

Airborne Action

GLIDER AND PARATROOP PILOTS FOUGHT ON GROUND IN FRANCE.



POST-MORTEM IN ST. SAVEUR LE VICOMTE. A GROUP OF U. S. AIRBORNE INFANTRYMEN TAKE A BREAK BEFORE A HOUSE IN THIS VILLAGE WHICH STANDS NEAR THE CENTER OF THE VITAL CHERBOURG PENINSULA.

By Sgt. SAUL LEVITT
YANK Staff Correspondent

ENGLAND [By Cable]—The paratroop action that took place early on the morning of D Day, hours before the landings in France, and the airborne operation that followed, were essential elements of the pattern of invasion. Whatever the cost, the paratroopers had to wipe out enemy gun positions ahead of our first thin assault waves, capture airfields and disrupt communications. The task of the airborne infantrymen who followed the paratroopers into the unknown darkness of France was to strengthen the paratroopers' original gains, further disrupt enemy movement and hold on.

2d Lt. Samuel S. Cromie of Philadelphia, Pa., piloted a troop carrier that took some of the first paratroopers into France, returned to England and took off on another mission, piloting a towplane with a glider filled with airborne infantrymen. On the towing job, Cromie's plane was riddled by enemy fire and crashed.

F/Os Richard F. Brown of Louisville, Ohio; Primo Ceravolo of Toledo, Ohio, and Frank R. Doubek of Chicago, Ill., piloted three of the gliders that were towed over France. They cut loose from the towplanes and landed beyond the beaches, where the loads of airborne infantrymen and equipment were discharged from their gliders.

Brown, Ceravolo and Doubek, like all the other glider pilots who set down in France on D Day, had no way of flying out again. Some of the glider pilots were killed before their powerless planes hit the ground. Others were killed on the ground. The rest—Brown, Ceravolo and Doubek among them—became ground soldiers after their landings. Although without training in the tactics of ground warfare and without any specific military responsibility or mission, they made their own responsibilities and fought their way back to the beaches.

Cromie, like other pilots of troop carriers and towplanes that were shot down or crashed, was caught in the same pattern with these glider pilots. He, too, was down in France, and he, too, became of necessity a ground soldier.

Let Cromie, Brown, Ceravolo and Doubek tell the story as they saw it, and as they told it soon after returning here from France.

"WE SPEARHEADED the invasion," Cromie said. "That day Eisenhower reviewed our paratroops and at the take-off stood along the runway and waved us off. We took off around 2400 hours. It was a beautiful night. You could fly in formation by moonlight, it was so doggone bright.

"There was flak coming up at us as soon as we got our first look at France. We kept inspecting that flak, but it didn't get any of us. Our crew chief told the paratroopers aboard about our progress along the route. The men had been briefed so well that they knew where the plane was at all times. They kept smoking a lot and drinking a lot of water. We broke open our own emergency water cans for them. A lot of them were praying all the way over.

"When we pulled in over the peninsula, we found a perfect cover of clouds there, which kept us away from the fire on the ground. Just as we started in over DZ (the dropping zone), bullets and flak started coming up at us again in every color of the rainbow. We gave the men the red-light warning that we were four minutes from DZ and told the crew chief to wish them all luck for us. Then we slowed down for the drop, gave them the green light and out they went. The last man got stuck in the door and never did find the rest of the men when he got down: I met him later and he told me about it.

major was very considerate and saw to it that we had no prop wash. So it was a beautiful ride right into the coast. We didn't see much of anything until we hit the French coast. After that, boy, they threw everything at us, then took their guns apart and threw the pieces at us. There was a lot of small-arms fire, but it was too low."

"They'd told us at the briefing," Doubek said, "that we would find large fields with only small trees—very good for glider landings. But when



THIS BALDING NAZI PRISONER PROVES THAT HITLER'S ARMY IS NO YOUTH MOVEMENT

we came over, we found the big fields had been flooded and all that was left were the small fields with tall trees, maybe 70 feet high. And we ran into enemy machine-gun and mortar fire."

"Lt. Red Coleman, one of our glider co-pilots, was being shot at while he was coming in for his landing," said Cromie. "He took out a rifle, busted the plexiglas with the butt end and picked off the sniper, who was using a machine pistol. Red did that while his glider was still in the air."

"We were the second glider in," said Brown. "There was gunfire coming at us all the time. We came out of our glider and from the first second we landed we were uncertain what our next step should be. We were pinned to the ground for quite a while. Then we made a run for the edge of the field. There were nine of us. We lay on the ground, scattered out for a while, and then we got together.

