

D-Diary of a Glider Infantryman

(D-Day is a thing of the past—but only now have some of the boys who made it a success found the time and energy to set down their first-hand observations during that first gruelling week after the landings. Pfc. George Groh, a glider infantryman who went in on foot, is one of those who have at last been able to turn momentarily from a rifle to a typewriter.)

D-Day

WHILE other regiments of our division (the 101st) swung the first liberation punch, we lay offshore in the Channel in an LST. We were scheduled to follow them at 1630 as a reserve unit. Our Company Commander—Capt. Harold MacQuiddy, of Santa Barbara, Calif.—predicted then that we were in for a tour of “light combat duty.” He later revised his opinion.

Just before dusk we watched a long wave of gliders swing low over the beachhead, break from the tow planes, and disappear somewhere in the foothills beyond. Some of us complained that we’d “miss the whole damned show,” especially when night found us still offshore, holding down a bleacher seat.

D-plus-1

After more watching and waiting and wondering, we finally got our clearance and piled into assault boats at 1505. Since ours is a jeepless, truckless unit, we came ashore with our first three days’ supplies on our backs. A few minutes later we hit the ground when four Messerschmitt 109s strafed us. Two of them fell to beachhead ack-ack fire, netting our side one slightly singed and very dejected Nazi pilot, who parachuted to safety. We bivouacked for the night.

D-plus-2

We manned outposts all morning. Mine was next to a “glider park,” a nasty device designed to look, from the air, like an open field. Actually the area was studded with long thin poles with rusty barbed wire stretched out at angles to form a giant spiderweb. In the afternoon we took off for the front, another traffic element in an already clogged roadway. A parachute captain, bicycling jauntily along, called to us cheerily: “They’re a pushover, boys! You can take ’em!”

Our outfit was slated to relieve a parachute infantry unit holding down the left flank of the beachhead. All along the flat approach we were harassed by an 88mm. gun, which caused considerable casualties just as we reached the unit’s position. Then an artillery outfit in the rear plastered the German’s promontory with a heavy barrage, and we moved out under cover of it to establish a new station under the bank of the Doove River. At nightfall we held one bank of the river, the Jerries the other.

D-plus-3

We spent most of the morning ducking in and out of our foxholes in rhythm with occasional 88mms. or mortar shells. On our side, Sgt. Chauncey McDaniel, of Chicago, lobbed over a few 60mm. mortar shells, Lt. Carlton Werner, of New York City, pecked away at a sniper with a BAR, and Sgt. Stanley Hojnacki, of Lorain, O., scored a hit on a pillbox with his grenade launcher. By now, most of our drinking water was gone and we tried to scoop some out of little sand pits. At noon we were ready to move out. Lt. Werner and Pfc. Gordon Hatchel, of Jamestown, N.C., swam the river at a point believed to be safe from Nazi observation, taking across a rope improvised from parachute cord. We secured a hand rope with the parachute cord and I stripped and crossed on that with Pvt. William

Yanks in the ETO

Webb, of Niles, O. Jerry had blown a bridge and had run a ferryboat aground, and we salvaged the boat and brought it back, setting up a ferry service with Lt. Werner, Pvt. Joe Bobinger, of New Orleans, and Sgt. Raymond Quam, of Stoughton, Wis., acting as crew.

Then Lt. Kenneth Vyn, of Cleveland, O., went out with a combat patrol and ran into trouble plus. Jerry ambushed the group, killing one man and wounding five others in the initial fire. Pvt. William Nix, of Akron, O., and Pfc. Douglas Collins, of Houston, Tex., returned the fire with BARS, Nix scoring at least two "probables." Then Pfc. Bennie Castleman crawled along a hedgerow and accounted for an officer and two other Germans at close range.

