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The Effectiveness of Allied Airborne Units on D-Day

by

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B.A. History/Spanish

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

History

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DEDICATION

This thesis is in memory of my grandparents, Marcelo Pena, Petra Pena and Elias Landavazo. It is also dedicated to all those who believe in the richness of learning

This thesis is dedicated to my father, David Landavazo, who taught me that the best kind of knowledge to have is that which is learned for its own sake. It is also dedicated to my mother, Marisela Landavazo, who taught me that even the largest task can be accomplished if it is done one step at a time. To my fiancé and future wife, Brooke Skinner, who taught me that I can accomplish anything I put my mind to.

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And finally to my fiancé Brooke Skinner, my mother Marisela Landavazo, my father David Landavazo and all of my other family members who were forced to deal with the stress, late nights and early mornings to finish this work, love is the greatest gift of all.

The Effectiveness of Allied Airborne Units on D-Day

by

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B.A., History/Spanish, University of New Mexico, 2009

M.A., History, University of New Mexico, 2011

ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions during, Operation Neptune, on D-Day was researched. Through the use of memoirs written by paratroopers who took part in the para-jump during the early morning hours of June 6, 1944 and other secondary sources written about the airborne, D-Day and the Second World War it is possible to understand the paratroopers true value. To identify their effectiveness the study of their objectives, casualty rates, targets destroyed in relationship to objectives missed and overall success must be considered.

Traditionally the paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were looked upon as a failure. They were widely scattered, unable to regroup and often missed their primary objectives. Military historians previously studying the airborne argued that due to their high risk high casualty rate the paratroopers were a waste of men and material. Until recently, with the increase in public support for the airborne and more generally the military, former paratroopers and D-Day veterans wrote their memoirs proclaiming their heroics and efficiency. Historians of the modern era have

altered their perception of the paratroopers and now tend to investigate their heroics rather than the objectives they were given while stationed in France.

The actions of the paratroopers on D-Day are heralded like the heroics of the veterans of most American foreign wars. Although criticized shortly after the war for their inability to secure all of the objectives given to them, they recently have received a large amount of positive press, due to the popular media. The veterans themselves have always believed in the good that they accomplished on D-Day. Their recent memoirs have illustrated their heroics.

Through the paratroopers implementation of tactics and strategy they were able to quickly and adeptly counter any offensive or defensive movements by the enemy. At the time airborne operations were still an untested science. The Airborne, although aware of its own failures, rose to the occasion and acted in a manner befitting the American military. The pride of American research and development also promoted their efficiency. The Airborne's ability to manipulate the most advanced German or American weapons and munitions gave them a significant edge in combat.

PREFACE

The history of the airborne on D-Day went through three very distinct generations. The first generation took place during and shortly after the war military historians viewed the airborne as a waste of men and material. Historians such as S.L.A. Marshall and Napier Crookenden criticized the airborne's actions and their lack of completed objectives. Because their point of view was centered on the overall logistics of the war they were not concerned with small unit combat and the tactics they used. Although this viewpoint was justified it provided little constructive criticism for the paratroopers. This generation is known for its critical opinion of airborne operations.

Generally, the second generation investigated the airborne with a kinder light. Historians such as Cornelius Ryan and John Keegan allowed the airborne the ability to destroy targets of opportunity rather than just their pre-assigned objectives. Although they still argued that the airborne was a waste of men and material they did asses that the confusion and chaos the airborne caused was a significant factor for the success of D-Day. The shift in the study of the airborne can be attributed to the time. During the mid to late nineteen eighties the backlash of the Vietnam Conflict was waning, the use of guerilla tactics around the world was increasing and patriotism within the United States was as high as it had been since the Second World War.

Finally the third generation of airborne history concentrated on a completely different area than its predecessors. Historians such as Stephen E. Ambrose and Anthony Beevor promote the actions of the small units and individuals on D-Day. Historians had never investigated the actions of the paratroopers on D-Day. Historians,

such as Ambrose, illustrated the trauma, courage and fear the paratroopers faced around every corner. They discovered a different set of objectives because they illustrated the movements and tactics of individuals and small units. These secondary objectives contributed more to the success of D-Day than their actual mission did.

This thesis illustrates the shared thematic commonalities between those combat elements of the individual, the group, the collective to that of the airborne's mission. Throughout this process it is integral to bring the history of the small combat units that were highly motivated, trained and equipped to the forefront and away from the individual as it is studied today or from the large scale operation that was studied during the history's onset.

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Chapter 1-Introduction

Airborne operations on D-Day have caused historians to discuss its validity for the last half century. Historians and veterans alike argue the importance and lack of importance behind the early morning airborne assaults on June 6, 1944. Some notable historians argue that the airborne was largely a waste of man power and resources. Because the airborne force was unable to accomplish all of the objectives given it by the Allied General Staff, the airborne assault was a failure.¹ They maintained that because the airborne was so badly misdropped they became a liability for the infantry to later have to rescue. Others argue for the intrinsic value of guerilla warfare and its ability to destroy communication lines, disrupt enemy movements and cause general havoc behind enemy lines. Regardless of the debate that surrounds and engulfs the history of the airborne, a controversy exists and permeates any discussion of it.

The study of military history in the last few decades has gone through a series of changes. The shift occurred at the end of World War Two when historians decidedly moved towards investigating the importance behind the soldiers on the ground and the strains of tactics and strategy. As Joan Beaumont exclaims in her article, "The General History of the Second World War," the military history of the Second World War and of military history in general "has shifted away from the 'great men' of the conflict and their so-called 'decisive decisions,' towards an emphasis on the physical material constraints on tactics and strategy."² Martin van Creveld, one of the first historians to

¹ See historians such as S.L.A. Marshall, Napier Crookenden and John Keegan.

² Joan Beaumont, "The General History of the Second World War," *The International History Review* 14(1992): 755.

note the shift from 'great men' to the study of tactics and strategy, emphasizes the decisions that the soldiers on the ground made over those made in Great Britain.³ One of the only ways to ensure the validity and accuracy of a more bottom to top history is the extensive use of oral history. The memories and writings of the people and soldiers who fought on the ground are invaluable to a history that is not centered on great men.

In 2000, Edward M. Coffman wrote an article titled "Talking about War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and military History" for the *Journal of American History* that discussed the importance of conducting oral history in the field of military history. He writes, "Because of the great interest in oral history about wars and the military experience, thousands upon thousands of interviews with veterans are now located in research institutions across the nation. Local and state historical groups have created collections, as have the various military services."⁴ These oral histories include a wide range of different styles, topics and purposes but they all provide an indepth look into the experiences of combat soldiers on the ground. Coffman states: "Since World War Two, the army, navy, air force, and Marine Corps historical offices and various subsidiary organizations have amassed thousands of oral histories. These range from interviews to supplement research on specific topics to lengthy oral memoirs."⁵ Without the use of memoirs, letters, diaries and oral histories the field of military history would lack its most important aspect, the human element. Oral interviews

³ Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1977.

⁴ Edward M. Coffman, "Talking about War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and military History," *The Journal of American History* 87 (2000): 589.

⁵ Ibid.

provide military history with the means to connect generations of war experiences and with meaning and significance into the future.

The controversy over the airborne divisions during the early hours of June 6, 1944 is a simple one. Critics held that the 101st Airborne Division was unable to complete its objectives due to extremely inaccurate drops and an inability to mobilize quickly enough to capture the German garrisons offguard. Most historians working on the subject suggest that the airborne was in fact ineffective during the early morning of June 6, 1944. Critics have come to that conclusion based on the airborne's inability to complete all of their objectives as well as their inability to organize into a coherent order of battle and move as one group to its tactical objectives. Historians such as S.L.A. Marshall, Napier Crookenden and Stephen E. Ambrose believe that extremely poor dropzone conditions forced the C-47 Dakota pilots to drop their airborne sticks at the inappropriate times.⁶ Furthermore some soldiers believed that they had survived the jump they had accomplished their mission and it was now time to survive instead of completing the objectives given to them. Although the effectiveness of the airborne is still debated to this day, the armament, tactics and strategy employed by the various airborne divisions were critical to their successes, failure and ultimate survival. This thesis explores the relationship between those combat elements and the airborne mission. Throughout this thesis it is critical to bring the history of the airborne back

⁶ S.L.A. Marshall, *Night Drop* (New York: Bantam Books, 1962). Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing, 1992). Napier Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976),

from the individual efforts of the paratroopers to the investigation of small combat units that were heavily armed and highly trained.

Paratroopers belonging to the two American Airborne divisions, the 82nd and the 101st were outfitted with the most advanced small arms and munitions available to the Allied armies. The armament they carried into battle allowed them to survive alone and cut off behind enemy lines while inflicting severe casualties on the enemy. They carried modified versions of weapons used by the regular infantry as well as new weapons created in light of the Airborne's specific combat or tactical needs. Particularly important were the modified carbine rifle, jump knife and small mobile artillery and antitank weapons. Historian Russell F. Weigley makes note of this in his monograph of World War Two, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaign of France and Germany, 1944-1945*: "The Garand .30-caliber M1 semi-automatic rifle was the best standard infantry shoulder arm of the Second World War. No other rifle of the war matched its combination of accuracy, rate of fire, and reliability."⁷ The folding stock of the M1 carbine made it easier and lighter for the paratrooper to carry with ease and to use immediately after landing in enemy territory. In order to deal with larger fortifications and light armor, the airborne were dropped with bazookas, 2.36-inch "recoilless gun or rocket gun," and 75mm pack howitzers.⁸ These howitzers, although packing caliber enough to destroy light armor and fortifications, were small enough in size to be carried with gliderborn infantry or dropped by parachute. One hundred and first Airborne

⁷ Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaign for France and Germany, 1944-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 12.

⁸*Ibid.*, 11.

Division historians Leonard Rapport and Arthur Northwood Jr. describe these pack howitzers in *Rendezvous With Destiny: A History of the 101st Airborne Division*: “Weapons were much the same as in the infantry division with predominance of the lighter types; the artillery consisted of thirty-six 75mm pack howitzers.”⁹ Although many would be destroyed during the drop or lost in the marshes that littered the Norman environment they are a perfect example of the small alterations behind the airborne’s armament.

In addition to weaponry, the tactics the airborne troops employed became the foundation of modern guerilla warfare. The paratroopers were able to move in small units that employed “search and destroy” methods seeking out important enemy fortifications, lines of communications and reinforcements before they could be put to use at the beach fronts. Once again Weigley writes: “If the paratroopers were scattered unduly, the scattering confused the Germans as well, and to enhance this effect the Americans and French Resistance busied themselves cutting communication lines.”¹⁰ This was not the ultimate objective of the airborne but its ability to disrupt enemy movements and communications became their proudest success. Also important was the overall strategies role of the two airborne divisions in the invasion. Regardless of the lack of experience and the untested nature of the airborne itself they were given a very important task to complete. The fate of the invasions rested solely on the shoulders of the airborne’s ability to secure the flanks of the entire invasion.

⁹ Leonard Rapport and Arthur Northwood, Jr., *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of the 101st Airborne Division* (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1948), 13.

¹⁰ Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*, 76.

If the American Airborne Divisions were unable to secure the right and left flanks of the invasion beaches, the Nazi forces could bring in armored divisions from the east and infantry and supplies from the west. Yet, if the airborne could secure these flanks that would cut off the west and provide a defensible front to the east. S.L.A. Marshall makes note of this fact in his monograph, *Night Drop*. He writes: "Their tasks were to seize the exits from Utah Beach and either seize or destroy the bridges and other crossings of the Douve and Merderet Rivers. So doing, they would reduce the heavy risks of the seaborne forces on the Allied right flank, which for a prolonged period would be separated from the mass of the invasion landing well to the eastward."¹¹ Although the grand strategy for the airborne may appear to have been farfetched, it was largely successful. Ultimately the airborne was ordered to assist the invasion and destroy any enemy reinforcements. Weigley writes, "Airborne troops were to be employed in these operations 'in assisting the ground forces to establish beachheads and to prevent rapid movements of German reinforcements.'"¹² Even though some of key bridgeheads, causeways and objectives were not taken or accomplished, the airborne was still able to prevent a major counter attack by Nazi armor or mobile infantry.

Men of the airborne were aware that once they hit the ground they would be forced to take on objectives and targets usually reserved for much larger forces. In *Currahee! A Screaming Eagle at Normandy*, Donald R. Burgett recalls a small unit poised to take on a garrisoned city: "'Swell,'" he said, 'there are seven of us here; we're going to

¹¹ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50.

attack that town; you can come along if you want.' Sure, Lieutenant, we were going that way anyway, 'I said."¹³ Throughout the Normandy Theater of Operations tactical assaults such as this were and the steep odds contributed to the image of the airborne. The image of the airborne would go on and continue to permeate the fabric of the American psyche.

The image of the airborne is critical in understanding why young American men chose to participate in such a dangerous and fairly untested division. They joined this particular elite unit because they wanted to be the best soldiers; they wanted to fight with the best. At a time when flying airplanes was still reserved for the elite classes of society future paratroopers volunteered to ride and subsequently jump out of the Army Air Corp's C-47 Dakota transport plane. Major Richard Winters comments on the elite nature of the airborne right before he decided to enlist in his memoir, *Beyond Band of Brothers*:

After ten months of infantry training, I realized my survival would depend on the men around me. Airborne troopers looked like I had always pictured a group of soldiers: hard, lean, bronzed, and tough. When they walked down the street, they appeared to be a proud and cocky bunch exhibiting a tolerant scorn for anyone who was not airborne. So I took it in my head that I'd like to work with a bunch of men of that caliber. The paratroopers were the best soldiers at the infantry school and I wanted to be with the best, not with the sad sacks that I had frequently seen on post.¹⁴

¹³ Donald R. Burgett, *Currahee! A Screaming Eagle at Normandy* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1967), 94.

¹⁴ Major Richard Winters, *Beyond Band of Brothers: The War Memoirs of Major Dick Winters* (New York, Penguin Publishing Group, 2006), 10.

Once again the image of the airborne is evident within Major Winters' words. He joined the airborne simply because of its elite reputation. The elite status also encouraged its members to act in a manner above and beyond the call of duty.

Individual heroics have always been a part of combat. Stories harkening through the ages show that a single man can defeat insurmountable odds. World War Two was no different and throughout the darkness in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944 individuals and small groups of paratroopers would take on entire garrisoned cities by themselves. An example of just one of the many acts of heroics is seen throughout Marshall's *Night Drop*. He writes: "From house to house, they changed weapons, once covering with the carbine (Camin's weapon) while the other broke the door in and blasted with the Tommy gun...They took no prisoners because no chance afforded, but firing and fighting, saying nothing to one another, they flushed some of the game toward the flattened net of skirmishers. Thirty Germans were killed in the five houses."¹⁵ Acts of heroism performed by paratroopers were common place throughout D-Day. In most cases these gallant acts did not lead to the accomplishment of main objectives but they did disorient, destroy and mislead enemy forces throughout Normandy. Moreover, the paratroopers had their fair share of defeat when they landed in France.

From the onset, the airborne encountered significant failures and complications. Malfunctioning technology, pathfinder misdrops, weather and intense anti-aircraft (AA) fire significantly deterred and deferred the original airborne operational plan. Even

¹⁵ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 171.

though the American and British paratroopers were extremely well trained, equipped and prepared, the German military was still able to cause significant trouble for the Allied unit trapped behind enemy lines. Stephen T. Powers questions how it was possible for the German Army to pose such a threat to the American and British airborne divisions: "The focus should be upon the subordinate commanders and formations that fought the battles. How was it possible that German troops facing overwhelming firepower and air power, often outnumbered could mount such a formidable resistance against the flower of the British and American armies?"¹⁶ Units were scattered for miles in front of and behind the dropzone. Paratroopers were forced to march for miles in the dark in order regroup and move as a unit to their predetermined objectives. Burgett writes: "More planes went over, but they were flying so low, fast and scattered that it was impossible to orient myself with their direction. I would have to play this one by instinct. In fact, all the troopers would have to do it this way. We were so widely scattered that all the months of practiced assemblies in the dark were shot in the ass. We would have to do this one on our own."¹⁷ The miscalculations of the drop itself were only the beginning for the airborne. The paratroopers would face more than a few complications and misdrops through their time in the European Theater of Operations. Throughout D-Day and the rest of the war, the airborne and the paratroopers themselves would have to adapt to the circumstances that tended to surround and encompass its missions.

¹⁶ Stephen T. Powers, "The Battle of Normandy: the Lingering Controversy," *The Journal of Military History* 56, (1992): 470.

¹⁷ Burgett, *Currahee!*, 88.

On more than one occasion paratroopers landed in France with little or no equipment. They were forced to make do with the equipment they had, or could find or they did without. Shortly before Operation Neptune began, the Allied General Staff ordered the airborne to implement a leg bag that would carry the majority of the paratrooper's equipment and would allow him to carry more than was originally estimated. Unfortunately military intelligence never tested the bags under combat jump conditions. Lieutenant Elmer F. Brandenberger remembers: "When I jumped the aircraft speed must have been at least 150 instead of the normal jumping speed. The opening shock tore the rifle from my grasp. I can still remember the thought flashing through my mind that it would hit some damned Kraut and bash his head in."¹⁸

The tactical situation that the paratroopers jumped into forced them to acclimatize to the rapid changing environment of combat in France. One such example of this can be seen through the tactics behind the taking of the guns at Brecourt Manor by Easy Company, 506th PIR, 101st Airborne Division. To this day the maneuver is taught to the cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Stephen E. Ambrose illustrates this maneuver in his monograph about Easy Company, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest*. He writes:

With twelve men, what amounted to a squad (later reinforced by Speirs and the others), Company E had destroyed a German battery that was looking straight down causeway No. 2 and onto Utah Beach. That battery had a telephone line running to a forward observer who was in a pillbox located at the head of causeway No. 2. He had been calling shots down on the 4th Infantry as it unloaded. The significance of what Easy Company had accomplished cannot be

¹⁸ George E. Koskimaki, *D-Day With the Screaming Eagles* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 69.

judged with any degree of precision, but it surely saved a lot of lives, and made it much easier-perhaps even made it possible in the first instance-for tanks to come inland from the beach.¹⁹

Because the airborne was able to implement tactics such as those used by Major Winters they were able to take advantage of otherwise strategically impossible combat situations. The paratroopers ability to attack targets of opportunity, find and use weapons they may or may not have been familiar with and create and employ improvised tactics allowed them to succeed in a situation in which many regular combat infantry groups would have balked.