"We found what looked like a tunnel, and there was a wounded German there. How he got there I don't know. We asked him where the Americans were, and he answered, 'All over.' Then we asked him where the Germans were, and he said, 'All over.'"

"I WAS the power pilot on the plane towing the last glider of the formation," Cromie said. "F/Os Clark and More were in that glider. Just after they cut loose, the Jerries riddled my right wing. We managed to turn off, and then the Jerries got the right engine. My co-pilot, Floyd Bennett, started to feather the right engine. Just then the left engine was shot out, and we were just like a glider, with both our engines dead.

"There was no field big enough even for a glider to land on, much less a power plane. Those fields are all narrow and small and they've got big trees—as big as telegraph poles. We started to land anyway, and one of the trees took off the whole right wingtip. Right then there flashed through my mind something I'd once read about a B-17 making a good forced landing by using trees to act as brakes. So I aimed between two trees, and what they did, instead of acting as brakes, was to take off my wings. The engines and the body kept going just as fast as before.

"There we were, sailing through the air with just the body of our ship. The crew had already braced themselves for the crash. I saw the front of the ship coming up at me. Then we hit. Don't ask me how I'm here. The glider boys would have checked me out as a glider pilot with that landing, because I had no engines. But I didn't have any wings either, and you don't check out even on a glider unless you've got wings. I don't know what I am.

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THERE'S HUMOR, TOO, AS A U.S. SOLDIER JOKES WITH AN AGED FRENCH WOMAN

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"We came down right in the middle of the fighting. There were low grass, hedgerows and trees. Paratroopers were running across the fields, and there was gunfire all around us. One of the gliders came down right into a concentration of gunfire. That pilot went through hell. He and his men were under fire all the way down and into the field, and they never had a chance to get out of their ship.

"The other pilot on the glider had been wounded before the plane hit ground, and when it touched down, the first thing the hurt boy said to the pilot was: 'Get me out of here.' The pilot went to his pal's assistance, and just then the Germans opened up with machine guns again. The men in the glider fell dead and wounded under the wings before they had a chance to get away. The Germans came right up to the glider and killed two wounded men who were lying under one wing.

"The wounded pilot played dead. They didn't touch him. But different units of Germans kept passing by and throwing machine-gun and mortar fire at the glider for 12 hours. The pilot lay there among the dead. He was soaked in the blood of dead men and lying under their bodies. Several times he wanted to commit suicide. He lay there until noon next day, when our paratroopers captured the field. He was shaken but he took it, and he's alive this minute in England."

"THE first contact we made on the ground with American forces," said Doubek, "was with tankmen. About an hour later we ran across some paratroopers. They threw their arms around us glider pilots and hugged us. It was a wonderful thing, seeing those boys. We glider pilots think the paratroopers are the toughest bunch of boys in the Army."

"Another reason they liked seeing us glidermen," said Brown, "was that they like our flak suits. When the gliders come in, the paratroopers go for those vests. They wear them when they're looking for snipers—snipe-hunting, they call it."

"One paratrooper I saw," said Ceravolo, "had on three flak suits. The paratroopers work in teams of three or four. One man meets the fire to draw it out, while the others cover him and pick off the snipers by their gun flashes. Well, this guy with the three flak suits just walked out into the field to draw fire, and his buddies kept picking off the snipers. You could see the German fire coming at him, but he kept going."

The gliders had landed at 2132 hours on D Day. Around them in the dusk and then the darkness, among the tall old trees and fields of Normandy, there was the movement of men and the splutter and roar of light and heavy guns. It was not a clear night, and the men beyond the beaches, creeping through the grass and around the trees, didn't know that the beaches were being rapidly cleared of the enemy and linked up. The airborne infantrymen scattered over Normandy began to link up, too, snowballing into larger groups.

"We had met our paratroopers and tankmen after hitting the ground," said Doubek. "We were supposed to take our equipment and personnel to the nearest CP, but we were told it had fallen into enemy hands. Another CP was being set up so we dug in there. We expected a counterattack.

"The glidermen volunteered to take over outpost duty and relieve the tankmen, who had been fighting all day and needed the rest they'd been counting on getting. We did outpost duty in shifts. The enemy was supposed to be 2,000 yards away from our tank park, but we found out he was not more than 100 yards away.

