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BIG JUMP INTO GERMANY

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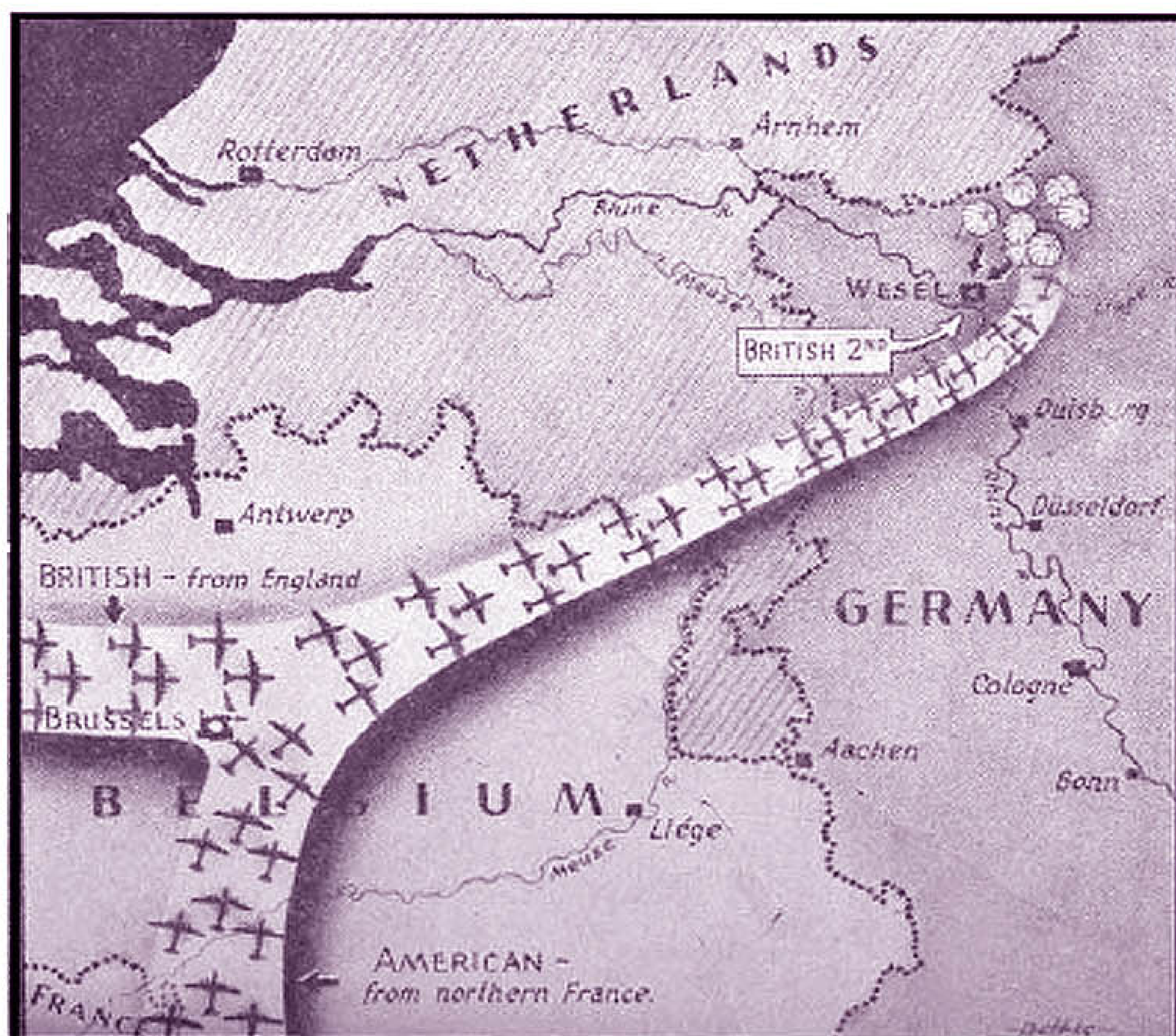

RADIOED FROM PARIS

He was in a Flying Fortress, watching our airborne army envelop the German side of the Rhine. Then a motor burst into flame. Our correspondent fingered his chute ring and said, "This is it"

WE GOT hit the first time as we swung over the drop zone. Out of the left waist window we were watching parachutes bubble out of a C-47. And then we heard the hammering straight down below us. You could tell by the sound that it was 20- or 37-mm., and at 700 feet, our B-17 was a fat, lazy bird. We should have known when the first shell knocked against our ship that we ought to get out of the area and stay out. But we didn't, and that's how it happened.