Regardless of the controversies that surround the airborne, the weapons, tactics, strategy and image that they used and implemented assured their effectiveness in combat. In spite of any objectives they failed to achieve or the scattered drop they were forced to deal with the paratroopers of the airborne were still able to come together and complete the ultimate objective of killing enemy combatants whenever possible. Because the airborne's worth has been in question since their formation they always felt they had a need to meet their own destiny in combat. So much so that airborne founding father Major General William C. Lee proclaimed that the 101st Airborne Division had a "Rendezvous with Destiny." Once again Rapport and Northwood detail the general's speech when they write:

The 101st...has no history, but it has a rendezvous with destiny. Like the early American pioneers whose invincible courage was the foundation stone of this Nation, we have broken with the past and its traditions to establish our claim to the future. Due to the nature of our armament and the tactics in which we shall perfect ourselves, we shall be called upon to carry out operations of far reaching

¹⁹ Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 83.

military importance, and we shall habitually go into action when the need is immediate and extreme.²⁰

As General Lee stated the members of the airborne knew that they would be the cornerstone of this new particular branch of the military. The entire airborne was swept up by the notion that they were the tip of the spear head for this new world war. The belief that the airborne had a “rendezvous with destiny” permeated the paratroopers and the American public. Without this belief that they not only had something to prove but were destined to prove it allowed the public and the Allied military leadership to perceive their necessity in the war to be vital.

Through their tactics and weaponry, heroics, ingenuity and image the airborne was able to accomplish something slightly different than the rest of the military on D-Day. Although, during the mid 1940's, American culture and society was swept up in patriotism and the unending belief in their military the airborne was still seen as something slightly different. Some high ranking Allied officials did see the risk that was inherent within the notion of airborne combat infantry but their criticism were often swept under the fervent belief in the airborne's abilities. The Allied commander Air Vice Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory argued with General Eisenhower over the validity of the airborne operations on D-Day. He persistently disputed that the risk of airborne casualties greatly outweighed their benefit. Ambrose details this debate in his D-Day monograph, *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*. He explains: “He told Eisenhower, ‘We must not carry out this airborne operation.’ He predicted 70 percent losses in glider strength and at least 50 percent in paratroop strength even

²⁰ Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 3.

before the paratroopers hit the ground.”²¹ The estimated loss of the life was always a distinct worry for Allied Commanders but what they could not for see at the time was not the in-air casualties but the casualties that would occur immediately after landing due to the marshes and obstacles created by the Nazis and the inability to rearm, reinforce and eventually retrieve airborne units trapped behind enemy lines for days on end.

Although some groups of paratroopers ran low on ammunition and supplies and had little if any hope for reinforcement they were still able to fight valiantly and either take objectives or hold enemy forces in check until the regular infantry could assemble to take them. Most of the young men composing the airborne had never seen combat before. A select group of paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division that survived action in Italy had taken fire but the large majority would receive their baptism by fire in Normandy. Koskimaki writes: “Perhaps D-Day doesn’t stand out as the most exciting day in the lives of the surviving 101st Airborne soldiers, but it was their baptism by fire. First impressions are lasting impressions. Lessons were quickly learned. It didn’t take the men long to distinguish between the ripping sounds of enemy guns and the staccato of American weapons.”²² As soon as the paratroopers jumped from the planes they were subjected to intense enemy fire and once they landed in France they were forced to quickly adapt to the sounds of combat in Nazi occupied France. Through the extensive training that they received the paratroopers were able to move past the fear

²¹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing, 1994), 178.

²² Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, 374.

and hopelessness that was evident and overcome any obstacles that were placed in front of them.

Although historical thought on the subject leans toward suggesting that the airborne operations on D-Day were not effective, the men themselves never believed that. Although not completing all of their objectives they were still effective in that they were able to distract, destroy and cause confusion and havoc amongst the German garrisons all across the Norman Coast and the Cherbourg Peninsula. Memoirs from members of the 101st Airborne Division tell a completely different story. These brave paratroopers related a story of extreme heroism and courage under fire. These memoirs note the confusion and terrible inaccuracy of the drop itself but also tell the ability of each individual paratrooper to regroup with other paratroopers and move toward their objectives. The memoirs of these paratroopers paint a different picture from what the historical record has created over the last sixty-four and a half years. Here a clear line is drawn between what historians of the field believed and what the paratroopers who were there believed about the actions they committed on June 6, 1944. The question as to whether or not the 101st Airborne Division was or was not effective toward the overall success of D-Day is a complex one to answer. Based on research from both historical texts and memoirs I will try and negotiate a clear and unbiased answer. First, however, the history of the 101st Airborne Division prior to D-Day is necessary in order to understand the circumstances in which these paratroopers fought and died in France. This thesis will investigate the different ways the American airborne proved to be successful on D-Day. First this investigation will address the

previous history of the airborne. Through its changing faces the airborne's abilities were and are always in question. Next, I will discuss the creation, organization and doctrine of the airborne. From its onset, the mission of airborne operations has always been somewhat murky. Most militaries in the world had experimented with airborne operations but few failed to implement them effectively. Next I will discuss the paratrooper's actions on D-Day. On June 6, 1944 American and Allied troops in Normandy were forced to use their training and skill. By investigating the airborne while at the most disorganized and weak it is possible to view their most impressive achievements. Finally, an investigation of the airborne's tactics and weaponry is integral in understanding whether or not they were effective. Because the paratroopers went into combat with the most advanced weaponry and knowledge of tactics available to the Allies it greatly improved their ability to survive. The manner in which the paratroopers employed these tactics and weapons is crucial to understanding how they were successful as an elite guerilla unit.

This thesis is intended to change the manner in which the history of the airborne is study. There has already been three different and distinct generations. However no investigation of the airborne has illustrated their real effectiveness as small guerilla units. Historians have usually castigated the paratroopers for their use of small squad tactics when, in fact, this strategy provided for their greatest successes on D-Day. Using oral history, memoirs, and secondary sources such as monographs on World War Two I intend to prove that, the previously untested, asymmetrical combat strategy propelled the airborne forces of the United States to successes in the field that they had not

prepared for. The airborne operations were successful in that a group of highly trained, equipped and motivated paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines and successfully engaged an entrenched and fortified enemy. The objectives given to the airborne before the combat jump were not appropriate for parachute infantry. Once on the ground the paratrooper's took on a new set of objectives that were more appropriate to small groups. This research is necessary because history has failed to examine the importance of small groups of paratroopers. It has, instead, illustrated the failures of the regiment as a whole or conversely, the successes of the individual. The ability for a group of highly skilled paratroopers carrying the most advanced weaponry to disrupt the enemy was crucial to the Allied success during the invasion of Normandy.

Chapter 2-Historiography of a Drop

The historiography of the airborne on D-Day is broken into three very distinct generations. First the achievements of the airborne were largely castigated by scholars. It was said that because they did not regroup as a division and complete their objectives they were a failure. The second generation of history surrounding the airborne concentrates more on the successes of the paratroopers. However, still failed to acknowledge how they accomplished them. In addition to that, scholars still asserted that the airborne operations as a whole were a failure. Finally, the third generation celebrates the individual efforts of the paratroopers. Although this is a significant alteration from previous generations it still fails to address how the paratroopers were able to achieve some of the objectives they did. Instead historians and veterans alike tend to focus on the paratrooper's individual successes and failures. The historiography of the airborne has yet to illustrate how the paratroopers were able to accomplish all that they had on D-Day. Without the study of small unit and group tactics it is impossible to understand how the paratroopers were able to accomplish all that they had on D-Day.

Investigations into the successes and failures of the airborne occurred even as soldiers of the 101st and 82nd were fighting in the hedge rows of Normandy in the summer of 1944. Curiosity had reigned throughout the world as the airborne experiment was tested at its onset in Italy, the Soviet Union and Germany in the mid 1930s. Although these countries implemented and researched the notion of airborne combat troops, only Germany implemented. The Nazi *Fallschirmjäger* achieved minor

victories in Norway and Greece before being relegated to elite combat infantry. Regardless of the obvious difficulties and failures of airborne operations the United States and Great Britain began their own airborne divisions.

Time has greatly changed the study and outlook of the airborne since the Second World War. There were three major changes in the study of the American airborne. First, during and shortly after the end of World War Two, historians believed that their use was largely a waste of men and materials. Second, during the 1980's and 1990's, historians altered their perception of the effectiveness of the airborne and wrote that not only were they successful but without their participation on D-Day the outcome would have been different. Finally, after the successes of some of these histories, during the early 2000's throughout popular culture, a third wave of historical work appeared. Largely this third wave consisted of the memoirs of paratroopers who participated on D-Day and their opinion of the successes and failures of their actions.

Throughout the last seventy years the opinion of historians and scholars regarding the airborne has fluctuated. Previous historians of American military history and the airborne, like S.L.A. Marshall, Cornelius Ryan and Napier Crookenden, have decidedly negative views of the airborne and whatever accomplishments they may have. While new scholars, such as Stephen E. Ambrose, John Keegan and George E. Koskimaki, have a much more positive view of their actions during World War II. Although it is hard to determine the cause of these shifts in the history of the airborne,

it is clear that their strategic value is in question. The variation between the opinions of scholars about the airborne makes the study of its true effectiveness very interesting.

S.L.A. Marshall, the official historian for the U.S. military during World War Two, enlisted in the army in 1919 and would later be awarded a battlefield commission of lieutenant. Between wars Marshall worked as a journalist in El Paso, Texas, and Detroit, Michigan and became one of the foremost military historians. Marshall was present in every American war from World War One to Vietnam. Shortly after World War Two, Marshall gained notoriety for his report and later monograph, *Men against Fire*, when he claimed that only thirty percent of American combat infantrymen fired their weapons. His monograph, *Night Drop*, details the airborne operations that occurred in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944.

Each historian had a different purpose when constructing their monographs of the war or the airborne. Their individual backgrounds, education and the era in which they wrote also greatly influenced their motivations for assembling their theses. An example is Marshall's investigation of the American airborne. *Marshall intended for Night Drop* to explain the chaos and confusion that occurred on D-Day and in airborne operations in general. The president, the general staff and even the commanders of the airborne itself demanded an explanation for the high casualty rate and the disorder that occurred at the drop zones. On such cause that Marshall outlines is the inability of the paratroopers to orient themselves properly. "When paratroopers are misdropped by night," says Marshall, "into combat and become lost, instinctively they react like water

and flow downhill. Reassembly comes about because, automatically, many men drift toward the drainage lines.”²³ Much of Marshall’s monograph castigates the airborne and their inability to capture and hold all of their objectives. Marshall does not believe that the airborne, although courageous, were a proper use of wartime personnel and materials.

Another historian and scholar who believed that airborne operations should have been limited on D-Day was journalist and military historian Cornelius Ryan. Ryan, born in Dublin, flew fourteen bombing missions with the Eighth and Ninth Air Wings and was attached to General Patton’s Third Army as he drove across Western Europe during World War Two. Ryan trained as a journalist before the war and quickly became known as one of the world’s foremost war correspondents. He has written several monographs about different operations that took place, including his epic about Operation Market Garden. Both *A Bridge Too Far* and *The Longest Day: The Classic Epic of D-Day, June 6, 1944* were translated into over nineteen languages and are well regarded within the historical community.

Ryan had an opinion of airborne operations similar to Marshall’s, *The Longest Day: The Classic Epic of D-Day, June 6, 1944*. His investigation analyzes every aspect of the invasion of Normandy on D-Day. Throughout his examination of the Allied efforts, he dedicates a rather large portion of his monograph to the airborne operations that took place during the early morning hours of June 6. Much like Marshall, Ryan believed

²³ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 6.

that the casualties inflicted on the airborne would be devastating. Ryan goes so far as to describe General Eisenhower's own hesitation: "He was more worried about the airborne operation than about any other phase of the assault." Ryan states, "Some of his commanders were convinced that the airborne assault might produce more than eighty percent casualties."²⁴ Even in the hours before the airborne operations commenced there was more than a reasonable doubt about the possibility of the operation's success. However high the casualty rate and chaos were, Ryan maintained, the allied airborne operations still had several major and minor successes.

Lieutenant General Sir Napier Crookenden, a senior British military advisor during the 1960s, was a British Airborne Brigade commander during World War Two. During the war he was a proponent of airborne operations on D-Day and in Holland. After the war he continued to serve in the British military until his retirement. Throughout his retirement, he became an avid historian of the airborne operations that took place during the war. While constructing his several monographs about the airborne, *Dropzone Normandy* and *Airborne at War*, he researched under the tutelage of Cornelius Ryan, which greatly influenced his own writing and research. Although he may be a lesser-known historian of the airborne, his insights into the weaponry, tactics and strategies of paratroopers on the ground in France provides an unparalleled source.

His monograph about the operations that took place on D-Day is particularly valuable because it provides firsthand experience through a secondary source. Marshall

²⁴ Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day: The Classic Epic of D-Day, June 6, 1944* (New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing, 1959), 100.

and Ryan tended to be critical of the costs, casualties and chaos that the airborne incurred on D-Day. Crookenden, although slightly critical of the execution, believed that the successes that the paratroopers had outweighed its failures. He asserts that although the drops themselves were skewed and off target, the ability of the paratroopers to regroup in mostly small combat teams and in some cases large numbers was their true success. He explains one such circumstance: “The day had been one of small-scale platoon, section and individual fights at Mesieres, St. Martin, Foucarville and Haut Fournel. The majority of the regiment were still missing from the drop and many men had been killed and wounded, but the regiment’s tasks had been completed and it had inflicted heavy casualties.”²⁵ Although his tone may contain a negative connotation, a shift is already beginning to occur in the historiography of the field. Crookenden asserts that the airborne had several major successes in the field on D-Day. He would not be the only historian, journalist or scholar to believe so by the end of the century.

During the 1990s, airborne history received renewed attention. At the tip of this surge was historian Stephen E. Ambrose. Ambrose received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1963 and was a professor of history at many universities, including the University of New Orleans and the Naval War College, in the United States. He was also the Explorer in Residence for the National Geographic Society and was the founder of the Eisenhower Center at the National World War Two Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana. His analyses of World War Two are known as some of the finest modern work written about the war. His two major works, *Band of*

²⁵ Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 95.

Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest and *D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*, provide a wealth of knowledge about the strategic and tactical value of the war and the airborne. Although there are some criticisms about the integrity of his work, his monographs on D-Day and the 101st Airborne Division are invaluable accounts of the war.

Ambrose's history of the airborne, *Band of Brothers*, analyzes the intrinsic value of airborne operations on D-Day by examining the successes of small groups of paratroopers rather than whole regiments or divisions. He argues that although not all of the division's objectives were accomplished, they were still able to disrupt communications, destroy supply lines and form search and destroy parties. Ambrose writes: "All across the peninsula, throughout the night and into the day of D-Day, paratroopers were doing the same-fighting skirmishes, joining together in ad hoc units, defending positions, harassing the Germans, trying to link up with their units. This was exactly what they had been told to do."²⁶ According to Ambrose, the paratroopers not only did what they were ordered to do but executed their missions well. Moreover, paratroopers across Normandy took the initiative and attacked targets of opportunity as they appeared. His monograph about Easy Company became the catalyst for the reprinting of old memoirs and in some cases the catalyst for former paratroopers to write new ones.

²⁶ Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 75.

Sir John Keegan is the foremost military historian of the Second World War. His monographs on D-Day, World War Two and the social and personal consequences of battle are the foundation for any study of the Second World War, War or even combat in general. He was an instructor at the British Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Throughout this time he also was a visiting lecturer at Princeton and a Distinguished Professor at Vassar. Some of his most prestigious monographs about combat and World War Two are *The Face of Battle*, *Six Armies at Normandy* and *The Second World War*. His analytical method compares the national historical character of each combatant nation with the decisive phase of the campaign in which each struggled. He compares the dashing and desperate courage of American paratroopers to their counterparts in other nations.

Keegan's text *Six Armies at Normandy* discusses the importance of D-Day but emphasizes that it was only the beginning of a much larger conflict. His research on the airborne bridges its old history populated by historians such as Marshall with that of its new history. Keegan does not go as far as to address small unit actions on D-Day but does assert that they did achieve some objectives. However he still does not go as far as to argue that the airborne was worth the money, training and equipment entrusted to them. On more than one occasion he claims that the paratroopers were merely participating in the background: "No general anywhere would consider sending formation *en masse* against prepared positions, and the role of the parachutist would

dwindle to that of the clandestine interloper.”²⁷ Keegan’s research provided the foundation for the new study of the airborne. Although he may not be as positive about the airborne as Ambrose or the veterans themselves he does give them credit for the work they did on D-Day.

George E. Koskimaki, a noted historian and member of the 101st Airborne Division, compiled the letters, diary entries, interviews and experiences of over five hundred different members of the airborne. He has written several different works on the airborne and their exploits throughout the war. Some of his most famous accounts of the airborne are *Battered Bastards of Bastogne* and *Hell’s Highway: Chronicle of the 101st Airborne Division in the Holland Campaign, September - November 1944* both of which recall some of the most courageous and brutal fighting the airborne has ever seen. His work provides insight into the decision-making process that each paratrooper had on D-Day.

In his compilation *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles* Koskimaki portrays the efforts of the airborne as nothing less than heroic. He does outline the successes and failures that occurred on D-Day but he decidedly weighs their successes over their failures. Koskimaki writes: “There would be larger airborne operations planned in the future, such as the assault on Holland and the jump across the Rhine. However, never again would the Allies attempt a large-scale night landing from the sky. The operation had eased the way for the seaborne troops, but the airborne soldiers had paid a heavy

²⁷ Keegan, *Six Armies*, 81.

price for that success.”²⁸ Because of the high casualty rate, the general staff and popular opinion decided that the airborne operations were too costly to be considered a success. Although technically not histories, the memoirs, letters and diaries of paratroopers became the harbingers of the history of the airborne.

Members of the airborne have always believed in the worth of their struggles and sacrifices. Paratroopers began writing their memoirs while in combat all over Western Europe. Although not trained as historians, paratroopers constructed memories that continue to be some of the most useful and insightful sources. One such resource is Major Richard Winters, the commander of easy Company 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. He wrote his memoirs about his experiences in World War Two. Winters, born and raised in Pennsylvania, graduated from Franklin and Marshall College in 1941 with a degree in business with honors. Upon his graduation he immediately enlisted in the army and soon he was accepted into Officer Candidate School (OCS) and joined the airborne. His exploits in World War Two are some of the most well-known and he was requested to train new paratroopers during the Korean Conflict in the 1950’s. Some argue that his memoirs simply retell the story presented by HBO’s miniseries *Band of Brothers* because it was published so late in his life. However, his memoir provides insight into the experiences of a parachute infantryman regardless of his motivations for writing them.

