1st Sgt. William Evans, S. Sgts. James Diel, Salty Harris, and Myron Ranney, and Sgts. Leo Boyle, Bill Guarnere, Carwood Lipton, John Martin, Robert Rader, and Amos Taylor. "These were men," as one private said, "who were leaders that we respected and would follow anywhere."

The officers were also special and, except for Company Commander Sobel, universally respected. "We couldn't believe that people like Winters, Matheson, Nixon, and the others existed," Private Rader remembered. "These were first-class people, and to think these men would care and share their time and efforts with us seemed a miracle. They taught us to trust." Winters, Rader went on, "turned our lives around. He was openly friendly, genuinely interested in us and our physical training. He was almost shy—he wouldn't say 'shit' if he stepped in it." Gordon said that if a man called out, "Hey, Lieutenant, you got a date tonight?" Winters would turn beet red.

Matheson, who was soon moved up to battalion staff as adjutant and who eventually became a regular Army major general, was the most military minded of the young officers. Hester was "fatherly," Nixon flamboyant. Winters was none of these, nor was he humorous or obstinate. "Nor at any time did Dick Winters pretend to be God, nor at any time did he act other than a man!", according to Rader. He was an officer who got the men to perform because he expected

nothing but the best, and "you liked him so much you just hated to let him down." He was, and is, all but worshipped by the men of E Company.

Second Lieutenant Winters had one major, continuing problem, 1st Lieutenant (soon promoted to captain) Sobel.

The C.O. was fairly tall, slim in build, with a full head of black hair. His eyes were slits, his nose large and hooked. His face was long and his chin receded. He had been a clothing salesman and knew nothing of the out-of-doors. He was ungainly, uncoordinated, in no way an athlete. Every man in the company was in better physical condition. His mannerisms were "funny," he "talked different." He exuded arrogance.

Sobel was a petty tyrant put into a position in which he had absolute power. If he did not like a man, for whatever reason, he would flunk him out for the least infraction, real or imagined.

There was a cruelty to the man. On Saturday morning inspections, he would go down the line, stop in front of a man who had displeased him in some way, and mark him down for "dirty ears." After denying three or four men their weekend passes on those grounds, he would shift to "dirty stacking swivels" and keep another half-dozen or so in barracks for that reason. When someone was late returning on Sunday night, the next evening, after a full day's training, Sobel would order him to dig a 6 x 6 x 6-foot pit with his entrenching tools. When the pit was finished, Sobel would tell him to "fill it up."

Sobel was determined that his company would be the best in the regiment. His method of insuring this result was to demand more of Easy's men. They drilled longer, ran faster, trained harder. Running up Currahee, Sobel was at the head of the company, head bobbing, arms flapping, looking back over his shoulder to see if anyone was dropping out. With his big flat feet, he ran like a duck in distress. He would shout, "The Japs are going to get you!" or "Hi-ho Silver!"

"I remember many times finishing a long run," Tipper said. "Everyone at the point of exhaustion and waiting in formation for the command, 'Fall out!' Sobel would be running back and forth in front of his men shouting, 'Stand still, STAND STILL!' He would not dismiss us until he was satisfied that we had the discipline to impersonate statues at his command. Impossible, of course. But we did what he wanted when he wanted. We wanted those wings."

Gordon developed a lifelong hatred of Sobel. "Until I landed in France in the very early hours of D-Day," Gordon said in 1990, "my war was with this man." Along with other enlisted, Gordon swore that Sobel would not survive five minutes in combat, not when his men had live ammunition. If the enemy did not get him, there were a dozen and more men in Easy who swore that they would. Behind his back the men cursed him, "f——ing Jew" being the most common epithet.

Sobel was as hard on his officers as on the enlisted men. Their physical training was the same, but when the men heard the final "fall out" of the day, they were free to go to their bunks, while the officers had to study the field manuals, then take a test on the assignment Sobel had given them. When he held officers' meetings, Winters recalled, "He was very domineering. There was no give-and-take. His tone of voice was high-pitched, rasplike. He shouted instead of speaking in a normal way. It would just irritate you." The officers' nickname for their captain was "The Black Swan."

Sobel had no friends. Officers would avoid him in the officers' club. None went on a pass with him, none sought out his company. No one in Easy knew anything about his previous life and no one cared. He did have his favorites, of whom No. 1 was company 1st Sgt. William Evans. Together, Sobel and Evans played men off against one another, granting a privilege here, denying one there.

Anyone who has ever been in the Army knows the type. Sobel was the classic chickenshit. He generated maximum anxiety over matters of minimum significance. Paul Fussell, in his book Wartime, has the best definition: "Chickenshit refers to behavior that makes military life worse than it need be: petty harassment of the weak by the strong; open scrimmage for power and authority and prestige, - sadism thinly disguised as necessary discipline,- a constant 'paying off of old scores'; and insistence on the letter rather than the spirit of ordinances. Chickenshit is so called—instead of horse- or bull- or elephant shit—because it is small-minded and ignoble and takes the trivial seriously."(3)

Sobel had the authority over the men. Lieutenant Winters had their respect. The two men were bound to clash. No one ever said so directly, and not everyone in Easy recognized what was happening, and Winters did not want it that way, but they were in competition to be the leader.

Sobel's resentment of Winters began during the first week at Toccoa. Winters was leading the company in calisthenics. He was up on a stand, demonstrating, "helping the fellows get through the exercise. These boys, they were sharp. And I had their complete attention." Colonel Sink walked past. He stopped to watch. When Winters finished, Sink walked up to him. "Lieutenant," he asked, "how many times has this company had calisthenics?"

"Three times, sir," Winters replied.

"Thank you very much," Sink said. A few days later, without consulting Sobel, he promoted Winters to 1st lieutenant. For Sobel, Winters was a marked man from that day. The C.O. gave the platoon leader every dirty job that he could find, such as latrine inspection or serving as mess officer.

Paul Fussell wrote, "Chickenshit can be recognized instantly because it never has anything to do with winning the war."(4)

3. Paul Fussell, Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 80.

4. Ibid.

Winters disagreed. He believed that at least some of what Sobel was doing—if not the way he was doing it—was necessary. If Easy ran farther and faster than the other companies, if it stayed on the parade ground longer, if its bayonet drills were punctuated by "The Japs are going to get you!" and other exhortations, why, then, it would be a better company than the others.

What Winters objected to, beyond the pettiness and arbitrary methods, was Sobel's lack of judgment. The man had neither common sense nor military experience. He could not read a map. On field exercises, he would turn to his X.O. and ask, "Hester, where are we?" Hester would try to locate the position for him without embarrassing him, "but all the men knew what was going on."

Sobel made up his mind without reflection and without consultation, and his snap decisions were usually wrong. One night at Toccoa the company was out in the woods on an exercise. It was supposed to be on the defensive, stay in position and be quiet and let the enemy come into the killing zone. "No problem," as Winters recalled, "just an easy job. Just spread the men out, get them in position, 'everyone be quiet.' We're waiting, waiting, waiting. Suddenly a breeze starts to pick up into the woods, and the leaves start to rustle, and Sobel jumps up. 'Here they come! Here they come!' God Almighty! If we were in combat, the whole damn company would be wiped out. And I thought, 'I can't go into combat with this man! He has no damn sense at all!' "

Winters recognized that Sobel was "a disciplinarian and he was producing a hell of a company. Anytime you saw Easy, by God, the men were sharp. Anything we did, we were out in front." Private Rader said of Sobel, "He stripped away your civilian way of doing things and your dignity, but you became one of the best soldiers in the Army." In Winters' opinion the trouble was Sobel could not see "the unrest and the contempt that was breeding in the troops. You lead by fear or you lead by example. We were being led by fear."

I asked every member of Easy that I interviewed for this book if the extraordinary closeness, the outstanding unit cohesion, the remarkable staying power of the identification with Easy came about because of or in spite of Sobel. Those who did not reply "Both," said it was because of Sobel. Rod Strohl looked me in the eye and said flatly, "Herbert Sobel made E Company." Others said something similar. But they nearly all hated him.

That feeling helped bring the company together. "No doubt about it," Winters said. "It was a feeling everybody shared. Junior officers, noncoms, enlisted men, we all felt exactly the same way." But, he added, "It brought us together. We had to survive Sobel."

They hated him so much that even when he should have earned their respect, he failed. While at Toccoa everyone, enlisted and officer, had to pass a qualifying physical test. By then they were in such good shape that no one was really worried about it. Almost all of them could do thirty-five or forty push-ups, for example, and the requirement was only thirty. But there was great excitement, Tipper said, because "we knew Sobel could barely do twenty push-ups. He always stopped at that point when leading the company in calisthenics. If this test were fair, Sobel would fail and wash out.

"Sobel's test was public and fair. I was part of a not-so-casual audience perhaps fifty feet away. At twenty push-ups he was noticeably bushed, but kept going. At twenty-four or twenty-five his arms were trembling, and he was turning red, but slowly continuing. How he managed to complete the thirty push-ups I don't know, but he did. We were silent, shook our heads, but did not smile. Sobel did not lack determination. We comforted ourselves with the idea that he was still a joke, no matter what."

The paratroopers were volunteers. Any man or officer was free at any time to take a walk. Many did. Sobel did not. He could have walked away from the challenge of being an Airborne officer and walked into a staff job with a supply company, but his determination to make it was as great as that of any member of the company.

Pushing Easy harder than Dog and Fox was difficult, because 2nd Battalion commander Major Strayer was almost as fanatic as Sobel. On Thanksgiving Day, Sink let his regiment feast and relax, but Major Strayer decided it was time for a two-day field exercise for the 2nd Battalion. It included long marches, an attack against a defended position, a gas alarm in the middle of the night, and an introduction to K rations (tins containing a sort of stew, crackers, candy, and powdered fruit juice).

Strayer made that Thanksgiving even more memorable by laying on the Hawg Innards Problem. He stretched wires across a field, at about 18 inches off the ground. Machine-gunners fired over the top of the wire. Beneath it, Strayer spread the ground with the intestines of freshly slaughtered hogs—hearts, lungs, guts, livers, the works. The men crawled

through the vile mess. Lipton recalled that "the army distinction between 'creep' and 'crawl' is that a baby creeps, and a snake crawls. We crawled." No one ever forgot the experience.

By the end of November, basic training had been completed. Every man in the company had mastered his own specialty, be it mortars, machine-guns, rifles, communications, field dressings, and the rest. Each man was capable of handling any job in the platoon, at least in a rudimentary fashion. Each private knew the duties of a corporal and sergeant and was prepared to take over if necessary. Each one who made it through Toccoa had been harassed almost to the point of rebellion. "We all thought," Christenson said, "after this, I can take anything they can throw at me."

A day or so before leaving Toccoa, Colonel Sink read an article in the Reader's Digest that said a Japanese Army battalion had set a world record for marching endurance by covering 100 miles down the Malayan Peninsula in seventy-two hours. "My men can do better than that," Sink declared. As Strayer's 2nd Battalion had trained the hardest, Sink picked it to prove his point. The 1st Battalion took the train to Fort Benning, the 3rd took the train to Atlanta, but the 2nd marched.

At 0700, December 1, Dog, Easy, Fox, and battalion HQ companies set out, each man wearing all his gear and carrying his weapon. That was bad enough for the riflemen, terrible for those like Malarkey in the mortar squad or Gordon, who carried a machine-gun. The route Strayer chose was 118 miles long, 100 miles of that on back-country, unpaved roads. The weather was miserable, with freezing rain, some snow, and thus slippery, muddy roads. As Webster recalled it, "The first day we sloshed and fell in the red mud and cursed and damned and counted the minutes before the next break." They marched through the day, through twilight, into the dark. The rain and snow stopped. A cold, biting wind came up.

By 2300 hours the battalion had covered 40 miles. Strayer picked the campsite, a bare, windswept hill devoid of trees or bushes or windbreaks of any kind. The temperature dipped into the low 20s. The men were issued bread smeared with butter and jam, as they couldn't get the field stoves started. When they woke at 0600, everything was covered with a thick layer of frost. Boots and socks were frozen solid. The officers and men had to take the shoestrings out of the boots to get them onto their swollen feet. Rifles, mortars, and machine-guns were frozen to the ground. The shelter halves crackled like peanut brittle.

The second day it took some miles for stiff, aching muscles to warm up, but the third day was the worst. With 80 miles covered, there were still 38 to go, the last 20 or so on the highway leading into Atlanta. Marching in mud had been bad, but the cement was much worse on the feet. The battalion camped that night on the grounds of Oglethorpe University, on the outskirts of Atlanta.

Malarkey and his buddy Warren "Skip" Muck put up their pup tent and lay down to rest. Word came that chow was ready. Malarkey could not stand up. He crawled on his hands and knees to the chow line. His platoon leader, Winters, took one look and told him to ride in an ambulance the next morning to the final destination, Five Points in downtown Atlanta.

Malarkey decided he could make it. So did nearly all the others. By this time the march had generated publicity throughout Georgia, on the radio and in the newspapers. Cheering crowds lined the route of march. Strayer had arranged for a band. It met them a mile from Five Points. Malarkey, who had struggled along in terrible pain, had "a strange thing happen to me when that band began to play. I straightened up, the pain disappeared, and I finished the march as if we were passing in review at Toccoa."

They had covered 118 miles in 75 hours. Actual marching time was 33 hours, 30 minutes, or about 4 miles an hour. Of the 586 men and officers in the battalion, only twelve failed to complete the march, although some had to be supported by comrades the last day. Colonel Sink was appropriately proud. "Not a man fell out," he told the press, "but when they fell, they fell face forward." Lieutenant Moore's 3rd platoon of Easy was the only one in the battalion in which every man walked every step of the way on his own. As a reward, it led the parade through Atlanta.

2 'STAND UP AND HOOK UP'

*

BENNING, MACK ALL, BRAGG, SHANKS

December 1942-September 1943

Benning was, if possible, even more miserable than Toccoa, especially its infamous Frying Pan area, where the jump training went on. This was the regimental bivouac area, consisting of scrubby little wooden huts set on barren, sandy soil. But Benning was a welcome relief to the men of E Company in the sense that they were getting realistic training for becoming paratroopers rather than spending most of their waking hours doing physical exercises.

Parachute school was supposed to begin with physical training (A stage), followed by B, C, and D stages, each lasting a week, but the 506th skipped A stage. This happened because the 1st Battalion arrived ahead of the others, went into A stage, and embarrassed the jump school sergeants who were assigned to lead the calisthenics and runs. The Toccoa graduates would laugh at the sergeants. On the runs they would begin running backward, challenge the sergeants to a race, ask them—after a couple of hours of exercises that left the sergeants panting—when they were going to get past the warm-up and into the real thing. After two days of such abuse, the sergeants told the CO that the 506th was in much better physical condition than they were, so all the companies of the 506th started in immediately on B stage.

For a week, the company double-timed each morning to the packing sheds, where the men learned how to fold and pack their parachutes. They ran back to the Frying Pan for lunch, then spent the afternoon leaping into sawdust piles from mock doors on dummy fuselages raised 4 feet off the ground, handling parachutes on a suspended harness, or jumping off 30-foot towers in parachute harnesses suspended from a steel cable.

The following week, in C stage, the men made free and controlled jumps from the 250-foot towers. One tower had seats, shock absorbers, and chute guide wires; the others had four chutes that released when they reached the suspension arm. From these, each man made several daylight jumps and one at night.

C stage also featured a wind machine, which blew a gale along the ground, moving both chute and jumper to teach the men how to control and collapse their canopies after landing.

After a week at the towers, the enlisted men were ready for D stage, the real thing, the five jumps from a C-47 that would earn those who completed the process their parachutists' wings. The men packed their chutes the night before, checked them, then packed them again, checked them again, until past 2300. Reveille was at 0530. They marched to the hangers at Lawson Field, singing and shouting in anticipation. They put on their chutes, then sat on rows of benches waiting to be summoned to the C-47s. There was joshing, joke telling, lots of smoking, nervous laughter, frequent trips to the latrine, and repeated checking of the chute and the reserve chute worn on the chest.

They loaded up, twenty-four to a plane. With only one or two exceptions, it was the first plane ride for the men. When the C-47 reached 1,500 feet, it circled. The red light went on; the jumpmaster, a sergeant instructor, called out, "Stand up and hook up." Each man hooked the line attached to the backpack cover of his main chute to the anchor line running down the middle of the top of the fuselage.

"Sound off for equipment check!" shouted the jumpmaster.

"Number twelve O.K.!" "Number eleven O.K!" and so on down the line.

"Close up and stand in the door!"

The first man stepped up to the open door. All the men had been ordered to look out at the horizon, not straight down, for obvious psychological reasons. They had also been taught to place their hands on the outer edge of the door, never on the inside. With the hands on the outside, there was nothing to hold a man in the plane, and the slightest nudge, even just the sense of the next man pressing forward, would be enough to get him out of the plane. If he tried to steady himself by putting his hands on the inside, as Gordon said, "twelve men behind couldn't push that fellow out of there if he didn't want to go. That's the power of fear." When a jumpmaster saw a man put his hands on the inside, he would pull him back and let the others go out.

Most of the men, according to Gordon, "were so psyched up and in the swim of this thing that we would almost have gone out without a parachute. It was almost that bad." Overall, 94 percent of the men of the 506th qualified, which set a record that still stands.

On the first jump, the men went one at a time. As soon as he was in the door, the jumpmaster tapped him on the leg. Out he went.

"I shuffled up to the door and leaped into a vast, breathtaking void," Webster remembered. "My heart popped into my mouth, my mind went blank." The static line attached to the hook on the anchor line in the plane pulled the back cover off his main chute; a break cord, tied to the apex of the chute, pulled the canopy out of the pack and then parted. The prop blast inflated the chute, and he felt the terrific opening shock.

"From then on the jump was fun. I drifted down, oscillating, or, as civilians would say, swinging to and fro, and joyously looking around. The sky was filled with high-spirited troopers shouting back and forth."

Standing in that open door was an obvious moment of truth. Men who had been outstanding in training, men who later won medals for bravery in combat as ordinary infantry, would freeze. Sometimes they were given a second chance, either on that flight after the others had jumped, or the next day. Usually, however, if a man froze once, he would never jump.

Two members of E Company froze. They refused to jump. One of them, Pvt. Joe Ramirez, was pushed to the back of the plane, but after everyone jumped out, he told the jumpmaster that he wanted to jump. The plane circled the field. On the second pass, he jumped. As Pvt. Rod Strohl put it, "That took more guts than for a guy to go out the first time."

Easy made its second jump that afternoon, with the men again going out one at a time. The next jump was a mass affair, the jumpmaster shouting "Go! Go! Go!" as the twelve men in the stick moved into the doorway. The sticks cleared

the plane in 6 seconds, to the astonishment of the jumpmaster. Carson wrote in his diary, "I think I am getting jump crazy because when I am on the ground I think of the thrill of jumping and I want to jump some more. When I feel that opening jerk, I shout with all my might."

The fourth jump came on Christmas Eve. On Christmas Day, the company got the day off and a nice turkey feast. It was the first Christmas away from home for virtually every man in the company. Carson wrote, "It don't seem like Christmas, no snow, no tree, no presents, no mom and dad."

On December 26, the last jump, each man got a certificate declaring that he was "entitled to be rated from this date as a qualified Parachutist." Then the proudest moment of all, the one toward which they had been working for six months, the pinning on of the silver wings. From that moment, never to be forgotten, each member of Easy, every member of the 506th, was forever special.

Colonel Sink held a regimental parade, then gathered the men around him. Standing on a platform, he read out an order of the day (the men later got printed copies). "You are a member of one of the finest regiments in the United States Army," Sink declared, "and consequently in the world." He said he was sending them home on a ten-day furlough, and reminded them that there were "certain things that are expected of you—not only while on furlough, but also a creed by which you are expected to govern your life." They should walk with pride and military bearing, take care of their personal appearance, and "Remember our battle-cry and motto, 'Currahee', and its meaning: 'Standing Alone.' We Stand Alone Together."

He ordered the men to "Stay out of jail," and dismissed them. Wearing their wings, their boots polished, the trousers bloused into the boots, off they went. When they got home, they were objects of wonder to their parents and friends, obviously because of their physical fitness, but even more because of the self-confidence they had acquired in the past half-year. They had been through a training course that three out of five volunteers could not complete; they had survived Sobel's wrath and harassment; they had jumped out of an airplane in flight. They were elite.

Not so elite, however, that they were free to ignore Army rules and regulations. Colonel Sink had warned them to get back to Benning when the furlough was up, but what with the inadequacies of the air, rail, and bus transportation systems in America in January 1943, an alarming number of the 506th were late reporting back for duty.

Colonel Sink held a regimental parade. The men turned out in their class A, or dress, uniforms. They were marched down a sandy street to an empty lot behind the cooks' hutments. Sink called them to attention, then gave the command "At ease." They watched and listened in silence as a lieutenant read a list of names, one from each company, from among the men who had reported in last.

"Private John Doe, E Company," the lieutenant called out. A drummer, standing beside the lieutenant, beat a soft, mournful roll. Two sergeants, bearing submachine-guns, moved to Private Doe. He stepped from the ranks. His face was pale. The sergeants, one on each side, escorted him forward. The drum continued to roll. They stopped in front of the lieutenant. He read out the orders. Private Doe was being drummed out of the paratroopers, condemned to the infantry.

The lieutenant ripped the 506th patch from the private's arm, the wings from his chest, the parachute patch from his hat, and threw them all on the ground. It was so humiliating that the officers and men were cursing under their breath. Webster wrote his mother, "One thing stirred us all up to a fighting madness; some cheap lieutenant without any sense of decency or good taste stood beside the drummer, snapping pictures of all the fellows who came up. Bad enough to be humiliated before your friends, but to be photographed in your disgrace—that lieutenant ought to be shot."

There was more. A jeep drove up and dumped out Private Doe's barracks bags. He had to take off his boots, put on regular shoes, wear his pants down like a regular infantryman ("straight legs," as the paratroopers called them). He picked up his bags and, followed by the submachine-gunners, marched sadly away, the drum continuing to roll, a picture of bleak loneliness. This was repeated nine times.

After that, the 506th had little problem with men returning late from a furlough.

In late January, Easy and the rest of the 506th moved across the Chattahoochee River to the Alabama side of Fort Benning. It was like going from prison to freedom. The barracks were comfortable and the food good. There was a fine PX and a movie theater. The training concentrated on squad problems, especially house-to-house fighting, which was fun, with lots of explosions, firing blanks at one another, tossing smoke grenades. The men made their sixth jump, the first with rifles.

Carson's diary entries capture the flavor of those winter days.

| February 8: "Last night we were in a hell raising mood, so we tore the barracks apart in a pillow fight. After three hours of fighting we finally decided that we were tired and went to bed." February 11: "[Cpl. Joe] Toye, [Sgt. George] Luz, and I to Columbus. Called up the girls and had a party, fun and more fun. Sometime during the party I ran into Betty the Key to Columbus. We finally had to get home, and got here 4:45 A.M." February 12: "Back to Chickasaw Gardens in Columbus and another lovely evening. Betty and I hit it off swell. Really had fun. Got home at 4:45 A.M. and went on duty at 5:30 with one eye open."|

In March, it was "pack 'em up, we're moving out." Camp Mack-all, North Carolina, was a marvel of wartime construction. On November 7, 1942, it consisted of 62,000 acres of wilderness. Four months later it had 65 miles of paved roads, a 1,200-bed hospital, five movie theaters, six huge beer gardens, a complete all-weather airfield with three 5,000-foot runways, and 1,750 buildings. The barracks were heated; the cots had mattresses. It was named for Pvt. John T. Mackall of the 82nd Airborne Division, the first American paratrooper to be killed in combat in World War II. He died on November 8, the day construction began, in North Africa. Camp Mackall was home to the Airborne Command.

Training intensified and became more sophisticated. The jumps now included not only rifles, but other small arms. The bazooka had to be jumped in one piece, the light machine-guns also (although the tripod could be separated and carried by a second man). Two men split the 60 mm mortar and its base plate. Food, ammunition, maps, hand grenades, high explosives, and more were attached to the paratroopers. Some men were jumping with 100 extra pounds.

After the jumps, there were two- and three-day exercises in the woods, with the main focus on quick troop movements and operating behind enemy lines as large forces. At dusk, platoon leaders were shown their location on maps, then told to be at such-and-so by morning.

Captain Sobel made Pvt. Robert "Popeye" Wynn his runner. He sent Wynn out to locate his platoons. Wynn managed to get "lost," and spent the night catching up on his sleep. In the morning, Sobel demanded to know why Wynn got lost.

"Because I can't see in the dark," Wynn replied.

"You had better learn to see in the dark," Sobel rejoined, and sent Wynn back to his squad, replacing him with Ed Tipper as runner. "With my help," Tipper recounted, "Sobel was able to mislay his maps, compass, and other items when he most needed them. He was getting similar 'assistance' from others and was disoriented and lost even more than usual. We were all hoping that he'd screw up so badly that he'd be replaced and we wouldn't have to go into combat under his command."

"Your rifle is your right arm!" Sobel would tell his men. "It should be in your possession every moment." On one night exercise he decided to teach his men a lesson. He and Sergeant Evans went sneaking through the company position to steal rifles from sleeping men. The mission was successful; by daylight Sobel and Evans had nearly fifty rifles. With great fanfare, Evans called the company together and Sobel began to tell the men what miserable soldiers they were.

As he was yelling, the C.O. of Fox Company, accompanied by some forty-five of his men, came up. To Sobel's great embarrassment, it turned out that he and Evans had been lost, strayed into Fox Company's bivouac area, and stolen their rifles.

A couple of weeks later, Sobel hurt his feet on a jump. He and Sergeant Evans returned to barracks while the company stayed in the field. The captain and the first sergeant conducted a private inspection. They searched through all the footlockers, clothing, and personal possessions of the men of E Company. They went through pockets, broke open boxes, rifled letters from girlfriends and family, and confiscated all items they considered contraband. "I don't know what the hell they were looking for," Gordon Carson commented. "Those were the days before drugs."

Sobel posted a list identifying the contraband, the offender, and the punishment. The men returned from the field exercise, exhausted and filthy, to find that everything they thought of as personal property was in disarray, underwear, socks, toothpaste and toothbrushes, all piled up on top of the bunks. Many items were missing.

Nearly every soldier had something confiscated. Generally it was unauthorized ammunition, nonregulation clothing, or pornography. Cans of fruit cocktail and sliced peaches, stolen from the kitchen, were gone, along with expensive shirts, none of it ever returned. One soldier had been collecting prophylactic kits. A few condoms were evidently acceptable, but 200 constituted contraband; they were posted on Sobel's list of confiscated items.

"That marked a turning point for me," Tipper recalled. "Before Sobel's raid I had disliked him but had not really hated the man. Afterward I decided Sobel was my personal enemy and I did not owe him loyalty or anything else. Everyone was incensed."

There was talk about who was going to shoot Sobel when the company got into combat. Tipper thought it was just talk, but "on the other hand I was aware of a couple of guys in Company E who said little but who in my judgment were fully capable of killing Sobel if they got the chance."

On the next field exercise, E Company was told that a number of its men would be designated as simulated casualties so the medics could practice bandaging wounds, improvising casts and splints, evacuating men on litters and so forth. Sobel was told that he was a simulated casualty. The medics put him under a real anesthetic, pulled down his pants, and made a real incision simulating an appendectomy. They sewed up the incision and bound it up with bandages and surgical tape, then disappeared.

Sobel was furious, naturally enough, but he got nowhere in pressing for an investigation. Not a man in E Company could be found who could identify the guilty medics.

How fit the men of Easy were was demonstrated at Mackall when the Department of the Army had Strayer's 2nd Battalion—already famous for the march to Atlanta—take a standard physical fitness test. The battalion scored 97

percent. As this was the highest score ever recorded for a battalion in the army, a Colonel Jablonski from Washington thought Strayer had rigged the score. Winters recalled, "They had us run it a second time, officers, men, service personnel, cooks, everybody—and we scored 98 percent."

Promotions were coming Easy's way. All three staff sergeants, James Diel, Salty Harris, and Mike Ranney, were original members of the company who had started out as privates. So too with the sergeants, Leo Boyle, Bill Guarnere, Carwood Lipton, John Martin, Elmer Murray, Bob Rader, Bob Smith, Buck Taylor, and Murray Roberts. Carson made corporal. Lieutenant Matheson moved up to regimental staff, while Lieutenants Nixon, Hester, and George Lavenson moved on to the battalion staff. (Through to the end of the war, every vacancy on the 2nd Battalion staff was filled with an officer from Easy. Companies D, F, and HQ did not send a single officer up to battalion. Winters commented, "This is why communications between battalion, regiment HQ, and Company E were always excellent. It is also why Company E always seemed to be called upon for key assignments.")

In early May, Winters's 1st platoon got a new second lieutenant, Harry Welsh. He was a reluctant officer. In April 1942, he had volunteered for the paratroopers and been assigned to the 504th PIR of the 82nd Airborne. After jump school, he made sergeant. Three times. He kept getting busted back to private for fighting. But he was a tough little Irishman with obvious leadership potential. His company commander noticed and recommended Welsh for OCS.

Welsh was assigned to Easy Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th PIR. He had wanted to return to the 504th, but Army doctrine was to send OCS graduates to new units, because it feared that if they went back to their old outfit, they would be too familiar with their enlisted friends. Sobel put Welsh in Winters's platoon. They immediately became the closest of friends. The relationship was based on mutual respect brought about by an identical view of leadership. "Officers go first," as Welsh put it.

At the end of May, the men of Easy packed up their barracks bags and joined the other companies of the 506th for a stop-and-go train ride to Sturgis, Kentucky. At the depot Red Cross girls had coffee and doughnuts for them, the last bit of comfort they would know for a month. They marched out into the countryside and pitched pup tents, dug straddle trenches for latrines, and ate the Army's favorite meal for troops in the field, creamed chipped beef on toast, universally known as SOS, or Shit on a Shingle.

This was not combat, but it was as close as the Army could make it. The maneuvers held in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Indiana from June 5 to July 15, 1943, combined paratroopers and gliderborne troops in the largest airborne exercise to date.

On June 10, the 506th PIR officially joined the 101st Airborne Division, thus making that date the greatest day the 101st ever had. Adding the 506th noticeably raised the morale of the 101st, at least according to the men of E Company.

The maneuvers, pitting the Red Army against the Blue Army, ranged over a wide area of backwoods hills and mountains. Easy made three jumps. Christenson remembered one of them vividly. It was hot, stifling inside the C-47, and the heated air rising in currents from the hills cause the plane to bob and weave. Cpl. Denver "Bull" Randleman, at the back of the stick and thus farthest from the open door, began vomiting into his helmet. The man in front of him took one look and lost his lunch. The process worked right up the line. Not everyone managed to vomit into his helmet; the floor was awash in vomit, the plane stank. Christenson, at the front, was hanging on, but barely. "My stomach was on the verge of rebellion. . . . 'Why don't they turn on the green light? There it is!' From behind, shouts of 'Go!' 'Go! Goddamn it, Go!' Out I went into the clean fresh air. I felt as if someone had passed a magic wand over my head and said, 'Christenson, you feel great.' And I did."