"At dawn our tanks started up again. Some of the glider pilots got into action by riding on the backs of the tanks. All the time they were under the fire of enemy snipers. The job of the tanks was to knock out a hill that was pouring out 88-mm fire. The hill was finally knocked out at about 1100 hours. It sure had us pinned down for a while."

"The snipers we met," said Ceravolo, "were using wooden bullets in some cases. They are red bullets, just a shade larger than our .30-calibers. They make a nasty wound. They're hollow and they splinter and spread after hitting. I saw one paratrooper who was hit in the leg. You never saw a bullet hole like that in your life."

"REMEMBER how we crashed?" picked up Cromie. "Without wings and engines? Well, only one man was injured—my co-pilot. We had to get him back to the beachhead and into a hos-

pital in a hurry. The medics got him into a captured German truck. All the way along the road, snipers picked on us."

"After that hill was knocked out," said Doubek, "we dug in, expecting another counterattack from the Germans. The glider pilots pitched in. It was surprising to see the way they acted tactically. This was their first time in combat.

"Just about midday of D-plus-one, our heavy equipment started to move up from the beaches—big guns, tanks and all kinds of stuff. It was the most beautiful sight you ever saw. Meanwhile the glider pilots were pouring in from everywhere and bringing prisoners with them—some they'd taken themselves and others that the paratroopers had unloaded on them. It was funny the way the paratroopers would hand the prisoners over to us; they figured we were superior officers. We stayed at the CP until about 1800 hours and then proceeded to the beach, taking a load of prisoners with us."

"I guess about 35 of our boys left for the beach that evening," said Ceravolo, "but I didn't. I was lazy and I wasn't going to walk. I waited for a ride. Some interesting things happened while I was waiting.

"I was talking to a QM colonel, and there was a sniper working a machine gun. The colonel said this sniper wasn't going after the wounded but after the medics who went out to bring the wounded in. Everybody was busy and just didn't do anything about this sniper for about an hour. Then some paratroopers couldn't stand it any more and they said: 'Let's go out and get the sonuvabitch.' They simply went out and got him.

"This same colonel asked me to help him pick up some packs that were being dropped by planes. We had to go in among the trees to get these packs of rations, medical supplies and ammunition. That's where we saw some paratroopers hanging from the trees. They hadn't had a chance; their harness and chutes had caught in the trees as they floated down and they were just shot up and bayoneted where they were."

By this time, the beachheads were being widened and deepened beyond the trampled sands where the landing barges had come up early the day before. Allied seaborne and airborne troops were establishing contact. German reserves were now in action, but the forging of the scattered Allied links went on. It was another dark night on land, another day of choppy waves in the Channel. Overhead Allied planes continued to fly, dropping their well-placed sticks of bombs at the proper bridge and railroad locations. For the men fighting in Normandy, the land, the people and the enemy now fell into a familiar pattern; the tension of yesterday's war with the unknown was replaced now by a more routine, but equally grim, warfare.

"I finally joined a convoy of about 40 vehicles," Ceravolo said, "and started for the beach, riding in a captured German jeep. I was sitting in the back of the jeep, looking for snipers. Three miles from the beach, a German paratrooper jumped out from the bushes, and I started fumbling for my gun. Any ground soldier would have known that he had to carry his gun ready, but I'm just a glider pilot. If this guy had wanted to shoot me he could have had me three times, but it turned out that he was surrendering and he dropped to his knees."

"What impressed me," said Cromie, "was the weapons and the horses the Germans had on hand. I saw our paratroopers coming along the roads with captured German horses that were well-groomed animals. Our boys were loaded down with grenades and rifles. Each man looked like an armory. And there were any number of guns along the roads. It seemed you could always find plenty of guns."

"There was German equipment in heaps all over the roads," Ceravolo said. "Stacks of gas masks. I saw one paratrooper mounted on a beautiful horse all loaded down with enemy guns, and he was patrolling the road big as hell. I said to him: 'You're so high up they could get you easy.' But he said: 'Like hell they can. They can't hit the side of a brick thunderpit.'"

"And do you remember," asked Brown, "the little French kids along the way who gave us an American salute? When we stopped for a second at the crossroads, they came out with wine."

"We ran across some Frenchmen," said Cromie, "who used their horses and trucks to bring in our wounded for us."

"They were being shot at all the time, too," said Ceravolo. "I saw one brought up for treatment who must have had half his face blown away. He knew it and was quite conscious. He'd kept his truck continuously on the move, hauling our wounded, until they hit him.