²⁸ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, 375.

His memoir, *Beyond Band of Brothers: The War Memoirs of Major Dick Winters*, gives an account of his time with Easy Company. Beginning his time in the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) as a Second Lieutenant and later as its captain, he offers a history of the airborne with both a bottom-up and top-down view. Not only did he drop and fight in Normandy, but he also became Easy Company's first combat commander due to the death of his immediate superior. Throughout his memoir, he argues that although some of the objectives given to his company were not accomplished, more pressing objectives were completed that could not have been outlined before his combat troops encountered them on the ground. One such occasion he details is his command of the destroying of a German artillery battery at Brecourt Manor. He remembers: "Even though Easy Company was still widely scattered, the small portion that fought at Brecourt had demonstrated the remarkable ability of the airborne trooper to fight, albeit outnumbered, and to win. This sort of combat typified the independent action that characterized the American Airborne divisions that jumped into Normandy. Once the battle began, discipline and training overcame our individual and collective fears."²⁹ It is clear that Major Winter's memoirs are a primary source containing his personal recollections of the war, but it is still a significant contribution to the historiography because it set a precedent for the current study of the history of the airborne.

Marshall's purpose in writing *Night Drop* was to examine and analyze the successes and failures of airborne operations on D-Day. Marshall constructed his

²⁹ Winters, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 89.

monograph to show his readers, the general staff and other military commanders, that the airborne is a viable option for future conflicts. His intentions were to analyze whether the airborne was able to accomplish their mission with an acceptable casualty rate. Marshall writes:

Some of the sticks which he had dreamed would form on him were now crawling half-drowned from the marshes. Others had far overshot the mark, and getting the green light after they had passed over the Division area, came down isolated in enemy country. Their problem became one of evasion and survival. When Ames walked out in the direction they had taken, he was one of the wisest men in Normandy-the first to know that the 82nd Division plan had fallen apart.³⁰

Throughout his monograph Marshall goes on to dictate, piecemeal, how the airborne operations on D-Day had few successes with extremely high casualties. On the other hand, Ryan's purpose is somewhat different. He intends to write a detailed analysis and investigation of D-Day for a far different audience. Unlike Marshall, Ryan illustrates, to a general audience of arm chair historians and the public, the heroics and failures that occurred on D-Day. Although, at times, he tends to castigate the airborne and their abilities he is still able to examine their successes in depth. Ryan writes: "It was nearly dawn-the dawn that eighteen thousand paratroopers had been fighting toward. In less than five hours they had more than fulfilled the expectations of General Eisenhower and his commanders."³¹ Although Ryan's complimentary attitude seems to encourage future airborne operations, he hopes to demonstrate that the airborne played a minor role in the success of D-Day.

³⁰ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 10.

³¹ Ryan, *The Longest Day*, 168.

Crookenden, like Marshall, writes for a specific audience aware and knowledgeable of the military operations during World War Two. Much like Marshall, he hopes to demonstrate the successes and failures that occurred on D-Day. However, he solely concentrates on the airborne operations. He provides a wealth of information about the tactics, strategies and weaponry used while on the ground in the early morning hours of June 6. Throughout his monograph, *Dropzone Normandy* he imposes upon the reader the firepower and training that paratroopers respectively carried and underwent. Crookenden writes: "The men of the two US Airborne divisions were well equipped for their task, except that the age-old tendency persisted to overload the individual soldier in an attempt to allow for every emergency."³² He demonstrates the importance of the training that the paratroopers received and the equipment that they carried. Without the advances in technology, equipment and training, the outcome of airborne operations on D-Day would have been vastly different. Crookenden's interpretation began to change historiography about the airborne.

Although Crookenden may have started the new historiography of the airborne Ambrose promulgated advanced and popularized it. Both of his monographs about D-Day, *Band of Brothers* and *D Day: June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*, highlight the heroism of individuals and small groups of soldiers and paratroopers. *Band of Brothers*, Ambrose's monograph about a company of paratroopers, greatly influenced the history of the airborne and how it would be written in the future. He hoped to demonstrate the importance and heroics behind paratroopers throughout Normandy.

³² Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 31.

He writes: "A German machine-gun opened fire on the group. When it did, the prisoners tried to jump the Americans. Guarnere shot them with his pistol. 'No remorse,' he said when describing the incident forty-seven years later. 'No pity. It was as easy as stepping on a bug.'"³³ Through writing his monograph Ambrose hopes to demonstrate the heroics found throughout the airborne are unmatched by any other outfit in the history of D-Day.

Another interesting example of airborne historiography is the memoir of Major Richard Winters. After Ambrose wrote his epic monograph about Easy Company it spurred many of the paratroopers of this company and the airborne in general to compose their own memoirs. One such of these cases was the popular character of Major Winters throughout *Band of Brothers*. Upon the publication and production of the book and miniseries respectively he was one of the many paratroopers to write his own memoirs. His memoirs captivate the reader by illustrating the detailed actions that his men and he endured while in Europe. Like Koskimaki, he does not fail to mythologize the heroics of the airborne. Winters retells Sergeant H.G. Nerhood D-Day story:

"My grandfather was on the beach getting his butt kicked. Your men were at the guns, kicking butt and saving his, along with hundreds more. Had you not succeeded, I might not be alive this day to tell you how deeply grateful I am that Easy Company accomplished its mission and saved the lives of a lot of men that day." H.R. Nerhood and Eliot Richardson were but two soldiers who survived Utah Beach because of the destruction of the Brecourt battery.³⁴

³³ Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 77.

³⁴ Ambrose, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 91.

On the other hand, Winters is not a trained historian. Secondly, his work is a work of memoirs and thus a primary source. Although it is not usually prudent to include primary sources throughout a historiographic investigation, they are important because they show the changing face of the history of the airborne and the affect of popular history's analysis of it. Without the inspiration of Ambrose's monographs it is likely that memoirs like that of Major Winters never would have been created.

The argumentation used throughout the airborne historiography is pretty consistent. Historians like Marshall and Ryan demonstrated the train of thought behind the tactics of airborne operations on D-Day. For the time period in which they wrote their investigations their arguments are sound and reliable. However at the time, the justifications behind their investigations were to identify the successes and failures of the objectives handed down to the airborne from the general staff at the Allied Command. Marshall dictated this in the prologue of his monograph *Night Drop*. He writes: "They were to hit in the flat hedgerow country inland from Utah Beach five hours before the small boats touched down. Their tasks were to seize the exits from Utah Beach and either seize or destroy the bridges and other crossing of the Douve and Merderet Rivers."³⁵ Like Marshall, Ryan has a very similar argument. His argues that the objectives that the airborne had were the anchor for the entire invasion of France. He writes: "To the Americans went the job of holding the right flank of the invasion area just as their British counterparts were hold on the left. But much more was riding on the American paratroopers: on them hung the fate of the whole Utah Beach

³⁵ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 2.

operation.”³⁶ The arguments that Ryan provides are relevant the evidence that both Marshall and Ryan supply enhance their monographs. Although both monographs are extremely relevant to the field they fail to answer all of the questions their sources ask.

Crookenden and Ambrose advance the historiography with the arguments they provide. Like the previous historians, Crookenden does investigate the airborne’s ability to complete their objectives. However he does include their ability to successfully find and destroy targets of opportunity. Crookenden illustrates: “Sergeant Snyder now returned to report that his patrol had cleaned out St. Martin and killed a number of Germans in position by the church. The patrol was at once sent back to hold the village and a message radioed to the 4th Division that Exit and Causeway 4 were clear.”³⁷ Although other historians have commented on the guerilla tactics employed by the airborne on D-Day Crookenden is one of the first. Rather than investigating the tactical situation like Marshall, Ryan and Crookenden, Ambrose chooses to investigate the heroic acts of the airborne versus its tactical failures. The heroics of the airborne touched on by Crookenden were only developed twenty years later by Ambrose. He does not fail to mythologize the actions of the airborne. Using the personal statements of paratroopers like Major Winters provides his monograph with an implausible sense of realism during an unbelievable action. Because this side of the airborne’s history has never really been told it is extremely relevant to the field. In a history that, for much of its scholarship was based solely on its military importance, Ambrose’s work provides a

³⁶ Ryan, *The Longest Day*, 136.

³⁷ Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 85.

human face for a history whose foundation was built on numbers of troops and tactical and strategic plans. These kind of histories demonstrates the social dynamics of combat.

Finally Koskimaki and Winters add another aspect to the humanity behind the mythology and military history of the airborne. Both Koskimaki and Winters provide an in depth and in one case personal analysis. Koskimaki argues that, although recent popular history and Hollywood have brought the history of the airborne into the limelight, Koskimaki claims that the personal experiences of the paratroopers themselves are fading into oblivion. Without works such as his, the memories of the airborne will disappear and the only thing that will remain will be the history of the tactical successes and failures during their operations. He explains this in his introduction when he writes: "The feats of the airborne troopers may soon fade into legend as the helicopter replaces the parachute and glider, but while the tale can be told, let these exploits of the sky invaders of Hitler's Fortress Europa become part of the annals of history."³⁸ Although firsthand accounts are not new to the historiography the interviews that Koskimaki used are different. Instead of describing the tactical and strategic situation on D-Day, he asked for their personal feelings and experiences. Instead of hearing about division-wide movements and actions Koskimaki wanted to illustrate small group tactics and individual actions.

³⁸ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, xv.

Finally, the arguments of Major Winters are vastly different than those of previous historians because his monograph examines his own personal experiences versus others paratroopers. Once again, it may not be typical to include a primary source in a historiographic analysis but the airborne's changing history throughout the last decade is partly due to the emergence of primary sources such as his. He argues that the memories and the memories of his fellow paratroopers the he maintains will die with him unless he publishes them for future generations to see. He writes: "Age is creeping up and taking its toll, and as what war correspondent Ernie Pyle called 'the old fraternity of war' enmeshes me one final time, I want to honor the men I served with by telling as best I can the 'untold stories.' Many of these stories are from men who are no longer with us, and I can think of no better legacy for them and their families."³⁹ Like Koskimaki, who provides analyses for countless memoirs, diaries, letters and journal entries, Winters hopes to disseminate the heroic and sometimes mythic actions of his fellow paratroopers. Because their works are slightly less historical than those written by trained historians in search of a detailed outline to place in their own works these men hope to influence future generation and retell the stories of hundreds of young men who could not tell their own story while they were alive.

Thematically speaking, all of these historians and authors provide an overarching thematic presence within their monographs. In addition to that all add something new to the historiography of the airborne. An example of a thematic presence within a monograph about the airborne is seen throughout Marshall's monograph *Night Drop*.

³⁹ Winters, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, ix.

The historical paradigm that he chooses to employ is the importance of the airborne's achievements on D-Day and how they impacted the general allied objective of capturing the Cherbourg Peninsula. "It was the task of the U.S. VII Corps, landing at Utah, commanded by Major General J. Lawton Collins, to capture Cherbourg." Marshall writes, "The two airborne divisions were part of that corps. This is the story only of their first days when they fought nigh unhelpe."40 Differently than Marshall, Ryan hopes to illustrate to the reader that the members of the airborne and all of the soldiers involved in D-Day were average people, not heroes or military masterminds. He writes: "What follow is not a military history. It is the story of people: the men of the Allied forces, the enemy they fought and the civilians who were caught up in the bloody confusion of D-Day –the day the battle began that ended Hitler's insane gamble to dominate the world."41 Ryan is able to encompass the history of D-Day through the lens of Social History. He analyzes the importance of people throughout the world's most infamous war. Both Marshall and Ryan hoped to prove that the purpose of and the people who fought on D-Day are different than what popular history and the general public believe.

Marshall and Ryan also provide a significant amount of information to the historiography of the field as well. Marshall became known as the foundation for the field. He was the first trained historian to investigate the successes and failures of the airborne. He had the privilege of interviewing and investigating the airborne during the war itself. Without his examination of D-Day and the airborne their history would be

⁴⁰ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 2.

⁴¹ Ryan, *The Longest Day*, 9.

vastly different than it is today. On the other hand, Ryan, who wrought one of the first histories of D-Day in the form of a novel, was able to add a name and a face to those who fought. Marshall and Ryan laid the foundation for future historians and paratroopers who would later compose their memoirs.

Other historians, like Crookenden, employed a different thematic paradigm throughout his text. He utilizes military history itself as his overarching thematic presence. Although Marshall used a similar theme, Crookenden thoroughly relies on it throughout his entire text. He is sure to note the military achievements above all else: “In the Cotentin peninsula the two United States divisions had overcome the difficulties of their scattered drop and inflicted heavy casualties on the German 709th and 91st Divisions and the 6th Parachute Regiment. The American 4th, 90th and 9th Divisions were ashore and moving north towards Cherbourg and west to St. Sauveur-le-Vicomte over the causeways and bridges captured by the airborne troops.”⁴² By using his extensive knowledge of military history as his foundation Crookenden is able to produce a truly valuable investigation of the airborne. He analyzes, in great detail, the airborne’s tactical and strategic effect on D-Day. Similarly to Ryan, Ambrose’s overarching paradigm of historical interpretation is social history. He believes that the true history of the Easy Company and the airborne lies within their remarkable closeness. He writes: I became curious about how this remarkable closeness had been developed. It is something that all armies everywhere throughout history strive to create but seldom

⁴² Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 280.

do, and never better than with Easy.”⁴³ It is interesting to note that both Ryan and Ambrose nearly utilize the same overarching thematic presence even though their purposes are vastly different. Ambrose’s interpretation of Easy Company and the airborne provides a new examination of their achievements on D-Day. Never before has such a personal retelling of history affected such a renewal and change in the historiography of a subject.

Crookenden and Ambrose contribute different things to the understanding of the airborne. Crookenden provides an in depth analysis of how the airborne fared militarily. He investigate every decisions made by every commander, NCO and private using his own initiative affected the outcome of the airborne’s objectives. Although most historians of the airborne have provided an examination of their military prowess they fail to look at how small unit tactics affected the more general objectives. On the other hand, Ambrose adds the personal feelings, emotions and fears of the men fighting on the ground. Never before have historians taken such a personal look into the life and times of a soldier while in combat. Other than the paratroopers themselves, with their memoirs, the experiences and emotions of paratrooper on the ground have never before been revealed within a historical text.

Finally, Koskimaki and Winters provide a different set of historical paradigms throughout their monographs. Koskimaki illustrates throughout his compilation that the paratroopers themselves had some concept before during and after joining the airborne

⁴³Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 310.

that they had a “rendezvous with destiny” as the motto of the 101st Airborne Division dictates. He writes: “I believe, down to the least imaginative one, really felt a close affinity with history. Something big was about to happen and we were going to be a part of it. The most terrible thing that could have happened to any one of us would have been to be scratched from the loading manifest.”⁴⁴ Finally Major Winters provides a different overarching historical paradigm because his monograph is a memoir. Throughout his memoirs, he hopes to portray to the reader that World War II brought the best of his men and himself. He demonstrates that although war is terrible it forces the best out of its participants. He writes:

War brings out the worst and the best in people. Wars do not make men great, but they do bring out the greatness in good men. War is romantic only to those who are far away from the sounds and turmoil of battle. For those of us who served in Easy Company and for those who served their country in other theaters, we came back as better men and women as a result of being in combat, and most would do it again if called upon. But each of us hoped that if we had learned anything from the experience, it is that war is unreal and we earnestly hoped that it would never happen again.⁴⁵

Throughout his memoirs Winters believes that he and his paratroopers were destined to do great things. It is interesting to note that the airborne’s achievements were not considered to be heroic until the early 1990’s and Ambrose’s monograph *Band of Brothers*. This is of particular note because Major Winters himself did not write his memoirs until after the year 2000 and the extremely popular HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*.

⁴⁴ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, xiv.

⁴⁵ Winters, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 292.

In general the historiography of the airborne on D-Day, the biggest disagreements within the field come in whether the efforts of the airborne were a success or failure. Even this disagreement is more temporal than historic in nature. Early historians of the field were sure, based on the accomplishment of objectives, that they were a bigger liability than success. As time went on, history and the public changed and the historiography seemed to favor heroism rather than objectives. That being said, newer historians never ceased to draw upon their earlier counterparts when constructing their own works. Crookenden, Ambrose and even Koskimaki drew heavily upon Marshall and Ryan.

Though they might not have agreed with the theses and arguments that they promoted they still relied heavily on their source base. In general the historiography of the airborne relies almost completely on the personal memoirs, interviews, diaries and letters of the paratroopers themselves. Most of these were and are considered to be the most important memories and treasures of the war. George E. Koskimaki says it the best when he writes: "They sent clippings from hometown newspapers which proud parents had sent to editors in the form of first letters from the combat zone. Parachute manifests were sent along with comments about the fate of some of their close buddies. Always with the admonition, 'Please take care of this material-it is my really great treasure of the war.'"⁴⁶ To these men their memories are more important than the flags, watches and weapons they recovered from their enemies. The methodology that these historians use, regardless of their purpose, is largely the same throughout. It is

⁴⁶ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, xiv.

almost as if their primary sources were passed from generation to generation of historians. However, it is important to reiterate the fact that until the popularization of the airborne through Ambrose's monograph *Band of Brothers* and HBO's *Band of Brothers* miniseries spurred the creation of many new memoirs of paratroopers. In addition to that, most of the memoirs written by members of Easy Company, 506th PIR, 101st Airborne Division largely mirror themselves.

The historiography of the airborne provides an interesting case study for analysis. It is not uncommon for the history of a group or their actions to change as time progresses. However the historiography of the airborne is particularly interesting because several aspects of its history have changed. Primarily, the subject matter itself has gone through a transformation. During and shortly after the conclusion of the war, historians investigated the tactical and strategic successes and failures based on their ability to achieve the objectives set out to them by General Eisenhower and the allied general staff. From there the subject changed to the personal heroics of the paratroopers themselves and their ability to successfully accomplish objectives based upon targets of opportunity. Secondly and encompassing the transformation of their history was the public's opinion of the airborne's effectiveness on D-Day. At first, due to the negative press they received from historians of the time, the public believed that airborne operations were largely a waste of man power and resources. In recent history, the airborne has been immortalized and mythologized due to the writings of modern historians, film makers and the memoirs of the paratroopers themselves.

