

## EXPERIENCES OF CAPTAIN LEROY DAVID BRUMMITT DURING THE ALLIED INVASION OF NORMANDY, FRANCE, JUNE 6, 1944.

On June 6, 1944, I was a Captain, serving as the S-3 (Operations, Plans and Training) Officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 507<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, a unit of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. I had been in that position since October 1942, participating in all the training and pre-combat planning for the Normandy, France operation.

Battalion Headquarters was split up for the D-Day drop with the Battalion Commander, the S-2 (Intelligence Officer) and one clerk flying and jumping with one of the three rifle companies. The remainder including the Battalion Executive Officer, Major Charles Johnson, the S-1 (Adjutant), S-3 (myself), S-4 (Supply Officer), the Battalion Surgeon and enlisted staff all flying and jumping with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Headquarters Company.

Headquarters Company consisted of the Company Commander, 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant, company clerk and the following:

- (1) Battalion Communications Officer and communications platoon with the function of providing wire and radio communications support for the Battalion.
- (2) Light Machine Gun platoon organized to be employed in support of the rifle companies.
- (3) 81MM Mortar Platoon organized to provide indirect fire support for the rifle companies.
- (4) Demolition Squad organized to be employed by the Battalion commander where needed for demolition tasks.
- (5) Battalion Medical Detachment. A portion of this detachment flew and jumped with Headquarters Company with the mission of operating the Battalion aid station. Another portion flew and jumped with the rifle companies to provide direct medical support.
- (6) Battalion Supply Section tasked to provide supplies of all types for the entire Battalion. Part of this Section remained behind to rejoin the Battalion with the land tail.
- (7) Mess Section. Its function was to operate a mess facility, including the kitchens, for the entire Battalion since the rifle companies did not have an organic mess. All troopers involved in the airborne assault carried assault rations, therefore the mess section was split with some personnel remaining behind to rejoin the Battalion later when the land tail arrived.

Although all troopers (except medical personnel) were trained to use the rifle and carbine, they were organized and trained to function in their assigned specialties. Their long and arduous unit training was directed primarily toward support of the entire Battalion mission. They were not, and I emphasize not, trained or equipped to fight as rifle squads or even as individual riflemen.

It should be noted that no one in the 507<sup>th</sup>, including these troopers, had any combat experience. Nevertheless, I think it fair to say that everyone, including those of us mentioned above, who made this drop were physically and mentally ready and eager to accomplish the missions assigned. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion mission called for a parachute drop near Amfreville, a short distance southwest of St. Mere Eglise where other 82<sup>nd</sup> Division units were to land.

The Army Air Corps Troop Carrier Squadron carrying 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company followed the planned flight route from England until we reached the Normandy coast where we began to encounter German anti aircraft flak. Instead of holding course, the squadron took a different heading. As jumpmaster for my plane load of troopers, I was standing in the open aircraft door searching the terrain and checking my watch for approximate elapsed flight time to the Drop Zone when the red warning light came on. I was unable to identify any familiar landmarks in spite of my long hours studying the maps, aerial photographs and sand table mock-ups. As we reached the critical, planned jump time, I noted the red warning light had not been replaced by the signal to jump. However, at that point I observed troopers in planes ahead of and around me leaving their planes and knowing our place was with the unit, I gave the "GO" command and exited the aircraft followed by my "stick" of troopers. Troopers were widely dispersed, some landing in swamp (the Germans had flooded the lowlands surrounding the canals in the area) and assembly was slow, lasting until approximately noon of D-Day.

On the ground I was unable to locate any identifiable landmarks and after daylight discovered from a French farmer that we were near the Village of Graignes, which was not to be found on my tactical map. Fortunately I had been issued an "escape kit" that included a silk map of Normandy which I examined and to my dismay discovered we had been dropped approximately 18 km from our assigned drop zone near Amfreville. To this day I have not received a credible explanation of the Troop Carrier actions, but the resulting mistake proved to be very costly to the 507<sup>th</sup>, and to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion mission in particular. As assembly continued into D-Day, troopers, including Major Johnson, gravitating to Graignes finally totaled 173 officers and men from the 507<sup>th</sup>, plus 7 troopers from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and one glider pilot. Later we added two Spanish civilians who had been forced into a German labor unit, both of whom spoke French thereby supplementing our one French-speaking 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion soldier. Major Johnson assumed command and established an abbreviated Command Post in the local schoolhouse. As noted above, our mission required us to join our parent unit with the greatest possible speed. Otherwise the ability of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion to accomplish its mission would be drastically reduced to small unit actions. With this thought uppermost in mind, I made a reconnaissance and observed what appeared to be a portion of the 101<sup>st</sup> Division attacking German forces in Carentan, approximately 8km distant, on line between us and the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division area, which of course included the 507<sup>th</sup>. Up to this time we had had no German contact in our vicinity and there did not appear to be any major German activity between the 101<sup>st</sup> Division and us.

