

D-Day Narrative of Howard L. Huggett
2nd Lieutenant, 2nd Platoon
Company C, 326th Airborne Engineer Battalion
101st Airborne Division

This account has its beginning in October 1943 when I was assigned to the 326th Airborne Engineer Battalion at Basildon Park on the river Thames near the town of Pangbourne, which is located west of Reading in Berkshire, United Kingdom. Previous to my assignment to the 326th I had been with the 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion of the 82nd Airborne Division, but in October of 1943 I was sent from Italy to a replacement depot in Scotland and within a short time was transported to the 326th. As of this date no one knows, including the 307th Battalion Commander, LTC Robert S. Palmer, why I was reassigned to the 326th, but it appears as a typical Army screw-up (C' est le guerre).

The months in England preceding the invasion of Europe were spent in training for accomplishing our mission which we weren't privy to as yet but we knew it would involve laying mines, demolitions, road blocks and fighting as infantry. During this period I can recall several incidents that probably didn't affect the outcome of D-Day but live in my memory as amusing and entertaining after all these years.

The 2nd Platoon of Company C was commanded by 1st Lt. Theodore T. Jones of Minneapolis, Minnesota and the assistant platoon leader was 2nd Lt. Howard L. Huggett of Alton, Illinois (1). One of our training exercises was to determine if a parachute bundle of land mines would denotate or explode upon impact if the parachute failed to open. This test required the drop zone to be in a restricted area devoid of personnel or buildings in case the mines denoted. The only time the restricted area was available was on Christmas Day of 1943; therefore, the test was scheduled for that day and Lt. Jones decided to take only a minimum number of men from the platoon and myself to perform the test. Early Christmas morning we departed for the airfield with our bundles of land mines and after being notified which aircraft we were to use proceeded to load the bundles and prepared for take-off. The men also had parachutes as we were going to jump from the aircraft after dropping the bundles and trucks would pick us up on the drop zone and transport us back to our area. During the month of December the amount of daylight is short in the United Kingdom and Lt. Jones and I decided it would be dark by the time we completed our mission and arrived back at Basildon Park by truck. Therefore; why not jump on the large front lawn of the Basildon Manor House and salvage some of Christmas Day even though such a procedure was probably forbidden. Forbidden or not we jumped and were greeted on the front lawn by Colonel Pappas, our Battalion Commander

who immediately restricted us to the area for a month. An unforgettable Christmas in the Berkshires.

The invasion of Europe was a combined effort of Allied Forces, but on the platoon level we had no exposure to our counterparts on the Allied Team. This was to change in March of 1944 when a team from Company C, comprised of one officer (H.L. Huggett) and twelve enlisted ranks were to be exchanged with a like number in the 6th British Airborne Division at Bulford on the Salisbury Plains. The exchange was to last two weeks and would give us all an opportunity to learn the organizations of the units and participate in each others training activities; an excellent program. After reporting to the 6th Airborne Division we were scheduled for synthetic training with our British comrades. Synthetic training consisted of the troops parachuting from a basket that was attached to a barrage balloon from an approximate height of 600 feet. To exit the basket a hole was provided in the bottom of the basket and was designed to simulate the method of parachuting from a Lancaster bomber. The Lancaster bomber was the type of aircraft that the British paratroopers used in their airborne operations. When we arrived at the training site a group of five Polish paratroopers were in the basket and being instructed in English about the procedure as to how each man would exit through the hole in the bottom of the basket. As the balloon was ascending to its jump height the British Sergeant was explaining the oral commands he would give to the men and from the ground we could hear the Polish troopers acknowledge their understanding of the Sergeant's instruction. Within a short period of time I heard the Sergeant bark an order of "Action Stations" and then "Go", and the basket containing the five Polish paratroopers looked like a rose bursting into bloom as all five had jumped over the side of the basket. It was a miracle that no one was hurt and we Americans observing our Allies had a great deal of respect for their naive courage. This was a meaningful experience and demonstrated the dedication of our comrade-in-arms to confront and overcome our common enemy (2).