We should not have been there in the first place. But the great airborne offensive across the northern Rhine on March 24th was probably one of the last big stories of the European war, and from a news as well as from a technical reporting angle, the Army wanted complete coverage. So the U.S. Troop Carrier Forces put aside a beautiful silver Flying Fortress, loaded it with their combat cameramen and observers, let me get on board with my sound-recording equipment and sent us out to cover the operation.

The plan was to take a small, but very important bite out of the German east bank of the Rhine. To the south, other armies were poised and ready to jump the river but, up in the north near the Dutch border, the British Second was held up by heavy opposition coming from around Wesel.

D-Day was set for March 24th, and two divisions, the British Sixth Airborne and the U.S. Seventeenth Airborne, were to be flown low across the Rhine inland five miles to the high ground northwest of Wesel and dropped there. Simultaneously, the engineers were to blanket 30 miles of the area with smoke, and General Miles C. Dempsey's British Second was to effect a Rhine crossing six hours before the air drops, push inland and join the paratroopers.

In effect, this was a better planned Arnhem job. You may remember that unsuccessful paratrooper landing in Holland last year. The job was carried out well, except that the paratroopers were so far ahead of the ground troops that the Germans in between held the ground troops back while cutting the airborne invaders to ribbons.

This time, the chunk of land was to be much smaller and much more vital. Days before the operation, the four areas selected for landing of paratroopers and gliders were given a careful going over by tactical aircraft, which stitched up and down the roads around the areas and smashed the antiaircraft gun positions and spotted German reinforcement columns miles east of Wesel and left them wrecked and blazing.

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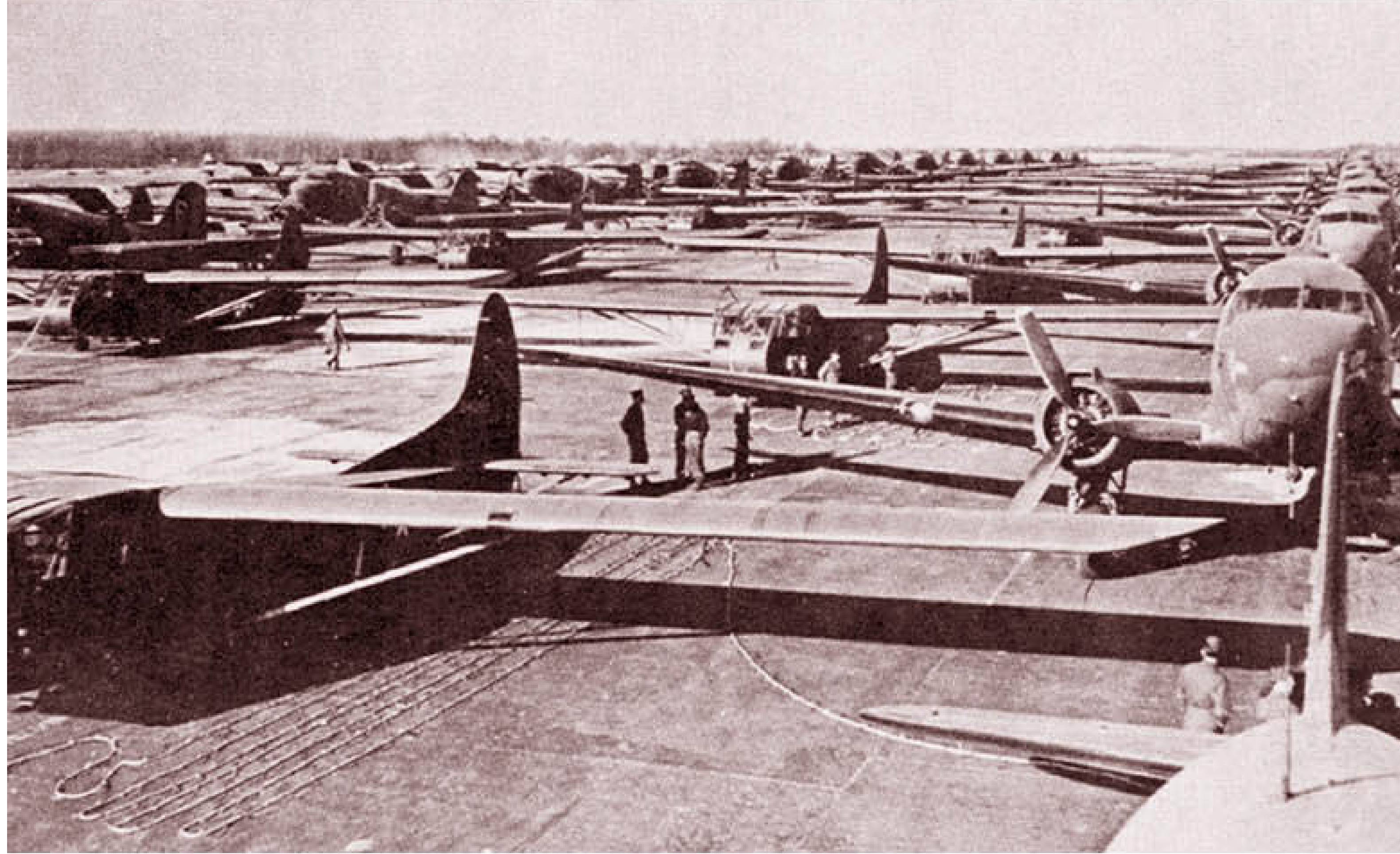
Meanwhile, the U.S. Seventeenth Airborne, which had not had combat jump experience, practiced drops in northern France. It had only reached Europe in December. The British Sixth Airborne, a combat-wise group, was in England practicing drops.

