

Paratroops Behind Nazi Lines

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PHOTOGRAPHS FOR COLLIER'S BY ROBERT CAPA



If it weren't for the American airborne troops behind the Sicilian lines, the Nazis might have blistered Patton's Seventh Army off the beaches. But the cloud kids, fighting their first real fight, were back there, playing bazooka solos on Mark VI tanks and blocking roads and bridges until the big guns moved up

THERE was feasting in the city of Kairouan in northeast Tunisia on the night of July 8th. One might have allowed himself to imagine that suddenly someone had called off the war—on the eve of the invasion of Sicily. There was merriment in Kairouan that night, as officers and men of a combat team of the 82d American Airborne Division followed big mouthfuls of juicy and fortifying steak with draughts of red and comforting wine. A few hours away in the time sequence of these men lay the Italian island outpost and bitter battles each knew he would have to live through—or die. Yet only the present was real, and the present was gay. Sicily was still a vague nightmare.

They remembered only yesterday, and the three months preceding, when they had nothing to eat but canned rations—no red, fresh beef. They had spent those months at Oudjda, north of the African desert and a thousand miles west of Kairouan, where the section of Sicily they were to attack—its roads and pillboxes—had been reproduced in life size and where the combat team rehearsed on this stage the battles of tomorrow when a nightmare was to become a reality.

Major General Matthew B. Ridgway, commanding the 82d, also remembered three months of canned rations and was conscious that the Lord only knew how many more months of them were to come. He ordered \$1,000 worth of beef and wine bought from regimental funds—a pound of beef and a bottle of wine for every man.

It might have occurred to some of these

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soldiers that men condemned to die customarily are proffered fine food and drink on the eve of their execution. Yet, in The paratrooper dines on K rations. He sits atop a hill, so that anyone who approaches must come from below. His long knife is strapped to his right calf. It can be used in the blink of an eye by air, and landing, at night, in clouds of parachutes and swarms of gliders. These air-carried forces then will be in a position to assist seaborne invaders not only by harassing the rear of the foe's first lines, but by standing in the way of his attempts to bring up reserves. Sicily proved it can be done.

These men also were to show that an airborne force can assail and capture an enemy's strategic strong points, can man his bridges and his highways, can dominate his high-banked rivers and, after this has been achieved, can fight off his counterattacks, can parry his thrusts at main bodies of invading troops; can, in a word, prevent the enemy from wiping out American beachheads.

One thing more these paratroopers were to prove: The American soldier is the best night fighter in Europe. Not only is he superior to the German and Italian when the moon is dark and the sky overcast, but he prefers to fight at night.

Army with Wings

About half the strength of the 82d Division parachuted into Sicily the night of Friday-Saturday, July 9-10th. The balance of the division's combat elements landed in gliders on the night of Sunday, July 11th. Only "several hundred" airtroopers were killed, according to Major General Joseph M. Swing, who was sent to North Africa late last June to help General Dwight D. Eisenhower co-ordinate the airborne phases of the invasion with the operations of seaborne troops. General Swing recently returned to his post as commander of the 11th Airborne Division now training at Camp Mackall, North Carolina.

On this job, the American airtrooper differed from all who preceded him by carrying all his fighting equipment with him. That is, it was either landed on his person or sent to earth in separate parachutes. This included his rifle, his .30-caliber machine gun, his 60- and 81-millimeter mortars, his 37-millimeter antitank gun, his light, specially built 75-millimeter howitzer, his bazooka. At Crete, the Nazis sent heavier equipment by sea. The U. S. paratrooper knocked out German tank after tank, some of them big Mark VI's with weapons that, with the exception of the little 75, were incapable of penetrating the frontal armor of the bigger Nazi machines.

American troops that landed in Sicily, even though they landed in a 35-mile wind, were a complete fighting force with equipment and soldiers trained for every combat task—infantry and artillery (parachute and glider), engineers, signal, medical, quartermaster and ordnance units.

Before the take-off for Sicily, transports of the Troop Carrier Command (in which soldiers of the combat team were carried into battle) were dispersed over ten landing fields in a triangular area some forty-five miles on either side and embracing the Tunisian towns of Kairouan and Enfidaville in the interior, and Sousse on the seacoast. The area was well within the range of Axis bombers, a circumstance which called for scattering the big carriers as widely as possible, so that the

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enemy would be afforded the poorest possible target.