At least ten officers were billeted on the upper floor of Basildon Manor in one of the large rooms. A single large light bulb hung from the center of the ceiling and standard operating procedure stated that the last one in bed turned out the light. The night before we departed for the marshalling areas everyone jumped into bed and no one volunteered to turn out the light. Each person in the room had been issued their basic load of ammunition, plus weapons and I don't remember who started firing at the light to put it out, but in a short time the room was in darkness. The ceiling and the Colonel were both "bent out of shape", but the next day we all proceeded to our respective marshalling areas like children that had escaped a deserved spanking.

On 28 May 1944 the 2nd Platoon of Company C left by rail from Reading to the marshalling area at Merryfield Airfield in Southern England to prepare for the invasion of Europe. The 2nd Platoon was attached to the 1st Battalion of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment to provide engineer support. Upon entering the marshalling area at Merryfield we were sealed in and not allowed to leave the area.

The platoon was billeted in squad size tents with cots for sleeping and all the comforts of home including latrines within a short walking distance. Once we settled in Lt. Jones and I briefed the platoon on our mission including where, when and how we were to participate in the invasion of Europe. Our mission was to prepare the bridge over the Douve River for demolition and destroy the bridge only on orders from the Regimental Commander (3). We calculated that approximately 600 pounds of C-2 explosive would destroy the stone, dirt and asphalt paved span of the bridge. During the next few days in the marshalling area we packed the parachute bundles with C-2 explosives, attached the equipment bundles to the aircraft and continued to brief the platoon on their mission and combat duties (4).

On 4 June we prepared to board our aircraft and proceed to Normandy for the invasion of Europe, but at the final hour the D-Day invasion was delayed 24 hours by the Allied Supreme Commander due to adverse weather conditions.

On the evening of 5 June we again left our bivouac in the marshalling area to board our aircraft on the airfield. As we entered the airfield guides were posted to direct us to the religious service of our choice for a brief period before proceeding to our assigned aircraft. Parachutes were issued at the aircraft and we started to put on our chutes, equipment and "Mae West" life preserver, which could be inflated with a carbon dioxide cylinder. Each man carried two Hawkins grenades to be used as anti-tank mines in addition to weapons, ammunition, C-2 explosives, rations, gas mask and personal items. Once this was attached to the men it required assistance from several persons to get the men up into the aircraft. I am not exactly sure how many men were in the jump stick, but the following names were on the manifest and participated in the night drop on 5 June 1944:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. 2nd Lt. Howard L. Huggett | 8. PFC Frank Drzal |
| 2. Sgt Michael Rutkowski | 9. PFC Richard Bleiler |
| 3. Sgt Harry Elmore | 10. PFC Gordon Van Horn |
| 4. T-5 John Preloh | 11. Pvt Joseph Lediger |
| 5. T-5 William Murphy | 12. Pvt Julius Holin |
| 6. PFC George Richko | 13. Pvt Eugene Kobierecki |
| 7. Pvt Edward Namowicz | |

The crew members of the C-47 transport aircraft were:

CPT John McCue _____ Pilot
2nd Lt. Ernest Wheeler _____ Co-Pilot
S/Sgt Archer Hughes _____ Crew Chief
Sgt James Freda _____ Radio Operator

(All of the above names were found on a manifest at the crash site in the parish of Brevands in Normandy a few years ago)

On 5 June 1944 at 2330 hours our aircraft started down the runway for take-off, and in my estimation the aircraft was almost overloaded as it swayed from side to side until it eventually became airborne. Once in the air we settled down and reconciled to a long flight of approximately two hours; some smoked and some slept.