The maneuvers featured extended night marches, wading through streams, climbing the far bank, making 3 feet only to slide back 2, stumbling over rocks, stumps, and roots, cutting a swath through matted underbrush and occasionally enjoying fried chicken prepared by Tennessee hill people. The men were tired, filthy, itching all over.

In late July, the maneuvers completed, the 2nd Battalion of the 506th received a commendation from Maj. Gen. William C. Lee, commander of the 101st, for "splendid aggressive action, sound tactical doctrine, and obviously well trained individuals." General Lee expressed his confidence that "future tests will reveal further indications of excellent training and leadership."

Easy moved from Sturgis to Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, where there were barracks, hot showers, and other luxuries. But the camp was overflowing, and once again it was the little pup tents for sleeping quarters, the ground for a mattress. It did not last long, as most of the men got ten-day furloughs, and shortly after they reported back, the entire division took trains to Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

It was immediately obvious that Bragg was a staging area, as the division prepared to ship overseas. The food was better; there were beds in barracks with hot showers and other improvements. But the real giveaway was a total reoutfitting. The men got new clothes, new weapons, new gear. They spent their days on the firing range, sighting in the rifles and machine-guns.

Where were they going, east or west, the European, Mediterranean, or the Pacific theater? No one knew, rumors flew from platoon to platoon, bets were made.

On weekends, the men went into Fayetteville to "prime the Pump," at the Town Pump, one of the local bars. Brawls were frequent. Most were started by the paratroopers, who would pitch into the regular soldiers stationed at Bragg. They also goaded the glider troops who were part of the 101st.

The glider troops were regular soldiers assigned to the glider regiment. Although they were airborne, they were not volunteers and were treated by the Army as second-class men. They did not receive the $50 per month bonus, they had no special badges, they did not wear boots and bloused trousers. Some of them made up posters showing photographs of crashed and burned gliders, with a caption that read: "Join the glider troops! No flight pay. No jump pay. But never a dull moment!"

A few members of Easy went down to the airfield at Bragg to take a ride on a glider. The experience of landing in one of those plywood crates convinced them jumping with a chute was a better way to land. When General Lee made a glider flight, the landing fractured several of his ribs. "Next time I'll take a parachute," he remarked. "We told you so!" the glider troops shouted. (In July 1944, the glidermen finally got the hazardous duty bonus of $50 per month and a special insignia.)

In mid-August, the division assembled in regimental formation. A band played "Over There" and the Red Cross girls cried as the men marched to the twenty trains waiting to take them off to war. Once aboard and somewhat settled down, the betting began over which way the trains would head, north toward New York and then Europe or the Mediterranean, or west toward California and then the Pacific.

The trains headed north, toward Camp Shanks, 30 miles up the Hudson River from New York City. Promises were made about passes into the city, promises that were not kept. Instead it was more inspections, followed by inoculations. "Shot followed shot," Christenson remembered, "until our arms hung from our bodies like limp ropes." Officers and noncoms got to know the Preparation for Overseas Movement manual by heart.

Sobel wrote up a form letter to send to the mothers of his troopers. "Dear Madam," it began. "Soon your son, Pfc. Paul C. Rogers [each name was typed in] will drop from the sky to engage and defeat the enemy. He will have the best of weapons, and equipment, and have had months of hard, and strenuous training to prepare him for success on the battlefield.

"Your frequent letters of love, and encouragement will arm him with a fighting heart. With that, he cannot fail, but will win glory for himself, make you proud of him, and his country ever grateful for his service in its hour of need." He signed each letter with a flourish, "Herbert M. Sobel, Capt., Commanding."

The enlisted men got hold of some whiskey. They were accustomed to beer, so the whiskey hit them hard. Christenson got so drunk he was "making out with the toilet," a condition common to young men who have just been introduced to whiskey. Corporal Randleman found him and gently carried him to bed. The next morning, the air filled with the moans and groans of the hungover men, the company marched down to the docks. A ferry carried the men to a pier, where hot coffee and doughnuts from the Red Cross girls helped revive the near-dead.

There was a great deal of cursing, partly because the men had hoped to march through New York City on their way to war and did not, also because they were not allowed to wear their jump boots. The reason: enemy spies might see them and would know that an airborne division was shipping out. They had to take the patch of the 101st, the Screaming Eagle, off their shoulders.

Winters remembered only one case of Gangplank Fever. A medical officer was "just smart enough to know what to take to be assigned to sick call and miss the voyage." All the others lined up in single file to walk up the gangplank, lugging their barracks bags and weapons. As they stepped onto the liner converted into a troop transport and called out their names, a checker marked them present. It took almost a full day to get the 5,000 men aboard a transport built to carry 1,000 passengers. Finally tugs towed the ship from her berth, and she started steaming out to sea. The men of Easy Company lined the rails to see the Statue of Liberty slip astern. For nearly every one of them, it was his first trip outside the United States. A certain homesickness set in, coupled with a realization, as the regimental scrapbook Currahee put it, of "how wonderful the last year had been."

3 "DUTIES OF THE LATRINE ORDERLY"

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ALDBOURNE

September 1943-March 1944

The Samaria was an old India mail liner and passenger ship converted to a troop transport. Originally built for 1,000 passengers, she carried 5,000 men from the 506th. The overcrowding created really dreadful conditions. Fresh water was severely rationed; the men could drink only at stipulated fifteen-minute intervals for a grand total of an hour and a half a day. The showers ran salt water, cold. The men had to wear their life jackets at all times, and their cartridge belts with canteens attached, which meant they were constantly bumping into one another. They slept in their clothes. One bunk was assigned to two men, which meant they alternated, sleeping every other night on the deck or in a hallway or wherever space to lie down could be found. The stench was simply awful.

There were two meals a day. Christenson described his first breakfast: "I didn't think we would ever stop going down stairs to the mess hall on the lowest deck, stairs that were slippery with grease and when we finally reached the bottom, the stench was almost overpowering. They fed us from large pots, containing boiled fish and tomatoes. The cooks wore stained white clothing, stains on stains showing they hadn't changed for days." The men ate the slop because they were hungry; to Webster, the mess hall had "the air of a floating madhouse."

At least the meals were a break from the routine, which consisted of walking the decks, leaning on the rail watching the convoy, or gambling. The gambling was continuous: poker, blackjack, and craps. Large amounts of money changed hands. Carson won $125 one night, lost it all the next day. Men tried to read, but they had precious few books. Captain Sobel tried to lead the men in calisthenics, but the space was insufficient and it became another Sobel joke.

On September 15, the Samaria docked in Liverpool. The next day a train took the men south. Trucks picked them up at the station at Ogbourne St. George and carried them on to their new home. They marched the last mile and a half, after dark, with only flashlights to show the way,- the wartime blackout impressed upon the men that they were in a combat zone. They got to their barracks, which were Nissen huts heated by twin potbellied stoves, were given mattress covers and shown the straw they could stuff into them, along with heavy wool blankets that itched, and went to bed.

Webster wrote that when he woke the next morning, "I thought I'd passed out on a Hollywood movie set. All around the area were fairybook cottages with thatched roofs and rose vines on their sides. Vast horses shaking long manes stomped down narrow winding cobblestone lanes. A soft village green set off a weathered old grey eleventh century Norman church whose clock chimed the hours just like Big Ben, and five ancient public houses, their signboards swinging in the breeze, bade us welcome to the land of mild and bitter beer." They were in Aldbourne, in Wiltshire, near Hungerford, not far from Swindon, 80 miles due west of London. It would be home for Company E for almost nine months, by far the longest period it stayed in one place.

Aldbourne was vastly different from Toccoa, Benning, or Bragg. There the men of Easy had been in self-contained, isolated posts, completely military. In Aldbourne, they were in the midst of a small English village, where the people were conservative, set in their ways, apprehensive about all these young Yanks in their midst. The danger of friction was great, but the Army put together an excellent orientation program that worked well. Beginning that first morning and continuing most of the week, the men were briefed in detail on English customs, manners, habits. Well-disciplined as they were, the men quickly caught on to the basic idea that they should save their hell-raising for Swindon, Birmingham, or London; in Aldbourne, they were to drink their beer quietly in the pubs, in the British manner.

They also learned to eat what the British were eating: powdered milk, powdered eggs, dehydrated apricots, dehydrated potatoes, horse meat, Brussels sprouts, turnips, and cabbage. The PX goods were rationed: seven packs of cigarettes per week, plus three candy bars, one pack of gum, one cake of soap, one box of matches, one package of razor blades.

Sobel didn't change. At the end of the first week, the men got passes to go to Swindon for a Saturday night dance. Sobel put out a regulation: no man would take his blouse off while dancing. Pvt. Tom Burgess, a farm boy from central Illinois, got to sweating while dancing in a wool shirt with a wool blouse over it, so he took off the blouse.

Monday morning, Sobel called Burgess into his office. "Burgess, I understand you were in town Saturday night with your blouse off at a dance."

"That's right, Captain Sobel," Burgess replied, "but I checked army regulations and it's very plainly written that you can take your blouse off if you've got a wool shirt on and you are moving about or dancing or whatever."

Sobel looked him up and down. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Burgess. You're gonna wear your blouse over your fatigues all week, you're gonna sleep with it on every night."

Burgess wore his blouse during the day, but he figured Sobel would not be checking on him at night, so he hung it on the edge of the bed. The following Saturday he went to Sobel's office to get a pass to go to the dance. Sobel looked him over. "Burgess," he said, "that blouse don't look to me like you slept in it all night." No pass.

They were in England to prepare for the invasion of Europe, not to dance, and the training schedule was intense. Malarkey thought he was back in Toccoa. Six days a week, eight to ten hours a day, they were in the field. They made 15-, 18-, 21-, and 25-mile hikes, went on night operations, spent an hour daily in close combat exercises, did some street fighting, and got training in map reading, first aid, chemical warfare, and the use and characteristics of German weapons. They made a 25-mile hike with full field equipment in twenty-four hours, then a few days later a 25-mile hike with

combat pack in twelve hours. There were specialized courses on booby traps, removal of mines, communications, and the like.

Once a week or so they went out on a two- or three-day exercise. The problems were designed not only to give them a working knowledge of the mechanics of combat but to teach the most basic thing an infantryman has to know: how to love the ground, how to use it to advantage, how the terrain dictates tactics, above all how to live on it and in it for days at a time without impairment of physical efficiency. Their officers stressed the importance of such things, that it would make the difference between life and death, that the men must do it instinctively right the first time, as there would not be a second.

So the men of Easy got to know the English countryside. They attacked towns, hills, and woods. They dug countless foxholes, and slept in them, learning how to do it despite rain and cold and hunger.

In early December, back in the field again, the company dug in around a high, barren, windswept hill. The platoon leaders told them to dig their foxholes deep, difficult in the rocky soil. Soon an armored combat team of Sherman tanks attacked. "They roared up the hill at us like primeval monsters," Webster wrote in his diary, "stopped, turned, and passed broadside. One charged at me. My hole wasn't deep enough for a single tread to pass safely over me, so I yelled frantically, 'Straddle me! Straddle me,' which he did." Carson's entry read: "It was the first time a tank ran over me in a foxhole, scary."

There was a lot of night work, Gordon recalled. "We would cut across country and crawl over fences and through gaps and go through woods and wade creeks." In the process, the members of the squads and platoons, already familiar with each other, grew intimate. "I could see a silhouette at night," Gordon said, "and tell you who it was. I could tell you by the way he wore his hat, how the helmet sat on his head, how he slung his rifle." Most of what they learned in the training proved to be valuable in combat, but it was that intimacy, that total trust, that comradeship that developed on those long, cold, wet English nights that proved to be invaluable.

They were jumping on a regular basis, in full gear, learning how to use their risers to guide themselves to open, plowed fields rather than come down on a hedgerow, road, telephone pole, stone wall, or woods. In the C-47s in the cold, damp English air, their feet were numb by the time the green light went on, so that when they hit the ground the feet stung and burned from the shock. A major purpose of the jumps was to learn to assemble quickly after landing, not so easy to do for the 2nd platoon of Easy on the first jump, as the platoon came down 25 miles from the drop zone.

There was tension. Members of the 82nd Airborne, stationed nearby, would tell the troopers from the 101st what combat in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy had been like. The officers especially felt the pressure of combat coming on, none more so than Sobel. "It showed up in his disposition," Winters said. "He was becoming more sour and sadistic. It was reaching the point that it was unbearable."

Sgt. Earl Hale recalled that "There was a lottery going on about whoever gets Sobel." Sobel had picked up an Air Force sheepskin jacket, of which he was proud and which he wore in the field, making him highly conspicuous. Tipper remembered that when the company was going through a combat range with live ammunition fired at pop-up targets, "Sobel experienced some near misses. More than one shot was aimed from the rear and side to crack by close to Sobel's head. He'd flop down, kind of bounce around and shout something, and jump up again. There was much laughing and gesturing from the men. I can't believe that Sobel thought what was happening was accidental, but maybe he did. Anyway, he kept jumping up and down and running around as if everything were normal."

The men continued to play tricks on Sobel. Pvt. George Luz could imitate voices. One night E Company was leading the battalion on a cross-country march. The barbed-wire fences kept slowing the progress. Sobel was in front.

"Captain Sobel," a voice called out, "what's the holdup?"

"The barbed wire," Sobel replied, thinking he was addressing Maj. Oliver Horton, the battalion executive officer.

"Cut those fences," Luz called out, continuing to imitate Horton's voice. "Yes, sir!" Sobel replied, and he ordered wire cutters to the front.

The next morning a contingent of Wiltshire farmers confronted Colonel Strayer. They complained mightily about the cut fences. Their cows were wandering all over the landscape. Strayer called in Sobel. "Why did you cut those fences?"

"I was ordered to cut them, sir!"

"By whom?"

"Major Horton."

"Can't be. Horton's on leave in London." Sobel caught hell, but he was never able to learn who had fooled him and was therefore unable to retaliate.

It was his jumping around, his "Hi-ho, Silver!" nonsense, his bull-in-the-china-shop approach to tactical problems, that bothered the officers, N.C.O.s, and enlisted men of the company more than his chickenshit. Dissatisfaction grew daily, especially with the N.C.O.s. Sgts. Myron "Mike" Ranney, a twenty-one-year-old from North Dakota, of 1st platoon, and "Salty" Harris of 3rd platoon, led the mumble-mumble of the potential disaster of Sobel leading the company into

combat. The N.C.O.s were fully aware that they were confronted by a delicate and extremely dangerous situation. To act would open them to charges of insubordination or mutiny in time of war,- to fail to act could get the whole company killed.

Ranney, Harris, and the other N.C.O.s hoped that the platoon leaders would bring the problem to Colonel Sink, or that Sink would become aware of the situation on his own and that Sink would then quietly remove Sobel. But that seemed naive. How could young officers whose responsibility was to back up their C.O. go to the colonel to complain about the C.O.? And what would they complain about? Company E continued to lead the way in the regiment, in the field, in barracks, in athletic contests. How could the N.C.O.s expect Colonel Sink to do other than support his company commander in the face of dissension and pressure from a group of sergeants and corporals? These guys were getting ready to go into combat against the most-feared army in the world, not to play a game or have a debate.

So the mumble-mumble continued, and Sobel and 1st Sergeant Evans remained isolated, but still very much in command.

Weekend passes and the excellent British rail service gave the men a break from the tension. England in the late fall and early winter of 1943 was a wonderland for the boys from the States. Most of the British boys their age were off in Italy or in training camps far from their homes, so there were lonely, bored, unattached young women everywhere. The American soldiers were well-paid, much better than the British, and the paratroopers had that extra $50 per month. Beer was cheap and plentiful, once out of Aldbourne all restraints were removed, they were getting ready to kill or be killed, they were for the most part twenty or twenty-one years old.

Webster described the result in an October 23 diary entry: "Although I do not enjoy the army, most of the men in this outfit find it a vacation. Boys who had been working steadily at home enter the army and are relieved of all responsibilities. It is unanimously agreed that they never pitched such glorious drunks back home."

The excitement of the time, the kaleidoscope of impressions that were continually thrust upon them, the desperate need to escape the rigors of training, the thought of upcoming combat and Sobel's chickenshit, combined to make this an unforgettable time and impel most of the men to make the most of it. "London to me was a magic carpet," Carson wrote. "Walk down any of its streets and every uniform of the Free World was to be seen. Their youth and vigor vibrated in every park and pub. To Piccadilly, Hyde Park, Leicester Square, Trafalgar Square, Victoria they came. The uniform of the Canadians, South Africans, Australians, New Zealanders, the Free French, Polish, Belgium, Holland, and of course the English and Americans were everywhere.

"Those days were not lost on me because even at twenty years of age, I knew I was seeing and being a part of something that was never to be again. Wartime London was its own world."

There was an excess of drinking, whoring, fighting. Older British observers complained, "The trouble with you Yanks is that you are overpaid, oversexed, and over here." (To which the Yanks would reply, "The trouble with you Limeys is that you are underpaid, undersexed, and under Eisenhower.")

E Company was adding officers, with the aim of having two lieutenants per platoon, in expectation of casualties when combat began. One newcomer was 2nd Lt. Lynn "Buck" Compton. Born on the last day of 1921 in Los Angeles, he was an all-American catcher on the UCLA baseball team and played football for UCLA in the January 1, 1943, Rose Bowl game. Upon graduation from OCS he went to Fort Benning. After completing jump school, he joined E Company in Aldbourne in December. "I remember feeling rather envious of those who had been at Toccoa," he wrote years later, "and felt sort of 'out of it' as a new member of the company."

Compton quickly learned that Lieutenant Nixon, now battalion S-2, resented "jocks." Nixon put Compton in charge of physical training for the battalion, which in practice meant Compton had to lead the battalion on long runs, the only officer who had to do so. Whether as a result of this experience, or because of his athletic background, or because he liked to gamble, Compton was close to the N.C.O.s and some of the enlisted men. Too close, some of the other officers felt. He got caught playing craps with some of the men and drew a reprimand from the X.O., Lieutenant Winters.

At 1100 hours on October 30, Lieutenant Colonel Strayer was scheduled to inspect E Company. Sobel gave Lieutenant Winters orders to inspect the latrine at 1000 hours. A few minutes later, at about 0930 hours, Lieutenant Colonel Strayer told Winters to censor the enlisted men's mail. That was a job that could not be done at headquarters, so Winters hopped on his bicycle and rode to his quarters, a small room in a private home in Aldbourne. Promptly at 1000 hours he returned, parked his bicycle outside the barracks, and entered to inspect the latrine. To his surprise, Sobel was there, making his own inspection.

Sobel walked past Winters, head down, giving no indication that he saw the X.O. Behind him walked a most unhappy Pvt. Joachim Melo, carrying a mop, soaking wet, dirty, badly needing a shave, hair uncombed. Sobel left without saying a word. Winters inspected the latrine and found that Melo had done a good job.

At 1045 hours Winters walked into the orderly room to get ready for the company formation. With a hint of a smirk on his face, 1st Sergeant Evans handed him a typed document. It read:

Company E, 506th PIR, 30 Oct. '43

Subject: Punishment under 104th Article of War

To: 1st Lt. R. D. Winters

1. You will indicate by indorsement [sic] below whether you desire punishment under 104th AW or trial by Courts Martial for failure to inspect the latrine at 0945 this date as instructed by me.

[Signed, with a grand flourish] Herbert M. Sobel, Capt., Commanding.

Winters confronted Sobel. "Captain," he said after saluting and asking permission to speak, "my orders were to inspect the latrine at 1000 hours."

"I changed that time to 0945."

"No one told me."

"I telephoned, and I sent a runner." Winters bit his tongue. There was no telephone in his room, and no runner had come.

It was time for inspection. Strayer went down the ranks and through the barracks. Everything, including the latrine, was satisfactory. Winters, meanwhile, made up his mind on how to respond to Sobel. On the bottom of the typed sheet, he wrote by hand:

Subject: Punishment under 104 A.W. or Trial by Courts Martial.

To: Capt. H. M. Sobel

1. I request trial by Courts Martial for failure to inspect the latrine at 0945 this date.

Lt. R. D. Winters, XO, Co. E

Sobel replied the following day:

1. You will be denied a 48 hour pass until after December 15, 1943.

2. In accordance with the procedure outlined in the Courts-Martial Manual you will iniutate [initiate; Sergeant Evans evidently had trouble either typing or spelling] your own letter of appeal with your reasons for objection and also a request for trial by courts-martial.

Winters simmered for three days. So far as he could make out, Sobel was saying, "Look, don't be silly, take the punishment and forget the courts-martial." Sobel knew that the "punishment" was a matter of indifference to Winters, as Winters spent his weekends on the post, reading or playing sports. But Winters had had enough. He wanted to force the moment to a crisis. The competition he had never wanted, between himself and Sobel for leadership of E Company, had to be settled. The company was not big enough for both of them.

On November 4, Winters appealed his punishment under the 104th Article of War. Sobel made an "indorsement" [Evans' spelling] the next day:

1. Punishment for the above offense given by the undersigned will not be lifted by him.

2. When given another task to perform by a ranking officer to myself [Strayer's order to censor the mail] you should have delegated your task to another officer to inspect the latrine and not let it go until such time that there was little time for corrective measures to be taken before the arrival of the General Officer about ten minutes later.

He signed with his usual flourish.

Winters' request for a court-martial, meanwhile, was posing a problem that was not as funny as it sounded for the 2nd Battalion staff. The officers got out the court-martial manual and studied it intensively to try to figure out some way to get out from under this embarrassment. They finally did, and Strayer set aside the punishment and declared the case closed—no court-martial.

Sobel was not finished. The next day, November 12, Evans handed Winters another typed order:

Subject: Failure to Instruct Latrine Orderly To: 1st Lt. R. D. Winters

1. You will reply by indorsement hereon your reason for failure to instruct Pvt. J. Melo in his duties as latrine orderly.

2. You will further reply why he was permitted to be on duty at 1030 Oct. 30 in need of a shave.

"I give up," Winters decided. "Go ahead and shoot me." In that mood he replied, by endorsement:

1. Reason for failure to instruct Pvt. J. Melo in his duties as latrine orderly: No excuse.

2. Reason why he was permitted to be on duty at 1030 hr in need of a shave: No excuse.

The next day Strayer decided, for the good of E Company (where, naturally, the long-anticipated showdown between Sobel and Winters was the talk of the barracks), to transfer Winters out of Easy. Strayer made him battalion mess officer.

That was an insult to Winters, in his view: "You only give a job like that to a guy that can't do anything right."

With Winters gone, Sobel still in charge, and combat coming, the N.C.O.s were in an uproar. Sergeants Ranney and Harris called a meeting. With the exception of Evans and one or two others, all the N.C.O.s in E Company attended.

Ranney and Harris proposed that they present Colonel Sink with an ultimatum: either Sobel be replaced, or they would turn in their stripes. They stressed that they would have to act together, with no dissenters land no identifiable leader.

This radical proposal elicited much comment, many questions, great concern, but in the end the group decision was that going into combat under Sobel's command was unthinkable. The only way they could let Strayer and Sink know how strongly they I felt was to turn in their stripes. Each noncom thereupon wrote out his own resignation: Lipton's went as follows: "I hereby turn in my stripes. I no longer want to be a non-commissioned officer in Company E." Lipton was C.Q. (charge of quarters, the sergeant who slept in the orderly room to be available to handle any problems that came up during the night, to wake the men in the morning, etc.) that night. He gathered up the resignations and put the stack in Sobel's "in" basket.

The N.C.O.s then thought further about what they were doing and decided to consult with Winters. He was invited to the orderly room, where on arrival Ranney told him what the group had done.

"Don't," said Winters. "Don't even think about it. This is mutiny."

The N.C.O.s protested. As the discussion continued, Sobel walked in. Everyone was speechless. Sobel did not say a word, he just walked over to his desk and picked up a book. As he turned to leave, Ranney said in a normal voice, "Now, Lieutenant Winters, what are we going to do about improving our athletic program?" Sobel gave no hint of concern, he just walked out.

Winters felt that Sobel had to have known what was going on. "Hell, there was no secret about it." Ranney had invited Evans to the meeting; it was all but certain Evans had told Sobel.

Indeed, by this time the whole battalion was talking about Sobel's battles, first with Winters, now with his N.C.O.s. Sink would have had to have been deaf, dumb, and blind not to have been aware. He should also have been grateful that Winters had talked the N.C.O.s out of presenting him with an ultimatum. A few days later, Sink came down to Company E, called all the noncoms together, and as Lipton recalled, "Gave us hell. He told us we had disgraced our company and that he could put every one of us in the guardhouse for years. As we were preparing for combat, he said that it could be called mutiny in the face of the enemy for which we could be shot."

Fortunately for Sink, the 101st Airborne had just established a Parachute Jumping School at the nearby village of Chilton Foliat, in order to qualify as paratroopers doctors, chaplains, communications men, forward artillery observers, and others who would be jumping on D-Day. Who better than Sobel to run a training camp?

Sink sent Sobel to Chilton Foliat and brought 1st Lt. Patrick Sweeney from Able Company to be X.O. of Easy. He made 1st Lt. Thomas Meehan of Baker the C.O. of Easy. And he brought Winters back, as leader of the 1st platoon. Sergeant Ranney was busted to private, and Harris was transferred. The Sobel era of Easy Company had come to an end.

Meehan was Sobel's opposite. Slender, fairly tall, willowy, he had common sense and competence. He was strict but fair. He had good voice command. "Under Meehan," Winters said, "we became a normal company."

Training intensified. On December 13, the company made a night jump and lost its first man, Pvt. Rudolph Dittrich of 1st platoon, due to parachute failure. Platoons and squads were being sent out on three-day problems, with different men being put in command as lieutenants and sergeants were declared out of action. "Imagine me platoon leader," Carson wrote in his diary on December 12. "No, it can't be." But it was. They were learning to be resourceful, which included learning to live off the land. This included "fishing" by tossing hand grenades into the streams and improving their diet by finding deer on the country estates that were willing to walk into a bullet in the head.

Christmas was a day off, with all the turkey a man could eat. New Year's Eve was quiet, "We just waited up for the New Year," Carson wrote. "I wonder what it shall bring, wonder how many of us will see 1945."

On January 18, Gen. Bernard Law Montgomery, commander of the 21st Army Group to which the 101st was attached, came to Chilton Foliat for an inspection. He reviewed the regiment, then told the men to break ranks and rally 'round his jeep. Climbing onto the "bonnet," he told them how good they were. "After eyeing the 506th," he said, "I pity the Germans."

The days slowly began to lengthen, meaning decent fighting weather was approaching, tension increased. Inevitably the young men thought of death. Few made their thoughts articulate, but Webster dealt with his directly. He wrote his mother, instructing her to "stop worrying about me. I joined the parachutists to fight. I intend to fight. If necessary, I shall die fighting, but don't worry about this because no war can be won without young men dying. If those things which are precious are saved only by sacrifice."

In February, training became more big unit oriented as the 101st, and indeed the entire invasion force of more than seven divisions, began rehearsals for the attack on Normandy. On March 23, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 506th made a combined jump, by far the largest of the war to date for the regiment. The occasion was an inspection visit by Prime Minister; Winston Churchill, Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, U.S. First Army commander Omar Bradley, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, commander of the 101st (General Lee had a heart attack in February and was forced to return to the States), and numerous other big shots.

The jump was a huge success. The C-47s came roaring through the sky in a perfect V of Vs. Churchill and the generals were watching from a specially constructed grandstand. The troopers began leaping out of their planes, stick after stick, more than 1,000 men and parachutes filling the sky in a seemingly unending deluge. The instant they hit the ground the troopers were twisting out of their chutes and heading for the assembly area on a dead run, putting their weapons together without slackening speed. The visitors were amazed at the rapidity of the movement; as the regimental scrapbook put it, "the Boys from Currahee" had made a grand impression.

Later, the regiment assembled in front of the reviewing stand. Taylor invited Churchill and Eisenhower to inspect the ranks. They did, stopping occasionally to ask a question or two of one of the men.

Eisenhower stopped in front of Malarkey. "Soldier, where are you from?" (Eisenhower talked to thousands of enlisted men on such inspections before D-Day; invariably his first question was "Where are you from?")

"Astoria, Oregon" Malarkey answered. "What did you do before the war?" Malarkey said he was a student at the University of Oregon. Ike wanted to know who won last fall's Oregon-Oregon State football game, and whether Malarkey intended to return to college after the war. Then he turned to Churchill and suggested that the Prime Minister might have a question.

"Well, son, how do you like England?" Malarkey assured him that he liked it very much, as he had always enjoyed English literature and history. Churchill promised to get him back to the States as soon as possible. "It was," said Malarkey, "a very memorable occasion."

Even larger maneuvers were held immediately after the Churchill jump, with the purpose of dovetailing the paratroopers, glider-borne units, and ground forces with the air forces and naval elements. Exercises were held throughout southwest England, with mass air drops and amphibious operations.

On one maneuver, Guarnere told Pvts. Warren Muck and Malarkey to drop a mortar shell on a 6-foot-square white target situated on a dune about 600 yards to their front. Malarkey fired once, too long. A second time, too short.

At that moment, some staff officers came up, accompanied by General Taylor. One of the staff officers told Guarnere to have his mortar squad fire at the target as a demonstration for the general.

Guarnere told Malarkey and Muck to fire three rounds. In rapid succession, they dropped three rounds down the barrel. Boom, the first hit the target dead center. Boom, boom, the other two came down on top of the destroyed target.

"Sergeant, is your squad always that accurate?" Taylor asked. "Yes, sir," Guarnere replied, "my boys never miss." The 101st took trains back to barracks in Wiltshire and Berkshire. General Taylor and his staff were well aware that there were many kinks to work out. The Boys from Currahee had learned their lessons about small unit tactics well; now it was up to the generals to fit them properly into the larger whole.

4 "LOOK OUT HITLER! HERE WE COME!"

*

SLAPTON SANDS, UPPOTTERY

April 1-June 5,1944

The 101st Airborne, the 82nd Airborne, and the 4th Infantry Division made up the VII Corps. The VII Corps and V Corps (1st Infantry and 29th Infantry Divisions) made up the U.S. First Army, Gen. Omar Bradley commanding. Eisenhower had given Bradley the task of establishing a beachhead on each side of the mouth of the Douve River, where the French coast makes a right angle; running to the east is the Calvados coast, running to the north is the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. The V Corps was to take the Calvados coast (code name for the target area, "Omaha Beach"), while the VII Corps was to take the base of the Cotentin (code name, "Utah Beach"). The VII Corps at Utah would be on the extreme right flank of the invasion area, which stretched from the mouth of the Orne River on the left (east) some 65 to 70 kilometers to the Cotentin.

Eisenhower needed to provide sufficient width to the invasion to bring in enough infantry divisions in the first wave to overpower the enemy, dug in behind Hitler's "Atlantic Wall."(1) In one way, Utah was the easiest of the five assault beaches. At the British and Canadian beaches ("Sword," "Juno," and "Gold," east of Omaha) the numerous vacation homes, small shops, and hotels and casinos that lined the coast provided the Germans

1. "Hitler made only one big mistake when he built his Atlantic Wall," the paratroopers liked to say. "He forgot to put a roof on it."