It is important to note that all of these historians and historians of the field in general have thoroughly illuminated the history of the airborne today. Marshall, Ryan, Crookenden, Ambrose, Koskimaki, Ambrose and Winters all provide different histories of the airborne that all add up to a thorough investigation of their achievements and sacrifices. As time passes and there are fewer and fewer veterans left alive to provide their history of World War Two the study of their heroics becomes more stable. Although the study of their history may have had its fair share of transformations throughout the last sixty years the paratroopers themselves have never changed their opinion of their actions. They always believed what they did was crucial to the success of the D-Day invasion and more importantly the success of the war. Without the heroics of the airborne it is impossible to know what the outcome of D-Day or the war would have been. Surely there were brave men in the other branches of the American military and the militaries of all other nations but during the last twenty years the limelight has solely rested upon the airborne. Perhaps the notion of jumping out of an airplane into enemy territory with limited supplies and little to no chance of reinforcement in 1944 fulfilled the requirements set down by the American public to be truly mythologized.

Chapter 3-Evolving a Mission and a Myth

At its inception no one understood how the airborne would respond to a combat situation. Problems with regrouping and equipment were evident throughout the large-scale training jumps and the small-scale combat jumps. Even though the different militaries understood these deficiencies they still failed to address the problem and continued to plan the airborne's part during the French invasion while using antiquated tactics. Through the inauguration of the American airborne a certain elite and masculine image of the paratroopers emerged. This image helped the paratroopers through their recruitment and combat efforts. While in combat this image propelled the paratroopers to survive and succeed. However, through their training and attitude their mission was clear. They went to Normandy to kill the enemy and they succeeded with great efficiency.

The airborne operations that took place on D-Day and in World War Two in general were never a forgone conclusion for the United States Military. The army resembled something of the nineteenth century not of a world power that recently took part in the First World War. After the millions of doughboys returned home from Europe the United States retreated into its traditional isolationist foreign policy. In 1940, the size of the American military was, in fact, only the size of two divisions and was not at the state of readiness that most minor European nations kept their militaries. Russell Weigley states, "In the early part of that year of the German Blitzkrieg, the American army was antique enough. There were only two Regular divisions in the

Continental United States that amounted to more than the barest of skeletons and could be said to be reasonably ready for combat.”¹ Typically the United States did not maintain a large standing military and relied heavily on volunteers when the nation was in need. In addition to that, half of the two divisions were horse cavalry. The United States also kept the military small during the Great Depression to save money.² Unlike the more militarily modern nations of Germany, France and the United Kingdom, the United States had yet to institute an armored division into its military. The American military was in the process of testing and debating the use of new military tactics, techniques, equipment and weapons.

In fact, like in the use of armored units, the United States lagged years behind other nations throughout the world in their development of airborne combat infantry. Nations such as the Soviet Union, Germany and Great Britain all developed airborne troops while the United States still maintained an extremely small standing military. So much so that historian Russell F. Weigley argued that it was not a military at all but instead a police force set to control unruly Mexicans and Indians. Weigley writes: “Historically, the American army was not an army in the European fashion, but a border constabulary for policing unruly Indians and Mexicans. The United States Army of 1940 had not yet completed the transition that would make it an appropriate instrument of its country’s claims to world power.”³

¹ Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*, 1.

² Edward M. Coffman, *The Regulars: The American Army, 1898-1941*(New York: Belknap Press, 2004).

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

While the United States was confronting border conflicts with post revolutionary Mexico and a still unhappy Native American population other nations were conducting large scale combat maneuvers. The Soviet Union and Germany conducted large scale paradrops in their war games during the 1930's. While the United States was just beginning to show interest in airborne divisions, nations such as this had already tested and implemented their airborne units. The largest was the Soviet Union's paradrops on Kiev in 1936. Rapport and Northwood write: "But during the 1930's both the Russians and the Germans carried out extensive experiments, and peacetime paratrooping probably reached climax with the reported Russian use of five thousand paratroopers in their maneuvers at Kiev in 1936."⁴ Maneuvers such as this made it clear that airborne troops would be used in the next large-scale confrontation. Although it was evident that the United States was beginning to fall behind in military technology the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff required more convincing.

The concept of soldiers falling from the sky behind an enemy's fortification has been a part of civilization since the ages of Da Vinci, Machiavelli and even Benjamin Franklin. Da Vinci sketched images of small gondolas fitted with sheets carrying men-at-arms, and Benjamin Franklin once said, "Five thousand balloons capable of raising two men each could not cost more than five ships of the line; and where is the prince who could afford so to cover his country with troops for its defense as that ten thousand men descending from the clouds might not in many places do an infinite deal of mischief

⁴ Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 5.

before a force could be brought together to repel them.”⁵ Although Benjamin Franklin was the first American to understand the benefits behind airborne troops, he was not the one who brought the idea to fruition. During World War One, Brigadier General William Mitchell conceived the idea that soldiers dropped from the sky could break the stalemate caused by trench warfare. He was granted provisional approval and was scheduled to apply the notion in November of 1918. However, another breakthrough in technology would have the honor of cracking open trench warfare: the tank. General Mitchell would have to wait another twenty-six years before he would be placed in charge of another airborne company.

Mitchell became the biggest proponent for the use of combat aircraft as the United States’ first line of defense. In addition to the use of airborne units he also promoted the creation, implementation and use of aircraft carriers and a dedicated air force. Since the end of the First World War, General Mitchell’s only goal was to promote the use of airplanes in every aspect of the American military. Unfortunately for him, the United States military was once again reduced after the end of the war. He became such an annoyance for the military that he was court-martialed for insubordination in 1928.

The creation of the airborne was a process that, although it went through its ups and downs, was implemented extremely quickly. By 1940 the American military approved the formation of a parachute test platoon that would not only test the notion

⁵ F. Stansbury Haydon, *Military Ballooning during the Early Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1908, 4).

of a paratroop platoon but also the ability for the military to transport, arm and successfully deploy this platoon into a combat zone. At its onset airborne divisions were composed of volunteers. In the future these volunteers would come from every aspect the United States military. They would come from the armored divisions, the tank drivers; they would come from the infantry and the officers would come right out of Officer Candidate School (OCS) or would be veterans of many years. Regardless of their history the future paratroopers volunteered to be molded into the elite unit they would later be known as.

However the United States did conduct small scale drops in Texas. Rapport and Northwood write: "In 1928-1929 small-scale experiments in dropping parachutists and weapons were conducted at Kelly and Brooks Fields, Texas."⁶ Paradrops such as these paled in comparison to their European counterparts and even the large Allied jumps during World War Two. Not only were the designers of the American airborne aware of the training that their European counterparts were receiving but they were also very aware of their military and combat prowess. David Kenyon Webster's memoir, *Parachute Infantry*, illustrates just how much the American airborne looked up to their European counterparts. They were especially aware of the German Luftwaffe. Webster quotes Colonel Robert Sink: "'Men,' he said, wiping his face with his hand, 'we've shown you this picture because we wanted you to see how the Germans fight. 'Did you watch them closely? Did you see how fast they moved? How they used every bit of the

⁶Ibid., 5.

available cover and concealment? Remember those things when you go into combat.”⁷

They comprised a few dozen paratroopers at most and often they jumped without any equipment or small arms. The European’s maneuvers included thousands of paratroopers and these different nations dropped everything from small artillery pieces to jeeps and armored personal carriers (APC’s). These small scale jumps would form the foundation of the American airborne. Once approved to create a provisional paratroop platoon Major Lee was forced to invent a way to properly train volunteers coming from the infantry to successfully jump from a plane.

Lee was influenced from a variety of different methods including the small American paradrops as well as those from Europe. Lee was even able to take methods from the New York World’s Fair, the parachute towers, to help train the future airborne. “Studying the parachute towers at the New York World’s Fair, he became convinced that they would help his men master the art of jumping. So on July 29 the Test Platoon was moved to Hightstown, New Jersey, for a week on the tower company’s home grounds.”⁸ Later these towers would be built at the Airborne’s new home a Fort Benning. These towers would provide the young troopers the intense feeling of an arrested free fall before the necessary training jumps they would all be forced to complete before receiving their jump wings. From here another founding father would take control, and then Major William C. Lee.

⁷ David Kenyon Webster, *Parachute Infantry*, New York: Bantam Dell Publishing, 1994, 12.

⁸ Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 7.

Lee, a rugged North Carolinian who fought in the infantry in World War I, was given the task of creating and inventing the units that would come to epitomize the elite nature of the airborne. The American military knew so little of the parachuting that Lee had to find knowledge elsewhere. He ventured west and learned about precision paradropping from the Forest Service and their smoke jumpers. "There was much to be done. After extensive inquiries, Major Lee found that the U.S. Forest Service in the West knew more about dropping men and equipment on a precise spot than any other group in America, and he went out there to learn how they did it."⁹ Between the advice the Department of the Interior gave and the parachute towers coined for a world's fair now Lieutenant Colonel Lee was able to effectively train the airborne. The first jump occurred on August 16, 1940 and it provided the foundation and regulations that led the military to institute further jumps. However, more importantly was the fact that the airborne had yet to receive a mission or an objective. The debate was still raging at all levels and no one was quite sure how the airborne could be used in a combat zone. However, in 1940 the military collectively came up with the airborne's first mission statement. "...the employment of parachute troops in hemisphere Defense to seize Landing areas where only light opposition is expected, and to secure the areas for short periods until reinforced by air infantry."¹⁰ For many this directive seemed more of a death sentence than an objective. To be drop in an area that was supposedly lightly defended with little chance of reinforcement left little to be desired. It is clear that this directive was changed numerous times before D-Day.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The paratroopers had an interesting take on the objectives of their division. From the beginning the airborne had a less than stellar reputation. In 1938 Camp Toombs was created in Southern Georgia in order to train the Georgia National Guard. It was named after General Robert Toombs, a general for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Camp Toombs maintained little or no facilities until the War Department decided to make the camp into the training facility for the paratroops shortly after World War II began. In 1942 Colonel Robert F. Sink, commanding 506th PIR, thought it was improper to have young troopers drive past a casket factory and learn to jump at "Camp Tombs." So he implored the War Department to rename the camp, Toccoa. The camp was originally made to accommodate 20,000 men but at its maximum never held more than two regiments at a time. Before leaving Toccoa, Colonel Sink, Commander 506th PIR read an article in *Readers Digest* about a 100 mile long march that the Japanese Army had completed down the Malayan Peninsula in seventy-two hours. Immediately following he decided that a 118 mile march was to be completed by Colonel Strayer's 2nd Battalion. In the end they covered 118 miles in seventy-five hours.¹¹ Although the paratroopers had a rather gloomy take on their position in the military but they were able to overcome it and use to their advantage. The paratroopers believed they had nothing to lose and therefore had everything to gain with hard training, extensive knowledge and epic endurance and courage.

By November of 1942 the men of the 101st Division moved to Fort Benning Georgia in order to complete parachute jump training. At this time, states Donald R.

¹¹ Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 29.

Burgett in his book *Currahee! A Screaming Eagle at Normandy*, the young paratroopers learned what was called the Trooper's Song, "Blood Upon the Risers," set to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic:

"Is everybody happy?" Cried the Sergeant, looking up.

Our hero feebly answered "yes," and then they stood him up.

He leaped right out into the blast, his static line unhooked.

He ain't gonna jump no more.

(Chorus)

He counted long, he counted loud, he waited for the shock;

He felt the wind, he felt the clouds, he felt the awful drop;

He jerked his cord, the silk spilled out and wrapped around his legs.

He ain't gonna jump no more.

(Chorus)

The risers wrapped around his neck, connectors cracked his dome;

The lines were snarled and tied in knots, around his skinny bones;

The canopy became his shroud, he hurtled to the ground.

He ain't gonna jump no more.

(Chorus)

The days he'd lived and loved and laughed kept running through his mind;

He thought about the girl back home, the one he'd left behind;

He thought about the medics and wondered what they'd find.

He ain't gonna jump no more.

(Chorus)

The ambulance was on the spot, the jeeps were running wild;

The medics jumped and screamed with glee, they rolled their sleeves and smiled;

For it had been a week or more since last a chute

had failed.

He ain't gonna jump no more.

(Chorus)

He hit the ground, the sound was *splat*, his blood
went spurting high;

His comrades then were heard to say, "A helluva
way to die";

He lay there rolling 'round in the welter of his
gore.

He ain't gonna jump no more.

(Chorus)

There was blood upon the risers, there were brains
upon the chute;

Intestines were a-dangling from this paratrooper's
boots;

They picked him up, still in his chute and poured
him from his boots.

He ain't gonna jump no more.

(Chorus)

CHORUS

Gory, Gory, What a Helluva way to die

Gory, Gory, What a Helluva way to die

Gory, Gory, What a Helluva way to die

He ain't gonna jump no more.¹²

As morbid as this song may sound, it provides an interesting window into the way paratroopers felt about their duty. The dangers of parachuting are much the same as they are today. There are very few situations that cause the paratrooper to use his reserve chute and even fewer fatalities. However, even keeping in mind these insecurities, the men were still able to joke about the dangers to cover their insecurities. Parachuting from a plane at 1000 feet in 1944 was still a relatively dangerous endeavor. Koskimaki describes one particular terrifying incident:

They bounced a couple of feet in the air. I couldn't get over the fact that they bounced; somehow it never occurred to me that a human body would do that.

¹² Burgett, *Currahee!* 27.

One of the sergeants leaped from a jeep and worked over the bodies a few minutes, then got back in and drove up to us. Climbing out of the jeep he held two pairs of bloodied jump boots from those two men out there.¹³

Even though the image of the death of these two paratroopers stayed with Koskimaki it is evident that the event was turned into a learning experience and something that was little more than ordinary. They were comfortable enough with the risks and dangers to continue participating in the airborne.

Along with the debate and confusion inherent within the creation of the airborne the military and public were unsure as to what the mission of an airborne division would be. Many assumed that the elite image of the airborne would require the divisions to be quite larger than that of a regular infantry division. However, in reality a regular airborne division would, in fact, be quite a bit smaller than that of their infantry counterparts. Koskimaki writes: "It was always easy for the casual observer to believe that an airborne division, simply because it was airborne, was more capable in every way than an ordinary division. Such misunderstanding dates from the very first announcements, as when the *Alexandria Town Talk* said in the previously quoted article, 'The new divisions will have about 8000 officers and men. The fire power, relatively speaking, will be far greater than it is off the infantry type.'"¹⁴ However ambiguous the establishment of the airborne was the problems that existed in the beginning continued to persist until the end of the war and were inherent to the nature of airborne operations.

¹³ Koskimaki, *Curraheel*, 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

Paratroopers continued to be misdropped and because they were so ill supplied it contributed to their poor communications once on the ground. All of the European nations that maintained airborne units had similar troubles in their programs. Most evident of this fact was the German Fallschirmjäger in Crete in 1941. Although the operation was an overall success the German Army and the Fallschirmjäger had several large miscalculations and because of those miscalculations they would never operate another large-scale combat jump for the rest of the war. Later, after World War Two began the United States would have its own similar difficulties with airborne operations in Africa and in Sicily. James A. Huston illustrates the difficulties seen within the Fallschirmjäger's jump into Crete: "The first American airborne operations in North Africa and in Sicily were disappointing. Scattered drops and lack of coordination indicated a need for more training than had been available. Paratroopers dropped as far as fifty and sixty miles in Sicily, and few hit the drop zones which had been selected."¹⁵ Although these issues appear to be rather serious, the airborne operations in North Africa and Sicily were considered to help in the overall success of the operation.

These are just a few of the serious implications and repercussions that the United States military learned after their first airborne experience. The night after the first drop in Sicily, airborne reinforcements were dropped to reinforce the paratroopers already on the ground.¹⁶ Huston writes: "the most unfortunate incident of that operation was the following night when friendly ground and naval units fired on

¹⁵ James A. Huston, "Tactical use of Air Power in World War II: The Army Experience," *Military Affairs* 14, (1950), 181.

¹⁶ Maj. Gen. James M. Gavin, *Airborne Warfare* (Washington: The Infantry Journal Press, 1947), 1-15.

transport planes bringing in airborne reinforcements.”¹⁷ From then on the United States commanders coordinated with the navy and army when conducting airborne operations to prohibit friendly fire. In some cases, however, it could not be avoided due to the lack of communication between the pilots themselves and the gun crews on land and sea nervously awaiting the Nazi horde that was just beyond the horizon.

The problems General Lee discovered while researching the formation of the airborne were still evident on June 6, 1944: scattered drops, poor communications and chaos. The only difference in 1944 was that the drop was made at night, the C-47 Dakotas took heavy anti-aircraft fire and the pilots of the Dakotas were forced, by fear or fire, to “green light”¹⁸ the jump too low and too fast. Webster writes: “That goddamn Air Corps. I reached up, grasped all four risers, and yanked down hard, to fill the canopy with air and slow my descent. Just before I hit, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath of air. My feet splashed into the water.”¹⁹ For paratroopers, the jump itself was the most traumatic experience of D-Day. Many C-47’s, receiving heavy fire from German anti-aircraft guns, took evasive maneuvers and increased and decreased speed and altitude in order to avoid mid air collisions. Often pilots switched the jump light from red to green simply to empty their cargo and return to England without taking anymore fire from the ground. Shortly after D-Day, the Army Air Corps received much of the blame and criticism for the misdrops all over Normandy.

¹⁷ Huston, “Tactical Use of Air Power in World War II,” 181.

¹⁸ Marvin R. Cain, “The Military Memoir as Critical history: The Case of James M. Gavin,” *Military Affairs* 44, (1980), 177.

¹⁹ Webster, *Parachute Infantry*, 46.

Throughout the last sixty-seven years the pilots transporting the airborne on D-Day have received more than their fair share of criticism. Criticisms have arisen surrounding the training, composure, intelligence and even bravery of the pilots. It was argued that because the pilots were not as well trained or well perceived by the public. Their low stature as transport pilots opened them up for criticism by those who believed that the more prestigious roles of bomber or fighter pilots were given to a more courageous and honorable lot. Koskimaki makes a note of the bad connotation that the C-47 pilots had when he quotes Sergeant Chester Pentz's experience on the flight to Normandy. "Our pilot veered off course when he encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire." Pentz remarked, "As you may know, quite a few pilots got 'buck fever' when we approached the drop zones."²⁰ Although the anti-aircraft fire was intense and the cloud bank that lingered right before the majority of the drop zones would have been troublesome for any veteran pilot it should have been made clear to the pilots that to veer off course could mean death and ultimate failure for their occupants. Another example of the chaos caused by pilots who were not trained to fly in a combat zone is seen through the memories of Captain William J. Waldmann Koskimaki illustrates: "We were preparing to jump when the plane suddenly speeded up (due to stacking up, as we were told later by the pilot), throwing us to the back of the plane. We jumped at high speed while the pilot was trying to return to the drop zone."²¹ The pilots of the Dakota's appear to be at fault for much of the problems that engulfed and surrounded the

²⁰ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, 54.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

airborne. However as previous airborne operations have shown, these troubles are inherent in the use of airborne troops behind enemy lines.