Being the jumpmaster or number one in the stick I could stand in the door of our aircraft and observe the other aircraft in the flight. When we left the coast of southern England the moon illuminated the channel below and I could see hundreds of dark shapes in the water down below, which later turned out to be part of the invasion fleet. Before long I could see the coast of France up ahead and also what appeared to be a wall of light, but developed into a wall of anti-aircraft artillery exploding and we were directly in its path. As we got closer and closer to the coast of France I alerted the men and told them to stand up and hook up in preparation in case we had to exit the aircraft in the emergency mode. It wasn't long before we were crossing the coast of Normandy and flying through the wall of anti-aircraft fire and then suddenly it was like a curtain closed around us. We had flown into a fog bank, which disoriented me, and when we emerged from the fog bank I was trying to determine our position with land marks illuminated by the moon. About this time the anti-aircraft fire became quite intense and the aircraft was lit up like a commercial airliner coming in for a landing. An aircraft on our port side was hit and blew up in the air, also our port wing and engine were on fire. A heavy burst of flak hit in the forward section of the plane and Pvt Julius Holin and Sgt Freda were either killed or seriously wounded. I also discovered that our equipment bundles packed with six hundred pounds of C-2 explosive under the aircraft were on fire and I decided not to activate the switch that released the bundles as the men exiting the aircraft could fall through the burning bundles and ignite the nylon parachutes (5).

The number two man to jump after the jumpmaster (H. Huggett) was Edward J. Namowicz. It was toward the end of our flight somewhere over Normandy that Pvt Namowicz stated that he had been hit and I told him that he would have to jump as the aircraft appeared to me to be out of control and if he remained with the plane his chances of survival were slim. (Orders had been issued in England prior to take-off that

wounded troopers would return with their aircraft) As Pvt Namowicz and I stood close together in preparation to leaving the aircraft a large chunk or fragment came through the bottom of the aircraft between us and hit Pvt Namowicz's reserve parachute. Also some sizeable fragments penetrated the aircraft in the area where he was standing and probably jolted him enough to cause him to believe that he was wounded. In the spring of 1981 Edward and I got together for the first time since that night in 1944 and had a good laugh over how "wounded" he had been.

With the aircraft on fire, in a dive, the pilot and co-pilot slumped forward and the crew chief unable to communicate by intercom - I gave the order to "go" and I estimated our altitude at approximately 350 feet. When my parachute opened it seemed I had two oscillations in the air and I hit the ground hard somewhere in France and not sure of my location to continue my adventure for D-Day (6).

While lying on my back in the middle of a field I readied my weapon, checked the direction of flight of the aircraft and removed my chute ready to engage the enemy, which turned out to be a large white horse calmly eating in the midst of the invasion. I could see that the aircraft had crashed and I estimated the distance at approximately one kilometer and I determined its flight path to be in a south-south easterly direction. My thoughts at this point were "did all of the men get out of the plane before it crashed?" Once I collected my gear I proceeded to the edge of the field where I encountered my first Normandy hedgerow and started down the hedgerow in the direction of flight to collect the jump stick. From the amount of firing from the other hedgerow it was obvious that a sizeable enemy force was between me and the men that had jumped with me and joining up together was going to be a real problem. I therefore; started down an adjacent hedgerow hoping to flank the enemy and establish a fire base and join forces so we could carry out our mission, which was to get to the Douve River. As I continued down the hedgerow I heard and saw an enemy patrol on the other side so I held my position in the hedgerow to let them pass and then proceeded to try and get into position for a fire fight. This fire fight never materialized as it seemed like everyone had disappeared. I then backtracked and reconnoitered the hedgerow I had come down hoping to find someone from my group and I even used my cricket (7) to try and contact someone, but to no avail. I then surmised that several hedgerows had separated us upon landing and the men in my jump stick had landed among enemy troops and I had landed on the fringe of the enemy bivouac.