With excellent protection for machine-gun nests, while at Omaha a bluff rising from the beach to a height of 200-300 feet gave the German defenders, dug into a trench system on a World War I scale, the ability to shoot down on troops

coming out of the landing craft. But Utah had neither bluff nor houses. There were some fixed defenses, made of reinforced concrete, containing artillery and machine-guns. The biggest was at La Madeleine, in the middle of Utah (the fortification took its name from a nearby religious shrine that dated back to Viking days). But the gradual slope and low sand dunes at Utah meant that getting across and beyond the beach was not going to be as difficult as at Omaha.

The problem at Utah was what lay inland. Behind the sand dunes was low ground, used by the Norman farmers for grazing cattle. Four narrow, unimproved roads ran inland from the beach; these roads were raised a meter or so above the ground. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the German commander, had flooded the fields, with the idea of forcing any troops and armor coming inland to use the roads ("causeways," Eisenhower's planners called them). Rommel had most of his artillery in camouflaged positions or reinforced casements and bunkers back from the flooded area, where it could bombard the roads; Rommel had his infantry prepared to take up defensive positions along the western end of the roads, where it could repel any troops moving up them.

The task Eisenhower gave the 101st was to seize these causeway exits. The method to be used was a night drop. The aim was to disrupt the Germans, create surprise and havoc, and get control of those exits and destroy the big guns before the Germans could react.

It would be an intricate, tricky, and risky operation. To have any chance of success, it would be necessary to practice. For the practice to be realistic, it would be necessary to find a piece of the English coastline similar to Utah Beach.

Slapton Sands, in Devonshire, in southwestern England, was similar to Utah. A long narrow stretch of beach was separated from dry ground by a shallow lake and adjoining swamp. Two bridges crossed from the shoreline to high ground. And so it was that the VII Corps carried out its rehearsals for the part it was to play on D-Day at Slapton Sands.

At the end of April, the entire VII Corps participated in Exercise Tiger. E Company rode in trucks to a resort hotel on the seashore at Torquay, where it spent a comfortable night. The next day, April 26, it was back into the trucks for a ride to an area back from Slapton Sands from which all civilians had been evacuated. The company slept in the field until midnight, when trucks brought the men forward to a simulated drop zone. After assembly, the company marched overland through a mist to an elevated point a mile back from the beach and set up a defensive position, guarding the bridge.

At dawn, Webster wrote, "We could see a vast fleet of amphibious craft moving slowly in to land. I've never seen so many ships together at one time; an invasion fleet is the most impressive sight in the world." What he had not seen was the disaster of the previous evening. German torpedo boats had slipped in among the LSTs and other big assault craft carrying the 4th Infantry. The Germans sank two LSTs and damaged others; more than 900 men drowned. The incident was covered up by the Allies for fear that it would hurt morale among the troops scheduled to go to France in LSTs (it remained covered up for more than forty years, evidently out of embarrassment).

Webster, watching the men of the 4th Infantry come up from the beach and pass through E Company's positions, noted that they were "sweating, cursing, panting." He also recorded that the officers informed the men that "we cannot write about our Torquay excursion." In the afternoon, the company made a 25-mile march, then bivouacked in a woods for the night. In the morning of April 28, it rode in trucks back to Aldbourne.

That weekend Malarkey, Chuck Grant, Skip Muck, and Joe Toye got passes to London, with Muck's best friend from Tonawanda, New York, Fritz Niland of the 501st PIR. There they met Niland's brother Bob, who was a squad leader in the 82nd Airborne and who had seen action in North Africa and Sicily. They spent the evening in a pub listening to Bob Niland talk about combat. He made a remark that Malarkey never forgot: "If you want to be a hero, the Germans will make one out of you real quick—dead!" On the train going back to Aldbourne, Malarkey told Muck that it sounded to him like Bob Niland had lost his effectiveness.

Back in Aldbourne in the first week of May, E Company went through more problems, attacking gun positions, bridges, causeways, and other objectives, once attacking after a real jump, other times simulating the air flight and "jumping" out of trucks.

From May 9 to 12, the 101st held its dress rehearsal for D-Day, code name "Operation Eagle." The entire division participated. Easy used the same airfield it would use on D-Day, Uppottery. Personnel and equipment were loaded onto the same aircraft the company would use on the real thing; the takeoff, drop, and assembly followed the plan as close to the letter as possible, including spending the same amount of time in flight.2

Climbing aboard the C-47s was difficult, because of all the gear each man carried. Individuals were overloaded, following the age-old tendency of soldiers going into combat to attempt to be ready for every conceivable emergency. The vest and long drawers issued each man were impregnated, to ward off a possible chemical attack; it made them cumbersome, they stank, they itched, they kept in body heat and caused torrents of sweat. The combat jacket and trousers were also treated. The men carried a pocket knife in the lapel of their blouses, to be used to cut themselves out of their harness if they landed in a tree. In their baggy trousers pockets they had a spoon, razor, socks, cleaning patches, flashlight, maps, three-day supply of K-rations, an emergency ration package (four chocolate bars, a pack of Charms, powdered coffee, sugar, and matches), ammunition, a compass, two fragmentation grenades, an antitank mine, a smoke grenade, a

Gammon bomb (a 2-pound plastic explosive for use against tanks), and cigarettes, two cartons per man. The soldier topped his uniform with a webbing belt and braces, a .45 pistol (standard for noncoms and officers; privates had to get their own, and most did), water canteen, shovel, first aid kit and bayonet. Over this went his parachute harness, his main parachute in its backpack, and reserve parachute hooked on in front. A gas mask was strapped to his left leg and a jump-knife/bayonet to his right. Across his chest the soldier slung his musette bag with his spare underwear and ammunition, and in some cases TNT sticks, along with his broken-down rifle or machine-gun or mortar diagonally up-and-down across his front under his reserve chute pack, leaving both hands free to handle the risers. Over everything he wore his Mae West life jacket. Finally, he put on his helmet.

2. Leonard Rapport and Arthur Northwood, Jr., Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of the 101st Airborne Division (Fort Campbell, Ky.: 101st Airborne Division Association, 1948), 68-69.

Some men added a third knife. Others found a place for extra ammunition. Gordon, carrying his machine-gun, figured he weighed twice his normal weight. Nearly every man had to be helped into the C-47. Once aboard, the men were so wedged in they could not move.

General Taylor had moved heaven and earth to get enough C-47s for Operation Eagle. The planes were in constant demand for logistical support throughout ETO, and Troop Carrier Command came last on the list. It was cheated on equipment. The fuel tanks did not have armor protection from flak.

Easy got its briefing for Eagle on May 10-11. The objective was a gun battery covering the beach. At dusk on May 11, Easy took off. The planes made "legs" over England, flying for about two-and-a-half hours. Shortly after midnight, the company jumped. For Easy, the exercise went smoothly; for other companies, there were troubles. Second Battalion Headquarters Company was with a group that ran into a German air raid over London. Flak was coming up; the formation broke up; the pilots could not locate the DZ. Eight of the nine planes carrying Company H of the 502nd dropped their men on the village of Ramsbury, line miles from the DZ. Twenty-eight planes returned to their airfields with the paratroopers still aboard. Others jumped willy-nilly, leading to many accidents. Nearly 500 men suffered broken bones, sprains, or other injuries.

The only consolation the airborne commanders could find in this mess was that by tradition a bad dress rehearsal leads to a great opening night.

On the last day of May, the company marched down to trucks lined up on the Hungerford Road. Half the people of Aldbourne, and nearly all the unmarried girls, were there to wave good-bye. There were many tears. The baggage left behind gave some hope that the boys would be back.

Training had come to an end. There had been twenty-two months of it, more or less continuous. The men were as hardened physically as it was possible for human beings to be. Not even "professional boxers" or football players were in better shape. They were disciplined, prepared to carry out orders instantly and un-questioningly. They were experts in the use of their own weapon, knowledgeable in the use of other weapons, familiar with and capable of operating German weapons. They could operate radios, knew a variety of hand signals, could recognize various smoke signals. They were skilled in tactics, whether the problem was attacking a battery or a blockhouse or a trench system or a hill defended by machine-guns. Each man knew the duties and responsibilities of a squad or platoon leader and was prepared to assume those duties if necessary. They knew how to blow bridges, how to render artillery pieces inoperative. They could set up a defensive position in an instant. They could live in the field, sleep in a foxhole, march all day and through the night. They knew and trusted each other. Within Easy Company they had made the best friends they had ever had, or would ever have. They were prepared to die for each other; more important, they were prepared to kill for each other.

They were ready. But, of course, going into combat for the first time is an ultimate experience for which one can never be fully ready. It is anticipated for years in advance,- it is a test that produces anxiety, eagerness, tension, fear of failure, anticipation. There is a mystery about the thing, heightened by the fact that those who have done it cannot put into words what it is like, how it feels, except that getting shot at and shooting to kill produce extraordinary emotional reactions. No matter how hard you train, nor however realistic the training, no one can ever be fully prepared for the intensity of the real thing.

And so the men of Easy Company left Aldbourne full of self-confidence and full of trepidation.

Easy's marshaling area in southwestern England, about 10 miles from the coast, was an open field beside the airstrip at Uppottery. The company lived in pyramidal tents. "Our standard of living went up considerably," Webster wrote. "We stuffed ourselves at the hospitable mess hall [a wall tent] ('Want some more, boys? Just help yourselves—take all you want.') on such luxuries as fried chicken, fruit cocktail, white bread with lots of butter. The realization that we were being fattened for the slaughter didn't stop us from going back for seconds."

Troops wearing German uniforms and carrying German weapons roamed constantly through the marshaling area, to familiarize the men with what the enemy looked like and what weapons they carried.

On June 2, the company officers got their briefings from former E Company officers, 1st Lieutenant Nixon (now 2nd Battalion S-2) and Captain Hester (S-3). On sand tables that showed terrain features, houses, roads, dunes, and the

rest, and on maps, Nixon and Hester explained that Easy would be dropping near Ste. Marie-du-Mont, about 10 kilometers south of Ste. Mere-Eglise, with the objective of killing the German garrison in the village and seizing the exit at causeway No. 2, the road coming up from the coast just north of the village of Pouppeville. The 3rd platoon was given the task of blowing up a communications line leading inland from La Madeleine.

The detailed information given out by Nixon and Hester, and by other intelligence officers briefing other companies, was truly amazing. They passed around aerial photographs of the DZ that showed not only roads, buildings, and the like, but even foxholes. One member of the 506th recalled that his company was told that the German commandant at its objective, St. C6me-du-Mont, owned a white horse and was going with a French schoolteacher who lived on a side street just two buildings away from a German gun emplacement that was zeroed in on causeway No. 1. He took his dog for a walk every evening at 2000.3

3. Donald R. Burgett, Curahee! (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 67. 62

Each officer had to learn the company mission by heart, know his own and every other platoon's mission to the most minute detail, and be able to draw a map of the whole area by memory. One point was made very clear, that the Germans relied less on their fixed coastal defenses than on their ability to counterattack. Mobile reserve units would start hitting the 4th Infantry wherever its units threatened to make it across the causeways. The briefers therefore impressed strongly on the officers that, regardless of where their platoons were or how many of their men they had managed to collect, if they spotted German units moving toward the causeways, they should fire upon them with everything they had. Even a five-minute delay thus imposed on the Germans could mean the difference between success and failure at Utah Beach. The importance of each mission was likewise emphasized, most effectively. Winters said, "I had the feeling that we were going in there and win the whole damn thing ourselves. It was our baby."

On June 3, Winters and the other platoon leaders walked their men through the briefing tent, showing them the sand tables and maps, telling them what they had learned.

Sergeant Guarnere needed to use the latrine. He grabbed a jacket and strolled over to the facility. Sitting down, he put his hand in a pocket and pulled out a letter. It was addressed to Sergeant Martin—Guarnere had taken Martin's jacket by mistake—but Guarnere read it anyway. Martin's wife was the author; they had been married in Georgia in 1942, and Mrs. Martin knew most of the members of the company. She wrote, "Don't tell Bill [Guarnere], but his brother was killed in Cas[s]ino, Italy."

"You can't imagine the anger I felt," Guarnere said later. "I swore that when I got to Normandy, there ain't no German going to be alive. I was like a maniac. When they sent me into France, they turned a killer loose, a wild man."

On June 4, Easy was issued its ammunition, $10 worth of new French francs just printed in Washington, an escape kit containing a silk map of France, a tiny brass compass, and a hacksaw. The men were given an American flag to sew on the right sleeves of their jump jackets. Officers removed their insignia from their uniforms and painted vertical stripes on the back of their helmets; N.C.O.s had horizontal stripes. Everyone was given the verbal challenge, "Flash," the password, "Thunder," and the response, "Welcome." They were also given small metal dime-store crickets, for alternative identification: one squeeze (click-clack) to be answered by two (click-clack . . . click-clack).

The men spent the day cleaning weapons, sharpening knives, adjusting the parachutes, checking equipment over and over, chain-smoking cigarettes. Many of the men shaved their heads, or got Mohawk haircuts (bald on each side, with a one- or two-inch strip of short hair running from the forehead to the back of the neck). Pvts. Forrest Guth and Joseph Liebgott did the cutting, at 15c per man.

Colonel Sink came round, saw the haircutting going on, smiled, and said, "I forgot to tell you, some weeks ago we were officially notified that the Germans are telling French civilians that the Allied invasion forces would be led by American paratroopers, all of them convicted felons and psychopaths, easily recognized by the fact that -they shave their heads or nearly so."

First Lt. Raymond Schmitz decided to ease the tension with some physical activity. He challenged Winters to a boxing match. "Come on, Winters, let's go out there behind the tents and box." "No, go away."

Schmitz kept after him. Finally he said, "O.K., let's wrestle." "Dammit, enough, you've been egging me long enough, let's go."

Winters had been a wrestler in college. He took Schmitz down immediately, but he threw him too hard. Schmitz suffered two cracked vertebrae, went to the hospital, and did not get to go to Normandy. His assistant leader of the 3rd Platoon, 2nd Lt. Robert Mathews, took his place, with Sergeant Lipton as his second in command. The rest of that day and night on up to the time the men strapped on their parachutes, Winters had a constant line of troopers asking him, with smiles on their faces, to break their arms or crack their vertebrae.

General Taylor circulated among the men. He told them, "Give me three days and nights of hard fighting, then you will be relieved." That sounded good. Three days and three nights, Winters thought to himself. I can take that. Taylor also said that when the C-47s crossed the coastline of France, he wanted every man to stand up; if a trooper got hit by flak, he wanted him to be standing and take it like a man. There was a point to the order that went beyond bravado; if a plane got hit the men hooked up and ready to jump would stand some chance of getting out. Taylor told Malarkey's platoon to fight with knives until daylight, "and don't take any prisoners."

That night, June 4, the company got an outstanding meal. Steak, green peas, mashed potatoes, white bread, ice cream, coffee, in unlimited quantities. It was their first ice cream since arriving in England nine months earlier. Sergeant Martin remembered being told, "When you get ice cream for supper, you know that's the night." But a terrific wind was blowing, and just as the men were preparing to march to their C-47s, they were told to stand down. Eisenhower had postponed the invasion because of the adverse weather.

Easy went to a wall tent to see a movie. Gordon remembered that it was Mr. Lucky, starring Gary Grant and Laraine Day. Sergeants Lipton and Elmer Murray (the company operations sergeant) skipped the movie. They spent the evening discussing different combat situations that might occur and how they would handle them.

By the afternoon of June 5, the wind had died down, the sky cleared a bit. Someone found cans of black and green paint. Men began to daub their faces in imitation of the Sioux at the Little Bighorn, drawing streaks of paint down their noses and foreheads. Others took charcoal and blackened their faces.

At 2030 hours the men lined up by the planeload, eighteen to a group, and marched off to the hangars. "Nobody sang, nobody cheered," Webster wrote. "It was like a death march." Winters remembered going past some British antiaircraft units stationed at the field, "and that was the first time I'd ever seen any real emotion from a Limey, they actually had tears in their eyes."

At the hangars, each jumpmaster was given two packs of papers, containing an order of the day from Eisenhower and a message from Colonel Sink, to pass around to the men. "Tonight is the night of nights," said Sink's. "May God be with each of you fine soldiers." Eisenhower's began, "Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force! You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. . . . Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking."

In addition to the exhortations, the jumpmasters passed around airsickness pills. Who thought of the pills is a mystery; why they were passed around an even greater mystery, as airsickness had seldom been a problem.

Something else was new. The British airborne had come up with the idea of "leg bags." These bags contained extra ammunition, radios, machine-gun tripods, medical gear, high explosives, and other equipment. They were to be attached to individual paratroopers by a quick release mechanism and fastened to his parachute harness by a coiled 20-foot rope. When the chute opened, the trooper was supposed to hold the weight of the leg pack, pull its release to separate it from his leg, and let it down to the end of the rope. It would hit the ground before he did. In theory, the trooper would land on top of the bundle and not have to waste any time looking for his equipment. It seemed sensible, but no one in the American airborne had ever jumped with a leg bag. The Yanks liked the idea of the thing, and stuffed everything they could into those leg bags—mines, ammunition, broken-down Tommy guns, and more.

The men threw their kits, parachutes, and leg bags into the waiting trucks, climbed in themselves, and were driven out to the waiting planes.

"With that done," Winters wrote in his diary, "we went to work harnessing up. It's here that a good jump master can do the most for his men. Getting all that equipment on, tied down, make it comfortable and safe, then a parachute over the top, calls for a lot of ingenuity and sales talk to satisfy the men that all's well."

Dressed for battle, they sat under the wings of the planes, waiting. The nervousness increased. "This is the jump where your problems begin after you land," they told one another. It was the "$10,000 jump" (the men had $10,000 G.I. life insurance). Men struggled to their feet to go to the edge of the runway to relieve themselves, got back, sat down, and two minutes later repeated the process. Joe Toye recalled Lieutenant Meehan coming over to his plane to tell the men, "No prisoners. We are not taking any prisoners."

At 2200, mount up. The jumpmasters pushed their men up the steps, each of them carrying at least 100 pounds, many 150 pounds. One 101st trooper spoke for all 13,400 men in the two airborne divisions when he got to the door of his C-47, turned to the east, and called, "Look out, Hitler! Here we come!"

At 2310 the C-47s began roaring down the runway. When they reached 1,000 feet, they began to circle, getting into a V of Vs formation, three planes to each V. As they straightened out for France, most of the men found it difficult to stay awake. This was the effect of those pills. Through that night, and into the next day, paratroopers had trouble staying awake. Joe Toye did fall asleep on his flight: "I was never so calm in all my life," he recalled. "Jesus, I was more excited on practice jumps."

On Winters's plane, Pvt. Joe Hogan tried to get a song going, but it was soon lost in the roar of the motors. On Gordon's plane, as on most, men were lost in their own thoughts or prayers. Pvt. Wayne Sisk of West Virginia broke the mood by calling out, "Does anybody here want to buy a good watch?" That brought a roar of laughter and a lessening of the tension.

Winters prayed the whole way over, prayed to live through it, prayed that he wouldn't fail. "Every man, I think, had in his mind, 'How will I react under fire?' "

With Lieutenant Schmidt in hospital, Sergeant Lipton was jump-master on his plane. The pilot gave the paratroopers a choice; they could ride with the door off, giving them fresh air and a chance to get out if the plane was hit, or ride with the door in place, which would allow them to smoke. They chose to take it off, which allowed Lipton to lie on the floor with his head partly out the door. Most of the men were asleep, or nearly so, a consequence of the airsickness pills.

As the C-47 crossed the Channel, Lipton saw a sight no one had ever seen before, nor would anyone ever see again, a sight that every man who was in the air that night never forgot: the invasion fleet, 6,000 vessels strong, heading toward Normandy.

Gordon Carson was with Lieutenant Welsh. As the plane crossed the Channel, Welsh told the men near the front, "Look down." They did, "and all you could see was wakes. No one ever saw so many ships and boats before." Carson commented, "You had to be a little bit awed that you were part of a thing that was so much greater than you."

At 0100, June 6, the planes passed between the islands of Guernsey and Jersey. In his plane, the pilot called back to Winters, "Twenty minutes out." The crew chief removed the door of the plane, giving Winters, standing No. 1, a rush of fresh air and a view of the coast. "Stand up and hook up," he called out. The red light went on.

At 0110, the planes passed over the coast and into a cloud bank. This caused the formation to break up. The lead V plowed straight ahead, but the Vs to each side veered off, the one to the right breaking away in that direction, the one on the left over the opposite way. This was the natural, inevitable reaction of the pilots, who feared midair collisions. When they broke out of the cloud bank, which was only a mile or two across, every pilot was on his own. Only the lead pilots had the device that would lead them to the Pathfinders' Eureka signals;(4)

4. Pathfinders were specially trained volunteers who dropped in an hour ahead of the main body of troops to set up a radio beacon on the DZ to guide the lead plane. Easy's Pathfinders were Cpl. Richard Wright and Pvt. Carl Fenstermaker.

With the formation gone, none of the others knew when or where to turn on the green light. They could only guess.

Lost, bewildered, frightened, the pilots immediately had another worry. Antiaircraft fire began coming up at them, blue, green, and red tracers indicating its path. It was light stuff, 20 and 40 mm. When it hit the planes, it made a sound like rocks being shaken in a tin can. On Harry Welsh's plane, some ack-ack came through exactly where he had been sitting a minute before.

The pilots were supposed to slow down before turning on the green light, but as Gordon put it, "here they were thrust into the very jaws of this violence and they had never had one minute of combat experience, so they were absolutely terrified. And rather than throttle down, they were kind of like a fellow thinking with his feet, they thought with that throttle. And they said, 'My God, common sense will tell me the quicker I get out of here, the better chance I have of surviving, and that's unfortunate for the boys back there, but be that as it may, I'm getting out of here.' "

So they increased speed, up to 150 miles per hour in many cases, and although they did not have the slightest idea where they were, except that it was somewhere over Normandy, they hit the green light.

Men began shouting, "Let's go, let's go." They wanted out of those planes; never had they thought they would be so eager to jump. Lipton's plane was "bouncing and weaving, and the men were yelling, 'Let's get out of here!' " They were only 600 feet up, the 40 mm antiaircraft tracers coming closer and closer. "About the time the tracers were popping right past the tail of the plane," Lipton remembered, "the green light went on." He leaped out. Pvt. James Alley was No. 2, Pvt. Paul Rogers No. 3. Alley had been told to throw his leg bag out the door and follow it into the night. He did as told and ended up flat on the floor with his head and half his body out of the plane, his bag dangling in the air, about to pull him in half. Rogers, who was "strong as a bull," threw him out the door and jumped right behind.

Leo Boyle was the last man in the stick on his plane. There was this "tremendous turbulence" as the green light went on and the men began leaping out into the night. The plane lurched. Boyle was thrown violently down to the floor. The plane was flying at a tilt. Boyle had to reach up for the bottom of the door, pull himself to it, and roll out of the C-47 into the night.

Tracers were everywhere. The lead plane in stick 66, flown by Lt. Harold Cappelluto, was hit with bullets going through it and out the top, throwing sparks. The plane maintained course and speed for a moment or two, then did a slow wingover to the right. Pilot Frank DeFlita, just behind, remembered that "Cappelluto's landing lights came on, and it appeared they were going to make it, when the plane hit a hedgerow and exploded." It was the plane carrying Lieutenant

Meehan, 1st Sergeant Evans, and the rest of the company headquarters section, including Sergeant Murray, who had held that long talk with Lipton about how to handle different combat situations. He never got to experience any of the possibilities he and Lipton had tried to visualize.

Easy Company had not put one man into combat yet, and it had already lost platoon leader Schmitz, company commander Meehan, and its first sergeant.

Pvt. Rod Strohl was one of those so overloaded that he could not put on his reserve chute. "I remember thinking, well, hell, if you need it, and it doesn't open, it's going to be over in a hurry, and if you don't need it, you don't need it." His plane got hit and started going down. As his stick went out, "the pilot and co-pilot came out with us."

George Luz was on Welsh's plane. He had barely made it, as in addition to all the regular gear he was carrying a radio and batteries, and had been unable to get into the plane until a bunch of Air Corps guys pushed him in. Once inside, he had turned to Welsh to say, "Lieutenant, you got me fifth man in the stick, and I'll never make it to the door." So Welsh had told him to change places with Pvt. Roy Cobb. When the flak started ("you could walk on it," Luz remembered; Carson said "we wanted to get out of there so damn bad it was unbelievable") Cobb called out, "I'm hit!"

"Can you stand up?" Welsh shouted.

"I can't."

"Unhook him," Welsh ordered. Mike Ranney unhooked Cobb from the static line. (Private Rader recalled, "Cobb was some pissed. To have trained so hard for two years and not get to make the big jump was hell.") Just then the red light went on, flashed a second, and was hit by flak. "I had no way of telling anything " Welsh recalled, "so I said 'Go' and jumped." Luz kicked his leg bag containing the radio and other equipment out the door and leaped into the night.

Thus did 13,400 of America's finest youth, who had been training for this moment for two years, hurl themselves against Hitler's Fortress Europe.

5 "FOLLOW ME"

*

NORMANDY

June 6,1944

They jumped much too low from planes that were flying much too fast. They were carrying far too much equipment and using an untested technique that turned out to be a major mistake. As they left the plane, the leg bags tore loose and hurtled to the ground, in nearly every case never to be seen again. Simultaneously, the prop blast tossed them this way and that. With all the extra weight and all the extra speed, when the chutes opened, the shock was more than they had ever experienced. Jumping at 500 feet, and even less, they hit the ground within seconds of the opening of the chute, so they hit hard. The men were black and blue for a week or more afterward as a result.

In a diary entry written a few days later, Lieutenant Winters tried to re-create his thoughts in those few seconds he was in the air: "We're doing 150 MPH. O.K., let's go. G-D, there goes my leg pack and every bit of equipment I have. Watch it, boy! Watch it! J-C, they're trying to pick me up with those machine-guns. Slip, slip, try and keep close to that leg pack. There it lands beside that hedge. G-D that machine-gun. There's a road, trees-hope I don't hit them. Thump, well that wasn't too bad, now let's get out of this chute."

Burt Christenson jumped right behind Winters. "I don't think I did anything I had been trained to do, but suddenly I got a tremendous shock when my parachute opened." His leg bag broke loose and "it was history." He could hear a bell ringing in Ste. Mere-Eglise, and see a fire burning in town. Machine-gun bullets "are gaining on me. I climb high into my risers. Christ, I'm headed for that line of trees. I'm descending too rapidly." As he passed over the trees, he pulled his legs up to avoid hitting them. "A moment of terror seized me. 70 ft. below and 20 ft. to my left, a German quad mounted 20 mm antiaircraft gun is firing on the C-47's passing overhead." Lucky enough for Christenson, the Germans' line of fire was such that their backs were to him, and the noise was such that they never heard him hit, although he was only 40 yards or so away.

Christenson cut himself out of his chute, pulled his six-shot revolver, and crouched at the base of an apple tree. He stayed still, moving only his eyes.

"Suddenly I caught movement ten yards away, a silhouette of a helmeted man approaching on all fours. I reached for my cricket and clicked it once, click-clack. There was no response. The figure began to move toward me again."

Christenson pointed his revolver at the man's chest and click-clacked again. The man raised his hands. "For Christ sake, don't shoot." It was Pvt. Woodrow Robbins, Christenson's assistant gunner on the machine-gun.

"You dumb shit, what the hell's wrong with you? Why didn't you use your cricket?" Christenson demanded in a fierce whisper.

"I lost the clicker part of the cricket."

Slowly the adrenalin drained from Christenson's brain, and the two men began backing away from the German position. They ran into Bull Randleman, who had a dead German at his feet. Randleman related that the moment he had gotten free of his chute he had fixed his bayonet. Suddenly a German came charging, his bayonet fixed. Randleman knocked the weapon aside, then impaled the German on his bayonet. "That Kraut picked the wrong guy to play bayonets with," Christenson remarked.

Lieutenant Welsh's plane was at 250 feet, "at the most," when he jumped. As he emerged from the C-47, another plane crashed immediately beneath him. He claimed that the blast from the explosion threw him up and to the side "and that saved my life." His chute opened just in time to check his descent just enough to make the "thump" when he landed painful but not fatal.

Most of the men of Easy had a similar experience. Few of them were in the air long enough to orient themselves with any precision, although they could tell from the direction the planes were flying which was the way to the coast.

They landed to hell and gone. The tight pattern within the DZ near Ste. Marie-du-Mont that they had hoped for, indeed had counted on for quick assembly of the company, was so badly screwed up by the evasive action the pilots had taken when they hit the cloud bank that E Company men were scattered from Carentan to Ravenoville, a distance of 20 kilometers. The Pathfinders, Richard Wright and Carl Fenstermaker, came down in the Channel after their plane was hit (they were picked up by H.M.S. Tartar, transferred to Air Sea Rescue, and taken to England).

Pvt. Tom Burgess came down near Ste. Mere-Eglise. Like most of the paratroopers that night, he did not know where he was. Low-flying planes roared overhead, tracers chasing after them, the sky full of descending Americans, indistinct and unidentifiable figures dashing or creeping through the fields, machine-guns pop-pop-popping all around. After cutting himself out of his chute with his pocket knife, he used his cricket to identify himself to a lieutenant he did not know. Together they started working their way toward the beach, hugging the ubiquitous hedgerows. Other troopers joined them, some from the 82nd (also badly scattered in the jump), some from different regiments of the 101st. They had occasional, brief firefights with German patrols.

The lieutenant made Burgess the lead scout. At first light, he came to a corner of the hedgerow he was following. A German soldier hiding in the junction of hedgerows rose up. Burgess didn't see him. The German fired, downward. The bullet hit Burgess's cheekbone, went through the right cheek, fractured it, tore away the hinge of the jaw, and came out the back of his neck. Blood squirted out his cheek, from the back of his neck, and from his ear. He nearly choked to death.

"I wanted to live," Burgess recalled forty-five years later. "They had hammered into us that the main thing if you get hit is don't get excited, the worst thing you can do is go nuts." So he did his best to stay calm. The guys with him patched him up as best they could, got bandages over the wounds, and helped him into a nearby barn, where he collapsed into the hay. He passed out.

At midnight, a French farmer "came out to the barn and sat there and held my hand. He even kissed my hand." He brought a bottle of wine. On the morning of June 7, the farmer fetched two medics and lent them a horse-drawn cart, which they used to take Burgess down to the beach. He was evacuated to England, then back to the States. He arrived in Boston on New Year's Eve, 1944. He was on a strictly liquid diet until March 1945, when he took his first bite of solid food since his last meal at Uppottery, June 5, 1944.