Throughout its inception with the Italians, its use in the maneuvers in Kiev, the Fallschirmjäger in Crete and eventually the Americans on D-Day, the airborne has experienced significant problems with the accuracy of its drops and the airborne's ability to regroup after landing. Once again, as the German Fallschirmjäger reached its climax as an operational force, Allied armies were just beginning to take shape. They became so bold that they decided to attempt an airborne invasion of the island of Crete, over the defending British Mediterranean Navy. John Keegan writes, "As German parachute formations grew in numbers and confidence, so that in April 1941 they could assault and take the island of Crete over the heads of an impotent Royal Navy, the first experimental airborne units had begun to take shape in the Allied armies."²² According to historian, John Keegan the German paradrops in Crete illustrated successes and failures of airborne operations against an enemy combatant. In the air the German Luftwaffe took heavy anti-aircraft fire that forced the pilots to misdrop the airborne. Once they landed the German Fallschirmjäger was disorganized and unable to regroup to attack en mass. They were separated and attacked by British and Commonwealth troops who were able to locate the confused paratroopers before they could rearm and regroup. He writes: "The minority of troops which actually fought kept together as best they could; those who had left Greece organized now lost all semblance of unity. 'Never shall I forget the disorganization and almost complete lack of control of the masses on

²² John Keegan, *Six Armies in Normandy* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 1982), 71.

the move.”²³ Major General Bernard Freyburg later said regarding the hasty retreat his men were forced to make. After the embarrassing endeavor in Crete and the same results in Holland the German army would never again attempt airborne operations. All in all the German Fallschirmjäger suffered much the same problems and confusion that allied units would see during their own operations.

The Allied armies failed to glean the failure of the airborne from their German counterparts. Even Hitler himself deemed the Fallschirmjäger too dangerous of an endeavor. Keegan writes: “Hitler’s appreciation of Operation *Merkur* was correct: parachuting to war is essentially a dicing with death, in which the odds are loaded against the soldier who entrusts his life to silk and static line.”²⁴ Instead the Allied commanders took different point of view regarding the successes and failures of the German airborne operations. They argued that the German implementation of the airborne was the problem and not that there was a problem with the concept of the airborne in general. Once again, Keegan writes: “The British and Americans, both energetically raising parachute divisions, drew from Crete a conclusion different from Hitler’s: that it was the particular form rather than the underlying principle of airborne operations which had proved unsound.”²⁵ Little did the Allied commanders know but the problems that the Fallschirmjäger ran into were inherent to the airborne and not simply a misuse of the doctrine. It could be argued that one of the reasons behind the mass confusion and disruption in reorganization that allied airborne units had once on

²³ John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 1990), 171.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

the ground in France was caused by the lack of credible intelligence about the ground around the landing zones.

The organization of the airborne caused confusion and speculation throughout the military, airborne and general public. Even the paratroopers themselves had trouble understanding the mission of the airborne as a divisional unit in a large army. Its size was always a large subject of debate. Even the paratroopers themselves assumed they would appear to be a modified infantry regiment. Dr. Lewis remembers: "Now, originally the 82nd was just a line outfit. Sergeant York's old outfit, if you remember. And now the Infantry Division, Land Division, is a larger division than the Airborne Division. The airborne is smaller, small and mobile."²⁶ It is important to note that the size of the two American Airborne Divisions was not for lack of public or military support or even lack of volunteers but was intended to create a small extremely mobile force that was able to respond quickly to enemy threats. In addition, the units that comprised the division were smaller than that of a regular triangular division.²⁷ A triangular division is a designation given to the way divisions are organized. In a triangular organization, the division's main body is composed of three regimental maneuver elements. Marshall Brucer edited a collection of histories from the airborne in *The History of the Airborne Command* and in it he details the unit sizes for the airborne and that of a standard infantry division. "The parachute and glider infantry regiments had

²⁶ Dr. Arch Joseph Lewis, Jr. 10/23/2002. Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/540>, 3.

²⁷ Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 13.

strength of 1958 and 1605 respectively, in contrast to the 3000 of the standard infantry regiment. All service units were smaller than those of the standard infantry division.”²⁸

The airborne units were supposed to land in wide open, dry plains that were clear of enemy forces as possible. After the Allied air forces defeated the German Luftwaffe and gained air superiority, they began to run large-scale intelligence operations over the proposed landing zones. Small planes with fighter escorts flew over the area and took scores of aerial photographs. Allied intelligence prided itself on the accuracy of its information. Code breaking operations like ULTRA provided the allies with an unprecedented amount of information about their enemy’s movements. However, for whatever reasons, the intelligence on the landing zones and anti-aircraft capabilities of the German’s in Normandy were underdeveloped or deficient. Ruggero writes: “Within minutes the German assault intensified, with the attackers dropping mortar rounds on the American roadblock. The little crossroads was full of flying shrapnel, which kept the GIs from moving about and adjusting their defensive positions to meet the new threats. The paratroopers were pinned in place by the accurate fire, while the enemy, mostly out of sight, pressed closer.”²⁹

However many of these photographs did not capture the booby traps that the German’s had laid out in case of airborne assault. The Germans did not know where the invasion of France would be but they did know that it was going to happen. In order to prevent an invasion of Europe Hitler ordered one of his top commanders, Field Marshall

²⁸ Marshall Bruce, *The History of the Airborne Command* (Galveston: The Command Club, 1945), 159.

²⁹ Ed Ruggero, *The First Men In: U.S. Paratroopers and the Fight to Save D-Day* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 159.

Erwin Rommel, to construct a defensive line across the beaches and flood the lowlands of northern France to prevent any possible allied invasion. The airborne defenses consisted of barbed wire, land mines, spiked wooden pillars and artillery shells wired to explode on contact. General Gavin describes the *Rommelspargel* in his memoir *On to Berlin*: “The entire hill was covered with *Rommelspargel*. They were all wired together with barbed wire, some from top to top, others from top of one pole to the bottom of an opposite pole, and others from the bottom of one to the bottom of another.” Gavin continues, “They were booby-trapped to artillery shells and some of them to mines.”³⁰ Unfortunately for Rommel and his *Ost* Battalions, German Army recruits from the conquered countries of Poland, Lithuania and occupied Russia, were far too few to construct them in all of the possible dropzones. Keegan describes these units:

Moreover, several of the German battalions were not German at all in composition, but manned by more-or-less willing volunteers from the army of prisoners whom the Germans had taken in the east during 1941-42. They were indeed known as East (*Ost*) Battalion, for to have called them Russian would have been inaccurate. They represented for the most part the peripheral and unassimilated peoples of the Russian empire, Cossacks, Georgians, Turkomen, Armenians, Volga Tartars, and Azerbaijanis, who had swapped a tenuous sense of citizenship for the guarantee of regular meals, and might be expected to waver in their new loyalty if pressed to fight for their suppers.³¹

Because the troops defending the “Atlantic Wall” were not frontline German soldiers it is argued that the airborne caught a good break. However, the *Panzer* Divisions ordered to respond to any conflict were veteran Eastern Front troops. These were just a few of the lethal obstacles placed in dropzones for the paratroopers to deal with. Luckily, few of the paratroopers encountered such defensive positions due to the miss drop.

³⁰ Gavin, *On to Berlin*, 111.

³¹ Keegan, *Six Armies*, 74.

Along the beaches Rommel constructed a defensive line that consisted of landmines, tank traps and machinegun nests that he called the "Atlantic Wall." To defend against airborne landings, he constructed machinegun nests facing any open area large enough for paratroopers to land. In addition he flooded³² the entire Normandy lowlands and constructed sharpened spikes entwined with barbed wire to eviscerate paratroopers as they landed. German troops called them "Rommel's Asparagus." Historian and journalist Max Hastings, a former German Soldier, explains in *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy*: "The soldiers did as little work as possible and we were too busy putting up wire and planting Rommel's Asparagus to have much time for training."³³ The machinegun nests and "Rommel's Asparagus" would prove to be deadly, but the misdrops by the Army Air Corps helped save the paratroopers because few landed in the marked dropzones.

Allied military intelligence took pride in their ability to map out the Norman countryside and collect the large volume of intelligence that they had on Nazi emplacements, troops and the dropzones. Regardless of what they thought they knew about the dropzones and the status of the enemy they failed to detect or see flooded dropzones, landing-zone booby traps, armored divisions and enemy strength. All of which the airborne units did not expect to encounter. The flooded dropzones caused the most trouble for the paratroopers as they landed. The men were not prepared to land in the water, which came as a fierce shock when they landed and almost

³² John D. McKenzie, *On Time, On Target: the World War II Memoir of a Paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne* (Novato: Presidio Press, 2000, 17).

³³ Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 66.

immediately began to sink and drown. At least thirty-six paratroopers drowned due to the flooded low lands. The water from the Douve and Merderet Rivers inundated the entire area and caused a terrifying experience for most of the paratroopers in some way or another. In his memoir Ed Ruggero, a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division, recalls the terrifying experience of one of his companions who landed in the water: "Scores of troopers landed in the flooded Merderet plain. Instead of collapsing, his chute went into the river, caught the current, and started pulling him along, face-down, overloaded with heavy equipment, and helpless."³⁴ The military always assumed that the more equipment that the paratroopers could carry the better off they would be in the field and the longer they could live without being reinforced. Unfortunately for many, the Allied commanders had no idea that the entire proposed landing zone was flooded.

The amount of equipment that paratroopers carried during D-Day made a powerful arsenal and flush footlockers and pantries. Everything from three-days rations, weapons, ammunition, clothing and explosives were attached to the paratroopers as they jumped from the Dakotas. In addition, if a paratrooper was a part of a weapon's team, mortar or machinegun team he also carried ammunition and parts for that system. Airborne historian Crookenden writes:

Impregnated, combinations vest and long drawers were issued to each man, but they were so stiff and scratchy to wear that most threw them away as soon as they had a chance to take their clothes off. The combat jacket and trousers were sensible, shower-proof and comfortable, and in the baggy pockets of the jacket

³⁴ Ruggero, *The First Men In*, 132.

and trousers a pocket knife, spoon, razor, socks, cleaning patches, torch, maps, rations and ammunition were carried. Each man had three days of K ration, a compact three-meal package of food alleged to be scientifically nourishing, but universally disliked by the Army (the best food of the war for the 82nd, in the soldier's view, was the British "Compo" 14-man ration issued to them in Holland during the Nijmegen battles), Each man also carried an emergency "D" ration of chocolate, a compass, two fragmentation grenades, one Hawkins anti-tank mine, one smoke grenade and a Gammon bomb.³⁵

Often the weight carried by the paratroopers equaled their own body weight. Ironically most airborne troops lost the majority of their equipment when they jumped. Most paratroopers landed only with a jump knife and perhaps their carbine or Thompson. Later on June 5, 1944, a historic image showed a young lieutenant pushing one of his comrades into the C-47 because he could not get up the steep ladder by himself. Major Winters describes how he took pride in helping each one of the men in his stick climb the ladder. He writes: "In fact, like others in the stick, I had to push him up the steps into the plane because he carried such a heavy load."³⁶ Others, officers included, found the extra load to be an unbearable burden and shed all spare equipment. Between the flooded low lands, booby-traps and the *Ost* Battalions and the inherent dangers jumping out of a plane paratroopers were lucky to survive. After D-Day the American public and the military created a myth that would shroud the airborne in danger, adventure and glory.

Historians and former paratroopers alike have written or commented on the image of the airborne. Draftees saw the shiny black shoes and the baggy pants and were immediately intrigued by the differences between the airborne and the other

³⁵ Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 31.

³⁶ Winters, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 72.

branches of the American military. Ben Molinaro remembers the mystery that surrounded the airborne even as the war waged. After the Battle of the Bulge and the 101st airborne's heroism at Bastogne that division earned the nickname "The Battered Bastards of Bastogne."³⁷ Molinaro remembers, "But Hitler called us killers with baggy pants."³⁸ The legend or reputation of the airborne was recognized throughout the U.S. military. However when the airborne recruited its first class of paratroopers, there was no long history or tradition and no combat record to entice volunteers. At first glance, few would be willing to join the airborne, the idea of jumping out a plane daunted many but the airborne seemed the manliest of outfits and the prestige of the airborne emanated swelled its ranks.

During the early days of the airborne, for example when paratroopers tried to encourage young draftees to join the airborne, the paratroopers epitomized super masculine roles. George Mosse's monograph on masculinity *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* examines how paratroopers presented the airborne as a group of uber masculine superman. Joanna Bourke, a historian at the University of London, writes about how modern masculine theory is based upon the super masculine body image. She writes, "This is the chief difference between modern masculinity and what went before: the modern stereotype emphasizes the body."³⁹ The early image of the airborne was full of Mosse's stereotypical masculine image. They were portrayed,

³⁷ George E. Koskimaki, *The Battered Bastards of Bastogne: A Chronicle of the Defense of Bastogne, December 19, 1944-January 17, 1945* (New York: Casemate Publishing, 2003).

³⁸ Benjamin Molinaro. Benjamin Molinaro Collection, 08/06/2005. Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/32334>, 28.

³⁹ Joanna Bourke, "Review of *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*," *Reviews in History* 15, no. 23 (1997).

stereotypically as gun toting macho men who accomplished their goals because of their gender. This is important because, as Mosse states, stereotypes help to formulate a person's judgments or memories. Mosse explains these:

Modern masculinity was a stereotype, presenting a standardized mental picture, 'the unchanging representation of another,' as *Webster's Dictionary* defines stereotypes. Such a picture must be coherent in order to be effective, and in turn, the internalized visual image, the mental picture, relies upon the perception of outward appearance in order to judge a person's worth. Stereotypes objectify human nature, making it easy to understand at a glance and to pass judgment.⁴⁰

The airborne's stereotypical images of men and the paratroopers, as masculine, helped to create the image of the airborne. The masculine images that the paratroopers typified allured young men to join.

Young men all over the United States were drawn to the manly image these boys strove to emulate. Dr. Lewis recalls: "They were sharp looking fellows, had Class A uniforms, wings, shiny boots, their pants tucked in their boots, and they asked for volunteers, and some of us volunteered. I thought I could do that. Those boys stood there and looked proud and liked what they were doing, and they convinced me, and I volunteered."⁴¹ Dr. Lewis is not the only young volunteer who was encouraged by the look and prestige of the airborne. Sergeant Donald Malarkey, made famous by the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*, wrote his own memoir and commented on why the airborne was a perfect fit for him. He writes: "I wanted to be one of the hardest, toughest, and best-dressed soldiers in the army. I wanted to be 'hardened into a

⁴⁰ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford, 1998), 6.

⁴¹ Lewis, Veterans History Project, 1.

physical superman.’ Wear those wings. Hell I wanted to jump out of an airplane with a parachute on my back and be ‘cocky.’ It seemed challenging, yet simple: go on a mission for few days, fight like hell, get picked up, and return to your post.”⁴² For many the look of the paratroopers and the status of the airborne was more than enough for them to want to join. However the future and success of the airborne was hardly guaranteed. The paratroopers themselves would have to prove their worth in combat for themselves and in the eyes of their commanders, the Allied command staff and the public in general.

As soon as the paratroopers landed in Northern France they began to take on a larger than life persona. The image of thousands of combat ready soldiers falling from the night sky while illuminated by enemy anti-aircraft fire provided an almost mythical illustration of martial prowess. Even the French citizenry who were awakened in the middle of the night by the enormous crackle and bang of Nazi anti-aircraft were mesmerized by the sights of the airborne that night. Ryan describes a scene: “The planes came in fast and low, accompanied by a thunderous barrage of anti-aircraft fire, and she [a French farmer] was momentarily deafened by the din. Almost immediately the roar of the engines faded, the firing ceased and, as though nothing had happened, there was silence again. It was then that she heard a strange fluttering sound from somewhere above her. She looked up. Floating down, heading straight for the garden, was a parachute with something bulky swinging beneath it.”⁴³ Thousands of French

⁴² Don Malarkey, *Easy Company Soldier* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2008), 30.

⁴³ Ryan, *The Longest Day*, 106.

citizens had similarly startling experiences with paratroopers. They remembered the faces of the young men who fell from the sky as their liberators. The singular paratrooper floating through the darkness illuminated by enemy fire to fight in a foreign land coalesced into the iconic image that the airborne wanted and needed and that the public eagerly consumed.

Although most of the paratroopers argue that their intention was not to be the next “Sergeant York” but to merely accomplish their mission and go home, the airborne was responsible for some of the most heroic actions among Allied forces on D-Day. One such example was when a young paratrooper from the 82nd dropped into an occupied French city. At once the commandant recognized the young man as an American paratrooper and offered him the keys to the city. In *Those Devils in Baggy Pants* former 82nd airborne paratrooper Ross S. Carter remembers: “Inside an impeccable old gent looking like a four-star general in a comic opera uniform stepped up, snapped to attention, gave me a tailor-made salute and spouted a bunch of formalities in the Ginnie language. I gravely returned the salute, and then asked my interpreter what the hell he’d said. He replied that the fancy dude was the commandant of the city, was turning it over to me and wanted to know what I was going to do.”⁴⁴ Although this is one of the more comical situations that a paratrooper had to deal with on June 6, it still represents the kinds of actions paratroopers dealt with. Unfortunately for others they were not as lucky.

⁴⁴ Ross S. Carter, *Those Devils in Baggy Pants* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1951), 33.

Most of the paratroopers were thrust into combat immediately upon landing in France. With or without weapons the paratroopers were forced to fight for their lives when they hit the ground. Rapport and Northwood write, "Or even [were] shot dead before they did so."⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the bulky leg bags, torn away by the jump, left many without their weapons. Without their rifles and equipment the paratroopers were virtually defenseless. The dropped placed others in precarious situations. Ryan describes paratrooper PFC John Steele hanging by a bell tower, shot in the foot and forced to watch the slaughter of the other members of his stick.

Almost as soon as he left his plane, Private John Steele of the 82nd's 505th Regiment saw that instead of landing in a lighted drop zone he was heading for the center of a town that seemed to be on fire. Then he saw German soldiers and French civilians running frantically about. Most of them, it seemed to Steele, were looking up at him. The next moment he was hit by something that felt 'like the bite of a sharp knife.' A bullet had smashed into his foot. Then Steele saw something that alarmed him even more. Swinging in his harness, unable to veer away from the town, he dangled helplessly as his chute carried him straight toward the church steeple at the edge of the square.⁴⁶

Images such as these, however terrifying, helped to weave the myth that soon enhanced the airborne's reputation. Their selfless sacrifice in hopeless situations symbolized the American can-do spirit. The average American understood that sacrifices, like those made by the paratroopers at Sainte-Mère-Église, was what was needed to win the war. And paratroopers went above and beyond the duty to that of the average soldier destroy targets and capture critical towns, roads, and other points.