In my capacity as Battalion S-3, I formulated a tentative night-march plan to go through the flooded swamp area, which we had waded finding it to be waist to chest deep, or alternatively to go around the surrounding coast line to Carentan, link up with the US force there and continue on to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division area. The plan had its negative aspects: 81 MM mortars would have to be spiked, ammunition destroyed and various other equipment abandoned. Additionally, the swamp appeared to include canals of unknown depth requiring us to swim a short distance or requisition two or three of the small fishing boats observed nearby for ferry use in accommodating the heavy equipment and non-swimmers. I considered our Battalion MISSION to be critical, overriding these obstacles and worthy of our best effort. I presented the plan to Major Johnson who rejected it curtly, turning aside my forceful reference to our stated MISSION. Instead, Major Johnson directed that we remain in place, organize a perimeter defense around the village of Graignes and await a link-up with ground forces coming across the beach. That decision entailed an on-the-spot reorganization of our specialist personnel into provisional infantry fire teams reinforced by the machine gun and mortar platoons. During the ensuing days the officers and men proved beyond a doubt that they were elite troops of the highest order. They went on both reconnaissance and combat patrols, mined the key Graignes bridge, manned outpost and perimeter defense positions set up with final protective fires, targeted gaps with pre-planned mortar fires and established wire and radio communications throughout the position. The Command Post and the Battalion Aid Station became operational. The position was improved as sporadic contact was made with German forces. On D+4 a German scout was killed. His papers identified him as a member of the reconnaissance battalion of an Armored Division.

On Sunday June 11<sup>th</sup>, the Germans launched a massive attack with a large infantry force variously estimated at a plus or minus regiment reinforced with artillery. Judging by the black uniforms found later on dead German soldiers, the attacking force contained SS troops. The attack increased in intensity through the afternoon and night hours. Wire communications were cut and radio communications became undependable. I took part in several fire-fights while visiting defensive positions. As the last position was being outflanked, I ordered the crew members of the remaining light machine-gun to withdraw to a previously designated fall-back position. During the movement both crewmembers were killed. I discarded my carbine, scooped up the machine gun (minus the damaged tripod) and the box of ammunition and leaped over a stone wall from which two troopers were giving me covering fire. As I reached their side, both were killed by small arms fire. I swung the gun around and steadying it fired a burst in the direction of the enemy fire. I heard no more from that sector. There was a lull in the fighting and not having received any recent communication from Major Johnson, I moved to another firing position behind a stone wall near the church. Battalion Sergeant Major Salewski approached me with information that "Major Johnson gave the order to abandon the position and attempt to return individually to friendly lines. He and others in the command post have gone." I walked over to the command post and found the report to be accurate. I did discover, however, that the Battalion S-1 (Lt. Wagner) plus a number of other troopers were still in firing positions nearby. Also our two French speaking Spanish civilians were still

with us. Later, it was reported that Major Johnson had been killed during the move. The battlefield was silent as I pondered this information and automatically I began an estimate of the situation. Darkness had fallen some time before and the German attack had ceased, perhaps for the night. However, they most likely would resume at daylight. Our chances of survival would be slim indeed if we continued to defend the position. A night withdrawal to my earlier-recommended march-plan assembly area, for those of us remaining, appeared to offer a chance to reach the 507<sup>th</sup> area. From the assembly area we could move into the swamps and thereafter implement my march-plan toward the 101<sup>st</sup> Division.

I was unaware of it until the following day, but the Battalion Surgeon, his medics and a number of wounded troopers in the Aid Station some distance away from the command post area had not departed. Had I been aware of this situation I would have made a specific move to bring them along. I do not know whether the Surgeon did not receive Johnson's order or whether he and his people chose to remain expecting to be treated as prisoners of war by the Germans. I learned much later that all of that group had been murdered by the enemy.

It appeared that we were the last remaining members of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company. I gave the S-1 and Sergeant Major an order to "round up all the people you can find and follow me." Still carrying the machine gun and box of ammunition, I led the way to the assembly area. Except for my having stumbled into a water-filled ditch, the march was reasonably silent and without incident. Upon arrival in the assembly area, I passed the machine gun to a trained gunner, posted sentinels dispersed the men in hedgerows for concealment and instructed them to get some rest. In an effort to ascertain our strength, as daylight broke, I passed my pocket notebook around with instructions to jot down their names. Shortly thereafter a sentinel observed another group of troopers approaching. It turned out to be a group led by Lt. Naughton and included Captain Chapman, the Headquarters Company Commander. After a discussion between Captain Chapman and myself, it was agreed that I would assume command of the entire force. The names of the new arrivals were jotted down and passed to the Battalion Sergeant Major as an abbreviated "Morning Report". Our total strength was eighty (80) 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion troopers, seven (7) 101<sup>st</sup> Division troopers, Two (2) Spaniards and perhaps a French citizen (I cannot be sure of that point).