Private Gordon hit hard. He had no idea where he was, but he had a definite idea of what he was determined to do first—assemble his machine-gun. He tucked himself into a hedgerow and did the job. As he finished, "I noticed this figure coming, and I realized it was John Eubanks from the way he walked." Shortly thereafter Forrest Guth joined them. Another figure loomed in the dark. "Challenge him," Gordon to Eubanks. Before Eubanks could do so, the man called out, "Flash." Eubanks forgot the countersign ("Thunder") and forgot that the clicker was an alternative identification option, and instead said, "Lightning." The man lobbed a grenade in on the three E Company men. They scattered, it went off, fortunately no one was hurt, the soldier disappeared, which was probably good for the group, as he was clearly much too nervous to trust.

Gordon, Eubanks, and Guth started moving down a hedgerow toward the beach. They saw an American paratrooper running through the field, crouch, and jump into a drainage ditch (there was a three-quarters moon that night, and few clouds over the land, so visibility was fair). Gordon told the others to stay still, he would check it out. He crept to the ditch, where "I encountered these two eyeballs looking up at me and the muzzle of a pistol right in my face."

"Gordon, is that you?" It was Sgt. Floyd Talbert. Now there were four. Together they continued creeping, crawling, moving toward the beach. A half-hour or so before first light, Guth heard what he was certain was the howling and whining of a convoy of 2'/2 ton G.I. trucks going past. How could that be? The seaborne invasion hadn't even started,

much less put truck convoys ashore. Some tremendous bursts coming from inland answered the question: the noise Guth heard came from the shells passing overhead, shells from the 16-inch naval guns on the battleships offshore.

The E Company foursome joined up with a group from the 502nd that had just captured a German strong point in a large farm complex that dominated the crossroads north of the beach at Ravenoville. They spent the day defending the fortress from counterattacks. In the morning of D-Day plus one, they set out southward in search of their company.

Jim Alley crashed into a wall behind a house, one of those French walls with broken glass imbedded in the top. He was cut and bleeding in several places. He backed into the corner of a garden and was in the process of cutting himself out of the harness when someone grabbed his arm. It was a young woman, standing in the bushes.

"Me American," Alley whispered. "Go vay, go vay." She went back into her house.

Alley found his leg pack, got his gear together (thirteen rounds of 60 mm mortar ammunition, four land mines, ammunition for his M-l, hand grenades, food, the base plate for the mortar and other stuff), climbed to the top of the wall, and drew machine-gun fire. It was about a foot low. He got covered with plaster before he could fall back into the garden.

He lay down to think about what to do. He ate one of his Hershey bars and decided to go out the front way. Before he could move, the young woman came out of the house, looked at him, and proceeded out the front gate. Alley figured, "This is it. I'll make my stand here." Soon she returned. A soldier stepped through the gate after her. "I had my gun on him and he had his on me." They recognized each other,- he was from the 505th.

"Where the hell am I?" Alley demanded. He was told "Ste. Mere-Eglise." He joined up with the 505th. At about daybreak he ran into Paul Rogers and Earl McClung from Easy. They spent the day, and the better part of the week that followed, fighting with the 505th.

All across the peninsula, throughout the night and into the day of D-Day, paratroopers were doing the same—fighting skirmishes, joining together in ad hoc units, defending positions, harassing the Germans, trying to link up with their units. This was exactly what they had been told to do. Their training and confidence thus overcame what could have been a disaster, and thereby turned the scattered drop from a negative into a plus. The Germans, hearing reports of action here, there, everywhere, grossly overestimated the number of troopers they were dealing with, and therefore reacted in a confused and hesitant manner.

Winters had come down on the edge of Ste. Mere-Eglise. He could see the big fire near the church, hear the church bell calling out the citizens to fight the fire. He could not find his leg bag. The only weapon he had was his bayonet, stuck into his boot. His first thought was to get away from the machine-gun and small arms fire in the church square. Just as he started off, a trooper landed close by. Winters helped him out of his chute, got a grenade from him, and said "Let's go back and find my leg bag." The trooper hesitated. "Follow me," Winters ordered and started off. A machine-gun opened up on them. "To hell with the bag," Winters said. He set out to the north to bypass Ste. Mere-Eglise before turning east to the coast. In a few minutes, he saw some figures and used his cricket. He got a reassuring double click-clack from Sergeant Lipton.

Lipton had landed in a walled-in area behind the hotel de ville (city hall) in Ste. Mere-Eglise, a block from the church. Like Winters, he had lost his weapon when he lost his leg bag. In his musette bag he had two grenades and a demolitions kit, plus his trench knife. He climbed over a gate and worked his way down the street, away from the church and the fire. At the edge of town there was a low, heavy concrete signpost with the name of the village on it. Lipton put his face up close to the letters and moved along them, reading them one by one, until he knew that the sign read "Ste. Mere-Eglise."

Paratroopers were coming down around him. Not wanting to get shot by a nervous American, when he saw two coming down close together, he ran right under them. When they hit the ground, before they could even think about shooting, Lipton was already talking to them. They were from the 82nd Airborne, 10 kilometers away from where they were supposed to be. Sergeant Guarnere joined up, along with Don Malarkey, Joe Toye, and Popeye Wynn. A few minutes later, Lipton ran into Winters.

"I saw a road sign down there," Lipton reported. "Ste. Mere-Eglise."

"Good," Winters answered. "I know where that is. I can take it from here." He set out at the head of the group, objective Ste. Marie-du-Mont. They joined a bunch from the 502nd. About 0300 hours they spotted a German patrol, four wagons coming down the road. They set up an ambush, and there Guarnere got his first revenge for his brother, as he blasted the lead wagons. The other two got away, but E Company took a few prisoners.

A German machine-gun opened fire on the group. When it did, the prisoners tried to jump the Americans. Guarnere shot them with his pistol. "No remorse," he said when describing the incident forty-seven years later. "No pity. It was as easy as stepping on a bug." After a pause, he added, "We are different people now than we were then."

At about 0600 hours they ran into Capt. Jerre Gross of D Company and forty of his men. They joined forces to head toward Ste. Marie-du-Mont, some 8 kilometers southeast. In a few minutes they ran into the 2nd Battalion staff with about forty more men. Winters found an M-l, then a revolver, belt, canteen, and lots of ammunition, "so I was feeling

ready to fight—especially after I bummed some food from one of the boys." Lipton found a carbine. The others armed themselves.

As the Americans moved toward Ste. Marie-du-Mont, so did the commander of the German unit defending the area, Col. Frederick von der Heydte of the 6th Parachute Regiment. He was an experienced soldier, having been in the German Army since the mid-1920s and having led men in combat in Poland, France, Russia, Crete, and North Africa. Colonel von der Heydte was the senior German officer present, as the division commanders were in Rennes, on the Seine River, for a war game. He had one battalion in and around Ste. Mere-Eglise, another near Ste. Marie-du-Mont, the third in Carentan. All his platoons were standing too, some were trying to engage the Americans, but confusion caused by reports of landings here, there, seemingly everywhere had made concerted counterattacks impossible.

Colonel von der Heydte wanted to see for himself. He drove his motorcycle from Carentan to Ste. Marie-du-Mont, where he climbed to the top of the church steeple, 50 or 60 meters above the ground. There he had a magnificent view of Utah Beach.

What he saw quite took his breath away. "All along the beach," he recalled in a 1991 interview, "were these small boats, hundreds of them, each disgorging thirty or forty armed men. Behind them were the warships, blasting away with their huge guns, more warships in one fleet than anyone had ever seen before."

Around the church, in the little village and beyond in the green fields crisscrossed by hedgerows, all was quiet. The individual firefights of the night had tapered off with the coming of light. Von der Heydte could see neither American nor German units.

Climbing down from the steeple, the colonel drove his motorcycle a couple of kilometers north to Brecourt Manor, where the German artillery had a battery of four 105 mm cannon dug in and camouflaged. There were no artillery men around; evidently they had scattered in the night after the airborne landings began. Von der Heydte roared back to Carentan, where he ordered his 1st Battalion to occupy and hold Ste. Marie-du-Mont and Brecourt, and to find some artillerymen to get that battery working. It was perfectly placed to lob shells on the landing craft on Utah Beach, and to engage the warships out in the Channel.

By this time, about 0700, E Company consisted of two light machine-guns, one bazooka (no ammunition), one 60 mm mortar, nine riflemen, and two officers. As the 2nd Battalion moved into a group of houses in a tiny village called Le Grand-Chemin, just three kilometers or so short of Ste. Marie-du-Mont, it drew heavy fire from up-front. The column stopped; Winters and his men sat down to rest. Ten or fifteen minutes later, battalion S-l Lt. George Lavenson, formerly of E Company, came walking down the road. "Winters," he said, "they want you up-front."

Captain Hester, S-3, and Lieutenant Nixon, S-2, both close friends of Winters, told him there was a four-gun battery of German 105 mm cannon a few hundred meters across some hedgerows and open fields, opposite a large French farmhouse called Brecourt Manor. Intelligence had not spotted the cannon, as they were dug into the hedgerow, connected by an extensive trench system, covered by brush and trees. There was a fifty-man platoon of infantry defending the position (part of Colonel von der Heydte's 1st Battalion); the cannon had just gone into action, firing on Utah Beach, some 4 or 5 kilometers to the northeast. The 2nd Battalion was less than 100 men strong at that point. Lieutenant Colonel Strayer had responsibilities in all four directions from Le Grand-Chemin. He was trying to build his battalion up to somewhere near its full strength of 600 men, and to defend from counterattacks. He could only afford to send one company to attack the German battery. Hester told Winters to take care of that battery.

It was 0830. Captain Sobel was about to get a little revenge on Hitler, the U.S. Army was about to get a big payoff from its training and equipment investment, the American people were about to get their reward for having raised such fine young men. The company that Sobel and the Army and the country had brought into being and trained for this moment was going into action.

Winters went to work instinctively and immediately. He told the men of E Company to drop all the equipment they were carrying except weapons, ammunition, and grenades. He explained that the attack would be a quick frontal assault supported by a base of fire from different positions as close to the guns as possible. He set up the two machine-guns to give covering fire as he moved the men forward to their jump-off positions.

The field in which the cannon were located was irregular in shape, with seven acute angles in the hedgerow surrounding it. This gave Winters an opportunity to hit the Germans from different directions.

Winters placed his machine-guns (manned by Pvts. John Plesha and Walter Hendrix on one gun, Cleveland Petty and Joe Liebgott on the other) along the hedge leading up to the objective, with instructions to lay down covering fire. As Winters crawled forward to the jump-off position, he spotted a German helmet— the man was moving down the trench, crouched over, with only his head above ground. Winters took aim with his M-l and squeezed off two shots, killing the Jerry.

Winters told Lieutenant Compton to take Sergeants Guarnere and Malarkey, get over to the left, crawl through the open field, get as close to the first gun in the battery as possible, and throw grenades into the trench. He sent Sergeants

Lipton and Ranney out along the hedge to the right, alongside a copse of trees, with orders to put a flanking fire into the enemy position.

Winters would lead the charge straight down the hedge. With him were Pvts. Gerald Lorraine (of regimental HQ; he was Colonel Sink's jeep driver) and Popeye Wynn and Cpl. Joe Toye.

Here the training paid off. "We fought as a team without standout stars," Lipton said. "We were like a machine. We didn't have anyone who leaped up and charged a machine-gun. We knocked it out or made it withdraw by maneuver and teamwork or mortar fire. We were smart; there weren't many flashy heroics. We had learned that heroics was the way to get killed without getting the job done, and getting the job done was more important."

When Ranney and Lipton moved out along the hedge, they discovered they could not see the German positions because of low brush and ground cover. Lipton decided to climb a tree, but there were none of sufficient size to allow him to fire from behind a trunk. The one he picked had many small branches,- he had to sit precariously on the front side, facing the Germans, exposed if they looked his way, balancing on several branches. About 75 meters away, he could see about fifteen of the enemy, some in the trenches, others prone in the open, firing toward E Company, too intent on the activity to their front to notice Lipton.

Lipton was armed with a carbine he had picked up during the night. He fired at a German in the field. The enemy soldier seemed to duck. Lipton fired again. His target did not move. Not certain that the carbine had been zeroed in, Lipton aimed into the dirt just under the man's head and squeezed off another round. The dirt flew up right where he aimed; Lipton now knew that the carbine's sights were right and his first shot had killed the man. He began aiming and firing as fast as he could from his shaky position.

Lieutenant Compton was armed with a Thompson submachine-gun that he had picked up during the night (he got it from a lieutenant from D Company who had broken his leg in the jump). Using all his athletic skill, he successfully crawled through the open field to the hedge, Guarnere and Malarkey alongside him. The Germans were receiving fire from the machine-gun to their left, from Lipton and Ranney to their rear, and from Winters' group in their front. They did not notice Compton's approach.

When he reached the hedge, Compton leaped over and through it. He had achieved complete surprise and had the German gun crew and infantry dead in his sights. But when he pulled the trigger on the borrowed tommy-gun, nothing happened. It was jammed.

At that instant, Winters called, "Follow me," and the assault team went tearing down the hedge toward Compton. Simultaneously, Guarnere leaped into the trench beside Compton. The German crew at the first gun, under attack from three directions, fled. The infantry retreated with them, tearing down the trench, away from Compton, Guarnere, and Malarkey. The Easy Company men began throwing grenades at the retreating enemy.

Compton had been an All-American catcher on the UCLA baseball team. The distance to the fleeing enemy was about the same as from home plate to second base. Compton threw his grenade on a straight line—no arch—and it hit a German in the head as it exploded. He, Malarkey, and Guarnere then began lobbing grenades down the trench.

Winters and his group were with them by now, firing their rifles, throwing grenades, shouting, their blood pumping, adrenalin giving them Superman strength.

Wynn was hit in the butt and fell down in the trench, hollering over and over, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I goofed off, I goofed off, I'm sorry." A German potato masher sailed into the trench,-everyone dived to the ground.

"Joe, look out!" Winters called to Toye. The grenade had landed between his legs as he lay face down. Toye flipped over. The potato masher hit his rifle and tore up the stock as it exploded, but he was uninjured. "If it wasn't for Winters," Toye said in 1990, "I'd be singing high soprano today."

Winters tossed some grenades down the trench, then went tearing after the retreating gun crew. Private Lorraine and Sergeant Guarnere were with him. Three of the enemy infantry started running cross-country, away toward Brecourt Manor.

"Get 'em!" Winters yelled. Lorraine hit one with his tommy-gun,- Winters aimed his M-l, squeezed, and shot his man through the back of his head. Guarnere missed the third Jerry, but Winters put a bullet in his back. Guarnere followed that up by pumping the wounded man full of lead from his tommy-gun. The German kept yelling, "Help! Help!" Winters told Malarkey to put one through his head.

A fourth German jumped out of the trench, about 100 yards up the hedge. Winters saw him, lay down, took careful aim, and killed him. Fifteen or twenty seconds had passed since he had led the charge. Easy had taken the first gun.

Winters' immediate thought was that there were plenty of Germans further up the trench, and they would be counterattacking soon. He flopped down, crawled forward in the trench, came to a connecting trench, looked down, "and sure enough there were two of them setting up a machine-gun, getting set to fire. I got in the first shot and hit the gunner in the hip; the second caught the other boy in the shoulder."

Winters put Toye and Compton to firing toward the next gun, sent three other men to look over the captured cannon, and three to cover to the front. By this time Lipton had scrambled out of his tree and was working his way to Winters. Along the way he stopped to sprinkle some sulfa powder on Wynn's butt and slap on a bandage. Wynn continued to apologize for goofing off. Warrant Officer Andrew Hill, from regimental HQ, came up behind Lipton.

"Where's regimental HQ?" he shouted.

"Back that way," Lipton said, pointing to the rear. Hill raised his head to look. A bullet hit him in the forehead and came out behind his ear, killing him instantly.

After that, all movement was confined to the trench system, and in a crouch, as German machine-gun fire was nearly continuous, cutting right across the top of the trench. But Malarkey saw one of the Germans killed by Winters, about 30 yards out in the field, with a black case attached to his belt. Malarkey thought it must be a Luger. He wanted it badly, so he ran out into the field, only to discover that it was a leather case for the 105 mm sight. Winters was yelling at him, "Idiot, this place is crawling with Krauts, get back here!" Evidently the Germans thought Malarkey was a medic; in any case the machine-gunners did not turn on him until he started running back to the trench. With bullets kicking up all around him, he dived under the 105.

Winters was at the gun, wanting to disable it but without a demolition kit. Lipton came up and said he had one in his musette bag, which was back where the attack began. Winters told him to go get it.

Time for the second gun, Winters thought to himself. He left three men behind to hold the first gun, then led the other five on a charge down the trench, throwing grenades ahead of them, firing their rifles. They passed the two Jerries at the machine-gun who had been wounded by Winters and made them prisoners. The gun crew at the second gun fell back; Easy took it with only one casualty.

With the second gun in his possession, and running low on ammunition, Winters sent back word for the four machine-gunners to come forward. Meanwhile six German soldiers decided they had had enough; they came marching down the connecting trench to the second gun, hands over their heads, calling out "No make dead! No make dead!"

Pvt. John D. Hall of A Company joined the group. Winters ordered a charge on the third gun. Hall led the way, and got killed, but the gun was taken. Winters had three of his men secure it. With eleven men, he now controlled three 105s.

At the second gun site, Winters found a case with documents and maps showing the positions of all the guns and machine-gun positions throughout the Cotentin Peninsula. He sent the documents and maps back to battalion, along with the prisoners and a request for more ammunition and some reinforcements, because "we were stretched out too much for our own good." Using grenades, he set about destroying the gun crew's radio, telephone, and range finders.

Captain Hester came up, bringing three blocks of TNT and some phosphorus incendiary grenades. Winters had a block dropped down the barrel of each of the three guns, followed by a German potato-masher grenade. This combination blew out the breeches of the guns like half-peeled bananas. Lipton was disappointed when he returned with his demolition kit to discover that it was not needed.

Reinforcements arrived, five men led by Lt. Ronald Speirs of D Company. One of them, "Rusty" Houch of F Company, raised up to throw a grenade into the gun positions and was hit several times across the back and shoulders by a burst from a machine-gun. He died instantly.

Speirs led an attack on the final gun, which he took and destroyed, losing two men killed.

Winters then ordered a withdrawal, because the company was drawing heavy machine-gun fire from the hedges near Brecourt Manor, and with the guns destroyed there was no point to holding the position. The machine-gunners pulled back first, followed by the riflemen. Winters was last. As he was leaving he took a final look down the trench. "Here was this one wounded Jerry we were leaving behind trying to put a MG on us again, so I drilled him clean through the head." It was 1130. About three hours had passed since Winters had received the order to take care of those guns.

With twelve men, what amounted to a squad (later reinforced by Speirs and the others), Company E had destroyed a German battery that was looking straight down causeway No. 2 and onto Utah Beach. That battery had a telephone line running to a forward observer who was in a pillbox located at the head of causeway No. 2. He had been calling shots down on the 4th Infantry as it unloaded. The significance of what Easy Company had accomplished cannot be judged with any degree of precision, but it surely saved a lot of lives, and made it much easier—perhaps even made it possible in the first instance—for tanks to come inland from the beach. It would be a gross exaggeration to say that Easy Company saved the day at Utah Beach, but reasonable to say that it made an important contribution to the success of the invasion.

Winters' casualties were four dead, two wounded. He and his men had killed fifteen Germans, wounded many more, and taken twelve prisoners; in short, they had wiped out the fifty man platoon of elite German paratroops defending the guns, and scattered the gun crews. In an analysis written in 1985, Lipton said, "The attack was a unique example of a small, well-led assault force overcoming and routing a much larger defending force in prepared positions. It was the high morale of the E Company men, the quickness and audacity of the frontal attack, and the fire into their positions from

several different directions that demoralized the German forces and convinced them that they I were being hit by a much larger force."

There were other factors, including the excellent training the company had received, and that this was their baptism of fire. The men had taken chances they would not take in the future. Lipton said he never would have climbed that tree and so exposed himself had he been a veteran. "But we were so full of fire that day."

"You don't realize, your first time," Guarnere said. "I'd never, never do again what I did that morning." Compton would not have burst through that hedge had he been experienced. "I was sure I would not be killed," Lipton said. "I felt that if a bullet was headed for me it would be deflected or I would move."

(Paul Fussell, in Wartime, writes that the soldier going into combat the first time thinks to himself, "It can't happen to me. I am too clever / agile / well-trained / good-looking / beloved / tightly laced, etc." That feeling soon gives way to "It can happen to me, and I'd better be more careful. I can avoid the danger by watching more prudently the way I take cover / dig in / expose my position by firing my weapon / keep extra alert at all times, etc."1)

1. Fussell, Wartime, 282.

In his analysis, Winters gave credit to the Army for having prepared him so well for this moment ("my apogee," he called it). He had done everything right, from scouting the position to laying down a base of covering fire, to putting his best men (Compton, Guarnere, and Malarkey in one group, Lipton and Ranney in the other) on the most challenging missions, to leading the charge personally at exactly the right moment.

Winters felt that if Sobel had been in command, he would have led all thirteen men on a frontal assault and lost his life, along with the lives of most of the men. Who can say he was wrong about that? But then, who can say that the men of Easy would have had the discipline, the endurance (they had been marching since 0130, after a night of little or no real sleep; they were battered and bruised from the opening shock and the hard landing) or the weapons skills to carry off this fine feat of arms, had it not been for Sobel?

Sink put Winters in for the Congressional Medal of Honor. Only one man per division was to be given that ultimate medal for the Normandy campaign,- in the 101st it went to Lt. Col. Robert Cole for leading a bayonet charge,- Winters received the Distinguished Service Cross. Compton, Guarnere, Lorraine, and Toye got the Silver Star,- Lipton, Malarkey, Ranney, Liebgott, Hendrix, Plesha, Petty, and Wynn got Bronze Stars.

A month or so later, Winters was called into regimental HQ. Sink, Strayer, and the staff were sitting in a tent. At the head of a table was S. L. A. Marshall, the Army's combat historian. The atmosphere around the table was "electric," Winters remembered. "Those West Pointers would have 'killed' to have the opportunity I had to be sitting in the chair across from Marshall." "O.K., Lieutenant," Marshall said, "tell me what you did out there on D-Day. You took that battery of 105s, didn't you?" "Yes, sir, that's right." "Tell me how you did it."

"Well, sir, I put down a base of fire, we moved in under the base of fire, and we took the first gun. And then we put down another base of fire and we moved to the second gun and the third gun and the fourth gun." "O.K., anything else?"

"No, sir, that's basically it." As a junior officer facing all that brass, Winters figured he had better not lay it on too thick. So he made it sound like a routine training problem.

When Marshall wrote his book, Night Drop, to Winters' disgust he left out Easy Company, except to say "the deployed [2nd] battalion had kept the German battery entertained at long range. . . ." He did give a full account of the capture of a battery at Holdy, near causeway No. 1, by the 1st Battalion, 506th. Marshall wrote that the battalion had 195 men lined up to take the battery. Winters commented, "With that many E Co. men, I could have taken Berlin!"2

2. S. L. A. Marshall, Night Drop: The American Airborne Invasion of Normandy (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), 281-86. Marshall has come in for considerable criticism for the mistakes in his work, especially from paratroopers who were there. I have sympathy for him; writing accurately about a battle for which you have conflicting testimony from the eyewitnesses and participants is a challenge, and then some. Military historians do the best they can.

At about 1215, Sgt. Leo Boyle joined up. He had been dropped in the 82nd's DZ, gotten lost, figured out where he was, marched toward Ste. Marie-du-Mont, and found his company. "The first man I met was Winters. He was tired. I reported in to him. He grunted and that's all I got out of him. I thought maybe he'd be a little more happy to see me, but he'd been under tremendous stress."

The men were congratulating one another, talking about what they had accomplished, trying to piece together the sequence of events. They were the victors, happy, proud, full of themselves. Someone found some cider in a cellar. It got passed around. When the jug got to Winters, he decided he was "thirsty as hell, and needed a lift." He shocked his men by taking a long pull, the first alcohol he had ever tasted. "I thought at the time it might slow down my thoughts and reactions, but it didn't."

Lieutenant Welsh reported for duty. He had been in various firefights alongside some men from the 82nd. In his backpack he was carrying his reserve parachute; he carried it throughout the Normandy campaign. "I wanted to send it back to Kitty to make a wedding gown for our marriage after the war. (Optimism?)"

German machine-gun fire from the hedgerow across the road from Brecourt Manor was building up. Winters put his machine-gunners to answering with some harassing fire of their own. Malarkey found his mortar tube, but not the base plate or tripod. Setting the tube on the ground, he fired a dozen rounds toward the Manor. Guarnere joined him, working another mortar tube. They discovered later that every round hit its target. "That kind of expertise you don't teach," Winters commented. "It's a God-given touch." When Malarkey ran out of mortar rounds, his tube was almost completely buried. An old French farmer got a shovel to help him dig it out.

Along about noon, infantry from the 4th Division began to pass Le Grand-Chemin: Welsh remembered "the faces of the first foot soldiers coming up from the beach while they puked their guts out from the sight of the distorted and riddled bodies of dead troopers and Germans."

There were about fifty E Company men together by then. No one knew of Lieutenant Meehan's fate, but Winters had become the de facto company commander.

Lieutenant Nixon came forward, with four Sherman tanks following. He told Winters to point out the enemy position to the tankers, then use E Company to provide infantry support for an attack. Winters climbed onto the back of the first tank and told the commander, "I want fire along those hedgerows over there, and there, and there, and against the Manor. Clean out anything that's left."

The tanks roared ahead. For the tankers, this was their first time in combat, their first chance to fire their weapons at the enemy. They had a full load of ammunition, for their 50-caliber and their 30-caliber machine-guns, and for their 75 mm cannon. "They just cut those hedgerows to pieces," Welsh remembered. "You thought they would never stop shooting."

By midafternoon, Brecourt Manor was secured. The de Vallavieille family came out of the house, headed by Colonel de Vallavieille, a World War I veteran, along with Madame and the two teen-age sons, Louis and Michel. Michel stepped into the entry into the courtyard with his hands raised over his head, alongside some German soldiers who had remained behind to surrender. An American paratrooper shot Michel in the back, either mistaking him for a German or thinking he was a collaborator. He lived, although his recovery in hospital (he was the first Frenchman evacuated from Utah Beach to England) took six months. Despite the unfortunate incident, the brothers became close friends with many of the E Company men. Michel became mayor of Ste. Marie-du-Mont, and the founder and builder of the museum at Utah Beach.

By late afternoon, the Germans had pulled out of Ste. Marie-du-Mont, as Easy and the rest of 2nd Battalion moved in, then marched south-southwest a couple of kilometers to the six-house village of Culoville, where Strayer had 2nd Battalion's CP. Winters got pie men settled down for the night, with his outposts in place. The men ate their K rations. Winters went on a patrol by himself, outside the village, he heard troops marching down a cobbled road. The sound of hobnailed boots told him they were Krauts. He hit the ditch; the German squad marched past him. He could smell the distinct odor of the Germans. It was a combination of 'sweat-soaked leather and tobacco. That's too close for comfort, Winters thought.

Lieutenant Welsh remembered walking around among the sleeping men, and thinking to himself that "they had looked at and smelled death all around them all day but never even dreamed of applying the term to themselves. They hadn't come here to fear. They hadn't come to die. They had come to win."

Before Lipton went to sleep, he recalled his discussion with Sergeant Murray before they jumped on what combat would be like and what they would do in different situations. He drifted off feeling "gratified and thankful that the day had gone so well." As Winters prepared to stretch out, he could hear "Germans shooting their burp guns, evidently in the air, for they did no harm, and hollering like a bunch of drunk kids having a party," which was probably what was happening.

Before lying down, Winters later wrote in his diary, "I did not forget to get on my knees and thank God for helping me to live through this day and ask for his help on D plus one." And he made a promise to himself: if he lived through the war, he was going to find an isolated farm somewhere and spend the remainder of his life in peace and quiet.

6 "MOVE OUT!" *

CARENTAN

June 7-July 12,1944

At first light on June 7, Captain Hester came to see Winters with a message. "Winters," he said, "I hate to do this to you after what you went through yesterday, but I want E Company to lead off the column toward Vierville."

The battalion had achieved its D-Day objectives, the 4th Division was well ashore, the causeways secured. Its next task was to move south, toward Carentan, on the other side of the Douve River, for the link-up with American forces coming west from Omaha Beach. The route was from Culoville through Vierville to St. Come-du-Mont, then across the river into Carentan.

The 2nd Battalion managed to clear Vierville, then move onto Angoville-au-Plain, with Easy now in reserve. The remainder of the day was spent beating off German counterattacks from Colonel von der Heydte's 6th Parachute Regiment. The following day 1st Battalion of the 506th took St. Come-du-Mont, about 3 kilometers north of Carentan, on the last high ground overlooking the Douve Valley and Carentan beyond. Colonel Sink set up his CP at Angoville-au-Plain, with Easy Company taking position to defend regimental HQ. That remained its task for the next three days.

Easy used the time to catch its breath and build its strength. Men joined up in a steady stream, coming from all over the Cotentin Peninsula. Sleep was still hard to come by, because of sniper fire, occasional counterattacks, artillery, and mortar fire. Burying dead bodies, human and animal, was a problem, as the bodies were beginning to bloat and smell.

Another problem emerged, one that was to plague the airborne forces throughout the next year. Every liberated village in France, and later in Belgium, Holland, Germany, and Austria, was full of wine, cognac, brandy, and other fine liquor, of a quality and in a quantity quite unknown to the average enlisted man. Pvt. Shifty Powers and a friend found a wine shop in St. Come-du-Mont. They broke in and began sampling the bottles, "to find the kind we liked." They took a bottle each and went out back to drink in peace. "Every once in a while there's a sniper trying to shoot us, and he's trying to ricochet one in on us, and we would hear that bullet hit and ricochet around, we kind of enjoyed that,"

Lieutenant Welsh found a barrel of cognac, "and I think he was trying to drink it all by himself," Winters recalled. "There were times when I talked to Harry and I realized later that he hadn't heard a word I'd said, and it was not because his hearing was bad. We got that problem straightened out in a few days." It didn't stay straightened out. There was just too much booze around, and the young warriors were under too much tension, for any simple solution.

On June 10 Pvt. Alton More asked Malarkey to join him on an expedition to Ste. Mere-Eglise to look through some musette bags that he had seen stacked up there in a vacant lot. More was a rugged John Wayne type, son of a saloonkeeper in Casper, Wyoming. He had married his high school sweetheart, and their first child had been born while he was in England. Malarkey agreed to go, but when they arrived, he felt a bit uneasy when he realized the musette bags had been removed from dead troopers. Nevertheless he joined More in emptying the bags upside down, picking up candy bars, toilet articles, rations, and money.

Suddenly Alton dropped to his knees and, in an almost inaudible voice, said, "Let's get the hell out of here." Malarkey glanced over and saw More looking at a knitted pair of baby booties. They dropped what they had collected and returned to St. Come-du-Mont, resolving that in the future they would be more respectful of their dead comrades.

German dead were another matter. Souvenir hunting went on whenever there was a lull. Lugers were a favorite item, along with watches, daggers, flags, anything with a swastika on it. When Rod Strohl finally joined up, on D-Day plus four, Liebgott saw him and came running up. "Hey, Strohl, Strohl, I've got to show you mine." He produced a ring he had cut off the finger of a German he had killed with his bayonet.