⁴⁵ Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 75.

⁴⁶ Ryan, *The Longest Day*, 133.

Combat and war had created heroes in the United States. World War Two was no different. Rapport and Northwood describe a legendary 101st Airborne Division assault on a fortified German position:

Past the mess hall was a two-story barracks. Summers, Camien and the others tried to attack; it resulted in four dead and four wounded paratroopers and building still stood. Private Burt then fired tracers into a haystack next to the building and started a fire which spread to a nearby ammunition shed. As the stuff began to explode Germans came pouring out of the shed. They were shot down-about thirty of them-as they tried to dash across the open space to the barracks or the field beyond. Just then S/Sgt. Roy Nickrent of Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, arrived with a bazooka. He put seven rounds into the building, the last one setting fire to the upper story. The remaining Germans, about a hundred-made a dash from the building.⁴⁷

A hand full of determined young paratroopers took on an entire barracks of well-armed, well-defended Germans and succeeded in destroying the strong point. Successes like these helped build American and military support for the airborne.

Not all paratroopers charged headlong into combat that night. Some were stricken ill by the air sickness pills given to the paratroopers right before they entered the Dakota's for the invasion. The air sickness pills, originally designed to avoid any motion sickness caused by turbulence or anti-aircraft fire, had the undesirable side affect of drowsiness. Paratroopers already exhausted physically and emotionally from months of training and anticipation could not resist the drug's affects and fell asleep in air or on the ground once they landed. "PFC George Doxzen had taken two anti-motion sickness pills and slept during the entire trip. The others had to wake him up for the jump preparations. After an uneventful drop, he had gotten together with four or five

⁴⁷ Northwood and Rapport, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 109.

others, including his squad leader. He said, 'I met up with Holbrook, Hatch Zettwich, and a few others. Hatch put me on outpost duty and I immediately fell asleep. The outfit moved while I slept. It was those damned pills!'"⁴⁸ One of the biggest blunders of the Allied D-Day assault, the last minute addition of the anti-motion sickness pills to the paratroopers, caused many to fall asleep or lose their "edge." Others, terrified, tired or overcome by adrenaline, were struck down by exhaustion and lingered for hours by themselves under cover. Others still simply tried to survive the night and try and regroup in the morning. Burgett remembers: "The four of us decided to find a place where we could defend ourselves and rest until daybreak, when we would stand a better chance of finding friendly troops without running into an army of enemy."⁴⁹ Staying in a well defended position until day break, however, was counterproductive to the mission objectives. The goal of the airborne was to achieve complete and utter surprise and to execute their combat missions in time for the beginning of the Allied invasion at the beachheads.

The airborne objectives were by no means trivial. Allied commanding general Eisenhower even claimed that without the airborne D-Day would have failed.⁵⁰ The objectives given to the airborne were not only critical for the invasion of Normandy on D-Day but also for the Allied efforts in the future, particularly to move toward Cherbourg, the only deep-water port in the area, and eventually to retake Paris and the rest of occupied France. According to Ambrose, Eisenhower gave the airborne the "task

⁴⁸ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, 83.

⁴⁹ Burgett, *Currahee*, 91.

⁵⁰ Ambrose, *D-Day*, 179.

of seizing the raised roads that crossed the flooded areas, so that the seaborne assault troops could use the roads to move inland,”⁵¹ and thus to free up space on the beaches, relieve cut off airborne units or engage enemy armor and infantry units defending the hedgerows throughout northern France. The hedgerows in Normandy would go down in history as the biggest difficulty the Allies had to overcome after the invasion of France. Historian David Irving would describe these earthen breastworks: “These hedges were to prove a serious impediment. Mud walls thrown up between the patchwork fields, matted with the roots of saplings cut back from time to time for firewood, the hedgerows were almost impassable even for the Allied tanks.”⁵² These hedgerows were significant obstruction for the paratroopers, making it very difficult for those trying to regroup and to locate where other paratroopers were.

These natural earthen barriers were fortified by the Nazi’s with barbed wire, machinegun nests and breastworks for infantry to cover behind. The labyrinth composed of wood, root and earth caused the paratroopers to be disoriented. Because of the confusion caused by the maze of hedgerows the paratroopers were almost always prevented from completing their objectives. According to Webster their objectives were to “take the two causeways, Exits One and Two, here. The Germans may flood the low ground behind the beach and confine the infantry to these causeways so they are A Number One on our list of objectives. They have to be taken and *held*. Those gun batteries I just mentioned have to be wiped out. If they’re not fully

⁵¹ Ibid., 76.

⁵² David Irving, *The War Between the Generals: Inside the Allied High Command* (New York: Congdon & Lattes, Inc., 1981), 163.

destroyed we may be all alone in Normandy, because they can stop the infantry right in the water.”⁵³ Because the airborne lost the element of surprise after hours of wondering throughout the hedgerows of Northern France the enemy was able to retake objective lost and contest those that being fought over. The enemy’s superiority in numbers, equipment, ammunition and armor allowed them to quickly and strongly reinforce contested areas. The Nazi’s superior armament and numbers allowed them to easily retake the positions that were loosely held by the airborne. Marshall writes: “The pile-up of German armor was in juxtaposition to the wreckage from the earlier fight threw a barrier (or shield) of metal broadwise of the causeway and the enemy infantry sprang to make best use of it. Thereby the two sides became locked in a sudden death grapple at 35 yards’ range, the Germans behind steel, the Americans partly helped by dirt banks.”⁵⁴

In some cases the airborne lost their conventional battles but, on occasion, the airborne was able to hold out under extraordinary circumstances until infantry units, usually from the 4th Infantry Division, rising from the beachheads could reinforce them. These were the battles that truly helped to create the myth of the airborne. The airborne seemed predisposed toward battles in which the odds were against them.⁵⁵

In some cases the element of surprise did work in the favor of the airborne and the Allied armies. The *Ost* battalions were hocked at being attacked in the dark, leading

⁵³ Webster, *Parachute Infantry*, 14.

⁵⁴ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 67.

⁵⁵ Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 179.

some to waver and retreat. The airborne trained the paratroopers to kill and to do so quickly and quietly. Sergeant Bill Guarnere explains that the airborne made sure to weed out any men who were not prepared to kill: "So it was kill or be killed. The Army was training us to be killers. If you didn't like the training, *hit the pike*. We didn't want any goldbricks or sissies next to us in combat."⁵⁶ In several different situations a few paratroopers tricked the German army into believing that their numbers were larger, causing them to retreat. Marshall describes one such situation: "the Germans, foxholed in the orchards or firing from inside the farm buildings, refused to give way. On the left of the road, Able Company was confronted by open fields. The presence of the tanks in column prevented any German displacement to the roadway to get on Able's flank. So the armor and the one rifle company rolled right along together in to Beaumont, capturing it at high noon. When the Americans gained the road intersection, the resistance in front of Baker Company dissolved, and its people came abreast near the village."⁵⁷

Extreme circumstances such as the combat the paratroopers faced on D-Day brought them together even closer than the rigorous physical training they went through. The airborne always seemed to be in the thick of it. The incessant combat that the airborne was thrown into forced the paratroopers to develop an unwavering trust in each other. More often than not a paratrooper's first combat experience was a shock. In an interview with Edward Michael Suita by Madeline Chavara, she asked him about

⁵⁶ Bill Guarnere and Edward "Babe" Heffron, *Brothers in Battle, Best of Friends* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2007), 21.

⁵⁷ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 232.

his baptism by fire. "I remember in France, the first night I hit France on Hedgerow. I'm watching guard and I think bats are flying around you know. You know the sound of a bird that flies by ya. That's what I heard. Shakin' it off, I get up the next morning after I get through with guard I went back fell asleep the next morning I'm telling these G.I.'s there must be a lot of bats around here. They said they're not bats, they're air shrapnel, you know. You learn from that."⁵⁸ The young paratrooper's ignorance would not last much longer than their first battle experience. A few would even go as far as to risk their own lives on D-Day, simply because, at the time, they did not realize the risks they were taking. Ambrose describes one such circumstance with Sergeant Carwood Lipton: "Lipton decided to climb a tree, but there were none of sufficient size to allow him to fire from behind a trunk. The one he picked had many small branches; he had to sit precariously on the front side, facing the Germans, exposed if they looked his way, balancing on several branches."⁵⁹ Risk taking, such as the Sergeant Lipton's on D-Day, happened less and less as the war went on and as the paratroopers became more familiar with combat but battles such as Brecourt Manner, Bastogne and Nijmegen all led to the creation of the image that surrounded the combat prowess of the airborne.⁶⁰

Unfortunately for the airborne the casualties for D-Day were very high. Even after D-Day the casualty rate for the airborne was almost always higher than that of

⁵⁸ Edward Michael Suita Collection. 04/10/2009. Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/66322>. 10.

⁵⁹ Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 80.

⁶⁰ Cain, "The Military Memoir as Critical History: The Case of James M. Gavin," 178.

their counterparts in the regular infantry.⁶¹ The airborne was also one of the few branches of the military that even required its replacements to volunteer; it became very difficult for the airborne to replenish its ranks after combat. Norman Stieg remembers: “They were asking for volunteers. The parachute regiments were volunteers because you didn’t get assigned, you had to volunteer...They needed so many replacement men because of the casualties.”⁶²

With the invasion, the paratroopers had to start dealing with the death that surrounded them. If a paratrooper took the time to acknowledge its significance he would fall apart in a matter of days. Bill Guarnere explains the need for a paratrooper to keep death at arm’s length: “Wrong place, wrong time. You thank God it’s not you, and you wonder if you’re next, but you don’t have time to think about it. You learn real fast about war. Men drop dead right in front of you, and you better keep moving. You don’t get used to it, believe me. But it’s war kid. You can’t be affected, or you’re dead. Later, when you’re alone with your thoughts, you can think back to all the men you lost, and then it hits you.”⁶³ Airborne would be accustomed to the sights, sounds and smell of death from jump training to combat in England, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria, death was a constant reminder of their mortality and purpose.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 800. Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 800. Phil Nordyke, *All American, All the Way: The Combat History of the 82nd Airborne Division in World War II* (New York: Zenith Press, 2008), 785.

⁶² Norman C. Stieg, Norman C. Stieg Collection. 11/23/2007. American Folklife Center, *Library of Congress*, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/58756>, 4.

⁶³ Bill Guarnere and Edward “Babe” Heffron, *Brothers in Battle*, 69.

⁶⁴ Compton, *Call of Duty*, 152.

From the beginning of Allied operation in Europe, critics discussed what the airborne did or did not do on D-Day. Noted military historian Marshall was present in Normandy after D-Day and one of the airborne's biggest critics: "Elsewhere, except for a few isolated and immobilized groups which were simply awaiting rescue, the American forces had failed and the enemy was in solid possession of the countryside."⁶⁵ Not until recent history have the airborne's actions on D-Day been praised. Perhaps modern military tactics and methods have illuminated the airborne's effectiveness. For many in the airborne the main objective, the key to success, was the ability to regroup. Lieutenant Compton writes: "We absolutely couldn't be scattered when we hit the ground. Our whole point was to jump as a unit, ready to fight. We were soldiers first, before we were parachutists."⁶⁶ Unfortunately the paratroopers were not dropped as one cohesive unit and groups of one, two and three wandered the Norman coast searching for enemy placements and targets of opportunity.

On D-Day, the objectives and tactics of the airborne quickly changed from large-scale operations to small ones. Although those objectives were still critical to the D-Day invasion, the search-and-destroy guerilla tactics that were used foreshadowed future combat. These tactics caused the German Army more trouble than their original objectives would have. Keegan writes: "The scattering of the American parachutists was thought a calamity at the time, most of all by their tidy-minded commanders. In retrospect it can be seen materially to have added to the confusion and disorientation

⁶⁵ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 36.

⁶⁶ Compton, *Call of Duty*, 2.

the invasion was inflicting on their German opposite numbers.”⁶⁷ It was years before the true effectiveness of the airborne was understood. At the time the only measure of success was the completion of the aforementioned objectives and because they failed to accomplish them they were deemed a failure. Small groups of paratroopers were more than capable of forming units of two or three and attacking fortified enemy positions or destroying lines of communication. Moreover, later in the day the paratroopers were able to form larger units and move onto an objective. Whether or not these tasks were assigned to them or not are not important but what was important is that the paratroopers had little or no difficulty moving towards them and trying to accomplish them.

The controversy surrounding the effectiveness of the Allied Airborne Divisions on D-Day has surrounded them for the last sixty-five years. Historians and paratroopers alike have difficulty deciding what was and was not a true objective. However, the paratroopers were able to confuse the enemy, destroy lines of communication, capture objectives and destroy batteries of artillery that were killing Americans on the beachheads. Although the paratroopers were not able to complete one hundred percent of their objectives, they did accomplish their primary objective which was to allow the Allied invasion forces to leave the beachheads. In addition to that they were able to accomplish many more objectives and caused the German Army to act as erratically as they did. Although they did not reform and mobilize as expected they were still able to harass the enemy and complete objectives. Regardless of their

⁶⁷ Keegan, *The Second World War*, 382.

inability to complete all of their objectives they were able to accomplish what their main goal as soldiers was: kill as many of the enemy as possible and to win the war.

This thesis is intended to investigate several different aspects of the airborne's contributions to D-Day. Through the chapter titled "Evolving a Mission and a Myth" the doctrine and organization of the airborne is investigated. This is important because it illustrates the tradition and elite nature the airborne exuded. Through understand the doctrine and organization of the airborne it is possible to ascertain the motivations of the command staff and paratroopers.

The following chapter addresses the action on D-Day. It also analyzes the importance in illustrating the movements and tactics of small units. Through moving from the airfields in England, to the jump into France and finally the paratrooper's movements on the ground it is possible to understand how the tactics of the airborne changed from large scale conventional tactics to small unit or individual based guerilla warfare. The true effectiveness of the airborne is seen through investigating the small unit tactics used by the paratroopers when they fought the German army. Although these tactics have largely been ignored they are the foundation of the paratrooper's successes in France.

Finally, the chapter based on tactics and weaponry hopes to illustrate how the airborne was able to facilitate using guerilla tactics. Asymmetrical tactics were used before the Second World War never before had an elite force of heavily armed, well trained and motivated soldiers been placed behind enemy lines to enforce these tactics.

The United States placed their entire research and improvement capabilities behind the improvement of arms and ammunition for the war effort. The airborne received the majority of the most advanced equipment. This equipment allowed the airborne to conduct guerilla warfare tactics with the most advanced weaponry. In addition to that the paratroopers were taught the most advanced theories of military science. This education allowed them to manipulate these tactics to be used by small groups hunting enemy targets.

Until now the study of the airborne has been concentrated on aspects that were secondary to its success. The historical problem surrounding the history of the airborne is that the small units that roamed through the hedgerows were previously ignored by military historians. The paratrooper's success relied upon the tactics they used as small groups not as a large divisional force. Although the promulgation of guerilla warfare during the seventies and eighties through colonial wars such as the French in Algeria encouraged historians to write about the airborne in a positive light they still failed to address the issue. The study of small separated groups of paratroopers that were well trained, supplied and provoked is the foundation of the history of the airborne on D-Day.

Chapter 4-Surprises, Chaos, Disruption

For the airborne, D-Day was a baptism by fire for most paratroopers. Through the ride across the channel, the drop itself and the resulting combat each paratrooper handled himself differently. For some the deadly flight across the channel affected the way they would conduct combat when they landed. Others found themselves looking for revenge, searching to destroy the first enemy target they encountered. The way in which the paratroopers conducted themselves on D-Day was the foundation for how small groups of soldiers should perform when behind enemy lines. The paratroopers destroyed artillery batteries, barracks, observation posts and enemy troops. They even secured the majority of the bridges and causeways on the flanks of the beach heads, which was their original objective. Because the paratroopers adapted to the situation they were in they were able to succeed as a combat force.

On a steamy early September day the people of New York City watched thousands of unmarked GI's milling around the harbor. They waited in long lines to board ships like the SS Samaria and SS Strathnaver. Few of the residents of the city found it strange that they lacked the unit insignia usually found on the right shoulder of a soldier. Fewer recognized the jump wings proudly worn upon their chests. The military was taking few if any risks in regards to the massive logistical operation that was taking place at that moment in similar ports dotting the Eastern seaboard. They would

not allow any stray German spy to notice some unit insignia on the shoulder of a young GI heading to Europe.¹

Secrecy was always a primary concern for the military. The paratroopers were told before they shipped out that they could not let slip to anyone what unit they were with or any suspicions they had about where they were headed. As these thousands of newly minted paratroopers stood in lines “packed in like sardines”² to enter the transport ships for to Europe, their family and friends were reading letters similar to this one written by Captain Sobel of Easy Company, 501st PIR, 101st Airborne Division:

Dear Madam, Soon your son [each individual name had been typed in] will drop from the sky to engage and defeat the enemy. He will have the best of weapons, and equipment, and have had months of hard, and strenuous training to prepare him for success on the battlefield. Your frequent letters of love, and encouragement, will arm him with a fighting heart. With that, he cannot fail, but will win glory for himself, make you proud of him and his country grateful for his service in its hour of need.³

Letters such as this one encouraged the friends and families of paratroopers who were shipping out. Unfortunately, their sons, husbands and fathers could not tell them when or where they were going before they left because they did not know. However, as comforting letters such as this one must have been for their families, Captain Sobel’s loyalty and attachment to the airborne is evident.

Most paratroopers had never been on a boat, much less been out to sea. Sergeant Guarneri remembers: “Nobody was ever on a boat before in their life, let

¹ Malarkey, *Easy Company Soldier*, 62.

² Guarneri and Heffron, *Brothers in Battle*, 34.

³ Malarkey, *Easy Company Soldier*, 62.

alone getting on a ship like that and going on the ocean.”⁴ They packed the top decks of their ships with all of their equipment. Most found the crowd unbearable, as the military left few amenities for comfort but they all had to catch one last glimpse of the United States before officially heading out to war. Ocean liners like the Queen Mary, the Normandy, and even the Titanic were lodged in American popular culture. However the airborne received and gave up the creature comforts they may have imagined a transatlantic trip offered. Webster writes: “We left in the morning. There were no steamer baskets, there was no confetti. There was no ‘all ashore who are going ashore!’ Because nobody was going ashore. Our sole audience was a handful of stevedores standing by the hawsers.”⁵ As the once glorious ocean liners pulled away from their births and headed out to open water the paratroopers saw something that usually marked a joyous occasion. The paratroopers saw the Statue of Liberty and as they passed they saluted her.