On the 22d, all paratroopers were brought to airports and placed in special stockades for security reasons. The next morning, pilots, navigators and radiomen were briefed before big maps marked "Top Secret." After dark, the jumpmasters were taken from the stockades and briefed. They were to jump low—700 feet. Forward speed was to be 105 miles per hour over the drop zones. The planes were to be emptied of 15 paratroopers in no more than eleven seconds.

At 8:30 A.M. on the 24th, a great parade of English planes and another great column of American planes met over Brussels, Belgium. There were five thousand ships in all, counting fighter escort, and they swung northeastward to the Rhine. As they crossed the river, the quiet paratroopers were hooking up to the guide lines and could see great globs of black smoke arising from the drop zones. The heavy bombers were just finishing the softening up.

The weather was on our side. For eleven superb days the sun had crossed the sky, brilliant from the moment it rose to its last setting red. It helped the men patrolling the sky, and the bomber fleets that went out day after day and night after night. It helped the men on the ground by drying out the soil over which they would have to move. Along the sacred German River Rhine it was the enemy who prayed for clouds and rain and overcast to help him against our supremacy in the air and the massive weight of our superiority on the ground. But on this day of decision the good weather held.



To me the only worrying thing about the enterprise was the fact that I was not in the least worried. It's not superstition. It is just that after seven years of crisis and war, I have come to feel that things are most likely to go wrong when it seems inevitable that they will go completely well.

But this slight twinge disappeared after half an hour in the air. Because the sight of airfield after airfield in northern France loaded with planes and gliders taking off and ready to take off was too real a sign of strength to brook any doubt.

The sky above was pale blue. Below us, golden soil and bright green meadows were cut by long morning shadows. Flying at a few hundred feet, banking steeply to let the cameramen get their shots, we saw the solid phalanxes of olive-green troop carriers and tow planes and gliders nose to tail on the perimeter tracks of the ground bases. From one field to another we went until it got monotonous, until we sat down on our flak suits and parachutes in the waist and just watched the sky. I no longer even felt worried that I was not worried.

On my right was Colonel Joel O'Neal, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the U.S. Carrier Forces, come to see the execution of what

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he had helped to plan. He chewed gum and looked at his map. Tech Sergeant Clarence Pearce and Staff Sergeant Fred Quandt sat silent, with their knees drawn up, and smoked. We all watched dark-bearded Sergeant George Rothlisberg, who sat and slept on the upended little khaki suitcase that carried his equipment. He just sat upright, with no support, and slept.

An Airborne Dream Come True

It was warm, despite the fact that we had taken the windows out of the waist, and the wind was rushing through. Outside, the sun was climbing, and you had just about absorbed the roaring of the four great engines and the screaming of the slipstream into the open fuselage as a thoroughly acceptable part of a perfect day, when someone nudged you and pointed out of the side.