As daylight started to approach I could hear artillery shelling to the north, and I started walking toward the sound even though I didn't know how far it was from my present position. My progress was slow as I could hear

German troops and vehicles moving around on roads and paths; therefore, I reasoned it would be safer to move in the hedgerows and head in the general direction of the artillery shelling. It was now daylight and to sum up my situation: I was lost, I had contacted the enemy, but I had not completed my mission and I was alone except for the enemy. It now became obvious that to survive in the daylight I had better find a good hiding place in the hedgerow and hope to eventually contact friendly troops.

Within a few hours the enemy activity of vehicle movement seemed to diminish, but the noise of battle had intensified and seemed to be closer to my position. By cautious movement I started progressing toward the end of the hedgerow where I came upon an unimproved road that gave evidence of heavy traffic and I concluded that the vehicle tracks were German. By this time exhaustion was overtaking me and I felt like I couldn't continue on without some rest. My cover was adequate in the hedgerow; therefore, I didn't resist the temptation to close my eyes and try to cat-nap and regain some of my stamina.

Sometime later I regained my senses and the chill in the air had me alert once again plus the sounds of battle seemed to have intensified which motivated me to try and find some friendly troops in the area. Since landing in Normandy my only greetings had been from hostiles and a white horse.

It was now dusk and I stayed close to the hedgerows as I proceeded in a northerly direction toward what I hoped was the Douve River, as I sensed rather than knew that I was south of the Douve River. Also the hedgerows were becoming less as hedgerows as I had known and the ground appeared to be more marshy, but I still couldn't determine any prominent terrain features to indicate my location. In my mind I am wondering: where are the church steeples? the main roads? the villages? the bridges? the rivers? the canals? the local populace? Darkness was fast approaching and I was still lost somewhere in France, in fact I wasn't even sure I was in Normandy.

When D-Day ended at midnight on 6 June 1944 I was lost and alone, not knowing if the beach landings had taken place, or even if I would be around for my 22nd birthday just ten days away.

To end the narrative of my first twenty four hours in Normandy I am looking forward to celebrating my 71st birthday in June 1993 on hallowed ground in Normandy.

(1) The TABLE of ORGANIZATION for a Parachute Airborne Engineer Company was comprised of three platoons and company headquarters. Each platoon had two officers and thirty-six enlisted personnel. Company headquarters had a Company Commander, executive officer and approximately twenty-six enlisted personnel

(2) It was during this same period that we had a training exercise that required us to jump from a C-47 aircraft and a Lancaster bomber with British parachutes. The British paratroopers didn't use reserve parachutes something the American paratroopers were accustomed to having attached to their main harness.

(3) This bridge is located on Highway N-13 which runs from Carentan to Ste Mere Eglise and on to Cherbourg. Colonel Howard Johnson was Commander of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment.

(4) C-2 explosives were of a plastic consistency and could be molded to conform to a desirable form or shape.

(5) Under the belly or fuselage of the C-47 were six bomb racks which were used to attach equipment bundles. These bundles were packed with explosives, weapons, ammunition, radios, rations, etc..

(6) In November of 1991 a French researcher of D-Day wrote me that he had found the crash site of the C-47 I was a passenger in the night of 5 June 1944. He stated that the aircraft crashed on the Parish of Brevands located south-south east of the city of Carentan in the middle of a marshy field. The serial number of the Douglas C-47 was 2.101019, 100th Squadron of the 441th Troop Carrier Command.

(7) Crickets were a toy that I remember getting when buying Buster Brown shoes as a child. For identification one click of the cricket was to be answered by two clicks. Every American paratrooper was issued a cricket.

August 21, 1994

James E. Wheeler, D.M.D.
Medical Center
Hardinsburg, KY 40143

Dear Jim:

Thank you for calling the other day and it was a great pleasure and honor to talk to you. It doesn't seem possible that fifty years have passed and I guess the memory is the second thing to go and if you don't know what the first is you aren't old enough to appreciate my humor. The 50th anniversary of D-Day has been a time of trying to recall incidents that have been forgotten or vague and then trying to resurrect these events from a mind that had suppressed many of these incidents. It seems ironic that no one remembered D-Day for 49 years and then for the 50th year everyone remembered heroes like your Dad.