Slowly at first and then like a fire it spread. “I think everyone was scared,” Guarneri recalls. “We were going into the unknown. We looked out at the Statue of Liberty and saluted her as we went past. I remember thinking, *This is it, I’m leaving America, going off to war.* I hoped we got over there, got it over with, got out alive and got home.”⁶ Early September 1943 proved to be the last time that many of these paratroopers would ever see the United States. Once upon the ship the paratroopers found out their destination. They would travel by boat to England and then jump into

⁴ Guarneri and Heffron, *Brothers in Battle*, 34.

⁵ Webster, *Parachute Infantry*, 2.

⁶ Guarneri and Heffron, *Brothers in Battle*, 34.

France. For most, the trip to England was little more than boring. They played cards, talked, trained and got sea sick. When they arrived in England, they were welcomed with open arms. Many officers, including then Lieutenant Winters, grew to love the host families they were billeted with.

For many paratroopers England was a land of knights and wizards. When they finally arrived in the small hamlets and villages, the paratroopers realized they were in a place that could be seen on English postcards. Lieutenant Compton writes: "Aldbourn was a town you'd see in postcards. Located in a small valley, the village had a town square dominated by a large church. The surrounding countryside was ideal for military training with its forests, creeks and green fields."⁷ For the remainder of 1943 and the beginning of 1944 the Airborne trained arduously for combat. The training included everything from combat exercises to more training jumps. Crookenden writes: "As winter approached the tempo of training quickened. In December, the staffs and signals were practiced in command post exercises and each regimental combat team carried out a field exercise and a drop."⁸ The training helped the men prepare for real combat situations in a foreign land. They tested tactics, map reading and the use of different weapons. The men and the people of England knew that the increase in training could mean only one thing: D-Day was approaching.

During their stay in England, the 101st spent its time training but during their spare time the paratroopers were allowed to fraternize with the local English populace,

⁷ Compton, *Call of Duty*, 91.

⁸ Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 29.

with the officers billeting with local families. Officers often became very close with these families. Lieutenant Richard Winters, "E" Company, 506th PIR, became so attached to his host family that he considered them his "second family."⁹ Enlisted men also enjoyed their time in England. They also socialized with the English, but once D-Day, approached security around the camps became tighter-in fact that the camps were surrounded by barbed wire, guarded by military police. There were machineguns at the corners of the camps, and the paratroopers were forbidden to talk to the guards.¹⁰ Paratrooper McKenzie remembers: "Security was tight-a double row of barbed-wire fences surrounded the invasion force camps with a four-yard space between them. We stood guard inside the fence and military police (MP's) stood guard outside. The compound thus was more like a prison than an army camp."¹¹ These measures were necessary due to the fact that the paratroopers had detailed knowledge of the operation including but not limited to locations and objectives.¹² It was imperative that their knowledge not fall into the enemy's hand.

On the evening of June 4, 1944, the men of the 101st Airborne Division sat patiently killing time waiting for the aforementioned "GO." This particular evening the men were given a "condemned person's' fancy meal" as Technician 5th Grade Gordon E. King said about the best meal he had ever received while in the army.¹³ Suddenly, movies were stopped and lights were turned on, prayers and craps games alike were

⁹ Winters, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 53.

¹⁰ Koskimaki, *D-Day With The Screaming Eagles*, 2.

¹¹ McKenzie, *On Time, On Target*, 11.

¹² *Ibid*, 3.

¹³ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, 8.

interrupted and military police stormed in a hail of commotion into recreation halls, movie theaters and barracks and told the Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOS) and officers that “tonight would be the night.”¹⁴ Throughout the next few hours the men of the 101st did many different things to prepare for that night’s jump. After their “last meal” a final equipment check was done and then they enjoyed a last minute bathroom break, blackened their faces and checked their weapons for the last time. Many men shaved their heads like Mohawk Indians.¹⁵ Keegan writes: “It did mean that the Americans would have to put forth every shred of that red Indian bravery which, with a last-minute sprouting of Mohawk haircuts and smearing of red and white war paint, many of the young bloods in the battalions were nerving themselves to emulate if they were to come through.”¹⁶ This was said to be done because the Germans had heard reports that the American Airborne Divisions were comprised of convicts that were said to have shaved their heads in that manner. Finally word arrived that Rome had fallen to advancing allied troops in the Mediterranean, but most men were too worried about their own baptism by fire to be concerned the Italian Campaign. Weapons were checked and rechecked. The paratroopers were ready if not willing.

Throughout the entire day of June 5, 1944, thousands of men comprising the two American Airborne Division’s, the 101st and 82nd, were scattered across southern England and in cities such as Aldbourne, Chilton-Foliat, Froxfield and Ramsbury, waiting for the “GO” that would signal the largest and most logistically intricate invasion in

¹⁴ Winters, *Band of Brothers*, 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Keegan, *Six Armies*, 75.

history. They later learned that this signal would be delayed twenty-four hours due to inclement weather over the Normandy coast.¹⁷ The weather on the English Channel during the late spring can always be cause for some alarm. Sudden cold fronts can bring large swells, wind and low thick cloud cover. The decision to launch was in the hands of one man, General Eisenhower. Although the weather on June 6 was still not ideal the tides and previous weather patterns left no doubt. Eisenhower exclaimed, "I'm quite positive we must give the order, I don't like it, but there it is ... don't see how we can possibly do anything else."¹⁸ During the next twenty-four hours the men spent their time praying, playing dice and cards, watching a movie or rechecking their previously checked equipment. Months and years of training were converging on the moment they all knew would happen, D-Day.

The sounds of rumbling M35 "deuce and half" trucks roaring through camps and into airfields across southern England and filled with paratroopers packed to the tee with equipment and supplies could be heard clearly on the evening of June 5, 1944. The people of England immediately knew what the commotion was about. There was only one place the airborne troops were headed from their beautiful little villages and hamlets. Once the trucks arrived at their designated airfields with C-47/DC-3 Dakota transport planes, the men unloaded and began to gather and put on their equipment. Before the jumpmasters helped the paratroopers put on their equipment they handed

¹⁷ Ibid.,12.

¹⁸ Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack*, New York: William S. Konecky Associates, 2003, 274.

out stacks of paper. Each sheet contained the now legendary message from General Eisenhower about the magnitude of the great task at hand.

Soldiers, sailors and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force! You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. Good luck! And let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.¹⁹

General Eisenhower worried about the fate of the airborne. Although he believed that the invasion would fail without their success, he anticipated that many of the young paratroopers would be killed. Historian Irving writes: "He recalled Leigh-Mallory's written prediction, the day before, that more than three quarters of these airborne troops would be immediate casualties. But their operations on the Cherbourg peninsula were vital for the success of the Utah beach, and Eisenhower had one record, too-ordering the jump to go ahead."²⁰ With the poop sheets passed out the paratroopers nervously awaited what was to be their first combat jump in World War Two.

As the paratroopers waited to board the C-47's, checking and rechecking equipment, they believed that the only remaining surprise awaited them on the Normandy Coast, but they were mistaken. Suddenly, jumpmasters appeared, telling each man to take and swallow one small white pill, which was supposed to help prevent air sickness while in flight over the English Channel. With the air sickness pills distributed and ingested, the paratroopers once again sat down to wait. The engines

¹⁹ Nordyke, *All American*, 198.

²⁰ Irving, *The War Between*, 151.

began roaring to life and slowly and almost imperceptibly the paratroopers could feel the planes start moving down the runway. Dwayne Burns, an 82nd Airborne Communications Sergeant, remembers the anxiety he felt while “waiting in line.” He writes: “The planes started to taxi in what looked like a never-ending procession toward the end of the runway. This was much bigger than a practice jump. I listened as planeload after planeload of troopers took off, one right after another, and I watched what I could out the window. The throttles of the plane I rode in were advanced and then pulled back several times. It seemed we only inched forward. Our aircrew waited for their turn, but I believed the waiting was worse for us jumpers.”²¹ For the airborne, the waiting was always the hardest part. Either on the ground or in the air, they often waited for hours to jump into combat. As the droves of planes took off down the runway, they flew in a holding pattern until all of the Dakota’s had left the runway. These times were for levity, prayer and, for some, sleep.

As the short flight progressed for what seemed like hours the men of the airborne did what they could to keep their minds off of the jump and their own mortality. Sergeants Burns spent his the time in the Dakota praying and thinking of the girl he left back home: “I mentally repeated the 23rd Psalm. My card was placed in my helmet and I reached up and touched it every once and awhile. *The LORD is my shepherd I shall not want.* Yet I do want, I want to live, why do I want to live so bad?”²² Prayer brought a welcome solace to many on the flight to France. Catholic paratroopers

²¹ Dwayne Burns, *Jump into the Valley of the Shadow: the war memories of Dwayne Burns, Communications Sergeant, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2006), 28.

²² *Ibid.*, 35.

read their Rosaries provided a steady hand and nourished a courageous soul. Ambrose notes: "Like many of the Catholic troopers, 'Dutch' Schultz was 'totally engrossed in my rosaries.' Clayton Storeby was sitting next to George Dickson, who 'was going around that rosary, giving a lot of Hail Marys. After about ten minutes, it seemed like it was helping him, so I said, 'George, when you're through with that, would you loan it to a buddy?'"²³ Others felt that peace and quiet and cigarette was the only cure for the stress that engulfed the paratroopers. However, most troopers passed the time of the journey with conversation with their fellow paratroopers and laughter. The one symptom that seemed to afflict the entire airborne were the stomach pains and nausea caused by tension. Nordyke quotes paratrooper Elmo Jones: "In the plane, some of the men had upset stomachs because of the tension and nerves. Some men could not speak. I was so afraid that I would be the same way that I said a prayer again that I had said on previous combat two combat jumps. It was simple and it was this: 'Lord thy will be done. But if I'm to die, please help me die like a man.' And then everything seemed to be OK."²⁴ The peace and quiet was short lived. Once the air armada reached the Nazi French outpost islands of Guernsey and Jersey the airborne was under direct fire from enemy anti-aircraft fire. Regardless of their actions on the plane ride to England the paratroopers did what they could to pass the time as easily as possible.

The view from the air was breathtaking for the sticks that chose to have the door removed from their Dakotas. The night of June 5 and the early morning of June 6th,

²³ Ambrose, *D-Day*, 198.

²⁴ Nordyke, *All American, All the Way*, 201.

1944 the weather was still and calm with clouds over the Normandy Coast. The planes once again leveled out at 1,000 feet. For most the ride to France was pleasant and smooth. The storms that had plagued the invasion area for the previous weeks had blown over and the views of the invasion fleet and the French coast had never before been seen. Elmo Jones recalls. "The C-47 with its door off [gave me] the ability to look out at sea and watch the water...watching the ships on the Channel as we flew over the top."²⁵ These Dakotas brought the airborne behind the shores of the invasion beaches of Utah and Omaha. The planes flew steady in "V of V formations, nine abreast as far as the eye could see. The planes seem to fill the entire sky."²⁶ The paratroopers were not the only ones that were treated to some amazing vistas. Although they were able to witness the largest invasion flotilla ever assembled, they were not able to witness their own feat, as hundreds of Dakotas flew over Hitler's Atlantic Wall.

As the men of the airborne divisions flew over the massive invasion fleet, the men below in transport craft looked up at the first blow to "Hitler's Atlantic Wall." Ryan writes about one particular instance when the last formation of planes passed by and gave the troops below one more sliver of hope. Ryan writes: "Nobody could say a word. And then as the last formation flew over, an amber light blinked down through the clouds on the fleet below. Slowly it flashed out in Morse code three dots and a dash: V for Victory."²⁷ For most soldiers and sailors the ride to Europe was nothing but

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 78.

²⁷ Ryan, *The Longest Day*, 102.

sickening. Those lucky enough to be on deck on the misty early morning of June 6 were treated to a sight that made most of them feel a little better.

Right after this last symbol of hope was dashed out, the formations of hundreds of C-47 Dakotas entered into a thick cloud bank. Although the pilots of the C-47's were extremely well trained, they were unprepared to enter such a large cloud formation. The strict formations that were maintained during the flight over the Channel were broken up and the pilots were forced to fly on instinct and alone. Compton remembers: "As we neared our drop zone, the weather grew overcast, and more and more anti-aircraft flak began to hit near our plane."²⁸ Once the Dakotas hit the cloud bank they were unable to keep in formation because the lead planes in the formations, or the center of the "v," were the only planes that had radar and Eureka receivers installed in them. In order to guide the planes behind, a small green light was installed in a clear bubble on the top of the plane. The planes behind the lead were ordered to maintain their direction and speed based on these lights.

The C-47 Dakota pilots were not trained to fly in low lying clouds over the drop zones and the beaches. After several seconds of flying through very little visibility, pilots had to contend with accurate and consistent fire from German anti-aircraft batteries placed all along the Cherbourg Peninsula. Paratrooper Joseph F. "Frank" Brumbaugh of the 82nd Airborne Division recalls: "We picked up flak that I swear was solid enough to walk on. There were shells bursting all over the sky. We flew through this solid flak all

²⁸ Compton, *Call of Duty*, 11.

the way over to where we jumped.”²⁹ The heavy Nazi anti-aircraft fire was a surprise for the paratroopers, the pilots of the Dakotas, the navy, and Allied intelligence. After the Allied air forces had achieved complete air superiority, they attacked Nazi targets of opportunity such as enemy AA sites. They believed that they had knocked out most and that any AA fire that followed would be minimal. Intelligence had previously stated that heavy Army Air Corps and Naval bombing would eliminate most if not all ground to air fire. Heavy and accurate anti-aircraft fire and the cloud bank forced the C-47 pilots to lower or raise altitude and increase speed significantly.³⁰

The combat jump procedure for paratroopers was engrained into their muscle memory of paratroopers. They followed a set of strict procedures that saved a sense of normalcy to an action that was inherently the opposite of one’s instincts. Compton remembers that routine:

Normally a red light would flash on, and we’d have three minutes to stand up, check our gear one last time, and get ready for the jump. Then a green light was supposed to flash, which meant it was time for us all to bail out. I was jumpmaster and positioned to be first out of the door. The red light flashed. *All my guys are edgy right now, I thought, so I’m not going to stand up and have us all standing around nervous. I’ll wait a few seconds before I stand.* Before I could even blink, the green light flashed—way ahead of schedule. We had to get out of the plane—now! Something must have happened, maybe our pilot missed our dropzone.³¹

Most of the paratroopers did not know that when the green light turned on, they were still several miles and several minutes from their destination. Even after they landed few paratroopers understood the gravity of the misdrop. Sergeant Malarkey writes:

²⁹ Nordyke, *All American, All the Way*, 202.

³⁰ Ambrose, *D-Day*, 196.

³¹ Compton, *Call of Duty*, 11.

“Later, we’d learn that we’d been dropped several miles west of our drop zone, which might have been a blessing in disguise because our target area, we later found, was crawling with krauts. We had landed about three quarters of a mile east of Ste.-Mere-Église, about five miles inland from Utah Beach.”³² At the time, the paratroopers believed that the pilots of the Dakotas would never turn on the “green light” before the dropzone, and it would take years to understand why they were so badly misdropped.

The cloudbank, enemy flak, and ensuing chaos unnerved the pilots to the point that paratroopers were dropped on average up to two miles off course from the designated drop zones. These mixed drops prevented any chance the airborne had to regroup quickly. Not only were the paratroopers unaware of how badly they were dropped, but the confusion only escalated when they ran into other paratroopers who were supposed to be tens of miles away.

The ensuing differences in altitude and air speed among the C-47s created scattered flight paths that made it impossible for the pilots to drop their paratroopers in their correct locations. The drops were so ineffective and confused that the 101st and the 82nd Airborne Divisions were mixed together and both generally landed far from their respective drop zones. Guarnere writes: “Guys were joining up from the 82nd, 501st, 502nd, all different outfits. Some stayed, some left, and some went and hid in a bar. Everyone was looking for their outfit. No one knew what was going on.”³³ They also lost sixty percent of their equipment including mortars, ammunition and radios.

³² Malarkey, *Easy Company Soldier*, 90.

³³ Guarnere and Heffron, *Brothers in Battle*, 63.

The loss of equipment and the scattering of paratroopers complicated the airborne's mission on the field of battle.

The majority of the paratroopers landed in France alone, without a weapon and far from the dropzones they had studied in England. Panic seemed to grip the pilots at the Normandy coast. Some pilots even dropped their sticks in the ocean before making landfall. Although Lieutenant Compton was lucky enough to have a smooth drop, he heard that some of his platoon was not so lucky: "We learned later that flight conditions inside some of the other planes were horrifying. Bullets from anti-aircraft fire streamed inside the planes, caging the soldiers in. Ironically, all that most men in those conditions wanted to do was exit the planes and jump into the fray below. Some pilots strayed off course. Some panicked and dropped their men in the sea, drowning them all. Some flew too low-with soldiers plummeting to the ground without enough time for their chutes to deploy."³⁴ The loss of equipment was particularly common. Lieutenant Winters states: "Worse yet, I had no weapon because my M-1 and grenades had been ripped off from the shock of the prop-blast as soon as I had exited the plane. In the distance a machine gun was firing into the night sky as other paratroopers descended into the Normandy countryside."³⁵ Paratroopers recalled that the prop blast, the backwash from the engines of the planes, was so strong that shortly after they realized what was happening it was time for them to prepare to land.³⁶ Many paratroopers like

³⁴ Compton, *Call of Duty*, 11.

³⁵ Winters, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 81.

³⁶ Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 80.

Lieutenant Winters, landing without a weapon and alone, were still eager to fight and complete their objectives.

On the ground, it was pitch-black and terror began to set in. Although the paratroopers were well trained and could cope, they were faced with a myriad of frightening situations. Everything from goats to herds of cattle caught the paratroopers off guard.³⁷ Some unlucky paratroopers landed in the middle of Nazi soldiers or in a tree where death was often a foregone conclusion. Ruggero explains one situation in which several paratroopers were killed before they could even take their parachutes off and find their weapons: “They fired as they ran, catching some of the Americans before they could even free their weapons. It was over in a few minutes, and four paratroopers were dead in the darkness at the edge of town.”³⁸ The public and the high command came to understand the airborne’s mission as risky and lethal.