The patrol swung into a hasty hedgerow defense, with Pvts. Charles Cheatham and Benjamin Franklin, of Little Rock, Ark., and Atlanta, Ga., respectively, acting as impromptu medics. Our ferry system had bogged down, so Pfc. Victor Schummer, of Sturgis, S.D., and Pvt. Marvin Taxman, of Omaha, Neb., swam back under thick fire to direct mortar fire on the German positions. The rest of the patrol was ordered to recross the river under cover of improvised protecting fire. Pvts. Nix and Arthur Mayer, of Chicago, came back together. Nix couldn't swim, but Mayer got him over with a combination of swimming hints, life-saving, and cheerleading. After dragging Nix out on our side, Mayer ran down the bank to encourage Pfc. Clyde Stephenson, of Fulton, Mo., who was floundering in mid-stream. Mayer was machinegunned in the arm and leg as he dragged Stephenson from the water. He was later awarded the DSC for gallantry under fire.

THE "road back" for the rest of the combat patrol was nearly as tough. Two Pfc.s, though badly wounded, managed to make the swim unaided. Lt. Werner brought back the remainder of the men on a raft which he made from two German sign boards. Pfc. Alexis Boris, of Lorain, O., a passenger on the raft, was recommended for a citation for his part in the action.

Now we had our orders—to cross the river at one o'clock in the morning and attack the German positions under cover of an artillery barrage. Lt. Joseph B. Johnson, of Carlson, Minn., took charge of the company. We boiled some rainwater coffee, broke open the last of some cans of Navy chicken we'd obtained on the LST, and then sat around and waited.

D-plus-4

Right on schedule, we crossed the river in rubber boats piloted by amphibious engineers. Our artillery barrage was terrific, but Jerry had pulled out at 2300 the previous night. From there, we went to outpost the town of St. Marie de Mon. Sgt. Quam came around after breakfast and picked five of us for a reconnaissance patrol. Briefing the mission, Maj. Hartford Salee, of Evansville, Ind., told us we were to proceed to a certain bridge, avoiding a fight if possible, and establish contact with the VII Corps. That bridge was known to have been held by the Germans, but the major thought it should have changed hands by this time.

Half a mile from the bridge, we ran into a little difficulty. Rounding a bend in the road, I came face to face with three bearded Heinies with machine-pistols. It was a case of mutual surprise—mine the greatest, because I discovered just then that my M1 had taken the morning off. Both sides dived for cover as if by common agreement. We decided in a hasty conference that we had run into a trap and that this was one of those cases where it was "possible" to avoid a fight. Frantic gestures to some Frenchmen across the road finally got them to unlatch their gate, and we then took off through that opening and back toward our own area in what was probably a new cross-country record. Jerry never fired a shot. I suspect he was busy setting up records in the opposite direction.

WE reported in at noon. Major Salee picked a company to act as combat patrol, detailing Sgt.

Yanks in the ETO

Quam to guide them back over our route of the morning. The rest of us had settled down to an international repast of captured Nazi crackers, French wine, and American K rations, when orders came to move on to Carentan. That was a red-hot assignment from the start. German snipers worked on us all the way up to the town; their engineers smashed a bridge while we were a mile out of the city and a chunk of flying concrete barely missed me in the process. Company A, in the lead, secured a large stone barn as a base of operations and took two houses 100 yards further along. From the barn to the houses was one long, unprotected dash—we called it "sniper run," but later had to change it to "machinegun run." Two men—a private and a sergeant—were wounded here, but for the most part the Nazi fire was wildly inaccurate and served only to make dash-men out of a lot of slow Joes.

The two houses we took were enclosed by a stone wall and inhabited by some 20 sheltering Frenchmen—including a French girl who would qualify as a pin-up in any league. The natives furnished a lot of moral support and cognac, so things were quite festive for a while until the Heinies opened up again. Pfc. Hatchel downed the first Jerry, who had just missed tossing a hand grenade into our laps. Sgt. Hojnacki got two more, sniping from our second story OP. Lt. Johnson and I were taking ten minutes on a featherbed—the first we'd seen in France—when Hojnacki's fire got too warm a response.

A few minutes later, Jerry took the OP apart, featherbed and all, with mortar fire. About this time, one of our men suffered a nasty wound in a duel with a German machinegun and we had to evacuate him to a hospital we'd improvised in the cellar. The battle continued throughout the afternoon, but we could take no more ground. Finally, the Nazis knocked out our barn with hand grenades and mortars and the forward element in our two houses was virtually surrounded. We collected our wounded and managed to leave for our own lines under cover of darkness. Lt. Werner, commanding the covering force, was the last to leave.