Since we had no food and only the water in our canteens, a foraging party consisting of the two French-speaking Spaniards and a French citizen was dispatched to obtain food using French Francs obtained from the officers' escape kits. Also two small boats were obtained for use in crossing any deep water, including the canals, on our planned march the following night. The foraging party was successful. During the day we cleaned weapons, checked remaining ammunition for redistribution and rested in concealment. Meanwhile I discussed the march-plan with officers and triple checked our planned line of march. Fortunately we were not discovered by the Germans and the few nearby French people did not reveal our presence. After nightfall we began the march through the waist

to chest-high water of the swamp. I designated one man as "point" to lead the way using his compass along the pre designated route while I followed a few paces to his rear sighting through my compass as a double check. Soon he became confused so I took the "point" where I remained for the rest of the withdrawal. As we encountered a canal we made use of the boats for ferrying and were able to reach our mid-point objective, a small spit of dry land, by morning nautical twilight. We still were undetected by the Germans and again sought concealment in the hedgerows until resuming the march the following night. Without losing a man we reached our final objective on June 13, spotting a reconnaissance element of an armored cavalry unit in close proximity to the 101<sup>st</sup> Division. From the Cavalry unit we were able to obtain US rations and water, and then got some much-needed sleep. The 101<sup>st</sup> Division troopers who had been with us accompanied me to the 101<sup>st</sup> Division command post where I reported to the Chief of Staff and requested safe passage for the two Spaniards. The 82<sup>nd</sup> Division was contacted and thereafter trucks were sent to transport us to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division area and subsequently to the 507<sup>th</sup>. I reported the arrival of 80 officers and men to General Ridgway, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division Commander and later to Lt. Colonel Maloney, acting 507<sup>th</sup> Regimental Commander. Troopers were returned to their units. I was reassigned as acting Regimental S-3 (operations) in which capacity I served for the remainder of the Normandy operation.

I cannot stress too strongly that I consider the performance of all the junior officers and men in this operation to be of the highest order and worthy of commendation. They confronted combat requirements for which they were not prepared, organized or trained and battled superior, veteran German forces to a standoff while inflicting grievous losses. Finally, the survivors demonstrated superb discipline in making an orderly withdrawal to friendly lines under extremely adverse conditions. Many were heroes of the battle and many gave their lives; one officer stands out in my memory for special recognition, that officer being 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Frank Naughton, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion communications officer and platoon leader. He proved to be a dedicated leader capable of performing many duties far beyond his communications function. He led combat as well as reconnaissance patrols and supervised the demolition of the key Graignes bridge. During the final German attack he controlled and supervised the defensive-fires action in his sector. Later he led an element of the surviving defenders to the assembly area where we joined the two forces. Without a doubt, his actions contributed significantly to the organization, defense, and withdrawal from Graignes.

Properly, the focus of this account has been on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion personnel and their actions during and subsequent to D-Day. However, without a reference to the magnificent performance of the gallant French patriots of Graignes, it would be incomplete and sadly lacking. During the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, they awakened to discover 180 armed American parachutists in their midst. After recovering from their initial surprise, they welcomed us as friends come to assist in liberating them from the onerous German occupation. As events progressed, several assisted in recovering equipment scattered in the countryside and in the swamp. Others guided troopers to the command post area; still others provided information about the activities and movement of German troops.

After our rations ran out Madame Boursier, the proprietress of the small local café, set up a Mess facility and procured foodstuffs, locally and from distant points, clandestinely transporting from the latter by cart and other concealed means. Mayor Voydie was especially influential in obtaining support of all sorts from the citizenry. All were aware that they risked death by their actions; we learned later that indeed five citizens had been executed by the furious Germans after the latter had entered the village and discovered that a large number of Americans had withdrawn successfully.

On July 6, 1986, largely through the dedicated efforts of Colonel Francis Naughton, the United States Government recognized the gallant efforts of the citizens of Grainges. Mayor Voydie and Madame Boursier were awarded the US Secretary of Defense Medal for Outstanding Public Service. A considerable number of others received Distinguished Civilian Service Awards, including posthumous awards to those who had been executed. It can be truly said that the gallant citizens of Grainges made a mighty contribution to the liberation of their community and to France itself. Certainly all officers and men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Headquarters Company, 507<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment will never forget the many kindnesses and assistance they received.

I take full responsibility for this account, written some fifty- five years after the event. I recognize that others may differ in some of the details, but I hasten to note that the accounts of many battle situations vary, depending on the vantage point and perspective of the individual concerned. The above is accurate as recorded from my vantage point, to the best of my recollection.

  
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