By this time the 29th Division, coming west from Omaha Beach, had taken Isigny, 12 kilometers from Carentan. Carentan, with a population of about 4,000, lay astride the main highway from Cherbourg to Caen and St. L6. The Paris-Cherbourg railroad ran through it. The German 6th Parachute Regiment, having failed to hold the high ground to the north, was now defending Carentan. Colonel von der Heydte had orders from Field Marshal Erwin Rommel to "defend Carentan to the last man."1

1. Rapport and Northwood, Rendezvous with Destiny, 166.

On June 10, the 29th Division coming from Omaha linked up with the 101st, northeast of Carentan. This made the beachhead secure, but it could not be developed or extended inland until the Americans drove the Germans out of Carentan. Progress was excruciatingly slow, for three major reasons: the lack of sufficient armor or artillery, the skill and determination of the defenders, and the hedgerows. Often 6 feet high or even more, with narrow lanes that were more like trenches, so solid that they could stop a tank, each hedgerow was a major enemy position. And there were so damn many of them. Take one hedgerow, after an all-out effort, and there was another one 50 meters or less away. This was about as bad a place to mount an infantry assault as could be imagined, as bad as clearing out a town house-by-house or room-by-room, as bad as attacking a World War I trench system. But it had to be done.

General Collins had VII Corps attacking north, in the direction of Cherbourg (the largest port in Normandy and a major strategic objective) and west, toward the coast (in order to cut off the Germans in the Cotentin from their line of communications), but gains were limited and little progress could be expected until the bottleneck at Carentan had been broken. The task fell to the 101st.

General Taylor decided to attack from three directions simultaneously. The 327th Glider Infantry Regiment would come in from the north, the 501st from the northeast, while the 506th would undertake a night march, swinging around the almost surrounded Carentan to the southwest. Coordinated attacks were scheduled to begin at dawn, 0500, June 12.

Captain Sobel had seen to it that Easy Company had spent months of training at night. Forced night marches cross-country, through woods, night compass problems, every conceivable problem of troop movement and control of troops at night. The men were completely at ease working at night, indeed some of them insisted they could see better in the dark than in daylight.

According to Winters (who was by now the acting company commander,- Meehan was still listed as missing in action rather than KIA), the ones who could not handle the night were the regimental staff officers. They had "crapped out" on the training problems and had not done the field work night after night that the troops and junior line officers had undergone. It had shown up on D-Day night, Winters said: "They were the ones who had the problems getting oriented and finding their objectives. They had the big problem getting through hedgerows. The junior officers and enlisted men, completely on their own, had found their way around and found their objective with little problem and no maps."

The deficiency showed up again on the night march of June 11-12. F Company led the way, with E following. They set out for Carentan across a marsh, over a bridge, then west across fields to the railroad. It was rough going through swampy areas and hedgerows. The companies kept losing contact. F Company would hit a tough section, work its way through, then take off at a fast pace, with no consideration for the rear elements breaking through that same bottleneck. Regimental HQ kept changing orders for the boundaries of the 1st and 2nd Battalions. The companies would stop, dig in, set up machine-guns, then get orders to move out again.

There had been major fighting over the route the 2nd Battalion was following. The area was strewn with bodies, American and German, weapons and equipment, difficult to see clearly in the dark. Once over the Douve River, heading toward the railroad track, Easy lost contact with F Company. "I knew we would not be able to find our way to our objective over the strange terrain on our own," Lipton recalled, "and that we were strung out in a defenseless formation."

Winters tried to raise battalion on the radio. The operators spoke in muffled undertones. A German MG 42 (the best machine-gun in the world) opened up with several short bursts from somewhere off to the left. Lipton moved over to his machine-gunner and whispered to him to set up his gun facing toward the incoming fire. As Lipton moved quietly off to position the rest of his platoon, he remembered, "I almost jumped out of my skin when [the man] full-loaded his gun. The sound of a light machine-gun being full-loaded, two times pulling back and releasing the bolt, can be heard a half-mile away on a still night. All our attempts at being quiet and surprising the Germans gone for nothing." But there was no further attack, and Lipton breathed a bit easier.

Contact was reestablished. Easy moved out again. Along the path it followed there was a dead German, his right hand extended into the air. Everyone stepped over him until Pvt. Wayne "Skinny" Sisk got there. Sisk reached out and shook the hand, meanwhile stepping on the bloated stomach. The corpse went

"Bleh."

"Sorry, buddy," Sisk whispered and moved on.

The path took an abrupt turn to the right. Carson recalled that "there was a German there with a rifle pointed right at you. He must have scared half the company. I said to myself, 'Why the hell doesn't he shoot and get it over with?' But he was dead and rigor mortis had set in, he was just like a statue there."

Easy reached the railroad line and set up another defensive position. The word came to expect German armor. Lipton put Tipper and his bazooka on the bank, with no line of retreat possible: a do-or-die situation.

"Tipper," Lipton whispered, "we're depending on you. Don't miss."

"I won't."

Tipper soon had a problem. His ammunition carrier, Pvt. Joe Ramirez, seemed awfully nervous. "We'll be okay, Joe," Tipper told him. "Just be sure you have two bazooka rounds ready to go, with absolutely no time lost, not a fraction of a second." Ramirez went back and returned with two bazooka rounds, stumbling and crashing around. To Tipper's horror, he said he had removed the pins (with the safety pin gone, an armed bazooka rocket would explode if dropped from two or three feet).

"Stick those pins back in," Tipper whispered. "I'll tell you when I want them out."

"I don't know where they are," Ramirez answered, holding the rounds stiffly out away from his body. "I tossed them away."

"Good God Almighty! Find them." Ramirez could not. Tipper got down on his hands and knees to help look. They found the pins. Ramirez's arms were twitching as Tipper carefully reinserted the pins. "When the disarming was accomplished," Tipper said, "Joe calmed down and his twitching stopped. Mine started at that point."

No attack developed. This was because Colonel von der Heydte, short on ammunition after six days of heavy fighting with no supplies reaching him, had pulled most of his force out of Carentan. He left behind one company to hold the city as long as possible, while he got resupplied and prepared a counterattack from the southwest. The fifty-man

company in Carentan had a machine-gun position to shoot straight up the road leading to the southwest, and 80 mm mortars zeroed in on the critical T-junction on the edge of town.

Easy moved out again, headed northeast. By 0530, the 2nd Battalion of the 506th was in position to attack Carentan. The objective was the T-junction defended by the company from the 6th Parachute Regiment. The last 100 or so meters of the road leading to the T-junction was straight, with a gentle downward slope. There were shallow ditches on both sides. F Company was on the left flank, with E Company going straight down the road and D Company in reserve. The orders were to move into Carentan and link up with the 327th coming in from the north.

All was quiet, no action. Lieutenant Lavenson, formerly of E Company, now battalion S-l, went into a field to take a crap. The men could see his white fanny in the early dawn light. A German sniper fired one shot and hit Lavenson in the butt. (He was evacuated to England; later, as he was being flown back to the States, his plane went down over the Atlantic.)

By this time, Winters was furious. It had taken all night for regiment to get the men in position. Stop, move out, stop, move out, so many times that the men were worn out. "It shouldn't have been," Winters said: "It wasn't that difficult. We had screwed away the night, just getting into position." There was no time for a reconnaissance,- Easy had no idea what lay ahead. There was no artillery preparation, or air strikes.

The order came down: attack at 0600.

Winters had his old platoon, the 1st, under Lieutenant Welsh, on the left side of the road, just past where the road curved and then straightened out, with 2nd platoon on the right and 3rd platoon in reserve. The men lay down in the ditches by the side of the road, awaiting orders. The German defenders had not revealed their machine-gun position or fired any mortars. Everything was quiet.

At 0600 Winters ordered, "Move out." Welsh kicked off the advance, running down the road toward the T-junction some 50 ' meters away, his platoon following. The German machine-gun opened fire, straight down the road. It was in a perfect position, at the perfect time, to wipe out the company.

The fire split the platoon. The seventh man behind Welsh stayed in the ditch. So did the rest of the platoon, almost thirty men. They were face down in the ditches on both sides of the road, trying to snuggle in as close as they could.

Winters jumped into the middle of the road, highly agitated, yelling, "Move out! Move out!" It did no good; the men remained in place, heads down in the ditch.

From his rear, Winters could hear Lieutenant Colonel Strayer, Lieutenants Hester and Nixon, and other members of the battalion HQ hollering at him to "get them moving, Winters, get them moving."

Winters threw away his gear, holding onto his M-l, and ran over to the left side, "hollering like a mad man, 'Get going!' " He started kicking the men in the butt. He crossed to the other side and repeated the order, again kicking the men.

"I was possessed," Winters recalled. "Nobody'd ever seen me like that." He ran back to the other side, machine-gun bullets zinging down the street. He thought to himself, My God, I'm leading a blessed life. I'm charmed.

He was also desperate. His best friend, Harry Welsh, was up ahead, trying to deal with that machine-gun. If I don't do something, Winters thought to himself, he's dead. No question about it.

But the men wouldn't move. They did look up. Winters recalled, "I will never forget the surprise and fear on those faces looking up at me." The German machine-gun seemed to be zeroing in on him, and he was a wide open target. "The bullets kept snapping by and glancing off the road all around me."

"Everybody had froze," Strohl remembered. "Nobody could move. And Winters got up in the middle of the road and screamed, 'Come on! Move out! Now!' "

That did it. No man in the company had ever before heard Winters shout. "It was so out of character/' Strohl said, "we moved out as one man."

According to Winters, "Here is where the discipline paid off. The men got the message, and they moved out."

As Sergeant Talbert passed Winters, he called out, "Which way when we hit the intersection?"

"Turn right," Winters ordered.

(In 1981, Talbert wrote Winters: "I'll never forget seeing you in the middle of that road. You were my total inspiration. All my boys felt the same way.")

Welsh, meanwhile, was neutralizing the machine-gun. "We were all alone," he remembered, "and I couldn't understand where the hell everybody was." Thanks to the distraction caused by Winters running back and forth, the machine-gunner had lost track of Welsh and his six men. Welsh tossed some grenades at the gun, followed by bursts from his carbine. The men with him did the same. The machine-gun fell silent.2

2. Winters wrote in 1990: "Later in the war, in recalling this action with Major Hester, he made a comment that has always left me feeling proud of Company E's action that day. As S-3, Hester had been in a position to see another company in a similar position caught in M.G. fire. It froze and then got severely cut up. E Company, on the other hand, had moved out, got the job done, and had not been cut up by that M.G."

The remainder of Easy Company drove into the intersection at a full run, and secured it. Winters sent the 1st platoon to the left, the 2nd to the right, clearing out the houses, one man throwing grenades through windows while another waited outside the door. Immediately after the explosion, the second man kicked in the door to look for and shoot any survivors.

Tipper and Liebgott cleared out a house. As Tipper was passing out the front door, "A locomotive hit me, driving me far back inside the house. I heard no noise, felt no pain, and was somehow unsteadily standing and in possession of my M-l." The German rear guard was bringing its prepositioned mortars into play. Liebgott grabbed Tipper and helped him to a sitting position, called for a medic, and tried to reassure Tipper that he would be O.K.

Welsh came up and got some morphine into Tipper, who was insisting that he could walk. That was nonsense; both his legs were broken, and he had a serious head wound. Welsh and Liebgott half dragged him into the street, where "I remember lying at the base of the wall with explosions in the street and shrapnel zinging against the wall above my head." Welsh got Tipper back to the aid station being set up in a barn about 20 meters to the rear.

Mortars continued coming in, along with sniper fire. Lipton led 3rd platoon to the intersection and peeled off to the right. There were explosions on the street; he huddled against a wall and yelled to his men to follow him. A mortar shell dropped about 2 meters in front of him, putting shell fragments in his left cheek, right wrist, and right leg at the crotch. His rifle clattered to the street. He dropped to the ground, put his left hand to his cheek and felt a large hole, but his biggest concern was his right hand, as blood was pumping out in spurts. Sergeant Talbert got to him and put a tourniquet on his arm.

Only then did Lipton feel the pain in his crotch. He reached down for a feel, and his left hand came away bloody.

"Talbert, I may be hit bad," he said. Talbert slit his pants leg with his knife, took a look, and said, "You're O.K."

"What a relief that was," Lipton remembered. The two shell fragments had gone into the top of his leg and "missed everything important."

Talbert threw Lipton over his shoulder and carried him to the aid station. The medics gave Lipton a shot of morphine and bandaged him up.

Malarkey recalled that during "this tremendous period of fire I could hear someone reciting a Hail Mary. I glanced up and saw Father John Maloney holding his rosary and walking down the center of the road to administer last rites to the dying at the road juncture." (Maloney was awarded the DSC.)

Winters got hit, by a ricochet bullet that went through his boot and into his leg. He stayed in action long enough to check the ammunition supply and consult with Welsh (who tried to remove the bullet with his knife but gave it up) to set up a defensive position in the event of a counterattack.

By this time it was 0700, and the area was secured. F Company, meanwhile, had hooked up with the 327th. Carentan had been captured. Lieutenant Colonel Strayer came into town, where he met the commander of the 3rd Battalion of the 327th. They went into a wine shop and opened a bottle to drink to the victory.

Winters went back to the battalion aid station. Ten of his men were there, receiving first aid. A doctor poked around Winters' leg with a tweezers, pulled the bullet, cleaned out the wound, put some sulfa powder on it, and a bandage.

Winters circulated among the wounded. One of them was Pvt. Albert Blithe.

"How're you doing, Blithe? What's the matter?"

"I can't see, sir. I can't see."

"Take it easy, relax. You've got a ticket out of here, we'll get you out of here in a hurry. You'll be going back to England. You'll be O.K. Relax," Winters said, and started to move on.

Blithe began to get up. "Take it easy," Winters told him. "Stay still."

"I can see, I can see, sir! I can see you!"

Blithe got up and rejoined the company. "Never saw anything like it," Winters said. "He was that scared he blacked out. Spooky. This kid just completely could not see, and all he needed was somebody to talk to him for a minute and calm him down."

The Germans were certain to counterattack, and it was sure to come from the southwest, down the road Easy had followed into town. Terrain dictated the axis of the advance; a peninsula of high ground led into Carentan from that direction. To the north, beyond the railroad track, was flooded ground, as also to the south of the road. General Taylor decided to push out several kilometers to the west and set up a defensive position on the high ground.

Winters got his orders. Easy would be on the far right, alongside the railroad track. He checked for ammunition. Leo Boyle and some others from 1st platoon found and "liberated" a two-wheel farm cart loaded with ammunition, and brought it to the barn on the edge of town that was serving as the aid station. As Boyle was preparing to bring it forward, he heard the cry, "Enemy tank!"

"I looked cautiously out of the doorway and saw the vague outline of a turret of a tank in a hedgerow a few yards away. Before I could react, a bullet from the machine-gun in the tank penetrated my left leg above the knee and knocked

me to the ground." Boyle was taken by truck back to Utah Beach, for evacuation to England. Along the way, "we met Captain Sobel who was ferrying supplies to the front by jeep."

Bazooka fire drove the tank off. Winters got the company reorganized and pushed off to the southwest, alongside the railroad track. The company moved 3 kilometers without significant resistance. Winters set up a defensive position behind a hedgerow.

The Germans were directly in front, behind the next hedgerow, laying down harassing fire. Anyone who moved drew aimed fire. As the light faded, the company received a resupply of food and ammunition and settled in for the evening. Winters got orders from battalion to jump off on an attack at first light, 0530.

At about 0030 hours, June 13, the Germans sent a patrol into the field between the hedgerows. Not a silent patrol to get intelligence, but a couple of squads, evidently drunk, shooting their machine pistols and shouting oaths at the Americans. "It scared the hell out of us," Winters remembered, "it didn't make any sense." He feared a night attack, but just that quickly the Germans fell back.

Gordon with his machine-gun, Sisk, and Guth were on outpost, on the far right, against the railroad track. Gordon was "uncomfortable and quite frightened," as there was little concealment, and he felt "very exposed." Sergeant Talbert checked on the men, decided they were too exposed, and pulled them back to the main line of defense.

Sergeant Talbert was up and down the line all night, shifting the men back and forth so that they could catch a few minutes sleep. He had the riflemen fix their bayonets. It was a cool evening; Talbert picked up a German poncho and put it on. About 0300 he prodded Pvt. George Smith with his revolver, to awaken him for duty. Smith was almost comatose. When he finally awakened, he saw in the pale moonlight this figure in a German poncho hovering over him and prodding him with a pistol.

Smith jumped up with his rifle with the fixed bayonet and began lunging at Talbert. Talbert tried to stop him, hollering, "Smith, it's Tab, don't!" But Smith kept thrusting until he succeeded in bayoneting Talbert in the chest. Fortunately he missed the lungs and heart, but Talbert was out of action. He had to be dragged away and carried the 3 kilometers back to the aid station.

By 0530, Winters had the company ready to attack. Just as he gave the order to move out, Colonel von der Heydte launched his 6th Parachute Regiment on its counterattack. Both sides cut loose with artillery, mortar, machine-gun, and rifle fire, everything they had. There was mass confusion. Fire coming in, dead-tired men who had used up their adrenalin long since, Taylor urging speed, men shouting, at one point a firefight between Easy and another company of the 101st, some Sherman tanks coming up in support firing into friendly units on the left, chaos.

Under the intense incoming fire, F Company on Easy's left flank broke and fell back. (The C.O. of the company was relieved on the spot by Colonel Strayer.) That exposed D Company's right flank, so it fell back too. That left Easy all alone, isolated, its right flank up against the track, its left flank in the air.

Easy stood to its guns. Gordon set his machine-gun up on a gate at the opening of the hedgerow into the field (he had lost the tripod on D-Day) and blasted away. A mortar round dropped 10 meters in front of him. Gordon went down with shrapnel in his shoulder and leg. The same mortar wounded Rod Strohl. Still they stayed in the line, continuing to fire. Winters, Compton, Welsh, and the other officers were running up and down the line, encouraging the men, straightening things out, making sure everything was done that could be done to stop the Germans.

A German tank started to break through the hedgerow on Easy's left flank, exactly where F Company should have been. Welsh told Pvt. John McGrath to bring his bazooka and come on. They raced out into the open field, crouched down, armed the bazooka, and Welsh told McGrath to fire. The shot hit the turret, but bounced off. The German tank turned its 88 mm cannon toward Welsh and McGrath and fired. The shell zoomed over their heads, missing by a few feet. The tank gunner could not depress his cannon sufficiently, because the tank driver was climbing the hedgerow in an effort to break through.

Welsh started reloading the bazooka. McGrath was saying, over and over, "Lieutenant, you're gonna get me killed. You're gonna get me killed." But he held his place, took careful aim at the tank, which was at the apex of its climb, cannon pointing skyward, the huge vehicle just about to tip forward as it broke through, and fired. He hit exactly where he wanted, the unarmored belly of the tank, and it exploded in a great burst of flame and fire.

That was the critical moment in the battle. German tank drivers lined up behind the one McGrath had hit, put their gear in reverse and began to back off. Meanwhile battalion headquarters had stopped the retreat of D and F companies, pulled them together, and pushed them forward about 150 meters, closing the gap somewhat on the left flank.

Still the Germans came on. They tried a flanking movement on the far (north) side of the railroad track. Winters got some mortar fire going, which stopped that attempt. Easy held its ground. The company had taken ten casualties on June 12 in the attack on Carentan, and nine more on June 13 in the defense of Carentan.

Gordon dropped out of the line and found Winters. A piece of shrapnel had gone into the calf of his leg on one side and come out on the other; he was also bleeding from the shrapnel wound in his shoulder. But what bothered him was

a boil that had developed on his shin right above his boot. The pain was unbearable. He told Winters he had to have the boil lanced. Winters told him to hobble his way back to the aid station.

The medic took one look at this man bleeding from the leg and shoulder, looking like someone who had not slept for three days and had just come in from an intense battle, and asked, "Are you hurt?"

"Well, yes," Gordon replied, "but that's not the problem. My problem is this boil. Get the boil." The medic lanced the boil, then looked at the other wounds. He said the shoulder would be all right, "but your leg wound is bad." Each side of the wound had closed, and Gordon's leg was turning blue. "You're going to have some real problems with that," the medic said. "We've got to evacuate you."

"No way," Gordon protested. "I didn't tell Lieutenant Winters."

"I'll get word back to him, don't worry about that." So Gordon finally agreed to be evacuated.

At 1630, sixty tanks from the 2nd Armored, accompanied by fresh infantry from the 29th Division, came up to relieve Easy. Winters recalled "what a wonderful sight it was to see those tanks pouring it to the Germans with those heavy 50-caliber machine-guns and just plowing straight from our lines into the German hedgerows with all those fresh infantry soldiers marching along beside the tanks."

"Oh, what a mess they made!" Welsh remembered, rubbing his hands with glee as he thought about it forty-seven years later.

At 2300 Easy and the rest of the 506th was withdrawn into division reserve in Carentan. The officers found billets for the men in undestroyed houses. Winters found a deserted hotel for his billet. Before going to bed, the officers checked on the men. Welsh returned to the hotel from his rounds, sat down on the steps, and fell asleep right there. Winters slept between sheets. It was a sleep he never forgot.

The following day, June 14, the barber shops had opened for business, and the men were queuing up for haircuts (they would help themselves to liquor, food, or whatever in abandoned shops and homes, but they paid for services). Winters went to the aid station to have his leg wound attended to; for the next five days he took it easy. It was during this period that he wrote the diary entries about his D-Day experiences, quoted in the preceding chapter. Welsh ran the company. Colonel Sink dropped by to thank Winters for the job Easy had done on June 13, when it held the right flank and prevented a German breakthrough that might well have been decisive in the struggle for Carentan. Sink also said he was recommending Winters for the Congressional Medal of Honor for the action at Brecourt Manor on D-Day. Winters thought that was very nice, but wondered what about medals for the men.

As for the action at Carentan, Colonel Sink told reporter Walter McCallum of the Washington Star, "It was Lt. Winters' personal leadership which held the crucial position in the line and tossed back the enemy with mortar and machine-gun fire. He was a fine soldier out there. His personal bravery and battle knowledge held a crucial position when the going was really rough."3

3. Washington Star, June 25, 1944.

The company went into a defensive position south of Carentan. The second day in this static situation, someone came down the hedgerow line asking for Don Malarkey and Skip Muck. It was Fritz Niland. He found Muck, talked to him, then found Malarkey, and had only enough time to say good-bye; he was flying home.

A few minutes after Niland left, Muck came to Malarkey,

"His impish Irish smile replaced by a frown." Had Niland explained to Malarkey why he was going home? No. Muck told the story.

The previous day Niland had gone to the 82nd to see his brother Bob, the one who had told Malarkey in London that if he wanted to be a hero, the Germans would see to it, fast, which had led Malarkey to conclude that Bob Niland had lost his nerve. Fritz Niland had just learned that his brother had been killed on D-Day. Bob's platoon had been surrounded, and he manned a machine-gun, hitting the Germans with harassing fire until the platoon broke through the encirclement. He had used up several boxes of ammunition before getting killed.

Fritz Niland next hitched a ride to the 4th Infantry Division position, to see another brother who was a platoon leader. He too had been killed on D-Day, on Utah Beach. By the time Fritz returned to Easy Company, Father Francis Sampson was looking for him, to tell him that a third brother, a pilot in the China-Burma-India theater, had been killed that same week. Fritz was the sole surviving son, and the Army wanted to remove him from the combat zone as soon as possible.

Fritz's mother had received all three telegrams from the War Department on the same day.

Father Sampson escorted Fritz to Utah Beach, where a plane flew him to London on the first leg of his return to the States.

The company dug in. Neither side was making infantry assaults south of Carentan, but the incoming and outgoing mail was tremendous, since both sides were receiving reinforcements in artillery and heavy weapons, the Americans from the beach and the Germans from the French interior.

In their foxholes, the men of Easy stayed underground, ready to repel any ground attack, but otherwise remaining out of sight during daylight hours. Lieutenant Nixon, battalion intelligence officer (S-2), wanted to know the strength of the German infantry opposite Easy's position. Winters came down the line, asking for a volunteer to take out a high noon patrol. No one responded. He told Guarnere that he was nominated to lead the patrol. Guarnere got a briefing from Nixon, who gave him a map showing all the hedgerows and a cluster of farm buildings that seemed to be a German command post, almost a kilometer away.

Guarnere, Privates Blithe and Joseph Lesniewski of Erie, Pennsylvania, and two others set out. Using the hedgerows for concealment, they moved forward. Blithe was at the point. He reached the last hedgerow leading to the farm buildings. A German sniper put a bullet into his neck.

"Get the hell out of here," Guarnere shouted. As the patrol fell back, German machine pistols opened up. When the patrol got back to Easy's lines, the company's machine-guns answered the fire.

Later, Malarkey led another patrol in another attempt to get information on the enemy. On this patrol Private Sheehy, at the point, moved up next to a hedgerow. Malarkey joined him there, but as he moved forward he stepped on a tree limb, breaking it. Immediately a German helmet raised up right across the hedgerow. Sheehy got him full in the face with a blast from his tommy-gun.

Seeing more Germans, Malarkey pulled the patrol back at a full run. Rob Bain, carrying a 300 radio, had trouble keeping up. After they had gotten back safely, Bain's comment was, "Apparently patrols are quite necessary, but it appears to me to be a good way to get your tail shot off."

The next day was relatively quiet. Fat Norman cattle were grazing in the field behind the company's position. Pvt. Woodrow Rob-bins, 1st squad machine-gunner, was dug in about 15 feet from Christenson's foxhole.

"Hey, Chris," he called out, "let's get some of that meat in the field!" Christenson did not want to leave his foxhole, but Bill Howell joined Robbins as he crawled up to a cow and shot her. They butchered the animal, then returned with a hind quarter. Robbins cut up steaks for the whole squad. They fried the meat over open fires in their foxholes. That night, Robbins and Howell tied the remainder of the carcass to a tree to the rear.

They covered it with a poncho,- the squad figured to be eating beef rather than K rations for a few days. What they had not figured on was all the shrapnel flying around from the incessant artillery barrages. It perforated the meat. At the next feast, the men of the squad were continually cutting their gums on shrapnel.

June 23. A sniper fired at Christenson, from 600 meters. Chris ducked behind a hedgerow and shouted to Robbins to spray the area from which the bullet came. Robbins fired fifty rounds at the distant trees. "I could hear a nervous grumbling from the men down the line," Christenson remembered. "Tension always grew when out of complete silence a machine-gun fires that many rounds." In the far distance, the sound of mortars belched, waump, waump, waump, waump. "This nerve-racking sound confirmed that four mortar bombs were heading in our direction. The suspense of waiting is eerie. Indescribable. Miserable. Then 'Boom,' the first one exploded not more than 7 feet in front of Robbins' and Howell's gun."

Howell jumped out of his position and ran to Christenson's foxhole, as the second mortar round exploded almost on top of the first, "so close that you could taste the pungent gun powder." Howell leaped into Christenson's foxhole. "I was all bent over and unable to move," Chris said, "because of my doubled up, cramped position. It was difficult to breathe, yet I was laughing hysterically for Howell's eyes were as big as tea cups. He was muttering things like, 'Christ-sake, oh my God,' at each shell burst. The pressure this big man was putting on me suddenly threw me into a state of panic, for I was suffocating." Fortunately the shelling stopped.

After two weeks on the main line of resistance (MLR), the men of Easy stank. They had not had a bath or shower or an opportunity to shave. Many had dysentery,- all were continually drenched with sweat. Their hair was matted from dirt and dust made worse by the profuse sweating caused by wearing their helmets constantly, and by the impregnated clothes they had been wearing since June 6. They looked like Bill Mauldin's Willy and Joe characters.

On June 29, the 83rd Infantry Division came up to relieve the 101st. "They were so clean looking," Christenson remembered, "with a full complement of men in each unit. Even the paint on their helmets looked as if they had just been unpacked. The impact of seeing such a disheveled motley group as we were was a shock to them."

For Easy, to get off the front line, even if it was only for a few days, was a deliverance. The thought of an uninterrupted full night's sleep, not being harassed by gun fire or being sent out on patrol, to get something hot to eat, to sleep dry, and most of all to get a shower, was good beyond description.

Easy had jumped into Normandy on June 6 with 139 officers and men. Easy was pulled out of the line on June 29 with 74 officers and men present for duty. (The 506th had taken the heaviest casualties of any regiment in the campaign, a total of 983, or about 50 percent). The Easy men killed in action were Lts. Thomas Meehan and Robert Mathews, Sgts. William Evans, Elmer Murray, Murray Robert, Richard Owen, and Carl Riggs, Cpls. Jerry Wentzel, Ralph Wimer, and Hermin Collins, Pvts. Sergio Moya, John Miller, Gerald Snider, William McGonigal, Ernest Oats, Elmer Telstad, George Elliott, and Thomas Warren.

For the 101st, Carentan was the last action of the Normandy campaign. The division was gradually pulled back to a field camp north of Utah Beach, complete with radio, telephone, bulletin board, policing the area, keeping weapons clean, parade ground formations, and a training schedule. To compensate, there were hot showers and nearly unlimited opportunities for scrounging.

Pvt. Alton More was the master scrounger in Easy Company. He found a way to get into the main supply depot near Utah. On his first foray, he returned carrying two cardboard boxes, one of fruit cocktail and the other of pineapple. "It tasted like the best thing you ever ate in your life," Harry Welsh remembered, "and I was never so sick in my life. We weren't used to that food." Thereafter, More brought in a more varied diet from his daily expeditions.

General Taylor stopped by, to congratulate the company on its lonely stand on the far right flank at Carentan. The men wanted to know what about his "give me three days and nights of hard fighting and I'll have you out of here" pre-D-Day promise.

Gen. Omar Bradley appeared for an awards ceremony. Standing on a little platform in the field, he read out the citations for the Distinguished Service Cross for eleven men, including General Taylor, Chaplain Maloney, and Lieutenant Winters. "That was a proud moment," Winters said. He recalled that after the ceremony, Bradley had the troops break formation and gather round him. "Are there any reporters here, any correspondents?" he asked. "If there are, I don't want this recorded.

"What I want to say," he went on, "is that things are going very well, and there is a possibility at this point, as I see it, that we could be in Berlin by Christmas."

Winters thought to himself, God, I can make it till Christmas. Just let me go home for Christmas.

On July 1, Winters received news of his promotion to captain. On July 10, the company moved down to Utah Beach, to prepare to embark for England. "Seeing the beach for the first time," Winters recalled, "with that armada of ships as far as the eye could see in every direction, and seeing the American flag on the beach, left me feeling weak in the knees for a few moments and brought tears to my eyes."

Private More pulled one last raid on that vast supply dump. He broke into the main motor pool and stole a motorcycle, complete with sidecar. He hid it behind a sand dune, then asked Captain Winters if he could put it on the LST and take it back to England. "Up to you," Winters replied.