D-plus-5

We spent the morning in a draw outside Carentan, exchanging mortar and machinegun fire with German emplacements in the city. At noon we were ordered into reserve, just as Jerry found the range and took a severe toll. His snipers and mortar fire were making it hard for us to get our wounded out. Lt. Werner took charge of the company as we went into a defensive around a tank park. Just before dark, Battalion issued two warnings—be careful of women snipers, and of German combat patrols dressed in American uniform, one of which had shot up a company of ours the previous night.

D-plus-6

We were ordered to participate in a battalion mop-up, and I spent the morning with Lt. Werner and James Poynter, of Indianapolis, Ind., scouting for the operation. We walked right by one well-camouflaged machinegun nest, but the occupants turned out to be White Russians who didn't want to fight anyway and surrendered. We bogged down about noon in the face of stiff opposition. T/Sgt. Robert Graef, of Piqua, O., took charge of the company that afternoon and led us on three successive bayonet charges against the German positions. We dug in at dusk about 75 yards from the enemy. Jerry was active for a while with a small mortar, but a couple of the boys broke it up with well-placed rifle shots. Pvt. Bill Robinson, of Little Rock, Ark., chased the Nazis out of a barn with a bazooka hit, and Pvt. Jack Case, of Toledo, O., gave them a little of their own back with a German machinegun; which he'd been taught to operate by a Nazi PW.

I crawled along a hedgerow, needling the Nazis with a stock phrase from YANK's GI German lessons: "German soldiers, surrender or die." Jerry

Yanks in the ETO

didn't like it, and a sniper began to needle me in return with his carbine. Since he had the better argument, I inched back to my own position and let him have the last word. When darkness fell, we manned strong points and waited for a counter-attack that never came. We were reduced to a company strength of 88 enlisted men, our ammunition was low, and we'd lost contact with the right, the left, and the rear. Our only sure contact was Jerry, just out in front. The night progressed with intermittent flares sent up by the enemy, who sprayed us with sporadic machinegun fire. We felt better then, indications being that he was more concerned with his own defense than with infiltrating ours. All the same, it was a long, long night.

D-plus-7

It was still dark when a German captain walked right up to an outpost manned by Pfc. Bill Keating, of Chicago, and Herbert Coker, of Darlington, S. C. They gave him the works. He'd been inside our lines and was going out eating from a jar of jam. We never did figure that one out, but the consensus held that he was some stray returning from a private expedition and hadn't known of our presence in the area. Anyway, the captain had some valuable maps with him. At dawn we withdrew to a better defensive position about 300 yards to the rear. Jerry crept up and tossed a few grenades, and a German sniper hit Pfc. Stephenson in the head. But he came up with one of those war miracles; his helmet turned the bullet and he escaped with a scalp wound.

BY 11 o'clock that morning Allied tanks were rumbling up the road that was our front line and everybody relaxed. A little later, we were relieved, and went into defensive bivouac, with Lt. Walter Fleming, of Hoosick Falls, N. Y., taking over as CO. Sgt. Quam and his patrol rejoined the company, getting through stiff resistance with loss of seven men. The first platoon—what was left of us—drew a mission just before dark to outpost and protect a bridge being built by some engineers of the 30th Division. We marched on past the bridge and set up our outposts, about two miles into German territory. Then, when the Nazis sprayed us after dark with machinegun bursts, we fell back on time-honored tactics of "getting t'hell out of here." We set up again 300 yards from the bridge and this time things were quiet. At dawn we went back to our bivouac area, the bridge having been completed. The 30th was to take over and swing some heavy blows with tanks, artillery, and a fresh division of infantry. We still had to go on and hold the base of the peninsula, while other units drove north to Cherbourg. But our hardest work was done. And everybody was damn glad of it.

By Pfc. GEORGE GROH
YANK Field Correspondent



"COULD I BORROW YOUR SOAP, PLEASE?"

—Pvt. Tom Flannery

OldMagazineArticles.com