You got up and looked, and there they were—hundreds of C-47s flying along in tight formation. This was the realization of months of training and planning. It was an airborne dream come true. It was a mighty olive-green river that surged steadily and inevitably over Germany, and over the Germans crouched behind their last great defense line below. It was a mightier river than the German Rhine, and this day would prove it. From now on in, it was business, strict and cold. The troop carriers looked sleek and well fed, bobbing up and down in the air currents and propwash like fat men in a gentle surf. But inside them there were thousands of desperate young men, trained to a fine edge and armed to the teeth. Slung under the green bellies of the planes were the bundles of explosives and ammunition and supplies for dropping to the paratroops. They nosed ahead inexorably, and behind them behind them still others, until the procession disappeared in the thin March mist.

Colonel O'Neal put his flak suit on over his parachute harness and strapped the steel flaps of his flak helmet down over his ears. We all did the same. The three photographers, their cameras clicking away, jostled one another at the waist windows as we swooped around the drop ships.

P-Hour, the drop hour for the paratroops, was 10 A.M. Just after 9:45 we passed our last check point. It was called the IP, or Initial Point, the same as a bombing run. Its code name was Yalta. All of a sudden the ground below us, which had been golden in the morning sunlight, turned gray. For a moment I thought that we had run into clouds. It seemed impossible. Then we caught a whiff. It was chemical smoke. Below us and around us was a bank of misty smoke that ran for miles up and down the west bank of the Rhine, across the river and over the east bank.

Here there was no sunlight; here in the center of green and fertile land was a clearly marked area of death. The smoke seemed a shroud. Outlines below us were indistinct. What had seemed warm now appeared ominously cold, and almost clammy. On our left was the first serial of paratroop pathfinders. We were flying at 700 feet.

Below us there was no sign of life. We looked for troops going across, for the familiar invasion LCVPs and LCMs of our Rhine navy. We saw none. The river below us was a slate-gray ribbon winding through a dull gray land; on our left the troop carriers, pregnant dolphins in an eerie sea; and down to our right, straight into the sun, the dark mass of the city of Duisburg. From its broad, regular inland harbor the sun reflected panels of light into the battle area.

Over the roar of the engines and the screaming of air in the waist windows we heard a faint thumping. Colonel O'Neal grabbed me by the shoulder and pointed. The intercom crackled and a dry voice said, "Flak at twelve o'clock and nine o'clock. But they're off the beam." Outside, coming up from Duisburg, were the shells from Nazi 88s. Black puffs of smoke feathered pretty far off to our right. All of a sudden I felt how tense I had become. There was no more flak for a moment and I began to relax.

And just at that moment we were over the first drop zone. It was 9:50, ten minutes early. On our left, paratroopers were tum-

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In the skies over Germany a small part of the 5,000 plane armada roars en route to Wesl, where 5,814,000 pounds of men and guns and equipment were dropped in an area two miles by three miles.

bling out of the C-47s, their green camouflage chutes blending with the dark gray ground. The troop-carrier serial seemed like a snail, leaving a green trail as it moved along. And it was crawling indeed—about 115 miles an hour. Our big Fort seemed to me to be close to stalling speed.

We were watching the bright blue and red and yellow supply parachutes mix with the falling troopers, admiring the concentration of that first jump, when we first got it. I was surprised and pained. The ground, as far as we could see it through the smoke, was torn up as if a gigantic seed drill had passed over it. It was an insult that anyone should be left down there to shoot at us.

It sounded like a riveting machine, a heavy one. For a split-second I didn't catch on. Then I smelled the explosive—a stench that always nauseates me. You get it in outward-bound bombers when the gunners clear their guns. But we had no gunners. Our turret guns were taped up and our waist guns had been unmounted. We were here to photograph and record, not to fight. There was a sharp rap on the ship somewhere. We had been hit.

The drop run was finished, so we swung up in a banking climb to our left while the first serial turned sharply right and headed out. I listened to the engines. They roared healthily on. The sound of the slipstream was the same, and the crackling of the aluminum skin.

A Premonition of Disaster

I looked around the waist with new eyes. I noted the sheet of armor below each waist window and decided to stick close there. The men were busy with their cameras, their knees bent, and hunched slightly over to keep balance. I hung on to one of the innumerable pipes that run down the top of the fuselage, like a strap-hanger in a New York subway, swaying slightly as we banked and heeled. I looked at Quandt. He looked back, and nodded his head with the corners of his mouth turned down. I knew exactly what he meant, so I did likewise. Colonel O'Neal's Irish face remained impassive.