The opening phase of the air invasion took place on the night of Friday-Saturday, July 9-10th. The first troop carriers started down their runways on schedules carefully worked out, so that when they got into their tight formations over tiny Kuriate Island, the ships would be flying in a sequence that would enable paratroopers to land in proper military order. An airborne division goes into battle just as a division on land moves into enemy territory—infantry first, artillery and other supporting units in the rear.

“The combat team flew into Sicily, just like a division moving down a road,” General Swing explained. “The planes made their rendezvous at Kuriate Island without mishap, formed their air columns and moved across the Mediterranean, first eastward to Malta, then in northerly direction until a landfall was made on Sicily, then northeast along the southwest Sicilian coast, out of range of shore defenses, until the air fleet reached a point opposite Gela, where the convoy made a right turn directly into the island. The route was approximately 300 miles long, or about 150 miles longer than a direct course.”



“Sicily below!” Gloved, loaded with equipment, the paratrooper leaps into the black velvet sky. His heavier accessories—field guns, ammunition, food—will follow him

It was necessary to select such a route to keep our planes out of the way of our own fighters then over Sicily, while at the same time making certain that the paratroopers were landed the number of hours ahead of the main forces required for softening up enemy defenses.

Throughout the entire crossing, the planes flew in tight formation, 200 feet above the water, to insure maximum security against enemy fighters.

But the minute the transports crossed the Sicilian beach in the vicinity of Gela, where the troops were to jump, enemy fighter and searchlight opposition was encountered. Very few American planes were hit, however, but from those that were struck by hostile fire, the majority of our troopers bailed out without injury.

In one of the crippled transports rode a platoon in charge of a lieutenant of the



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370th Field Artillery. The plane had climbed to about 500 feet, the altitude from which the jumps were made, allowing about fifteen seconds to elapse between the start of the jump and the time the trooper came to earth. An anti-aircraft shell hit the plane as the men were in jump position. The lieutenant was crouched in the open door, his men in a tight, grim little row behind him, their "static" lines hooked to the cable so that each chute would be yanked open as they tumbled groundward.

The lieutenant calmly unhooked his static line, moved his men out ahead of him. They lived to fight on the ground. He died in the crash.

Surrounding the Enemy

With two exceptions, the majority of airborne units were dropped at their appointed places in the cactus and vine-covered mountain country north and east behind Gela, where, after thirty hours of savage fighting, they captured and held positions commanding the Gela-Vittoria road (the only good coastal highway on the island), also roadways converging on Gela from the interior, over which, be the missions of the airborne troops was to keep the foe from making full use of his advantageous defense positions by constantly menacing his rear. The enemy's resistance was light, partially because strong airborne forces were behind him.

The other mission of the paratroopers was to prevent the 15th German Panzer Division from coming forward from reserve positions in the interior to help drive the seaborne American divisions into the sea.

While German armored troops in some instances were able to send spearheads to the sea, they were not in sufficient force to hurt the mass landings. The failure of German armor in the early phases of the invasion was due to a large extent to the tremendous fighting power displayed by American air soldiers who had never been in battle before.

Fight to the Finish

A half-battalion of infantry floated down some distance from its objective—

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but still behind the coast defenses—landing in the hills north of Niscemi. Before officers of these companies could consider what it was best for them to do, the enemy provided the answer by surrounding their positions in superior strength.

In this predicament, there was only one course of action. That was to dig in on the heights and fight. They fought like madmen. Some died. Many survived. None was taken prisoner. And while they were unable to lend direct support to principal airborne components nearer Gela, their performance was tactically valuable. The enemy had to send troops up the Niscemi road to get at them, and such was the resistance of the Americans that considerable bodies of Axis soldiers had to be diverted for the attack.

The second "lost" detachment consisted of two infantry companies that landed near Marina di Ragusa. They, too, found themselves in the midst of an enemy whose great numerical strength they prudently avoided meeting in a frontal attack. They chose, instead, to hack away at small hostile units. At this, they were eminently successful. Lacking a long-range transmitter of their own, they captured a German radio. Transmitting on the Nazi wave length, their first message requested orders for the disposition of 400 Italian prisoners.