The next day, as the company marched up the ramp of the gigantic LST, More moved the motorcycle up the inland side of the forward dune. He had arranged with Malarkey for a hand signal when everyone was aboard and it was time to go. Malarkey tipped off the Navy personnel. At the proper moment, standing on the ramp, Malarkey gave the signal and More came roaring over the dune and up the ramp.

On the LST, the skipper said to Welsh, "Lieutenant, what would your men like to have: chicken or steak? ice cream? eggs?" Sailing in convoy, the LST got back to Southampton the night of July 12. The next morning, a train took the men (except More and Malarkey, who rode their motorcycle) to Aldbourne. "It was wonderful to be back," Winters remembered. "Everybody was glad to see us. It was just like home."

7 HEALING WOUNDS AND SCRUBBED MISSIONS

* ALDBOURNE

July 13-Septemberl6,1944

"It's the only time I ever saw the Army do anything right," Gordon Carson said. "They put us on those LSTs, brought us into Southampton, took us back to Aldbourne, gave us two sets of complete, all-new uniforms, all our back pay, $150 or more, and a seven-day pass, and by 7, 8 in the morning we're on our way to London."

The men of Easy have little memory of that week in London. The American paratroopers were the first soldiers to return to England from Normandy; the papers had been full of their exploits; everyone in town wanted to buy them a meal or a beer— for the first day or so. But the young heroes overdid it. They drank too much, they broke too many windows and chairs, they got into too many fights with nonparatroopers. It was one of the wildest weeks in London's history. One newspaper compared the damage done to the Blitz. A joke went around: the MPs in London were going to receive a presidential citation for duty above and beyond during the week the 101st was in town.

Not everyone went to London. Harry Welsh traveled to Ireland, to see relatives. Winters stayed in Aldbourne to rest, reflect, and write letters to the parents of men killed or wounded. Gordon and Lipton, after recovery from their wounds, went to Scotland to see the sights.

In the hospital after his evacuation from Normandy, Gordon had been given skin grafts, then had his leg enclosed in a cast that ran from hip to toe. He was the only combat wounded man in his ward; the others were ill or had been hurt in accidents in England. He was therefore "an object of great respect. They were in awe of me." Three times officers came in

to pin a Purple Heart on his pillow. "I would lower my eyes modestly and murmur thanks to the small group who had gathered to see the hero." Then he would hide the medal and wait for the next one.

After eight weeks in the hospital, he returned to E Company. (It was Airborne policy to return recovered men to their original company; in the infantry, when wounded became fit for duty, they went wherever they were needed. The former was, in the opinion of every paratrooper, one of the wisest things the Airborne did; the latter policy was, in everyone's opinion, one of the dumbest things the Army did.)

Sergeant Talbert got back to Easy at the same time Gordon did. As his wound had been inflicted by Private Smith's bayonet, rather than by a German, he was disqualified from receiving the Purple Heart. Gordon told him not to worry, he could fix him up with one of his extra ribbons. The 3rd platoon got together and conducted an appropriate ceremony for Talbert. Gordon and Rogers had written a poem to immortalize Talbert, Smith, "and the bayonet that came between them." The title was "The Night of the Bayonet"; fortunately for posterity, the poem has not survived (or at least the authors refused to give it to me for this book). The indignant Talbert declared, "I could have shot the little bastard six times as he lunged toward me, but I didn't think we could spare a man at the time."

Some of the wounded were worried about permanent disability. Malarkey found this out when he and Don Moone were sitting in the mess hall as Lipton passed by. "Hi, crip," Malarkey called out. Lipton turned and grabbed the two men by their throats, lifted them from their chairs, and declared that he would take them on one at a time or together. They went pale and said they didn't mean anything by the crack. Later Lipton returned, red faced, and said he was sorry to lose his temper, but he feared that the wound to his hand had inflicted permanent damage that would prevent him from playing college football.

Underlying the release of tension in London, or Gordon's feeble attempts at some humor, was the reality these men had faced and their apprehension about what they would be facing.

Sergeant Martin looked around the 1st platoon barracks the first night back from Normandy, and half the men who had been there from September 1943 to May 1944 were gone. He said to Guarnere, "Jesus, Bill, here we've got a half a hut full of guys, and we aren't even started in the war yet. We don't have a Chinaman's chance of ever getting out of this thing."

"If we lost half the barracks in one goddamn little maneuver in Normandy," Guarnere replied, "forget it, we'll never get home."

They took their leave in Scotland, where they got tattoos, figuring what the hell, "losing that many men in one little deal like that and the whole war ahead of us, why not?"

Pvt. David Kenyon Webster had jumped with 2nd Battalion's HQ Company on D-Day, been wounded a few days later, evacuated to England, and returned to Aldbourne before the battalion returned. He hid in the shadows of the Red Cross hut as "the thin, tired column of survivors marched into the area," hoping that no one would look him in the face and ask, "Where the hell were you, Webster, when the Krauts made the big counterattack the other side of Carentan and F Company gave ground and E Company's flank was exposed?"

His embarrassment aside, Webster was overjoyed to see his friends return. "You know everybody in the Battalion by sight," he wrote, "if not by name, and you feel like part of a big family. You are closer to these men than you will ever be to any civilians."

He applied for a transfer back to E Company, because with HQ Company he had been an ammunition carrier most of the time, had fired his machine-gun only once in Normandy, and "I craved action. I wanted to get the war over with; I wanted to fight as a rifleman in a line company." He became a member of 1st platoon.

Webster's attitude was, as he wrote his parents, "I am living on borrowed time. I do not think I shall live through the next jump. If I don't come back, try not to take it too hard. I wish I could persuade you to regard death as casually as we do over here. In the heat of battle you expect casualties, you expect somebody to be killed and you are not surprised when a friend is machinegunned in the face. You have to keep going. It's not like civilian life, where sudden death is so unexpected."

When his mother wrote to express her considerable alarm at this attitude (and her worries about his younger brother, who had just joined the paratroopers), Webster was blunt in his reply: "Would you prefer for somebody else's son to die in the mud? You want us to win the war, but you apparently don't want to have your sons involved in the actual bloodshed. That's a strangely contradictory attitude.

"Somebody has to get in and kill the enemy. Somebody has to be in the infantry and the paratroops. If the country all had your attitude, nobody would fight, everybody would be in the Quartermaster. And what kind of a country would that be?"

Lipton felt that "when men are in combat, the inevitability of it takes over. They are there, there is nothing they can do to change that, so they accept it. They immediately become callused to the smell of death, the bodies, the destruction, the killing, the danger. Enemy bodies and wounded don't affect them. Their own wounded and the bodies of their dead friends make only a brief impression, and in that impression is a fleeting feeling of triumph or accomplishment

that it was not them. [Thank God it was him and not me is a feeling common to many combat soldiers when their comrades fall; later it can produce guilt feelings.] There is still work to be done, a war to be won, and they think about that."

Once out of the line, back in a rest camp, Lipton goes on, "they begin to think. They remember how their friends were wounded or killed. They remember times when they were inches or seconds from their own death. Far from combat, death and destruction are no longer inevitable—the war might end, the missions might be cancelled. With these thoughts men become nervous about going back in. As soon as they are back in, however, those doubts and that nervousness are gone. The callousness, the cold-bloodedness, the calmness return. Once more there's a job to be done, the old confidence comes back, the thrill of combat returns, and the drive to excel and win takes over again."

If that sounds idealized, it can't be helped; that is the way Lipton and many others in Easy, and many others in the Airborne and throughout the American Army—and come to that, in the German and Red Armies too—fought the war. But by no means does Lipton's analysis apply to all soldiers. Millions of men fought in World War II. No one man can speak for all of them. Still, Lipton's insights into the emotional state of the combat soldier provide guidance into attempting to understand how men put up with combat.

Coming out of Normandy, many of the men of Easy were fighting mad at the Germans and absolutely convinced the Allies would win the war. "I hope to go back soon," Webster told his parents, "for I owe the Germans several bullets and as many hand grenades as I can throw." The Germans had cut the throats of paratroops caught in their harnesses, bayoneted them, stripped them, shot them, wiped out an aid station. Because of these atrocities, "we do not intend to show them mercy." As to the outcome, "after seeing that beachhead, a breathtaking panorama of military might, I know we cannot lose. As for the paratroopers, they are out for blood. I hope to be back in on the kill."

Promotions were made. Welsh and Compton moved up from 2nd to 1st lieutenant. Regiment needed new junior officers, to replace casualties; Winters recommended Sgt. James Diel, who had acted as company 1st sergeant in Normandy, for a battlefield commission. Colonel Sink approved, so Diel became a 2nd lieutenant and was assigned to another company in the 506th. Winters moved Lipton up to replace him as company 1st sergeant. Leo Boyle became staff sergeant at Company HQ. Bill Guarnere became a staff sergeant. Don Malarkey, Warren Muck, Paul Rogers, and Mike Ranney jumped from private to sergeant (Ranney had been a sergeant but was busted to PFC. during the Sobel mutiny). Pat Christenson, Walter Gordon, John Plesha, and Lavon Reese were promoted from private to corporal.

Webster was an aspiring novelist, an avid reader of the best in English literature, a Harvard man, a combat veteran who praised and damned the Army on the basis of personal observation and keen insight. His long letters home provide snapshots of some of the men of Easy Company, following its first combat experience. Pvt. Roy Cobb, who had been hit on Harry Welsh's plane over Normandy and thus did not make the jump, "was an old soldier with some nine years to his credit. He managed to keep one long, easy jump ahead of the army. His varied and colorful wartime career had thus far included: 1. An assault landing in Africa with the 1st Armored Division, 2. A siege of yellow jaundice and an evacuation to America on a destroyer after his troopship had been torpedoed, 3. Several months' training at the Parachute School, 4. A timely leg wound from flak over Normandy. Tall, lean, thirsty, and invariably good-natured."

The first squad of the 1st platoon was "headed by little Johnny Martin, an excellent soldier, a premier goldbrick, and a very fast thinker who could handle any combat or garrison problem that arose, always had the equipment, the food, and the good living quarters."

The second squad leader was "Bull" Randleman, who was constantly bitching but who could "be very G.I., as I once discovered when he turned me in to the first sergeant for laughing at him when he told me to take off my wool-knit hat in the mess hall. Bull was considered a very acceptable noncom by the officers, who frowned on Sergeant Martin's flip attitude."

Webster's squad leader was Sgt. Robert Rader. "I don't think Rader ever goldbricked in his life; he was the ideal garrison soldier, the type that knows all the commands for close-order drill and takes pride in a snappy manual of arms, that is impatient with men who ride the sick book and slip away from night problems."

The assistant squad leaders, Cpls. William Dukeman, Pat Christenson, and Don Hoobler, "generally let the buck sergeants do the work. Dukeman had a way of beating night problems and skipping off to London every weekend that was truly marvelous to behold." Christenson was Randleman's assistant, which Webster considered a "snap job" because Randleman, like Rader, was very conscientious. Christenson was "of medium height and athletic build, with curly golden hair, E Company's only glamour boy. Hoobler was his opposite in every way. Hoobler was the only person I met who actually enjoyed fighting; he got a kick out of war. A happy-go-lucky, gold-toothed boy, he volunteered for all the patrols in combat and all the soft jobs in garrison. He was one of the best and most popular soldiers in the company." In Webster's opinion (and he had been around a lot as a member of HQ Company), the members of 1st platoon, E Company, were "younger, more intelligent than those in other companies." For the first time in the Army, and to his delight, he found men who talked about going to college after the war, including Corporal Dukeman and Sergeants Muck, Carson, and Malarkey.

All these men were what Webster called "new-army non-coms." Their average age was twenty-one. They did not know the Articles of War backward and forward, they didn't care about "the Book that ruled the lives of so many regular-army men." They mingled with their men, they had not served in Panama or Hawaii or the Philippines. "They were civilian soldiers. They were the ones who saved America."

Webster was also impressed by some of the officers. He described Winters as "a sizable, very athletic individual who believed in calisthenics in garrison and aggressiveness in combat." Welsh was now Winters' executive officer; Webster described him as "small, dark, lazy, quick-thinking, the only officer in the 2nd Battalion who could give an interesting and informative current events' lecture." He thought Lieutenant Compton, leader of the 2nd platoon, a friendly and genial man who was everyone's favorite. He had convinced the college-bound group that UCLA was the only place to go for an education.

First platoon was led by Lt. Thomas Peacock, a replacement officer. Webster wrote that "he always obeyed an order without question, argument, or thought." Webster felt that Peacock "was highly esteemed by his superior officers and cordially disliked by his men. He was too G.I." Once the platoon came back to Aldbourne from a ten-hour cross-country march; Peacock made the men play a baseball game, because that was what was on the schedule. "Peacock believed in the book; he was in his element in Normandy as battalion supply officer, but as a platoon leader his men hated even to look at him."

Peacock's assistant was Lt. Bob Brewer. Very young, a superb athlete, Webster described him as "overgrown, boyish."

In the summer of 1944, Easy Company had excellent billets. The officers were in a lovely brick house near the village green; in back there were stables, which the men cleaned out and used. The stables consisted of a series of box stalls in each of which four men lived in comfort and a dark, welcome privacy. There they could hide,- so many did so when night training exercises resumed that Winters was forced to make a habit of checking the individual stalls to be certain no one was hiding behind the bunks or standing in the clothes hanging from the hooks. Beyond cover and concealment, each stall had a stove, a large, thick, soundproof door, and a high, airy ceiling. There was sufficient room to hang uniforms and barracks bags and still play poker or craps.

For entertainment, the men listened to Armed Forces Network (AFN) radio. It was on from 0700 to 2300 with an occasional rebroadcast of a Bob Hope show, BBC news every hour, and swing music. The men much preferred it to BBC broadcasts, even though they had to endure SHAEF exhortations to keep clean, salute more often, or refrain from fighting. ("Remember, men, if you're looking for a fight, wait till you meet the Germans!"

When they didn't like the tune being played on AFN, they could turn to German radio and listen to Axis Sally and Lord Haw Haw. These propagandists played popular tunes, intermixed with messages that were so crudely done they always brought a laugh.

In addition to the radio, there were movies twice a week, usually cowboy thrillers, seldom a recent release. Occasionally a United Services Organization (USO) show came to the area, but generally the big stars stuck to London.

Glenn Miller was an exception. For Malarkey, "the big thrill of the summer" came on July 25, when he was one of six men in the company to get a ticket to a concert given by Miller and his Army Air Force Band in Newbury. Forty-seven years later, Malarkey could remember the program; Miller started with "Moonlight Serenade" "the most thought provoking theme song ever written," according to Malarkey), followed by "In the Mood."

On weekends, when they were not in a marshaling area or on an alert, the men got passes. Malarkey and More would jump on their motorcycle and head for the south coast—Brighton, Bournemouth, or Southampton—for swimming and sun bathing. Upon returning from one such excursion, they got a message from Captain Sobel. He wanted Malarkey and More to know that he knew they had the motorcycle and that it was stolen, but he was not going to do anything about it, except that he intended to confiscate it when the company next went into combat. Malarkey figured that Sobel's relatively reasonable attitude was a result of his unwillingness to confront Captain Winters.

What was not so pleasant as the billets or the radio or the weekends was the training. "I got the impression we were being punished for going to Normandy," Webster wrote. There was a dreary list of parades, inspections, field problems, night problems, and trips to the firing range.

Winters had smuggled some live ammunition back to Aldbourne from Normandy. He used it to give the replacements the feel of advancing in an attack under covering fire. There was a risk involved, obviously to the men on maneuvers, but also to Winters himself, as it was unauthorized, and if anyone had been wounded, it would have been his fault. But he felt the risk was worthwhile, because he had learned on June 6 at Brecourt Manor that the key to a successful attack was to lay down a good, steady base of fire and then advance right under it. Done correctly, the job got accomplished with few casualties.

The training exercises were necessary in order to give the replacements in the company (nearly half the company was made up of recruits by this time, just over from the States after completing jump school), the feel of live fire, and to integrate them into the company. But, necessary or not, they were hated. Still, compared to the 1943 experience in

Aldbourne, the summer of 1944 was a joy. Malarkey explained: "We were no longer subject to the discipline and vindictiveness of Herbert Sobel and Sergeant Evans. With Dick Winters fairness and compassion replaced the unreasonableness of his predecessor. The esprit de corps in the company increased tremendously."

It helped morale that, however rigorous the training program, Easy was spending the summer in Aldbourne rather than Normandy. "I thank God and General Eisenhower that we returned to England," Webster wrote his parents, "whenever I think of the Pacific boys, living in jungles and on barren coral reefs, and of the infantry in France, grinding forward without music or entertainment of any kind until they are killed or wounded." All the men in Aldbourne were keenly aware that the 4th Infantry Division, their partners on D-Day, was still on the line, taking casualties, sleeping in foxholes, eating K rations, never bathing. Rumors were constant. On August 10, Eisenhower himself inspected the division, which convinced everyone that the next combat jump was coming immediately, a conviction reinforced on August 12 when brand-new equipment was handed around.

Some were sure it was off for the South Pacific, others thought India, others Berlin. Those rumors were ridiculous, of course, but what fed them was the fact that the division made plans for sixteen operations that summer, each one of which was canceled. The problem was that through to the end of July, the front line in Normandy was nearly static; then Bradley's First Army broke out at St. Lo, Patton's Third Army went over to Normandy, and the American ground forces overran proposed drop zones before the paratroopers could complete their plans and make the jump.

On August 17, Easy was alerted and briefed for a drop near Chartres, to set up roadblocks to cut off supplies and reinforcements for the Germans in Normandy, and to block their escape route. The company, along with the rest of the battalion, took buses to the marshaling area, at Membury airdrome, outside Aldbourne. They were fed steak and eggs, fried chicken, white bread, milk, ice cream. They checked their weapons and equipment, went over their briefing, discussed their objective.

The recruits were excited, tense, eager, nervous. The veterans were worried. "I hate to think of going again," Webster wrote in his diary. What worried him most of all was the thought of being killed in his chute as he came down, swinging helplessly in the air, or getting caught in a tree or on a telephone pole and being bayoneted or shot before he could free himself. He had acquired a .45 automatic pistol, but it was no match for a distant machine-gun. He felt that if he could live through the jump, he could take the rest as it came.

Talking to the subdued veterans around him at the airdrome, he noticed that "the boys aren't as enthusiastic or anxious to get it over with as they were before Normandy. Nobody wants to fight anymore."

Some hope was expressed that with Patton racing across France, the Allies on the offensive in Italy, the Red Army moving forward relentlessly on the Eastern Front, and the Wehrmacht high command in turmoil after the July 20 attempt on Hitler's life, Germany might collapse any day. Most of the men would have welcomed such a development, but not Webster, who wrote his parents:

"I cannot understand why you hope for a quick end of the war. Unless we take the horror of battle to Germany itself, unless we fight in their villages, blowing up their houses, smashing open their wine cellars, killing some of their livestock for food, unless we litter their streets with horribly rotten German corpses as was done in France, the Germans will prepare for war, unmindful of its horrors. Defeat must be brought into Germany itself before this mess can come to a proper end; a quick victory now, a sudden collapse, will leave the countryside relatively intact and the people thirsty for revenge. I want the war to end as quickly as anybody wishes, but I don't want the nucleus of another war left whole."

August 19 was D-Day for Chartres. It was scheduled to be a daylight drop. All around Membury that morning, men were getting up at first light, after a more-or-less sleepless night spent mainly sweating on their cots, imagining all sorts of possibilities. They dressed silently. They were detached and gloomy. No one was cutting Mohawk haircuts. There were no shouts of "Look out, Hitler! Here we come!" It was more a case of "Momma, if you ever prayed for me, pray for me now."

Joyous news over the radio! Patton's Third Army tanks had just taken the DZ at Chartres! The jump was canceled! The men shouted. They jumped up and down. They laughed. They blessed George Patton and his tankers. They cheered and danced. That afternoon, they returned to Aldbourne.

On Sunday morning, August 28, the 506th held a memorial service for the men killed in Normandy. When it was announced that the men would have to give up their Sunday morning, there was terrific moaning and groaning; as one trooper put it, he would honor the dead on Saturday morning or all day Monday, but he'd be damned if he'd honor the dead on his own time. But that was just talk, a soldier exercising his inalienable right to grouse. He put on his class A uniform and went along with the rest.

Easy Company was taken by buses to regimental HQ on the estate of Lord Wills at Littlecote, outside Chilton Foliat, where it joined the other companies on a soft green field. A band played the dead march in such a slow cadence that everyone got out of step, but once the regiment was in place, the 2,000 young American warriors spread like a solid brown carpet on the lawn, the grand castle before them, it made an inspiring sight.

Chaplain McGee gave a talk, saying the dead really were heroic, America really was worth dying for, those who died did not die in vain, and so on. The men were more impressed by the regimental prayer, written by Lt. James Morton and read by the chaplain:

"Almighty God, we kneel to Thee and ask to be the instrument of Thy fury in smiting the evil forces that have visited death, misery, and debasement on the people of the earth. ... Be with us, God, when we leap from our planes into the dark abyss and descend in parachutes into the midst of enemy fire. Give us iron will and stark courage as we spring from the harnesses of our parachutes to seize arms for battle. The legions of evil are many, Father; grace our arms to meet and defeat them in Thy name and in the name of the freedom and dignity of man. . . . Let our enemies who have lived by the sword turn from their violence lest they perish by the sword. Help us to serve Thee gallantly and to be humble in victory."

General Taylor came next, but his speech was drowned out by a formation of C-47s passing overhead. Then the roster of the dead and missing was read out. It seemed to drone on endlessly— there were 414—and each name brought a sharp intake of breath from the surviving members of the soldier's squad, platoon, company. Each time he heard the name of a man he knew, Webster thought of "his family sitting quietly in a home that will never be full again." The reading ceased abruptly with a private whose name began with Z. The regiment marched off the field to the tune of "Onward Christian Soldiers."

The 101st Airborne Division was now a part of the First Allied Airborne Army, which included the U.S. 17th, 82nd, and 101st Airborne (together the U.S. units constituted the XVIII Airborne Corps), the Polish 1st Parachute Brigade, and the British 1st and 6th Airborne Divisions plus the 52nd Lowlanders (air-transported). Gen. Matthew Ridgway commanded the XVIII Corps; Gen. Lewis Brereton commanded the Airborne Army. General Taylor remained in command of the 101st; Gen. James Gavin commanded the 82nd.

All these generals, and their senior subordinates, were itching to get the Airborne Army into action, but every time they made a plan, briefed the men, transported them to their marshaling areas, and prepared to load up, the ground troops overran the DZ and the mission was canceled.

It happened again at the end of August. On the thirtieth, at midnight, Taylor ordered company formations. The men were told to pack their bags for an 0800 departure for Membury. At the airdrome, along with all the other activity, a money exchange took place; English pounds for Belgian francs. Thus the men knew the objective even before the briefing (finance officers told those who did not have a pound note, "tough").

The DZ was to be near Tournai, Belgium, just across the border from the French city of Lille. The aim was to open a path for the British Second Army in its drive across the Escaut Canal and into Belgium. Two days of intense briefings, hectic preparations, and marvelous food followed. But on September 1 the Guards Armored Division of the British Second Army captured Tournai, and the operation was canceled. There was the same relief as when the Chartres drop was canceled, but the determination of the high command to get the paratroopers into the action was so obvious to the men that even as they rode the bus back to Aldbourne, they acknowledged to each other that one of these times they would not be coming back from the airport.

The Allied armies continued to roll through France and Belgium. The Airborne Army's high command grew ever more desperate to get into the battle. It had the best troops in ETO, the best commanders, the highest morale, unmatched mobility, outstanding equipment. Officers and men were proved veterans who wanted another chance to show what paratroopers could do in modern war. The Airborne Army was by far Eisenhower's greatest unused asset. He wanted to keep the momentum of the advance going, he wanted to seize the moment to deliver a decisive blow before the Germans could recover from their six-week-long retreat through France. When Montgomery proposed to utilize the Airborne Army in a complex, daring, and dangerous but potentially decisive operation to get across the Lower Rhine River, Eisenhower quickly agreed, to the immense delight of the Airborne Army command.

Code name was MARKET-GARDEN. The objective was to get British Second Army, with the Guards Armored Division in the van, through Holland and across the Rhine on a line Eindhoven-Son-Veghel-Grave-Nijmegen-Arnhem. The British tanks would move north along a single road, following a carpet laid down by the American and British paratroopers, who would seize and hold the many bridges between the start line and Arnhem.

The British 1st Airborne Division, reinforced by the Poles, would be at the far end of the proposed line of advance, at Arnhem. The 82nd Airborne would take and hold Nijmegen. The 101st's task was to land north of Eindhoven, with the objective of capturing that town while simultaneously moving through Son toward Veghel and Grave, to open the southern end of the line of advance. The task of the 2nd Battalion of the 506th PIR was to take the bridge over the Wilhelmina Canal at Son intact, then join the 3rd Battalion in attacking Eindhoven, where it would hold the city and its bridges until the Guards Armored Division passed through.

It was a complicated but brilliant plan. Success would depend on execution of almost split-second timing, achieving surprise, hard fighting, and luck. If everything worked, the payoff would be British armored forces on the north German plain, on the far side of the Rhine, with an open road to Berlin. If the operation failed, the cost would be the

squandering of the asset of the Airborne Army, failure to open the port of Antwerp (Eisenhower had to agree to put off the commitment of troops needed to open that port in order to mount MARKET-GARDEN), a consequent supply crisis throughout ETO, and a dragging out of the war through the winter of 1944-45.

In addition to putting off the opening of Antwerp, Eisenhower had to stop Patton east of Paris to get sufficient fuel for the British Second Army to mount MARKET-GARDEN. In short, the operation was a roll of the dice, with the Allies putting all their chips into the bet.

On September 14, Easy took the buses back to the Membury marshaling area. On the fifteenth, the company got its briefing. It was reassuring. The men were told this was to be the largest airborne landing in history, three divisions strong. It would be a daylight landing. Unlike Normandy, it would come as a surprise to the Germans. Flak would be light, the initial ground opposition almost nonexistent.

In the marshaling area, waiting to go, there was a great deal of gambling. One of the recruits, Pvt. Cecil Pace, was a fanatic gambler. To the chagrin of the veterans, he won $1,000 at craps.

Colonel Sink gave the regiment a pep talk. "You'll see the British tanks," he said, "some of them Shermans and the others Cromwells. Don't mistake the Cromwells for German tanks.

"And those Guards divisions—they're good outfits. Best in the British army. You can't get in 'em unless you've got a 'Sir' in front of your name and a pedigree a yard long. But don't laugh at 'em. They're good fighters.

"Another thing," he went on, rubbing his face. "I don't want to see any of you running around in Holland in wool-knit caps. General Taylor caught a 506th man wearing one of those hats in Normandy and gave me hell for it. Now, I don't want to catch hell, see, and I know you don't, so if you've got to wear a wool-knit cap, keep it under your helmet. And don't let General Taylor catch you with that helmet off.

"I know you men can do all right, so I don't have to talk about fighting. This is a good enough outfit to win a Presidential Citation in Normandy. Now, you old men look after the replacements, and we'll all get along fine."

Webster recorded that it was always a pleasure to listen to Sink, because he had a sensible, realistic, humorous approach to combat. General Taylor was his opposite,- in Webster's opinion Taylor had a "repellently optimistic, cheerleading attitude. Colonel Sink knew the men hated to fight. Up to the end of the war, General Taylor persisted in thinking that his boys were anxious to kill Germans. We preferred Colonel Sink."

On September 16 Private Strohl, who had been in the hospital since June 13, got a one-day pass from the doctors. He hitched a ride to Aldbourne, where he ran into Captain Sobel, who was ferrying baggage back to Membury. Sobel told Strohl that the company was about to go into action; Strohl said he wanted to join up and asked for a ride to the airdrome.

Sobel warned him, "You're going to be AWOL." Strohl responded that he did not think he would get into big trouble by choosing to go into combat with his company, so Sobel told him to hop in.

"It was a stupid thing to do," Strohl said four decades later. "I was as weak as a pussy cat." But he wasn't going to let his buddies go into action without him. He got himself equipped and climbed into a C-47.

Popeye Wynn, who had been shot in the butt helping to destroy the battery at Brecourt Manor on June 6, had been operated on and was recuperating in a hospital in Wales when he was told that if he was absent from his company for more than ninety days, when he was listed fit for combat, he would be assigned to a different outfit. Wynn wanted none of that. He persuaded a sergeant who was in charge of releasing the patients to send him back to Aldbourne with light-duty papers. He arrived on September 1, threw away the papers, and rejoined the 3rd platoon.

He was not fully recovered. During the flight to Holland, he stood up in the back of the stick, as he was too sore to sit. But he was there, where he wanted to be, going into combat with his buddies in Easy Company.

8 "HELL'S HIGHWAY" *

HOLLAND

September 17'-October 1,1944

It was a beautiful end-of-summer day in northwest Europe, with a bright blue sky and no wind. The Allied airborne attack came as a surprise to the Germans; there were no Luftwaffe planes to contest the air armada. Once over Holland, there was some antiaircraft fire, which intensified five minutes from the DZ, but there was no breaking of formation or evasive action by the pilots as there had been over Normandy.

Easy came down exactly where it was supposed to be. So did virtually all the companies in the division. The landing was soft, on freshly plowed fields, in the memory of the men of Easy the softest they ever experienced. Webster wrote his parents, "It was the most perfectly flat jump field I've ever seen. Basically, Holland is just a big, glorified jump field." The official history of the 101st declared that this was "the most successful landing that the Division had ever had, in either training or combat."1

1. Rapport and Northwood, Rendezvous with Destiny, 269.

The only problem Winters could recall was the need to get off the DZ as soon as possible to avoid getting hit by falling equipment and landing gliders. "It was just raining equipment," he said: "Helmets, guns, bundles." Malarkey remembered running off the field to the assembly area (marked by smoke grenades). He heard a crash overhead; two gliders had collided and came plummeting to earth. There was no German opposition on the ground; the company assembled quickly and set off toward its objective.

The objective was the bridge over the Wilhelmina Canal at Son. The route was over a north-south road that ran from Eindhoven to Veghel to Nijmegen to Arnhem. The road was part asphalt, part brick, wide enough for two automobiles to pass each other but a tight squeeze for two trucks. Like most roads in Holland, it was a meter or so above the surrounding fields, meaning that anything moving on it stood out against the horizon.

The road was the key to Operation MARKET-GARDEN. The task for the American airborne troops was to take control of the road and its many bridges to open a path for the British XXX Corps, with the Guards Armored Division in the van, to drive through to Arnhem and thus over the Lower Rhine River.

Easy landed about 30 kilometers behind the front line, some 15 kilometers north of Eindhoven. The 506th's initial objective was Son, then Eindhoven, which meant the initial march was south. The regiment moved out with 1st Battalion going through the field to the west of the road, 2nd Battalion down the road, 3rd Battalion in reserve. Second Battalion order of march was D Company leading, then E Company, Battalion HQ, and F Company following.