We turned and circled for a minute or two, and then joined another serial going into its drop zone. On the ground we could see occasional gun flashes, but no sign of life apart from them. No flak was coming near, so again a gradual relaxation made me see how tense I had become in every muscle. We watched the serial, with its fifteen tight little three-ship V formations, drop its load.

A hundred yards away from us, one of its ships, spawning parachutes from the rear, suddenly blossomed with yellow light up forward. It was not the reflection of the sun on the windshield. It was flame. And the ship turned off to the left in a steep glide. I remembered that two ships in the first serial had also slipped away, but with no apparent damage. Probably the pilots were hit by flak.

This bunch finished its work and turned for home. We turned off and joined a third formation, flying level with them at their speed and altitude. One of the photographers, crowded away from the window, was probably thinking along identical lines with me. There were a couple of extra flak suits back with us, and he stretched the double aprons flat out on the wooden floor.

It suddenly seemed extremely silly to me

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that we should be there, because we were a huge bright silver B-17 flying along at almost stalling speed. We were probably the most conspicuous thing in the sky.

The Germans must have arrived at the same conclusion. We had been over the drop zone twenty or twenty-five minutes. We were turning again to pick up the first incoming serial of C-46s. These ships, the Curtiss Commandos, carried more paratroopers and jumped them out of two doors at once. They were used in this operation for the first time.

We were banking to head back to the Rhine and pick them up. Hanging from my pipe, I could look almost straight down through the waist window through the tattered smoke at the ground. By now, there were several blobs of drop zones where the colored parachutes reminded you of a Mardi Gras sidewalk strewn with confetti.

And then we really hit trouble. It may have been the same gun. I did not see it. Radio Operator Roy Snow watched the tracers come up from the ground and lifted his feet to let the shells pass under him. In the waist we heard the riveter again. A short burst, then a longer one. The heavy steel-scaled flak suit and the heavy flak helmet, which had been weighing me down, now felt light and comforting. Then we got hit in a ripple. The ship shuddered, I grabbed my pipe. And then, as if it had been rehearsed, all five of us in the waist stepped onto the flak suits, spread on the flooring.

Flight in a Burning Ship

Over the intercom, Snow was telling our pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Benton Baldwin, that the left wing had been hit, and that fire was breaking out between the engines. The flak stopped. Baldwin was gaining altitude in a climbing turn. Smoke began to pour down through the plane, and in the left waist window. A tongue of flame licked back as far as the window, and the silver inner skin of the ship reflected its orange glow. The crew chief told Lieutenant Albert Richey that gasoline was sloshing around in the bomb bay.

Sitting in a plane that is being peppered by flak and being able to do nothing at all about it is a miserable feeling. But even that is nothing to the sensation of sitting in a burning plane. Baldwin used both extinguisher charges in a vain attempt to put out the fire. There was nothing to do but bail out.

This Fortress carried two thousand gallons of aviation fuel, which can almost ignite in a hot wind. One engine was burning; the one next to it was catching fire. The ship was still under control. But there was no telling for how long.

As we staggered out, we watched the C-46s come in and apparently walk into a wall of flak. I could not see the flak, but one plane after another went down. All our attention was concentrated on our own ship. It could blow up in mid-air any moment. We moved close to the windows. From the pilot's compartment came streams of stinging smoke. The intercom went out.

Up in the cockpit, Colonel Baldwin was keeping the ship under control, watching the fire eat a larger and larger hole in the left wing like a smoldering cigarette in a tablecloth. Looking down on the wing from above, he could not see a large fire. The flame was mainly below the wing.

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Suddenly we went into a sharp dip. Back aft we did not know what was happening. All we had was the smoke and the deafening noise, and the tiny fragments of molten metal which the wing was throwing back and which twinkled in the sun as they raced past the waist window.

We pulled off our flak suits and helmets. I reached down and buckled on my chest chute. It was obvious we would have to jump. But down below was still the cold, gray smoky country east of the Rhine. Impossible to tell what was happening down there. If it was not in enemy hands, it was a battlefield.

As we went into the dip, I thought the pilots had been hit, and I put my hands on the edge of the window to vault out. But the colonel brought her back under control, and we hung on. There was no movement among the men in the waist. We stood and waited—for flak, or more flames or explosion or for the Rhine to slide by below. There was nothing else to do. After what seemed hours, the Rhine was below us at last. The left wing was blazing, but three motors were still running.