Officers and men of the 82d Division were familiar with the military landscape in the vicinity of Gela. This section of Sicily had virtually been re-created near Oudjda, the North African invasion rehearsal area nearly 1,500 miles from the island. By aerial photographs and other means, the precise nature of the topography of the land and of the military installations was reproduced, in miniature, on sand tables, and also in full size on the North African landscape. Sand tables showed what the Gela section looked like from the air. To make the soldier on the ground as familiar with his battlefield as he was with his own home town, Army bulldozers sliced up the countryside around Oudjda into roads, hills and pill-boxes as nearly as possible as they were to be found in Sicily.

Here, for three months, paratroopers and glider troops of the 82d were dropped from big transport planes, were collected with their full equipment on the ground, and were put through all phases of attack until every man in the division, from General Ridgway to the greenest buck private, knew precisely what fortifications were to be assaulted, when they were to be hit, and what road to take or what ravine to traverse to get to them.

On the first day of fighting, the combat team accomplished its first mission. It blocked the Gela-Vittoria road. On the second day, it took command of heights on the east bank of the Acate River. Here it dug in.

Here the little 75s and mortars could sweep broad stretches of the countryside, could challenge the advance of German armor along the converging roads. Somewhere in front of them the 15th German Panzer waited to strike. At their rear were the enemy's first defense lines in the coastal hills and, beyond the hills, American soldiers were landing from the sea.

Lying in Wait for Jerry

The German was not long in coming. He rumbled up in Mark IV's and big Mark VI's. The 88-millimeter guns of these

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tanks have a range of four miles and, as soon as they got within their most effective striking distance, they started to bang away at American positions. Mostly, the German was firing blind, because the American declined to reveal his location by returning the fire.

Not a shot was fired from the American side until the enemy was within 150, 100 or 50 yards. Then the paratrooper let him have it with everything in his arsenal from the 75s to bazookas, machine guns and rifles. At that point-blank range the 75s could stop the big tanks, while the little 37-millimeter antitank gun was effective against the Mark IV's. That was waiting until you saw the whites of their eyes, 1943 style.

The bazooka was really terrific. This weapon resembles a length of lead pipe. The Germans learned to dread it. Its terrible armor-piercing and explosive power was death to the Mark IV's. It could not destroy the Mark VI's, but after these tanks had been pounded fifteen or twenty times with the bazookas, they withdrew, presumably because their crews could no longer endure the shock.

On occasion, the Germans refused to come close enough to give the Americans maximum firepower with their light weapons. Then it was necessary to lure him closer by tricks. Such tactics cost the Germans many a tank, and two American soldiers traded their lives for Mark IV's.

One was Lieutenant Colonel — of New York. All he had were a few bazooka teams, which he had widely dispersed, lying on their stomachs and well covered. As the tank approached, the colonel exposed himself, attracting the attention of the crew and drawing them closer by firing his M-1 rifle. The tank crew occupied itself in returning the colonel's shots with their 88-millimeter gun. Colonel and tank swapped several rounds — 88-millimeter shell for .30-caliber bullet—until, finally, the American officer took a direct hit and died instantly. A moment later, the tank was ambushed by the bazooka teams. It was stopped cold and the crew exterminated.

Another who died was an unidentified American sergeant who captured a German tankette, or one-man tank, jumped into the vehicle and ran it in front of a charge of enemy tanks to draw their fire while his comrades blasted away with bazookas. These tanks were also stopped.

For thirty hours, the Americans made their stand along the river heights. A good part of the time they were without support of any sort from more heavily armed units. It was Saturday, July 10th, before they got reinforcement when the 45th Division was able to get some heavier guns and tanks up to them. In knocking out the German tanks, the airborne troops had the assistance of what General Swing has described as "wonderful screening fire" from the Navy offshore. This was the first time in the history of warfare that cruisers and monitors went into action against tanks.

It became apparent almost from the start of the invasion that the Germans had pretty well anticipated the American plan of attack. On July 10th and 11th, airborne troops were constantly fending off counterattacks, a circumstance clearly indicating that the enemy expected assaults to be made where the Americans made them.

In counterattacks, the enemy penetrated outer American defense lines only to discover, before he could turn his tanks around, that his own infantry was being

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attacked by our troops. It was these infantry attacks that sold the American soldier on the idea that, man for man, he was as good or better than the German. Take his machines away from him, they learned, and the German is just another soldier whose reputation for invincibility vanishes in close combat.