The enclosed narrative was written for Robin Hunter Neillands, a writer in England, but I haven't heard anything about the book he was supposedly writing. Major Jack Watson, of the British 6th Airborne Division who is a friend of mine is now checking on the publication.

Sgt Michael Rutkowski ----- Deceased in 1982

Sgt Harry Elmore ----- Whereabouts unknown

T-5 John Preloh ----- 3388 W. Camino de Amigos
Tucson, AZ 85746
Health problems

Pvt Edward J. Namowicz ----- Deceased in 1982

Pvt Eugene Kobierecki (Kobey) ---- 810 SE 21st Place / -
Ocala, FL 34471-5339
We correspond and visit at least twice a year

With the exception of Julius Holin I don't know the whereabouts of the remaining men that participated in the night drop in Normandy.

Since you have been to Normandy you can understand our mission and visualize the areas that I describe in the following:

" The Douve River, with its marshes, water meadows, and lock controlled inundated areas, was an important water barrier: control by the Germans of its crossings would aid an armored counterattack from the South against the Utah Beachhead; these crossings destroyed or in American hands would augment the defense characteristics

offered by the inundated areas against such a counterattack. From the junction of the Douve and Merderet to the sea there were just five crossings of the river itself. One was the railroad. The railroad ran out of Carentan to the northwest and crossed the Douve two and a half miles from town. The Valognes highway (N-13) running roughly parallel, crossed the Douve about a mile west of the railroad. A small tributary joins the Douve here and the river splits and rejoins itself so that the highway crosses four bridges within a mile and a half of Carentan. The other crossings of the Douve were two wooden bridges three miles down the river, about halfway from Carentan to the sea and between the highway bridges and the wooden bridges - the locks at La Barquette, which could be crossed on foot.

To the first and second battalions of the 501st was assigned the mission of destroying one of the railroad bridges and two of the four highway bridges. The two wooden bridges downstream were to be seized, prepared for destruction, and held by the third battalion of the 506th. Company C of the 326th Airborne Engineers had the job of preparing these bridges for destruction and the personnel were divided among the three battalions assigned to the bridges. Seizure of the La Barquette locks, which controlled the tidal flow up the Douve River, was an additional assignment of the first and second battalions of the 501st. Control of these locks by the invaders would put them in position to keep the area flooded against a German counterattack from the South or, by draining, aid the American drive south through the lowlands".

As you noticed on your trip to Normandy the Douve river bridge is not one and a half miles from Carentan, but more like a half mile, as the town has expanded out toward the river. When I went back in 1988 I couldn't believe how close to town the river was plus the little lane and half road from Carentan to Ste Mere Eglise was a modern two lane blacktop and now from Ste Mere Eglise to Cherbourg a four lane interstate is being constructed. You probably didn't notice the present new bridge crossing the Douve, but the old stone and blacktop bridge we were supposed to destroy is still adjacent to the new bridge. Last year the four lane highway was progressing south from Ste Mere Eglise toward Carentan. One thing I like about Europe is their concern for tradition, and their reluctance to destroy landmarks. (I think during the war Ste Mere Eglise had a population of 1540 and the mayor told me last year that the population was now 1544)

Emma Lee and I just returned from San Francisco where we visited our son, his wife and two daughters. We also spent a week at Lake Tahoe and had a great time eating and enjoying the cool high altitude (6500')

I retired in 1987 at age 65 from the local utility, Duke Power Co., where I was an engineer in their design department. We have one son, age 45, a girl 44 and a girl 41; four grandchildren and none live in Charlotte. This gives us an opportunity to visit San Francisco, Raleigh and Atlanta.

It was great to hear from you and we will stay in touch.

Very truly yours,