We were hardly across the river when Roy Snow came back and told us that the pilot wanted us to jump. That and the Rhine River were all we had been waiting for.

Colonel O'Neal went back and began to struggle with the handle that jettisons the rear door. I jogged my chest pack up and down, made sure it was sécure. The other men did the same. Colonel O'Neal was still wrestling with the door. I went back to help.

There was no panic. But if this telling sounds cool and collected, the actuality was not so. Uppermost in everyone's mind was just physically getting out of that ship. We were still flying at less than a thousand feet, which left not much time. I abandoned, with hardly a thought, my recording equipment and typewriter and notes and jacket in the radio compartment. Of the cameramen, only Quandt thought to take the film out of his camera. There was no point in trying to jump with anything in your hand because the opening of the chute will make you drop anything that is not tied to you.

The colonel got the door open and crouched in it for a moment. I shouted, "Okay, Colonel, get going." He didn't hear, but tumbled out. I got into the doorway.

All my life, one of the sensations I have disliked most has been the feeling of falling. As a boy I avoided the big slides in the amusement parks at Coney Island. Even now, working at the front, when I go up in a Cub or observation L-5, I always hope fervently that the pilot will not do those steep banking dives they like so much. The sinking feeling in my stomach when I fall is sickening.

Standing in the doorway of the burning Fortress, I somehow hardly thought of that. Down below, the ground was green and golden and friendly again. We had left the smoke zone, the sun was bright and the air was warm. Everything seemed friendly. It was the most natural thing in the world to want to leave the doomed plane and, anyway, behind me were three men waiting to jump, too. So I simply let myself tumble forward on my face. As I left the ship, the slipstream caught me, and it was like a big friendly hand that I could dig my shoulder into. The black rubber de-icer on the stabilizer was above me. And then all was confusion.

We were jumping at about six hundred feet, so I pulled the rip cord almost immediately. I pulled it so hard I almost jerked my shoulder out. There was more confusion. I felt as if I had come to a dead stop. The harness straps were digging into my flesh. My main thought was to save the ring, and I put it in my pocket. My next thought was gentle surprise that I should have been successful in parachuting the first time I tried.

For a moment there was relaxation, and enjoyment of the wonderful quiet that the departing Fort had left me in. Up above my head, the chute was glistening white, billowing like a sail full of wind. I began to sway, so I turned my attention to the ground.

I tried to remember everything I had read about parachuting—like pulling the shrouds to stop swaying. But I was afraid to try anything that might spill the chute. So I concentrated on worrying about where I was going to fall. Below me were a farmhouse, some open fields, a clump of trees and a pond. Men were running in my direction from one side of the house. Away in the next

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field Colonel O'Neal, who had also been swaying, had just come down.

I landed in a pasture. Trying to gauge my height to brace myself for the fall, I kept opening and closing my eyes, but was barely able to keep pace. I remembered to flex my knees. The next second I hit with a grunt. I snapped off the parachute and got to my feet. To my surprise I stayed there, getting my wind back.

The Hospitality of an Ally

It was the British Second Army area, and —true to the old Battle of Britain tradition— the parachuting visitor was promptly filled with tea and whisky.

I reached in my pocket for the ring. It is parachuting tradition to keep the ring to prove you have been in command of the situation at all times. The ring was not there. I had obviously been out of control.

Word came that the colonel was all right, but that Pearce, who jumped right after me, had been killed when his chute streamed like an exclamation mark instead of opening. Our pilot pulled his rip cord in the cockpit by accident while putting his chute on after we had all got out. So he rode the Fort into a crash landing and came out safe.

All around us, as we stood on this approach route for the airborne forces, burning and disabled C-47s crashed into the fields. In every case the pilot stayed with his ship until his crew and passengers were out before bailing out himself. In some cases he stayed too long. It was a thrilling demonstration of the highest kind of courage to see a burning troop carrier come gliding in, to see two or three or four chutes blossom out under it, a pause as the ship turned away, and then another lone chute as the pilot got out. We stood looking up and cheered.

After a while, I noticed that my eye was hurting, and found that the chest chute had given me the start of a beautiful shiner as it was ripped up past my face. On hitching my way back to Paris next day, I found a telegram from my boss in London saying: "Better a purple eye than a Purple Heart."

By that time, there was good news from the front. Some 6,400 Nazis had been taken prisoner in the drop zones; the whole operation was a great success, and the British Second Army was slashing across the top of Germany—east of the Rhine.

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