"In our convoy, we had 11 German paratroop prisoners. When we stopped, somebody said the Germans hadn't been searched. We found 50 boxes of K rations on them. We stacked the boxes in the road and told the French kids they could have them."

"Those Germans are careless about the Red Cross emblem," said Brown. "Did you notice?"

"Well," said Ceravolo, "we captured two German medics who were carrying Lugers under their blouses. Our medics are unarmed. And I heard of one case where a German stabbed a medical officer who tried to help him. The German was a lieutenant who came out of the bushes

shouting 'Kamerad! I'm wounded.' The American medical officer ran to help, and the German stabbed him. One of our wounded paratroopers lying nearby grabbed a carbine to shoot the German, but the S-2 officer stopped the GI. 'We want this guy for interrogation,' he said.

"Another paratrooper, also wounded, was lying in a field when a medic spotted him and started running forward. A sniper fired on the medic and he dropped. He held up his arm to show the Red Cross band, but the sniper fired again. A couple of paratroopers who saw this just went crazy. They yelled: 'Let's go get him' and went out after the sniper. They got him."

"I saw Germans let Red Cross trucks go by," said Cromie, "but when we got to the beach, they strafed a hospital. We tried to find a place to sleep. The next thing I remember is planes overhead. One peeled off and dropped a bomb on the beach. They were 109s, and our boys knocked off two of them but not until they'd strafed the hospital. The Red Cross painted on the outside must have been about four feet wide, and the wounded were lined up outside because there wasn't room enough inside."

As the glider pilots drove in jeeps and trudged along the roads to the beach, some were happy to learn—and others were too tired to care—that the German garrison of Bayeux was under fire and then that the town had surrendered. It was the first town in France to be wrested from enemy occupation.

The glider pilots, who had brought American airborne infantrymen into France and had fought as foot soldiers themselves, were going back now to England. Some were taking German prisoners with them to prove it; others carried red poppies—a milder kind of evidence. They came and trampled the sands along the gray choppy Channel and looked out toward England on the evening of D-plus-one and during D-plus-two. Their "down and go" was nearly over.

"When I got on the beach," said Doubek, "I was like a kid waiting for the ice-cream man. When I realized the predicament those men on the beachhead had been in, and the men farther in; when I understood how badly and how much they needed everything, it made me feel awfully good to watch our big stuff coming in off the landing craft—guns, tanks, trucks, bulldozers.

"There was quite a collection of prisoners on the beach behind the barbed wire when we came up, and we glider pilots brought more—the men we'd captured and the ones the paratroopers had given us."

"A couple of prisoners I saw," said Ceravolo, "had been accidentally shot by their own men. One was shot through the arm and another's hand had been partly shot away. All the prisoners I saw were either old men or very young kids who didn't look more than 15 or 16. The old men weren't so bad, but the kids were sassy, insolent young bastards full of that Nazi stuff. Born with it, I guess."

WHEN we got to the beach," Doubek said, "we reported to the beachmaster. He took our names, ranks and serial numbers and immediately told us when there would be a tug to take us out to a ship. He asked us if we would take charge of some prisoners who had to be taken to England. Most of the German prisoners knew they would have to wade out into the water so they took off all their clothes right up to the waist. But we glider pilots waded in with all our clothes on. For days afterward, we were picking salt and sand from our cigarette lighters."

"When we got aboard the LST," said Ceravolo, "and I saw that steak and ice cream, I said, 'Come to me.' I just couldn't stop putting it away."

"Most of the German prisoners we took over," said Doubek, "didn't look like crack troops to me. Some of them were officers in their middle 20s, but most of the troops claimed to be Russians and Poles captured when the Germans invaded their countries and forced to fight under threats that their families would be harmed. They seemed happy to be captured by us and said they wouldn't give us any trouble.

"About 1900 hours we passed out some canned corned beef. The prisoners ate only half the ration. We asked them why, and they said they hadn't had so much meat for so long that they were saving the other half for the next day.

"Each German officer had a briefcase and a very small piece of hard, dry sausage inside. They also had plenty of butter in a screw-top dish with a red plastic top. We found that when we searched them; they'd been searched as they got on the boat but we were taking extra precautions. After we got through, one produced a razor blade we'd missed.

"The Navy treated us like kings. We were so grateful we were glad to guard the prisoners. We waited one day for a convoy back to England to form. On D-plus-three we reached England and returned to our base."