General Swing visited the scene of the fighting in the Acate River heights. In that area alone, he counted twenty-seven German tanks knocked out. At least six of them were Mark VI's.

The British Eighth Army used airborne troops to great advantage, especially when Nazi resistance stiffened before Catania. After the big coast port fell, General Sir Bernard Law Montgomery permitted correspondents to tell what happened at a certain bridge near the middle of the Catania plain.

The British wanted the bridge badly. If they held it, the Germans could not advance. But it was flanked by swale grass flatlands, and there was no way of getting to it without being exposed to a deadly cross fire. So Montgomery ordered paratroopers to take it at night.

The British Held the Bridge

A score of big transport ships circled over the bridge and dropped 300 men. Equipment followed. Then a great orange moon peeked out from behind a cloud bank and the British, still floating downward, found they had company. Plenty of company. About 300 German paratroopers were floating down with them. The German commander must have had the same idea as Montgomery. Both wanted that bridge. Both decided on the same method. Both used the identical minute to execute it. On the ground, frightened soldiers of both sides picked up any weapon, and British soldiers killed Germans with their own guns, and vice versa. In the morning, the British held the bridge.

While our airborne operations in Sicily were on a scale larger than any comparable undertaking of the Allies, in the weeks and months to come it is possible that they may be dwarfed by still larger troop landings from the air. Air-invasion tactics are still in a fluid state. They are being modified almost daily on the basis of experiences in Sicily and in training centers in the United States.

There is good reason to believe that, because of the American successes, General Henry H. (Hap) Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces, Lieutenant General Leslie J. McNair, chief of the Army Ground Forces Airborne Command, are considering wider use of gliders in place of parachutes as a better means of getting soldiers out of the air and onto the ground.

Unquestionably, the glider has staggering potentialities as an offensive weapon. Both American and British glider troops were landed in Sicily at night. Night landings of incredible accuracy have become a routine part of glider-troop training in the United States. In recent weeks, troop-laden gliders, without the addition of special equipment, have even been landed successfully on water.

The glider used by Americans in Sicily was capable of carrying fifteen men, including pilot and copilot and necessary equipment. A few weeks ago, new gliders of improved design and with twice the load capacity of the older type, came off production lines.

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The glider, easy for enemy fighter planes and anti-aircraft to hit in daylight, at night becomes an exceedingly silent, elusive target. That enables the attacking force to utilize to the utmost the element of surprise. Only an enemy aware that he is about to be attacked could detect the presence of night gliders. These frail-looking craft, after their release from their towing planes, sail to their destinations with only the whistle of wind in their wing struts to warn of their coming. Against the night sky they are shadow planes. Only the luckiest kind of shot could bring one down.

Glider have another advantage. Troops and equipment landed by parachute are scattered even under the most favorable conditions. The landing force thus loses cohesion for varying periods of time, during which they are highly vulnerable to attack. Glider troops are landed in fighting units, ready to hit an enemy within a matter of seconds after their ship slips almost noiselessly to the ground.

Landing casualties to glider troops have been much lower than among paratroopers. This has been true in both day and night operations. Gliders frequently crash, particularly in rough country, but their construction is such that, in breaking up, they absorb most of the landing shock. Time and again, troops have stepped unscratched from nearly demolished gliders. Unlike motored aircraft, they carry no fire-hazardous gasoline.

Glider—Invasion Ship

As at present organized, American airborne divisions are comprised of parachute and glider troops. The paratrooper was used in the opening of the Sicily air invasion because of the roughness of the terrain. It was felt that glider landings could not be made in the areas. Subsequent experience has shown that gliders can be put down in very small landing areas, so it is possible that when fair terrain is to be invaded, more gliders and fewer paratroopers will be used.

"The Allies won't have success against heavily fortified positions which can be readily reinforced," said General Swing, after the fall of Sicily, "unless the force sent to reduce them is aided by airborne troops attacking from the enemy's rear in a kind of pincers operation.

"Airborne soldiers ease the landing of troops driving in from the sea. Forces on the beaches will have to contend only with what is in front of them, while the enemy has to stave off blows from the back. We used to hit him from the front and sides. Now we can lean over and hit him a kidney punch."

THE END