The column entered Son. The residents were drawn up on each side of the road, as for a parade. Unlike Normandy, where the French villagers mainly stayed out of sight, the Dutch were ecstatic to be liberated. The parish priest, Hussen of Son, handed out cigars. Orange flags, forbidden by the German occupiers, flew from the windows. People gave the passing paratroopers apples and other fruit. Bartenders opened their taps and handed out glasses of beer. Officers had a hard time keeping the men moving.

Emerging from Son, less than a kilometer from the bridge, the column was fired on by a German 88 and by a machine-gun, both shooting straight down the road. There were no casualties. D Company covered the right side of the road, E Company the left. They pushed forward, firing rifles and lobbing mortar shells, which silenced the opposition. But the Germans had done their job, delaying the advance long enough to complete their preparations for blowing the bridge.

When the lead American elements were 25 meters or less from the bridge, it blew in their faces. There was a hail of debris of wood and stone. Winters, with Nixon beside him, hit the ground, big pieces of timber and large rocks raining down around him. Winters thought to himself, What a hell of a way to die in combat!

Colonel Sink ordered 2nd Battalion to lay down a covering fire while 1st Battalion looked for a way to get over the canal. Cpl. Gordon Carson of Easy spotted a couple of waterlogged row-boats on the far side and decided on immediate action. He stripped stark naked, made a perfect racing dive into the water, swam across, and fetched a boat that carried some men from the first squad about halfway over the canal before it sank. Other men from 1st Battalion, more practical, took the doors off a nearby barn and with the help of Sergeant Lipton and several E Company men laid them across the bridge pilings. The German rear guard, its mission accomplished, withdrew. Engineers attached to the regiment improved the footbridge over the canal, but it was so weak that it could bear only a few men at a time. It took the battalion hours to get across.

It was getting dark. Sink got word that the Guards Armored Division had been held up by 88s a few kilometers south of Eindhoven, and he did not know the state of German defenses in the city. He ordered a halt for the night.

The platoon leaders posted outposts. Those not on duty slept in haystacks, woodsheds, whatever they could find. Privates Hoobler and Webster of Sergeant Rader's 2nd squad, 1st platoon, found a farmhouse. The Dutch farmer welcomed them. He led them through the barn, already occupied with regimental Headquarters Company ("You shoot 'em, we loot 'em" was its motto), who resented their presence. On to the kitchen, where the Dutchman gave them half a dozen Mason jars filled with preserved meat, peaches, and cherries. Hoobler gave him some cigarettes, and Webster handed him a D-ration chocolate bar. He sucked in the smoke greedily—the first decent cigarette he had enjoyed in five years—but saved the candy for his little boy, who had never tasted chocolate. Webster decided on the spot that he liked the Dutch much better than the British or French.

In the morning the march resumed, with 2nd Battalion following 1st Battalion on the road south. On the edge of Eindhoven, a city of 100,000 that rose abruptly from the rich black soil, Colonel Sink spread his regiment, sending 2nd Battalion out to the left, with Easy on the far left flank. Winters gave the order over his radio: "Lieutenant Brewer, put your scouts out and take off." Brewer spread 1st platoon out in textbook formation, scouts to the front, no bunching up, moving fast. The platoon advanced through truck gardens and freshly plowed fields toward the houses on the edge of the city.

There was only one thing wrong. Brewer was in front, with his map case at his side, his binoculars hanging around his neck, obviously an officer. Worse, he was well over 6 feet tall. Gordon thought he looked like a field marshal on parade. He was a perfect target.

Winters shouted over his radio, "Get back. Drop back. Drop back!" but Brewer could not hear him. He kept moving ahead. Every man in the company, every man in battalion, could see what was sure to happen.

A shot rang out. A sniper had fired from one of the houses. Brewer went down "like a tree felled by an expert lumberman." He had been shot in the throat just below the jaw line. Gordon and a couple of other enlisted men ran over to him, even though their orders were to keep moving and leave any wounded for the medics. They looked down at Brewer, bleeding profusely from his wound.

"Aw, hell, forget him," someone said. "He's gone, he's gonna die." They moved on, leaving Brewer lying there.

He heard it all, and never forgot it, and never let the men forget it when he recovered and rejoined the company.

After that there was only light, scattered resistance, mainly from snipers. The 506th got into Eindhoven without further difficulty. The Dutch were out to welcome them. Many spoke English.

"So nice to see you!" they called out. "Glad you have come!" "We have waited so long!" They brought out chairs, hot tea, fresh milk, apples, pears, peaches. Orange flags and orange armbands hidden for years blossomed on all the houses and shirtsleeves. The applause was nearly deafening; the men had to shout to each other to be heard. "It was the most sincere thanksgiving demonstration any of us were to see," Webster wrote, "and it pleased us very much." It took most of the rest of the day to push through the crowds to secure the bridges over the Dommel River. It did not matter,- the British tankers did not show up until late that afternoon. They promptly stopped, set up housekeeping, and proceeded to make tea.

Winters set up outposts. Those not on duty joined the celebration. They posed for pictures, signed autographs (some signing "Monty," others "Eisenhower"), drank a shot or two of cognac, ate marvelous meals of fresh vegetables, roast veal, applesauce, and milk. The civilians continued to mob them as if they were movie stars. Winters still shakes his head at the memory: "It was just unbelievable."

The company spent the night in hastily dug foxholes in Tongelre, a suburb on the east side of Eindhoven. On the morning of September 19, Winters got orders to march east, to Helmond, in order to broaden the Eindhoven section of the corridor and to make contact with the enemy. A squadron of Cromwell tanks from the Hussars accompanied Easy. Some of the men rode on the backs of the Cromwells. The tanks, Webster wrote, "barked, spluttered, clanked, and squeaked in their accustomed manner as we set out."

Winters led a forced march to Nuenen, about 5 kilometers, encountering no opposition but once again cheering Dutch, offering food and drink. Webster remarked that this was the village in which Vincent Van Gogh had been born. "Who the hell's that?" Rader asked.

Beyond Nuenen, the picnic ended. The Germans had recovered from their surprise and were beginning to mount counterattacks. "Kraut tanks! Kraut tanks!" Webster heard Pvt. Jack Matthews call out.

Oh, Jesus Christ! Webster thought to himself, as he and the others jumped off the Cromwells to dive into a ditch. Less than 400 meters away the first in a column of German tanks "slithered through the bushes like an evil beast."

The 107th Panzerbrigade, stationed in Helmond, was attacking west, toward Nuenen, with some fifty tanks—"more than we had ever seen at one time," Winters recalled. Sergeant Martin saw a German tank almost hidden in a fence row about 100 meters away. A British tank was coming up. Martin ran back to it, climbed aboard, and told the commander there was an enemy tank just below and to the right. The tank continued to move forward. Martin cautioned the commander that if he continued his forward movement the German tank would soon see him.

"I caunt see him, old boy," the commander replied, "and if I caunt see him, I caunt very well shoot at him."

"You'll see him damn soon," Martin shouted as he jumped down and moved away.

The German tank fired. The shell penetrated the British tank's armor. Flame erupted. The crew came flying out of the hatch. The gunner pulled himself out last; he had lost his legs. The tank, now a flaming inferno, continued to move forward on its own, forcing Bull Randleman to move in the direction of the enemy to avoid it. A second British tank came forward. It too got blasted. Altogether four of the British tanks were knocked out by the German 88s. The two remaining tanks turned around and began to move back into Nuenen. Easy Company fell back with them.

Sergeant Rogers had been hit. He was bleeding badly. "They kinda pinked you a little, didn't they, Paul," Lipton said. "Rogers let out a string of profanity that lasted a full minute," Lipton remembered. "Most unusual for him."

Lt. Buck Compton got hit in the buttocks. Medic Eugene Roe went to Compton's aid. Malarkey, Pvt. Ed Heffron, and a couple of others came forward to help.

As Heffron reached to help, Compton looked up and moaned, "She always said my big ass would get in the way."

He looked at the five men gathered around him. "Take off," Compton ordered. "Let the Germans take care of me."

He was such a big man, and the fire was so intense, that the troopers were tempted to do just that. But Malarkey, Guarnere, and Joe Toye pulled a door off a farm outbuilding and laid Compton face down on it. Then they skidded him up the roadside ditch to one of the retreating British tanks and loaded him, face down, onto the back end.

The bullet that hit Compton had gone into the right cheek of his buttocks, out, into the left cheek, and out. Lipton looked at him and couldn't help laughing. "You're the only guy I ever saw in my life that got hit with one bullet and got four holes," he told Compton.

Compton growled, "If I could get off this tank, I'd kill you."

Other men joined Compton on the backs of the withdrawing tanks. Strohl and Gordon, who had been out on the flank, Strohl with a mortar and Gordon with his machine-gun, had to run across an open field to rejoin the outfit. The weight of their weapons slowed them down. Bullets were kicking up the dirt at their feet. There was a 3-foot-high wooden fence between them and the road. "We hurdled it like two horses," Strohl said. Safely on the other side, they paused to catch their breath.

"That's one thing you and I will never do again," Strohl said.

"I don't think we did it the first time," Gordon replied.

They took off again for the tanks, caught up, and Gordon pulled himself onto the back of one. But Strohl was dead beat. He put his hand up; Gordon grabbed it as Strohl passed out. Gordon hauled him aboard and got him secured.

Randleman, who had been in the van, got hit in the shoulder and cut off from his squad. He ducked into a barn. A German soldier came running in behind him. Randleman bayoneted the man, killed him, and covered his body with hay. Then he covered himself up with hay and hid out.

Once in town, men found shelter in buildings that they used as cover to move around and set up some semblance of a return fire. Easy managed to hold up the Germans but was unable to force them back. Sgt. Chuck Grant got hit, among many others. Pvt. Robert Van Klinken was killed by a machine-gun burst when he tried to run forward with a bazooka. Pvt. James Miller, a nineteen-year-old replacement, was killed when a hand grenade went off on his kidneys.

Pvt. Ray Cobb had the shakes. Webster heard Sergeant Martin comforting him "the way a mother talks to a dream-frightened child: 'That's all right, Cobb, don't worry, we're not going back out there. Just relax, Cobb, take it easy.' "

Martin went over to a Cromwell, hiding behind a building. He pointed out the church steeple and asked the commander to take it out, as the Germans were using it as an observation post.

"So sorry, old man, we can't do it," the commander replied. "We have orders not to destroy too much property. Friendly country, you know."

The Germans kept pressing. Their aim was to get through to the highway leading from Eindhoven to Nijmegen—"Hell's Highway," as the 101st named it—and cut it. But they could not get through Nuenen.

Winters had decided to withdraw under the cover of darkness, but before giving ground he wanted a prisoner for interrogation. He called for volunteers for a patrol. No one volunteered. "Sergeant Toye," he called out. "Yes, sir, I'm here." "I need two volunteers."

Toye selected Cpl. James Campbell and a private and set out. They were tripping over British and American bodies as they made their way to a nearby wood. A German soldier fired at them. Toye told his men to stay put. He crept into the woods, went around the German, got behind him, and gently placed his bayonet against the man's back. The soldier gave Toye no trouble. Pushing the German ahead of him, Toye returned through the woods and delivered his prisoner.

The company retreated to Tongelre. Winters noticed that the Dutch people who had been cheering them in the morning, were closing their shutters, taking down the orange flags, looking sad and depressed, expecting the Germans to reoccupy Eindhoven. "We too were feeling badly," Winters remarked. "We were limping back to town."

After getting his men settled down and fed, Winters went to battalion HQ. He found Lieutenant Colonel Strayer and his staff laughing it up, eating a hearty supper, in a jovial mood. Strayer saw Winters, turned, and with a big smile asked, "How did it go today, Winters?"

Tight-lipped, Winters replied, "I had fifteen casualties today and took a hell of a licking." The conversation in the room came to an abrupt stop.

Easy got one break that day. The company bedded down in Tongelre, so it watched, rather than endured, a seventy-plane Luftwaffe bombing mission against the British supply column in Eindhoven. As the Allies had no antiaircraft guns in the city, the Germans were able to drop bright yellow marker flares and then make run after run, dropping their bombs. The city was severely damaged. Over 800 inhabitants were wounded, 227 killed.

The next morning, Strayer moved his other two companies into Nuenen. They found Sergeant Randleman holding the fort.

The German tanks had moved out, to the northwest, toward Son. Company E set up close-in defenses around Eindhoven and stayed there two days.

On the morning of September 11, Winters got orders to mount his men on trucks. The 506th was moving to Uden, on Hell's Highway, to defend the town against a Panzer attack that the Dutch underground warned was coming from Helmond. Regimental HQ Company, with Lt. Col. Charles Chase (the 506th Regimental X.O.) in command, accompanied Easy and three British tanks in an advance party. There were only enough trucks for the 100 or so men of HQ Company plus a platoon of Easy. Winters, Lieutenant Welsh, and Captain Nixon joined the convoy.

The trucks got through Veghel and into Uden without encountering resistance. Winters and Nixon climbed to the top of the church steeple to have a look. When they got to the belfry, the first thing they saw was German tanks cutting the highway between Veghel and Uden. Then Winters spotted a patrol coming toward Uden. He ran down the stairs, gathered the platoon, and said, "Men, there's nothing to get excited about. The situation is normal; we are surrounded." He organized an attack, moved out to meet the German patrol, and hit it hard, driving it back. Colonel Chase told Winters to set up a defense. Easy, with help from HQ Company, set up roadblocks on all roads leading into Uden.

Winters told Sergeant Lipton to take every man he could find, regardless of unit, and put him into the line. Lipton saw two British soldiers walking by. He grabbed one by the shoulder and ordered, "You two come with me."

The man looked Lipton up and down calmly and said, "Sergeant, is that the way you address officers in the American army?" Lipton took a closer look and saw that on his British combat uniform was the insignia of a major. "No, sir," he stammered. "I'm sorry." The major gave him a bit of a half-smile as he walked away.

The Germans did not come on. Had they realized that there were fewer than 130 men in Uden and only three tanks, they surely would have overrun the town, but evidently Winters' quick counterattack against their lead patrol convinced them that Uden was held in strength. Whatever the reason, they shifted the focus of their attack from Uden to Veghel.

Winters and Nixon climbed to the belfry again. They had a clear view to Veghel, 6 kilometers south. "It was fascinating," Winters recalled, "sitting behind the German lines, watching tanks approach Veghel, German air force strafing, a terrific exchange of firepower." The members of Easy who were in Veghel remember it as pure hell, the most intense shelling they had ever experienced.

It was a desperate battle, the biggest the 506th had yet experienced. It was also critical. "The enemy's cutting the road did not mean simply his walking across a piece of asphalt," the history of the division points out. "That road was loaded with British transport vehicles of every type. Cutting the road meant fire and destruction for the vehicles that were caught. It meant clogging the road for its entire length with vehicles that suddenly had nowhere to go. For the men at Nijmegen and Arnhem, cutting the road was like severing an artery. The stuff of life—food, ammunition, medical supplies, no longer came north."2

2. Rapport and Northwood, Rendezvous with Destiny, 359.

Webster was in Veghel. When the German artillery began to come in, he took shelter in a cellar with a half-dozen Easy men, plus some Dutch civilians. "It was a very depressing atmosphere," he wrote, "listening to the civilians moan, shriek, sing hymns, and say their prayers."

Pvt. Don Hoobler was with the 3rd squad, 1st platoon, hiding in a gateway. He decided to have some fun with Pvt. Farris Rice, so he whistled a perfect imitation of an incoming shell. Rice fell flat on his face. That put Hoobler in stitches: "Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Boy, sure sucked you in on that one!"

"Goddamn you, Hoobler, that's bad on a guy."

BzzYoo . . . BAM! A real shell came in. Hoobler stopped laughing.

Colonel Sink came roaring up in a jeep, jumped out, and began barking orders right and left. He got the men of Easy, and those of D and F Companies, to establish a perimeter defense with orders to shoot at anything moving.

Webster and the others climbed out of the cellar and went into an orchard. Webster and Pvt. Don Wiseman frantically dug a foxhole, 2 feet wide, 6 feet long, 4 feet deep. They wanted to go deeper but water was already seeping in.

Sitting helplessly under intense artillery fire is pure hell, combat at its absolute worst. The shells were coming in by threes.

"Wiseman and I sat in our corners and cursed. Every time we heard a shell come over, we closed our eyes and put our heads between our legs. Every time the shells went off, we looked up and grinned at each other.

"I felt sick inside. I said I'd give a foot to get out of that place. We smelled the gunpowder as a rancid thunderhead enveloped our hole. A nasty, inch-square chunk of hot steel landed in Wiseman's lap. He smiled.

"Three more. And then three, and then three. No wonder men got combat exhaustion." Webster later wrote his parents, "Artillery takes the joy out of life."

Things quieted down sufficiently for the supply people to bring up some British rations. Webster shouted at Hoobler to throw him a can. Hoobler was sitting above ground, laughing and joking, having a picnic with four or five others. "Come and get it," he called back. "The 88s are taking a break."

An 88 came in. Hoobler leaped into his hole, with his buddies piling in on top of him.

The men spent the night in their foxholes. There was a drizzle, the air was frosty. They sat with their heads on their knees, pulled their raincoats around their shoulders, and nodded off the best they could.

Back in Uden, Winters and Nixon lost their front-row seat. A German sniper spotted them and fired away. He hit the bell in the belfry. The ringing noise and the surprise sent the two officers flying down the steps. "I don't think our feet touched the steps more than two or three times," Winters declared.

He set up his CP at a store on the road junction on the south end of town. The owners, the Van Oer family, who lived there, welcomed them, then went down to the cellar. Winters had his men move the furniture and rugs to one side, then brought in the machine-guns, ammunition, Molotov cocktails, and explosives and prepared to defend against any attack. His plan was, if the Germans came on with tanks, to drop composition C charges and Molotov cocktails on the tanks from the second floor windows—the Russian style of tank defense.

With that position set, Winters went to the other end of town, the northwest corner. On the left side of the road coming into town there was a manor house, with a tavern on the other side. Winters told Welsh to put the roadblock between the two buildings, backed up by one of the British tanks. He indicated he wanted Welsh to set up his CP in the manor.

Winters checked his other roadblocks, then at 2200 he returned to the northwest corner for one last look around. The British tank was where it was supposed to be, but there was no one in it or around it. Nor were there any E Company men at the roadblock. Highly agitated, Winters ran over to the manor and knocked on the door. A maid answered. She spoke no English, he spoke no Dutch, but somehow she figured out that he wanted to see "the soldiers." She escorted him down a hallway and opened the door to a large, lavishly furnished living room.

"The sight that greeted my eyes left me speechless," Winters recalled. "Sitting on the floor, in front of a large, blazing fire in a fireplace, was a beautiful Dutch girl, sharing a dinner of ham and eggs with a British lieutenant." She smiled at Winters. The lieutenant turned his head and asked, "Is my tank still outside?" Winters exploded. The lieutenant got moving.

Winters went back to the street to look for Welsh and his men. "Where the hell can Harry be?" He looked at the tavern across the street and his question answered itself. He went in and found Welsh and his men sacked out on the top of the bar.

"Harry and I talked this whole situation over," was the polite way Winters put it. "Satisfied that we would have a roadblock set up to my satisfaction, and that I could get a good night's sleep and not worry about a breakthrough, I left."

In Veghel, the Germans continued to attack through the night and into the next morning. British planes and tanks finally drove them off. The 506th moved out again, getting to Uden on the afternoon of September 24. The Easy Company men who had been trapped in Veghel assumed that the small force isolated in Uden had been annihilated; those in Uden likewise assumed that the rest of the company in Veghel had been annihilated. When the two parts reunited and learned that the entire company had survived the encounter in good shape, there was mutual elation.

The company prepared to spend the night in Uden. The men who had been there were amazed when the men who had undergone the shelling in Veghel dug foxholes 4 feet deep; they had only dug 6 inches or so into the ground and let it go at that. The officers had billets in houses in Uden. Lieutenant Peacock of 1st platoon approached Webster's foxhole and told him to come along. Webster climbed out, and they walked to Peacock's billet above a liquor store on the village square.

"Take that broom and sweep this room out," Peacock ordered.

"Yes, sir," Webster replied, thinking to himself, What kind of a man is this? He decided, "I would rather starve to death as a bum in civilian life than be a private in the army."

The Germans had lost Uden and Veghel, but they hardly had given up. On the evening of September 24, they attacked Hell's Highway from the west, south of Veghel, and managed to drive a salient across it. Once again the road was cut.

It had to be reopened. Although the strategic objective of MARKET-GARDEN had been lost by now (on September 20 the Germans had retaken the bridge at Arnhem from Col. John Frost's battalion of the British 1st Airborne Division, and the division as a whole had been thrown on the defensive and the Guards Armored Division had been halted on September 22 some 5 kilometers south of Arnhem), it was still critical to keep the road open. Tens of thousands of Allied troops were dependent on it totally for their supplies. The units north of Veghel included the U.S. 101st at Uden and the 82nd at Nijmegen, the British 1st Airborne north of the Lower Rhine, outside Arnhem, the Guards Armored and the 43rd Wessex Divisions, the Polish parachute regiment, and the British 4th Dorset and 2nd Household Cavalry regiments, all between Nijmegen and Arnhem. If the 101st could not regain control of the road and keep it open, what was already a major defeat would turn into an unmitigated disaster of catastrophic proportions.

General Taylor ordered Colonel Sink to eliminate the German salient south of Veghel. At 0030, September 25, Sink ordered his battalions to prepare to move out. At 0445 the 506th began marching, in a heavy rain, south from Uden toward Veghel. The order of march was 1st Battalion on the right, 3rd Battalion on the left, 2nd Battalion in reserve. At

about 0700 the weary men passed through Veghel. At 0830 the 1st and 3rd Battalions began the attack on the salient. Initially the advance went well, but soon the German artillery and mortar fire thickened. German tanks, brand-new Tiger Royals with 88 mm guns, dug in along the road, added their own machine-gun and shell fire. They were supported by Colonel von der Heydte's 6th Parachute Regiment, Easy's old nemesis at Ste. Marie-du-Mont and Carentan. The concentration on the narrow front was murderous. About noon, the battalions were forced to halt and dig in.

Sink ordered Lieutenant Colonel Strayer to have 2nd Battalion make an end run, a flanking move to the left. It would be supported by British Sherman tanks. There was a wood of young pine trees along the left (east) side of the highway to provide a screen for the flanking movement. Company E led the way for the battalion.

Company E's first attack in Holland had been to the south, toward Son and then Eindhoven. The second had been to the east, toward Nuenen. The third had been to the north, into Uden. Now it would be attacking to the west, thus completing the points of the compass. That is the way surrounded troops fight. That was the way the airborne had been trained to fight.

Nixon joined Winters to scout the terrain. They found a pathway on the edge of the woods that was solid and firm, providing traction for the tanks. Good enough so far, but the woods ran out 350 meters from the highway, giving way to open ground that provided no cover whatsoever for the final assault.

Winters put the company into formation: scouts out, two columns of men, spread out, no bunching up. They got halfway across the field when the Germans opened up with machine-gun fire. Everyone hit the ground.

Guarnere and Malarkey got their 60 mm mortar into action. Guarnere called out range and direction; Malarkey worked the mortar. He was the only man in the field at that point who was not flat on his stomach. His first round knocked out a German machine-gun post.

Winters was shouting orders. He wanted machine-guns to go to work. The crews found a slight depression in the ground and set up the gun. They began to lay down a base of fire. Winters spotted a Tiger Royal dug in hull-defilade on the other side of the road and told the machine-gunners to take it under fire.

Turning to his right, Winters noticed Nixon examining his helmet, a big smile on his face. A German machine-gun bullet from the first burst had gone through the front of his helmet and exited out the side at such an angle that the bullet simply left a burn mark on his forehead. It did not even break the skin.

The German fire was too intense; Winters decided to pull the company back to the woods. The process would be to maintain the base of fire from the machine-guns while the riflemen backed off the field; when the riflemen reached the woods, they would begin firing to permit the machine-gunners to pull back.

When Lipton reached Winters, on the edge of the woods, Winters told him, "They [the machine-gunners] will need more ammo. Get some out there to them." Lipton ran to a Sherman tank (all the tanks were behind the woods, out of sight from the Germans—much to the disgust of the men of Easy). Shermans used 30-caliber machine-guns, the same as Easy Company's machine-guns. Lipton got four boxes of ammunition from the British. He gave two to Sergeant Talbert and took two himself. They ran out to the machine-guns in the middle of the field, which were firing continuously, dropped the boxes, circled around, and ran back to the edge of the field as fast as they could run. "The Germans were poor shots," Lipton remembered. "We both made it."

Just as the German parachute troops began to drop mortars on the machine-gun positions, Easy's riflemen went to work and the machine-gunners were able to withdraw.

Winters ran back to the tanks. He climbed on the lead tank "to talk nose to nose with the commander." He pointed out that there was a Tiger Royal dug in on the far side of the road. "If you pull up behind the bank on the edge of the woods, you will be hull-defilade, and you can get a shot at him." As Winters climbed down, that tank and the one to its left cranked up and began plowing straight through that stand of small pine trees, knocking them down.

As the first tank got to the far edge of the woods, it wheeled left to line up for a shot at the Tiger. Wham! The Tiger laid an 88 into it. The shot hit the cannon barrel and glanced off the hull. Evidently the German commander had fired blind, lining up on the falling tops of the trees.

The British commander threw his tank into reverse, but before he could back out, the Tiger put a second round dead center through the turret. It penetrated the armor. The commander's hands were blown off. He tried to pull himself up through the hatch with his arms, but his own ammunition began to explode. The blast killed him and blew his body up and out. The remainder of his crew died inside. The tank burned through the afternoon and into the night, its ammunition exploding at intervals.

The Tiger turned its 88 on the second tank and knocked it out with one shot.

Easy spent the remainder of the day, and all that night, in a miserable constant rain, raking the roadway with mortar fire. Headquarters Company brought up some 81 mm mortars to add to the fire. Artillery at Veghel joined in, but cautiously, because elements of the 502nd PIR were attacking the salient from the south.

It was a long, miserable, dangerous night for the company, but the battalion S-2, Captain Nixon, had a lovely evening. He found a bottle of schnapps somewhere, and drank it himself. He knew he had a perfect excuse—his close call

that afternoon when the bullet went through his helmet. He got roaring drunk and spent the night singing and laughing until he passed out.

In the early hours of September 26, the Germans withdrew from the salient. At first light, the 506th advanced on the road, unopposed. Once again the American paratroopers occupied the ground after a fierce firefight with German paratroopers.

That afternoon, in the rain, the regiment marched back to Uden. Easy Company arrived after dark, dead tired. The following afternoon, the men received their first mail since leaving England ten days earlier. This strengthened a general feeling that for the Americans at least, the campaign in Holland was over.

That supposition turned out to be wrong, but it was true that the offensive phase of the campaign had ended. And failed.

For Easy, as for the 101st, the 82nd, and the British armored and infantry outfits involved in MARKET-GARDEN, it had been a dispiriting experience. For the British 1st Airborne Division, it had been a disaster. It had landed on the north side of the Lower Rhine on September 17 with 10,005 men. It evacuated on September 26 only 2,163. Nearly 8,000 men were killed, wounded, or captured. Not only had there been no strategic or tactical gain to compensate for such losses, now the Allies had a salient leading nowhere that had to be defended. It was a narrow finger pointed into German lines, surrounded on three sides by a superior German force, dependent on the vulnerable Hell's Highway for supplies.

Ten days earlier, the euphoria in the Allied camp had been running very high. One more operation and the war would be over had been the feeling. The Germans had been on the run ever since the breakout in Normandy, from the beginning of August right on through to the middle of September. It had been assumed that their unit cohesion was gone, their armor was gone, their ammunition was gone, their morale was gone. Those assumptions proved to be one of the great intelligence failures of the war.

In fact, by mid-September the Germans were well on their way to pulling off what came to be called the Miracle of the West. They put their units back together, resupplied and refitted them, brought in replacements, established a coherent defensive line. Eisenhower learned from the experience; in March 1945 he wrote his wife, "I never count my Germans until they're in our cages, or are buried!"3

3. John S. D. Eisenhower, ed., Letters to Mamie (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1978), 244.

MARKET-GARDEN was a high risk operation that failed. It was undertaken at the expense of two other possible offensives that had to be postponed because Eisenhower diverted supplies to MARKET-GARDEN. The first was the Canadian attack on the approaches to Antwerp, Europe's greatest port and essential to the support of any Allied offensive across the Rhine. In the event, Antwerp was not opened and operating until the end of 1944, which meant that through the fall the Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF) fought with inadequate supplies. The second postponed offensive was that of Patton's Third Army, south of the Ardennes. Patton believed that if he had gotten the supplies that Monty got for MARKET-GARDEN, he could have crossed the Rhine that fall and then had an unopposed path open to Berlin. That seems doubtful, but we will never know because it was never tried.

To the end of his life, Eisenhower insisted that MARKET-GARDEN was a risk that had to be run. In my interviews with him, between 1964 and 1969, we discussed the operation innumerable times. He always came back to this: the first rule in the pursuit of a defeated enemy is to keep after him, stay in contact, press him, exploit every opportunity. The northern approach to Germany was the shortest, over the terrain most suitable to offensive operations (once the Rhine had been crossed). Eisenhower felt that, given how close MARKET-GARDEN came to succeeding, it would have been criminal for him not to have tried.

Until I undertook this study of Easy Company, I agreed with his analysis. Now, I wonder. Easy Company was as good as any company in the AEF. It had won spectacular victories in Normandy. Its morale was high, its equipment situation good when it dropped into Holland. It had a nice mix of veterans and recruits, old hands and fresh men. Its officers were skilled and determined, as well as being brave. The NCOs were outstanding.

Despite this, in the first ten days in Holland, just as Winters told Strayer the night of the attack at Neunen, it took a hell of a licking. It failed to get the bridge at Son, it failed to get through at Nuenen on its way to Helmond and for the first time was forced to retreat, it failed in the drive to Uden, it failed in its initial attack on the German salient south of Veghel.

The causes of these failures were many. First and most critical, in every case the German opposition outmanned and outgunned the company. The airborne troops did not have the artillery or the manpower necessary to launch a successful attack against German armor. Second, these were crack German troops, including their elite parachute regiment. They did not outfight the men of Easy, but they fought as well as the Americans did. Third, the coordination between the British tankers and the American infantry was poor. Neither Easy Company nor the Guards Armored Division had any training in working with each other. This shortcoming hurt Easy at Nuenen, at Uden, and again south of

Veghel. At Brecourt Manor and at Carentan in Normandy, Easy had worked effectively with American tanks. In Holland, it worked ineffectively with British tanks.

On a larger scale, the trouble with MARKET-GARDEN was that it was an offensive on much too narrow a front. The pencil like thrust over the Rhine was vulnerable to attacks on the flanks. The Germans saw and took advantage of that vulnerability with furious counterattacks all along the length of the line, and hitting it from all sides.

In retrospect, the idea that a force of several divisions, consisting of British, American, and Polish troops, could be supplied by one highway could only have been accepted by leaders guilty of overconfidence. Easy was one of 150 or so companies that paid the price for that overconfidence. It jumped into Holland on September 17 with 154 officers and men. Ten days later, it was down to 132.

9 THE ISLAND *

HOLLAND

October 2-November 25,1944

Easy Company, like all units in the American airborne divisions, had been trained as a light infantry assault outfit, with the emphasis on quick movement, daring maneuvers, and small arms fire. It had been utilized in that way in Normandy and during the first ten days in Holland. From the beginning of October until almost the end of November 1944, however, it would be involved in static, trench warfare, more reminiscent of World War I than World War II.

The area in which it fought was a 5-kilometer-wide "island" that lay between the Lower Rhine on the north and the Waal River on the south. The cities of Arnhem, on the Lower Rhine, and Nijmegen, on the Waal, marked the eastern limit of the 101st's lines,- the small towns of Opheusden on the Lower Rhine and Dodewaard on the Waal were the western limit. The Germans held the territory north of the Lower Rhine and west of the Opheusden-Dodewaard line.

The Island was a flat agricultural area, below sea level. Dikes that were 7 meters high and wide enough at the top for two-lane roads held back the flood waters. The sides of the dikes were sometimes steep, more often sloping so gradually as to make the dikes 200 or even 300 feet wide at the base. Crisscrossing the area were innumerable drainage ditches. Hills rose on the north side of the Lower Rhine, giving the Germans a distinct advantage in artillery spotting. They had apparently unlimited ammunition

(the German industrial heartland was only 50 kilometers or so up the Rhine River), enough at any rate to enable them to fire 88s at single individuals caught out in the open. All movement on the Island was by night; during daylight hours, men stayed in their foxholes, observation posts, or houses and barns. The fall weather in northwest Europe was, as usual, miserable: cold, humid, rainy, a fit setting for a World War I movie.

There were whole regiments of British artillery on the Island, firing in support of the 101st. This meant that Island battles were artillery duels in which the main role of the infantry was to be prepared to hurl back any assault by the German ground troops and to serve as forward artillery observers. Patrols went out every night, to scout and to maintain contact with the enemy. For the most part, however, Easy and the other companies in the 101st sat there and took it, just as their fathers had done in 1918. A man's inability to do anything about the artillery fire added to the widespread, overwhelming feeling of frustration.

But of course it was not 1918. On the Island, the men of Easy first saw jet airplanes in action. They watched vapors from the V-2s, the world's first medium-range ballistic missile, as they passed overhead on the way to London. Still, as had been true of soldiers on the Western Front in 1914-1917, they fought without tank support, as a tank was much too conspicuous a target on the Island.

The rations added to the sense that Easy was in a World War I movie rather than a real 1944 battle. The company drew its rations from the British, and they were awful. The British 14-in-1s, according to Corporal Gordon, "will support life, but not morale." Bully beef and heavy Yorkshire pudding were particularly hated, as was the oxtail soup, characterized as "grease with bones floating in it." Most men took to throwing everything in the 14-in-ls into a single large pot, adding whatever vegetables they could scrounge from the countryside, and making a sort of stew out of it. Fortunately there was fresh fruit in abundance, mainly apples and pears. Cows that desperately needed milking were relieved of the contents of their bulging udders, and that helped, but there was no coffee and the men quickly tired of tea. Worst of all were the English cigarettes. Cpl. Rod Bain described them as "a small portion of tobacco and an ungodly amount of straw." Best of all was the daily British rum ration. Next best was finding German rations. The hard biscuits were like concrete, but the canned meat and tubes of Limburger cheese were tasty and nutritious.

As had been true of the villages of France on both sides of the line on the Western Front 1914-1918, the civilian residents of the Island were evacuated (and Holland is the most densely populated country on earth). This gave the men almost unlimited opportunities for looting, opportunities that were quickly seized. Webster wrote, "Civilians dwell under

the misapprehension that only Germans and Russians go through drawers, closets, and chicken coops, whereas every G.I. of my acquaintance made a habit of so doing." Watches, clocks, jewelry, small (and large) pieces of furniture, and of course liquor quickly disappeared— that is, what was left, as the British had already stripped the area.

The Island was most like World War I in its stagnated front. Easy spent nearly two months there, in daily combat. It sent out almost 100 patrols. It repelled attacks. It fired an incredible amount of ammunition. It took casualties. But when it was finally relieved, it turned over to the relieving party front-line positions that had hardly moved one inch.

The company moved onto the Island on October 2, by truck, over the magnificent bridge at Nijmegen (still standing) that had been captured by the 82nd on September 20 at 8:00 P.M. Once over the Waal, the trucks took the men some 15 kilometers, past dozens of camouflaged British artillery pieces, to the village of Zetten.

They arrived at night, to relieve the British 43rd Division. The 506th regiment was taking over a stretch of front line that had been held by a full division. It was over 6 miles in length. The 2nd Battalion of the 506th was on the right (east) end of the line, with Easy on the far right with the 501st PIR to its right. Easy had to cover almost 3 kilometers with only 130 men.

British soldiers met the company in Zetten and escorted the leading elements to their new positions. "What's it like up here?" Webster asked.

"It's a bloody rest position, mate," was the reply. The numerous craters from 105s and 88s looked fresh to Webster, who doubted that he was being given straight scoop. After a three-hour march, the patrol reached its destination, a clump of houses nestled beside a huge dike. The Lower Rhine was on the other side of the dike, with a kilometer or so of flat, soggy grazing land between it and the dike. The area was littered with dead animals, burned houses, and empty machine-gun belts and ammo boxes. This was no-man's-land.

To cover his assigned section of the front, Winters put the 2nd and 3rd platoons on the line, along the south side of the dike, with the 1st platoon in reserve. He did not have sufficient troops to man the line properly, so he placed outposts along the dike at spots that he calculated were most likely enemy infiltration points. He kept in contact with the outposts by means of radio, wire, and contact patrols. He also sent three-man patrols to the river bank, to watch for enemy movement and to serve as forward artillery observers. He set up his CP at Randwijk.

At 0330, October 5, Winters sent Sgt. Art Youman out on a patrol, with orders to occupy an outpost in a building near a windmill on the south bank of the dike. With Youman were Pvts. James Alley, Joe Lesniewski, Joe Liebgott, and Rod Strohl. The building was beside a north-south road that ran to a ferry crossing on the river to the north, back to the small village of Nijburg to the south.

When the patrol reached the road, Youman told Lesniewski to go to the top of the dike to look things over. When he reached the top, hugging the ground as he had been taught, Lesniewski saw an unexpected sight, the outline of a German machine-gun set up at the point where the road coming from the ferry crossed the dike. Behind it, in the dark, he could just make out a German preparing to throw a potato-masher grenade at Youman's patrol, down at the south base of the dike.

Simultaneously the other members of the patrol heard German voices on the north side of the dike. Liebgott, who was trailing, called out, "Is that you, Youman?"

The German threw the grenade as Lesniewski called out a warning. Other Germans pitched grenades of their own over the dike. Lesniewski got hit in the neck by shrapnel. Alley got blown to the ground by a blast of shrapnel that left thirty-two wounds in his left side, face, neck, and arm. Strohl and Liebgott took some minor wounds,- Strohl's radio was blown away.

They had run into a full company of SS troops. It had come across the river by ferry earlier that night and was attempting to infiltrate south of the dike, to make a diversionary assault in support of a major attack the 363rd Volksgrenadier Division was scheduled to launch at first light against the left flank of the 506th at Opheusden. Although the patrol did not know it, another SS company had crossed the dike and was on the loose behind American lines. Although division did not yet know it, the attack on 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 506th was much more than just a local counterattack; the German objective was to clear the entire Island area of Allied troops.

After the skirmish with the first SS company, the E Company patrol fell back. It was a full kilometer to Winters' CP. "Come on, Alley," Strohl kept saying. "We've got to get our asses out of here."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," the limping Alley replied.

At 0420 Strohl got back to the CP to report the German penetration.1 Winters immediately organized a patrol, consisting of a squad and a half from the 1st platoon, which was in reserve, plus Sgt. Leo Boyle from HQ section with a radio.

Sergeant Talbert ran back to the barn where his men were sleeping. "Get up! Everybody out!" he shouted. "The Krauts have broken through! God damn you people, get out of those beds." Webster and the others shook themselves awake, grabbed their rifles, and moved out.

Winters and his fifteen-man patrol moved forward quickly, along the south side of the dike. As they approached the SS company, he could see tracer bullets flying off toward the south. The firing made no sense to him; he knew there was nothing down that way and guessed that the Germans must be nervous and confused. He decided to stop the patrol and make his own reconnaissance.

Leaving the patrol under Sergeant Boyle's command, he crawled to the top of the dike. On the other (north) side, he saw that there was a 1-meter deep ditch running parallel to the dike. It would provide some cover for an approach to the road. He returned to the patrol, ordered two men to stay where they were…

(1. When I did a joint interview with Strohl and Winters in the summer of 1990, the conversation went as follows: AMBROSE: So Rod comes back and tells you "We've got a penetration here." Now

pick up the story. WINTERS: Let me tell you when he comes in, he's been in combat. He is breathless and you take one look at him and you Know here's a guy that has just faced death. No question about it. STROHL: I didn't look that bad.

WINTERS: You don't have to be ashamed of it. Somebody shooting at you. STROHL: He's saying I shit my pants. I never)

… as rear and right flank protection, and took the remainder up and over the dike to the ditch on the north side. The group then moved forward cautiously down the ditch toward the road.

When he was 200 meters from the road, Winters stopped the patrol again and moved forward alone, to scout the situation. As he neared the road—which was raised a meter or so above the field—he could hear voices on the other side. Looking to his right, he could see German soldiers standing on top of the dike by the machine-gun position, silhouetted against the night sky. They were wearing long winter overcoats and the distinctive German steel helmets. Winters was about 25 meters from them, down in the drainage ditch. He thought to himself, This is just like the movie All Quiet on the Western Front.

He crawled back to the patrol, explained the situation, and gave his orders. "We must crawl up there with absolutely no noise, keep low, and hurry, we won't have the cover of night with us much longer."

The patrol got to within 40 meters of the machine-gun up on the dike. Winters went to each man and in a whisper assigned a target, either the riflemen or the machine-gun crew. Winters whispered to Christenson to set up his 30-caliber machine-gun and concentrate on the German MG 42. Behind Christenson, Sergeant Muck and PFC. Alex Penkala set up their 60 mm mortar. Stepping back, Winters gave the order, "Ready, Aim, Fire!" in a low, calm, firing-range voice. Twelve rifles barked simultaneously. All seven German riflemen fell. Christenson's machine-gun opened up; he was using tracers and could see he was shooting too high, but as he depressed his fire Muck and Penkala dropped a mortar round smack on the German machine-gun. Sergeant Boyle was "astounded at the heavy, accurate fire that we delivered at the enemy." He later told Lipton he thought it was the best shooting he had ever seen.

The patrol began to receive some light rifle fire from across the road running from the dike to the ferry. Winters pulled it back down the ditch for about 200 meters, to a place where the ditch connected with another that ran perpendicular to it, from the dike to the river. Out of range of the Germans, he got on Boyle's radio and called back to Lieutenant Welsh.

"Send up the balance of the 1st platoon," he ordered, "and the section of light machine-guns from HQ Company attached to E Company."

As the patrol waited for the reinforcements, Sgt. William Dukeman stood up to shout at the men to spread out (as Gordon Carson, who recalled the incident, remarked, "The men will congregate in a minute"). Three Germans hiding in a culvert that ran under the road fired a rifle grenade. Dukeman gave a sigh and slumped forward. He was the only man hit; a chunk of steel went in his shoulder blade and came out through his heart, killing him. The survivors opened up with their rifles on the Germans in the culvert and killed them in return.

While waiting for the remainder of the platoon to come forward, Winters went out into the field between the two lines to be alone and to think things through. Three facts struck him: the enemy was behind a good solid roadway embankment, while his men were in a shallow ditch with no safe route for withdrawal; the enemy was in a good position to outflank the patrol to the right and catch it in the open field; there was nothing south of the bank to stop the Germans from moving down the road unmolested to the 2nd Battalion CP at Hemmen. Under the circumstances, he decided he had no choice but to attack. It was now full daylight.

Returning to the patrol, he found that the reinforcements had arrived. Now he had some thirty men. He called Lts. Frank Reese and Thomas Peacock and Sgt. Floyd Talbert together and gave his orders: "Talbert, take the third squad to the right. Peacock, take the first squad to the left. I'll take the second squad right up the middle. Reese, put your machine-guns between our columns. I want a good covering fire until we reach that roadway. Then lift your fire and move up and join us." He told Talbert and Peacock to have their men fix bayonets.

As his subordinates went off to carry out his orders, Winters called the 2nd squad together and explained the plan. Private Hoobler was standing right in front of him. When Winters said, "Fix bayonets," Hoobler took a big swallow. Winters could see his Adam's apple move up and down his throat. His adrenalin was flowing.

"My adrenalin was pumping too," Winters remembered. On his signal the machine-guns began laying a base of fire, and all three columns started to move as fast as they could across the 200 meters of level but spongy-soft field between them and the road, doing their best to keep low.

At this point, Winters had no firm idea on how many Germans were on the other side of the road running from the dike to the ferry, which was just high enough to block his view. Nor did the Germans know the Americans were coming; inexcusably, after losing their machine-gunners and riflemen in the first volley, they had failed to put an outpost on the road or up on the dike.

In the lead, Winters got to the road first. He leaped up on it. Right in front of him, only a few feet away, was a German sentry with his head down, ducking the incoming fire from Reese's machine-guns. To his right, Winters could see out of the corner of his eye a solid mass of men, more than 100, packed together, lying down at the juncture of the dike and the road. They too had their heads down to duck under the machine-gun fire. They were all wearing their long winter overcoats and had their backpacks on. Every single one of them was facing the dike; he was behind them. They were only 15 meters away.

Winters wheeled and dropped back to the west side of the road, pulled the pin of a hand grenade, and lobbed it over toward the lone sentry. Simultaneously the sentry lobbed a potato masher back at him. The instant Winters threw his grenade he realized he had made a big mistake,- he had forgotten to take off the band of tape around the handle of the grenade he kept there to avoid an accident.

Before the potato masher could go off, Winters jumped back up on the road. The sentry was hunched down, covering his head with his arms, waiting for Winters' grenade to go off. He was only 3 yards away. Winters shot him with his M-l from the hip.

The shot startled the entire company. The SS troops started to rise and turn toward Winters, en masse. Winters pivoted to his right and fired into the solid mass.

Winters described what happened next: "The movements of the Germans seemed to be unreal to me. When they rose up, it seemed to be so slow, when they turned to look over their shoulders at me, it was in slow motion, when they started to raise their rifles to fire at me, it was in slow, slow motion. I emptied the first clip [eight rounds] and, still standing in the middle of the road, put in a second clip and, still shooting from the hip, emptied that clip into the mass."

Germans fell. Others began aiming their rifles at Winters. Others started running away from him. But all their movements were awkward, hampered by those long overcoats. He dropped back to the west side of the road. Looking to his right he could see Talbert running crouched over leading his column. It was still 10 meters from the road. Winters' own column, in the middle, was struggling through the field. Peacock's column on the left was 20 meters short of the road, held up by some wires running across the field.

Winters put in a third clip and started popping up, taking a shot or two, then dropping back down. The Germans were running away as best they could when the other American columns reached the road.

"Fire at will," Winters called out.

It was a duck shoot. The Germans were fleeing. The Easy Company riflemen were shooting them unmolested. "I got one!" Webster heard Hoobler call out. "Damn, I got one!" According to Webster, "Hoobler was in his element; he ate this stuff up."

A bunch of Germans were cut off, hiding in some tall weeds. Christenson spotted them. "Anybody here speak German?" he called out. Webster came up. "Heiaus!" he yelled. "Schnell! Hande hoch! Schnell! Schnell!" One by one, eleven Germans came out. Husky, hard-boiled, they claimed they were Poles. Christenson motioned them to the rear.

Webster went back to the road to get in on the shooting. A German turned to fire back. "What felt like a baseball bat slugged my right leg," Webster recalled, "spun me around, and knocked me down." All he could think to say was, "They got me!" which even then seemed to him "an inadequate and unimaginative cliché." (Like all writers, he was composing his description of the event as it happened.)

It was a clean wound. The bullet went in and out Webster's calf, hitting no bone. A million dollar wound. I got it made, he thought to himself. When medic Eugene Roe got to him, Webster had a big grin on his face. Roe patched the wound and told Webster to retire. Webster gave his bandoliers to Martin, "who was still very calm and unconcerned, the calmest, most fearless person I ever saw," and his grenades to Christenson. He kept his pistol and M-1 and began limping to the rear.

Winters could see more German soldiers about 100 yards away, pouring over the dike from the south side, the previously unnoticed SS company. They joined their retreating comrades in a dash to the east, away from the Easy Company fire. This made the target bigger. Lieutenant Reese had brought the machine-guns forward by this time; Private Cobb set his up and began putting long-distance fire on the routed German troops. The surviving German troops reached a

grove of trees, where there was another road leading to the river. As Winters observed, they swung left and began to follow that road to the river.

Winters got on the radio and called for artillery. British guns began pounding away at the main force of retreating Germans. Winters wanted to push down to the river on his road, to cut off the Germans at the river, but thirty-five men against the 150 or so surviving Germans was not good odds. He got on the radio again to ask 2nd Battalion HQ for support. HQ promised to send a platoon from Fox Company.

Waiting for the reinforcements, Winters made a head count and reorganized. He had one man dead (Dukeman) and four wounded. Eleven Germans had surrendered. Liebgott, slightly wounded in the arm, was a walking casualty. Winters ordered him to take the prisoners back to the battalion CP and then get himself tended by Doc Neavles.

Then he remembered that Liebgott, a good combat soldier, had a reputation of "being very rough on prisoners." He also heard Liebgott respond to his order with the words, "Oh, Boy! I'll take care of them."

"There are eleven prisoners," Winters said, "and I want eleven prisoners turned over to battalion." Liebgott began to throw a tantrum. Winters dropped his M-l to his hip, threw off the safety, pointed it at Liebgott, and said, "Leibgott, drop all your ammunition and empty your rifle." Liebgott swore and grumbled but did as he was ordered.

"Now," said Winters, "you can put one round in your rifle. If you drop a prisoner, the rest will jump you." Winters noticed a German officer who had been pacing back and forth, obviously nervous and concerned over Liebgott's exuberance when he first got the assignment. Evidently the officer understood English; when he heard Winters' further orders, he relaxed.

Liebgott brought all eleven prisoners back to battalion HQ. Winters knew that for certain, as he checked later that day with Nixon.

The ferry crossing the Germans had used to get over, and now would need to get back, was at the end of the road Easy Company was on. Winters wanted to get there before they did. When the platoon from Fox Company arrived, bringing more ammunition, Winters redistributed the ammo and then gave his orders. He set up a base of fire with half the sixty or so men under his command, then had the other half move forward 100 meters, stop and set up its own base of fire, and leapfrog the first group down the road. He intended to repeat this maneuver the full 600 or so meters to the river.

About 200 meters short of the river, Winters' unit reached some factory buildings. German artillery had started to work. The SS troops, desperate to get to the ferry, mounted a seventy-five-man attack on the right rear flank of the Americans. Winters realized he had overreached. It was time to withdraw to be able to fight another day. The unit leapfrogged in reverse back to the dike.

Just as the last men got over the dike, the Germans cut loose with a terrific concentration of artillery fire on the point where the road crossed the dike. They had it zeroed in perfectly. The airborne men scattered right and left, but not before suffering many casualties.

Winters grabbed the radio and called battalion HQ to ask for medics and ambulances. Doc Neavles came on and wanted to know how many casualties.

"Two baseball teams," Winters replied.

Neavles knew nothing about sports. He asked Winters to put it in clear language.

"Get the hell off the radio so I can get some more artillery support," Winters shouted back, "or we'll need enough for three baseball teams."

Just at that moment, Boyle "heard some mortars coming. You could tell they were gonna be close." Boyle wasn't moving too fast, as he was exhausted, a result of a less than complete recovery from his wound received in Normandy. "I pitched forward on the dike. A shell hit just behind me on the left and tore into my left leg from the hip to the knee and that was it. A terrible blow but no pain." Just before he lost consciousness, Winters tapped him on the shoulder and told him he would be taken care of.

Guarnere and Christianson cut his pants leg off and sprinkled sulfa powder on the horrible wound (most of the flesh on Boyle's left thigh had been torn away). They gave him morphine and got stretcher bearers to carry him rearward.

Webster, alone, was trying to cross an open field to get to an aid station. He was crawling along a cow path, lower than he had ever gotten in training, crawling through mud and cow dung. He ripped his pants on barbed-wire fence. On the far side, he risked getting up and limping the last 100 yards to safety. A German observer saw him and called down some 88s. Three explosions, one on each side, one behind, made Webster feel "terrified and self-conscious." He managed to get out of the field before the 88 completed the bracket.

Some F Company men helped him to a road junction. Two medics with a jeep, coming back from the dike, picked him up, laid him across the engine hood, "and told me to relax. They said we would be going fast, because the man on the rear stretcher, Sergeant Boyle, was badly wounded and in need of immediate medical attention."

Altogether, the two platoons from Easy and Fox Companies took eighteen casualties from that artillery bombardment. None killed.

Winters set up strong points to cover the place where the road crossed the dike. Captain Nixon came up. "How's everything going?" he asked.

For the first time since the action began, Winters sat down. "Give me a drink of water," he said. As he reached for Nixon's canteen, he noticed that his hand was shaking. He was exhausted.

So was Christenson. He couldn't understand it, until he counted up. He realized that he had fired a total of fifty-seven clips of M-l ammunition, 456 rounds. That night while trying to stay awake on outpost duty and trying to calm down after being so keyed up, Christenson pissed thirty-six times.

With thirty-five men, a platoon of Easy Company had routed two German companies of about 300 men. American casualties (including those from Fox Company) were one dead, twenty-two wounded. German casualties were fifty killed, eleven captured, about 100 wounded.

Later, Winters realized that he and his men had been "very, very lucky." In an analysis, he said the main reason for success was the poor quality of German leadership. The Germans had let the 1st squad get away with sitting in the field waiting for reinforcements. They had bunched up in one big mass, inexcusable in Winters' view. They had allowed two machine-guns to pin them down while the three columns of Easy ran 200 yards across the field in the bayonet charge. They had reacted much too slowly when Winters fired on them from the road. They failed to put together an organized base of fire when the shooting started.

Easy, by contrast, did almost everything right. Winters called this "the highlight of all E Company actions for the entire war, even better than D-Day, because it demonstrated Easy's overall superiority in every phase of infantry tactics: patrol, defense, attack under a base of fire, withdrawal, and, above all, superior marksmanship with rifles, machine gun, and mortar fire."

More can be said. For example, the physical fitness of the Easy men was a sine qua non. They put out more energy than a heavyweight boxer in a fifteen-round title match, way more; they put out more energy than a man would playing sixty minutes in three consecutive football games. Also notable was the company's communication system, with radio messages, runners, and hand signals being used effectively. The leapfrog advances and retreats put into play the training they had undergone at Toccoa and were carried out in textbook fashion. The evacuation of the wounded was likewise carried out with calm efficiency. The coordination with British artillery was outstanding.

So was Winters. He made one right decision after another, sometimes instinctively, sometimes after careful deliberation. The best was his decision that to attack was his only option. He provided not only brains but personal leadership. "Follow me" was his code. He personally killed more Germans and took more risks than anyone else.

But good as Easy Company of the 506th was, and there was no better light infantry company in the Army, there was nothing it could do about that terror of the battlefield, modern artillery. Easy had to cross the dike to get home. It could not stay in the open field and get pounded. But in crossing the dike, the company exposed itself to zeroed-in German artillery. A few minutes of total terror, and the company had taken more casualties than it had in its encounters with German riflemen by the hundreds earlier in the day.

"Artillery is a terrible thing," Webster said. "God, I hate it."

The Public Relations Office of the 101st Airborne Division gave the action extensive publicity, in typical wartime jargon: "Winters' order had to be, and was, for a bayonet attack. As a result of that brave order two companies of SS were heavily battered and forced to withdraw without getting an opportunity to start their attack which was scheduled to start at almost that very instant."

Insofar as the German 363rd Volksgrenadier Division launched a major attack at Opheusden at dawn that day, against the left flank of the 506th, the small action at the dike may have been crucial. Had the German SS companies proceeded unmolested south of the dike, they would have hit regimental HQ at exactly the moment Colonel Sink had to concentrate his attention on Opheusden.

Sink was appreciative. He issued a General Order citing 1st platoon of Easy for gallantry in action. After describing the bayonet charge, he wrote: "By this daring act and skillful maneuver against a numerically superior force" the platoon "inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy" and turned back the enemy's attempt to attack battalion HQ from the rear.

A couple of days after the bayonet attack, Colonel Sink paid Winters a visit. "Do you think you can handle the battalion?" he asked, indicating that he was considering making Winters the X.O. of 2nd Battalion. (Maj. Oliver Horton had been killed in battle of Opheusden on October 5.)

Winters, twenty-six and a half years old, a captain and company commander for only three months, gulped and replied, "Yes, sir. I know I can handle our battalion in the field. Combat doesn't worry me. It's the administration. I've never had administration."

"Don't worry," Sink assured him. "I'll take care of that part." On October 9, he made Winters the X.O. of 2nd Battalion.

Winters' replacement as Easy Company commander failed to measure up. He came in from another battalion. Pvt. Ralph Stafford was scathing in his description: "He really screwed up. He not only didn't know what to do, he didn't care to learn. He stayed in bed, made no inspections and sent for more plums."

He was shortly relieved.

Other replacement officers had also failed. Christenson said of one, "Indecision was his middle name. . . . In combat his mind became completely disoriented, and he froze. We, the N.C.O.s of the platoon, took over and got the job done; and never did he complain, for he realized his inability to command under pressure."

Webster wrote about a platoon leader in the Nuenen fight:

"I never saw him in the fracas. He never came to the front. He failed to live up to his responsibilities; the old men in the platoon never forgave him. For an enlisted man to fail in a grave situation was bad, but for an officer, who was supposed to lead his men, it was inexcusable."

Malarkey related that in that fight, Guarnere "was giving hell to some officer who had his head buried in the sand, telling him he was supposed to be leading the platoon. . . . The same officer was later seen at an aid station shot through the hand, suspected of being self-inflicted."

A combination of new officers and men who had not been trained up to the standard of the original Currahee group, the rigors of constant pounding by artillery and the danger of night patrols was taking a toll on Easy. The conditions exacerbated the situation.

Paul Fussell has described the two stages of rationalization

a combat soldier goes through—it can't happen to me, then it can happen to me, unless I'm more careful—followed by a stage of "accurate perception: it is going to happen to me, and only my not being there [on the front lines] is going to prevent it."2 Some men never get to the perception; for others, it comes almost at once. When it does come to a member of a rifle company in the front line, it is almost impossible to make him stay there and do his duty. His motivation has to be internal. Comradeship is by far the strongest motivator—not wanting to let his buddies down, in the positive sense, not wanting to appear a coward in front of the men he loves and respects above all others in the negative sense. Discipline won't do it, because discipline relies on punishment, and there is no punishment the army can inflict on a front-line soldier worse than putting him into the front line.3

2. Paul Fussell, Wartime, 282.

3. Except certain death. The Wehrmacht in Normandy, for example, had German sergeants standing behind foreign conscripts. A Pole in the Wehrmacht at Omaha Beach managed to be taken prisoner. At his interrogation, he was asked how the front-line troops stood up to the air and naval pounding. "Your bombs were very persuasive," he replied, "but the sergeant behind me with a pistol in his hand was more so." But the American Army didn't do things that way.

One reason for this is what Glenn Gray calls "the tyranny of the present" in a foxhole. The past and, more important, the future do not exist. He explains that there is "more time for thinking and more loneliness in foxholes at the front than in secure homes, and time is measured in other ways than by clocks and calendars."4 To the soldier under fire who has reached his limit, even the most horrible army jail looks appealing. What matters is living through the next minute.

Gray speculates that this is why soldiers will go to such extraordinary lengths to get souvenirs. At Brecourt Manor, Malarkey ran out into a field being raked by machine-gun fire to get what he thought was a Luger from a dead German. In Holland, on October 5, as Webster was limping back to the rear, in an open field under fire from a German 88, he spotted "a German camouflaged poncho, an ideal souvenir." He stopped to "scoop it up." Gray explains the phenomenon: "Primarily, souvenirs appeared to give the soldier some assurance of his future beyond the destructive environment of the present. They represented a promise that he might survive." It is almost impossible to think of anything but survival in a life-threatening situation, which accounts for the opposite phenomenon to souvenir-grabbing—the soldier's casual attitude toward his own possessions, his indifferent attitude toward money. "In campaigns of extreme hazard," Gray writes, "soldiers learn more often than civilians ever do that everything external is replaceable, while life is not."5

What is not replaceable is the esteem of comrades, but to the replacement soldier, just arrived, there is no comradeship, so there is nothing to hold him to his post. Gray tells the story of a deserter he found in a woods in France in November 1944. The lad was from the Pennsylvania mountains, he was accustomed to camping out, he had been there a couple weeks and intended to stay until the war ended. "All the men I knew and trained with have been killed or transferred," the deserter explained. "I'm lonely. . . . The shells seem to come closer all the time and I can't stand them." He begged Gray to leave him. Gray refused, said

4. Gray, The Warriors, 119.

5. Gray, The Warriors, 82.

he would have to turn him in, but promised he would not be punished. The soldier said he knew that; he bitterly predicted "they" would simply put him back into the line again—which was exactly what happened when Gray brought him in.6

At the front, not only spit-and-polish discipline breaks down. Orders can be ignored, as supervision is not exact where danger of death is present. "Old soldiers have learned by bitter experience to be independent and to make their own decisions," Webster wrote his parents shortly after he was wounded. "Once our lieutenant told my squad leader to take his eight men and knock out some anti-aircraft guns that were firing on a flight of gliders. Nine men with rifles fighting dual-purpose 88s and 40 mms! The sergeant said yes (censored). By using his own judgment he saved our lives in a situation where a new man would have rushed in blindly. This same lieutenant later ordered two scouts into a (German position, but they, knowing better, got (censored)."

Veterans tried to help replacements, but they also took care I not to learn their names, as they expected them to be gone shortly. It was not that the old hands had no sympathy for the recruits. "Our new members," Webster wrote his parents, "representatives of the 18-year-old draft, were so young and enthusiastic-looking it seemed a crime to send them into battle. We paratroopers get the best men in the army, but it's a hell of a fate for somebody who's never been away from home or high school to come here."

No man in Easy had been in combat before June 6, 1944, but by October all the men who took off from England on the evening of June 5 who were still alive in Holland had been through two combat jumps and two campaigns. Many of them had been wounded; some of the wounded had gone AWOL from the hospital to go to Holland. This was not because they had a love of combat, but because they knew if they did not go to war with Easy, they would be sent to war with strangers, as the only way 1 out of combat.00091 16 T0.00(b)-2r005 Tc 0.00 tw07(had been in comt.ct ma50.0009 Tw -25.30