In most cases these images of men dying in the air, in trees or on the ground provided the surviving paratroopers with something to fight for. Malarkey states: “Some paratroopers, I’d later learn, would die in such trees, target practice for the Germans come daybreak. Some didn’t even make it that far. In either shot-down planes or hanging limp from parachutes, with bullets in them, they were dead on arrival.”³⁹ Catastrophes such as this one were fairly common on D-Day. The paratroopers quickly became accustomed to seeing their brothers in arms and countrymen wounded, lying helpless on the ground and dead in ditches throughout the hedgerows. In one tragic

³⁷ Koskimaki, *D-Day With The Screaming Eagles*, 84.

³⁸ Ruggero, *First Men In*, 119.

³⁹ Malarkey, *Easy Company Soldier*, 89.

case the 101st Airborne Division, German soldiers located an equipment drop and immediately set an ambush for those sent to recover the equipment. Once the unsuspecting paratroopers arrived, the German soldiers opened fire on them, greeting them with a hail of bullets.⁴⁰ Situations such as these and the extreme conditions in which the jump was made caused the casualties for airborne to be exceptionally high.

Despite casualties and scattering, the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions still captured and held the flanks of the Allied invasion forces as well as the causeways and exits from the beach heads. Malarkey states: "That quickly, a key objective had been taken. Krause cut the communications cable point. His men held the roads leading into St.-Mere-Église, most importantly the main highway from Caen to Cherbourg."⁴¹ Disabled communication lines prevented the German Army from summoning reinforcements and sending invasion information to headquarters in a timely manner. Most importantly however was the fact that the Germany Army could not implement Hitler's and Field Marshall Jodle's plan to concentrate armor at the beachheads in case of invasion. Keegan writes: "It was therefore vital that the Panzer divisions, which alone had the capability for rapid, off-road movement, should be positioned close to the invasion zone, to hold a line until the infantry reinforcements arrived."⁴² Cutting the communication lines was not one of the main objectives for the 101st Airborne Division but it turned into one of the most successful tactical strikes with far-reaching consequences, that day. With Hitler's prized Panzer divisions idle fifty miles from the

⁴⁰ Koskimaki, *D-Day With the Screaming Eagles*, 100.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 237.

⁴² Keegan, *World War Two*, 371.

invasion beaches there was little chance for significant German reinforcement and counterattack in Normandy. The result, catastrophic for the Germans, was the Allied lodgment in Normandy.

In addition to casualties, the airborne had thousands of paratroopers missing by the end of D-Day. Crookenden explains in great detail the missing and casualties the airborne had on D-day: "Of the 6,600 men of the 101st Division who had dropped that morning, 3,500 were missing as D-Day ended; 182 had been killed in action and 537 wounded. By August 1944, there were still 1,240 men missing; some of them were eventually traced as prisoners of war, but many more had drowned in the marshes and the sea."⁴³ He goes on to write about the 82nd Airborne Division: "of the 2188 parachute troops to drop on Drop Zone N, 2183 jumped, two refused and one was wounded in the aircraft. Only 17 out of 132 sticks landed on or near the drop zone, with another 16 within a mile of it. Some men fell into the River Douve; some dropped eight miles to the east in 101st Division area; two sticks jumped over Valognes nine miles to the north; and five more near Cherbourg. For the next four days, the 508th was unable to complete any of its tasks."⁴⁴ On the other hand, German casualties were far larger. To this day it is hard to ascertain what exactly their losses were on D-Day. However it is estimated that their casualties ranged from four to nine thousand.

⁴³ Crookenden, *Dropzone Normandy*, 110.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

The airborne casualty rates were cause for much of the negative publicity that surrounded the airborne after the war. Some historians, veterans, and commanders argue that the airborne casualties were far too high in proportion to their effectiveness. Although the majority of their objectives were met, the high losses they incurred was not worth their achievements. Most vocal of these critics was the American military's chief historian, S.L.A. Marshall. He addressed every major action that the airborne faced from their landings in the marshes and fields to specific engagements that particular units and regiments fought in. Throughout all these discussions Marshall projects a picture of waste and failure: "When Ames walked out in the direction they had taken, he was one of the wisest men in Normandy-the first to know that the 82nd Division plan had fallen apart."⁴⁵ Marshall believes not only that the airborne actions should not have taken place but of the work that the airborne divisions on D-Day was useless and ineffective.

Marshall begins his critique: "From the beginning, what threw the paratroopers and confused operations along the line of the Merderet River was the presence of the marshes. This was not according to the script."⁴⁶ Because of poor intelligence, the second the paratroopers landed in France they were immediately thrown off course and believed they were in a completely different location. Marshall states: "Many drowned. Those more fortunate had equipment fouled and bodies worn nigh to exhaustion before they could shoulder arms. Twice a betrayer, the marsh, where it lost the grapple, lied to

⁴⁵ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 10.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 50.

them about where they stood and which way to go. It blocked the concentration of thought as of men.”⁴⁷ The confusion of the marshes was the first case of the airborne’s failures.

One Hundred and First Airborne Division historians and D-Day veterans Northwood and Rapport come to the same conclusions. Marshes and misdrops broke up and scattered airborne formations and blunted the edge of the assault. They illustrate: “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 counter attack from the South against the Utah Beachhead.”⁴⁸ For the paratroopers themselves the marshes were often the most difficult part of the night. After the terror in the C-47’s, their landing provided little relief. Sergeant Pat Lindsey remembers: “Instead of the land that I expected, there was only a large body of water below me. I tried to aim for a small finger of land on which stood a large silo. I tried to manipulate my chute toward the projection of land but the wind was not cooperating and kept carrying me out over the water no matter how I tried to slip toward land. I hit the water-went completely under into the soft gummy bottom. I fought my way to the top and flapped my arms to stay afloat with all my equipment trying to pull me under.”⁴⁹ Sergeant Lindsey was lucky enough to survive the marshes. Many of his friends were not. (To this day it is unknown how many

⁴⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁸ Northwood and Rapport, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 91.

⁴⁹ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, 73.

paratroopers died from drowning in the marshes.) However, the paratroopers were unfortunately not finished with the troublesome flooded lowlands of Normandy.

The marshes provoked another major problem for the airborne, communication. Throughout the entire day of June 6, 1944, commanders had extreme difficulty communicating with their troops while in or out of combat. Marshall writes, "No information was coming back."⁵⁰ Because commanders were unable to locate and communicate with their troops they were virtually useless on D-Day. More often than not commanders sent out runners to relay messages to their platoon and squad leaders, but the runners rarely found their way or their units. Keegan illustrates this through the experiences of Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Krause. Keegan describes a situation in which the paratrooper's lines of communication completely failed. The Lieutenant-Colonel sent the message, "I am in Ste. Mere-Église,"⁵¹ but the runner he sent disappeared. More often than not the messages that airborne commanders sent were never received or in some cases the commanders never sent them due to lack of organized units. Poor communications hindered the execution of large-scale or even small-scale attacks. One example of this, although not of the 101st but the 82nd, was a comment Marshall had about Major General Matthew Ridgway. "Amid battle, his personal isolation was nigh complete. As a soldier, he was doing his part nobly; as a chief, he was almost devoid of power to direct anything, because of the collapse of

⁵⁰ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 129.

⁵¹ Keegan, *Six Armies*, 94.

communications.”⁵² In several circumstances, high-ranking officers led patrols, scouting missions, and even fought as infantrymen after the drop. Northwood and Rapport write: “Major Legere led a squad, lieutenants served as scouts. The abundance of brass caused General Taylor to remark, ‘Never were so few led by so many.’”⁵³ Without communications field commanders were unable to view the battlefield in a tactical manner, and they were unable to regroup and mobilize their troops.

After the drop, paralysis among some paratroopers also slowed or prevented regrouping. According to some veterans, these paratroopers believed that surviving the jump no longer obligated them to move on to their objectives. These men were simply too terrified to move at night. They judged that regrouping with the rest of their stick was too risky. So they found a hedgerow to duck into until daybreak. Dr. Lewis remembers:

All I can tell you is that eventually I found I would sometimes, I’d move around in the dark and got scared because I might run right into a machine gun nest. I didn’t like to do that. I like to find a place pretty secure, if I could, but still a little daylight. And I did this one thing. I might have waited a little too long for that. I went into a hedgerow and got back in the corner, and I thought this would be a good place, and I sat down, put my rifle across my lap and leaned into the hedgerow. Eventually you lie down after you get more comfortable, and the least little sound I would have awakened, believe me, in a second, but I slept pretty well that night, as I recall. I woke up, and there was a gun emplace-I mean a tank emplacement I found that-it was all smoothed out, and all the tad to do was-he could have come right in there.⁵⁴

Because of the chaos after the drop, the paratroopers placed their own security above regrouping with their platoons. According to Marshall, completing the tactical

⁵² Marshall, *Night Drop*, 77.

⁵³ Northwood and Rapport, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 98.

⁵⁴ Lewis, Library of Congress, 6.

objectives given to them became a secondary concern. Thousands of scared paratroopers did ever thing they could to survive.

The trauma inflicted upon the paratroopers by the low-level, high-speed combat jump on D-Day altered their mentality from one of action to one of survival. Marshall writes: "They fought when they were confronted beyond choice, and some of the results were spectacular."⁵⁵ But in general they were no longer an effective combat group but rather many small bands of a guerilla-like forces operating behind enemy lines. Some of the small forces were effective when confronted by the enemy. On the other hand the German army very rarely sought action against the paratroopers. Marshall notes: "In fact, there is not one single example of German troops acting counter offensively against the Americans in the night drop, though opportunities were numerous."⁵⁶ The German *Ost* battalion was incapacitated without their command and control structure. Because the Paratroopers were able to kill some commanding officers, destroy lines of communication, and generally disrupt the enemy the Germans were unable to conduct a counteroffensive that would corner the paratroopers and corral the invasion of the beaches.

In some cases, however, the paratroopers were completely outnumbered, outgunned and outmatched. At the battle of the La Fièrre Bridge, a company of paratroopers became trapped on a causeway (raised road above the marsh) and took fire from three directions. After an entire morning of combat, these men of the 505th

⁵⁵ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 83.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

PIR were once again bombarded by heavy German artillery. With nowhere to hide on the causeway, when the German mortar and artillery fire started, the paratroopers jumped into shallow foxholes and hid behind the few trees that were scattered along the edge of the causeway. Paratrooper Robert Murphy writes: "Since 0800 hours the mortars and heavy artillery had intensified, including the horrifying tree bursts. We were in our foxholes, but of necessity craning our necks looking out for the enemy approach."⁵⁷ After the intense artillery barrage ceased, the German armor and infantry rolled forward against the lightly armed paratroopers with on a few anti-tank weapons. Murphy describes the large enemy action: "The enemy attack across the causeway began. It was once again heralded by the slow approach of two of the same type of Renault tanks with another 200 enemy foot soldiers following behind and interspaced with the tanks. Two additional German tanks followed, for a total of four supporting the onslaught."⁵⁸ The Renault tanks were French light tanks left over from the First World War. Although ineffective against other armor the light tanks were still useful when attacking infantry. Though inflicting heavy losses on both sides, the airborne was able to take the causeway a few days later, after being resupplied.

Their gung-ho nature enabled the paratroopers to withstand grave disadvantages, such as those encountered at the causeway during the battle of the La Fièvre Bridge. Murphy writes: "He took a piece of paper from a little note pad, wrote something on it, and told me, 'Here, I've come to give this to Sergeant Owens.'" Ducking

⁵⁷ Robert M. Murphy, *No Better Place to Die* (New York: Critical Hit, 2000), 94.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

incoming shells and bullets, I ran back across the road to Owens and the remnant platoon and gave him the note. As he read the message, I told him what Dolan had said to me. When I asked him what the message said, he replied, 'We stay. There is no better place to die.'⁵⁹ Capturing the causeways to the east and west of the beachheads was the airborne's primary objective. They did not want to surrender La Fièvre Bridge and the causeway.

Despite Marshall's critique, the roving bands of paratroopers were extraordinarily effective against the static German army in Western France. McKenzie states: "Wandering groups of paratroopers held up many of the German reinforcements and confused their high command as to where the main landings were. Although not planned this way, the division had accomplished its primary mission by preventing the enemy from reinforcing the strong defensive positions in the heights above Utah Beach."⁶⁰ Their guerilla actions inadvertently accomplished some objectives, confusing the German commanders and helping to prevent German reinforcements of the beach exits.

Other historians deferred the airborne's record on D-Day. In the first-twenty four hours of the Allied invasion of France American Airborne casualties were expected to be extremely high. These expectations were found to be exaggerated, and Ryan suggests that airborne casualties were acceptable. Ryan gives several estimates: "Included in this compilation are 82nd and 101st airborne losses, which alone are

⁵⁹ Murphy, *No Better Place to Die*, 98.

⁶⁰ McKenzie, *On Time, On Target*, 17.

estimated at 2,499 killed, wounded and missing.”⁶¹ Considering that over 15000 airborne troops were used on D-Day the odds were still in favor of them. The 101st Airborne took significant losses during their time in France. “E” Company of the 506th PIR of the 101st Airborne took the heaviest casualties in the campaign with a total of 983, equal to about fifty percent.⁶² According to Ryan, however terrible these casualties were they were still acceptable losses in terms of the overall mission. The Airborne was still hampered the German Army’s ability to stop the invasion on June 6, 1944

Despite the criticisms of the airborne’s performance, paratroopers did destroy some targets and capture some positions. One of the first objectives given to the units of the airborne was to cut the communication lines of the German Army. As soon as small units of paratroopers regrouped they immediately looked for targets of opportunity, such as telephone lines and cables. Captain Charles Shettle and a small group of fifteen found a casement for communication lines and destroyed it. Ambrose writes, “Within a half hour of his drop, Shettle had gathered fifteen men From Company I. He set out, found the casement, placed the charges, and destroyed it, (Years later an officer from the German 6th Parachute Regiment, deployed in the area, told Shettle that the Germans were astonished that the American had been able to disrupt their primary source of communication so quickly.”⁶³ In many instances lone soldiers destroyed these communication lines as a target of opportunity. One private recalls, “Along the way, in

⁶¹ Marshall, *Night Drop*, 278.

⁶² Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 105.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 217.

Herouvillete, we cut down the telephone wires, it seemed a reasonable thing to do.”⁶⁴ Sergeant Malarkey describes his experience: “Out of the darkness came three horse-drawn carts and a handful of German soldiers, apparently hauling ammo toward the beach. We jumped them, rifles aimed at their faces. The horses got jumpy. Our guys were shouting; their guys were shouting. We took fifteen German prisoners. We marched them into a group, rifles at their backs.”⁶⁵ During D-Day the men of the scattered airborne harassed German troops and disrupted communications, relieving some pressure on the landing beaches.

In spite of the terrible drop, the lack of supplies and the complete disorientation of most of the division small units of paratroopers were still able to complete the objectives handed down to them by General Eisenhower and the General Staff. Due to the heroics of several individuals and some small squads they were able to complete most of its objectives as well as destroying key communication lines and creating mass confusion for the German Army. “They were however, aided by an even greater German confusion. The cutting of telephone wires by paratroopers and the resistance had proved an invaluable tactic.”⁶⁶ They were, however, unable to capture the bridges over the Douve River and capture the city of Carentan securing the flanks of the Allied invasion forces. Ambrose, like most modern historians, does not clearly assert whether or not the paratrooper’s actions on D-Day were a success or not. He does clearly state that they completed the primary task of destroying communication lines and creating

⁶⁴ Ibid, 231.

⁶⁵ Malarkey, *Easy Company Soldier*, 91.

⁶⁶ Beevor, *D-Day*, 114.

confusion but he later states that they were unable to complete all of their other objectives. Ambrose does state, however, that without the 101st and 82nd Divisions the invasion forces would have been a complete failure. . Keegan provides evidence for this fact when he writes: “Three German divisions, the 709th, 352nd and 716th, were thus to undergo attack by eight Allied divisions without any immediate support from their higher headquarters. The 709th and 716th found themselves in particularly desperate straits. Neither was of good quality and both lacked any means of maneuver. The first was defending the area on which the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were dropping as well as Utah beach, where the US 4th Division was assaulting from the sea. It was almost an impossible mission.”⁶⁷ The Germany Army would have been able to cut the Allied forces off at the beach heads, seize the exits and man the causeways. After they had done that they would have been able to have a concentrated counterattack with heavy artillery that would have surely destroyed the beleaguered invasion forces stuck in the sand and water of the Normandy Beaches. “If the paratroopers were not there to seize the causeway exits, the entire 4th Division would be endangered. But cancelation of Utah would so badly disarrange the elaborate plan as to endanger the whole Overlord operation.”⁶⁸

Historians do not make a clear assessment as to whether or not the airborne on D-Day was a success. They most often comment on the success of small combat groups attacking German positions but they also comment about the paratrooper’s inability to

⁶⁷ Keegan, *World War Two*, 383.

⁶⁸ Ambrose, *D-Day*, 1179.

regroup into one large fighting force like they had been trained. It is important to note that one must take into consideration both the high casualties and their failure to regroup with that of the paratrooper's ability to confuse the German army and their ability to destroy targets of opportunity. With both representations it is possible to create a clear view of what the paratroopers of the airborne faced on D-Day. Although they had many failures, they experienced the stress of airborne combat infantry had never before been assessed and in that the paratroopers were largely unprepared for what they faced during the early morning hours of June 6th. Other than select units of the 82nd Airborne that participated in the combat jumps in North Africa and Sicily, most paratroopers had never dropped into a combat situation before. With that in mind, the paratroopers did excel at what would today become the most common and lethal form of tactics, strategy, guerilla warfare against a well-entranced and armed conventional force.

Chapter 5-Tactics and Weapons

The paratroopers received the most advance training and weaponry available. They implemented them in the field with ingenuity and innovation. Although they had trained as a division they were able to use these skills as small groups and units. This creativity not only saved many of their lives but also allowed them to complete the majority of their objectives. Throughout this chapter it is important to note how the paratroopers were able to utilize the tools given to them while under duress. In addition to that it is also important to note that the tactics that were taught to the airborne were largely not used in France. The paratroopers were forced to manipulate what they had learned in the United States and England to what was useful in the field. This is what made the paratroopers so successful on D-Day, their ability to apply what they had learned to what they could use while in small units or groups.

The airborne was given the most advanced weaponry and was taught the most advanced tactics available at the time. The tactics used by the airborne on D-Day are some of the most studied strategies of military history today. For many years historians of the airborne and D-Day were decidedly negative towards the paratrooper's actions. In most cases today, after seventy years of tactical development, the United States studies the paratrooper's actions as perfect examples of guerilla warfare in action by an elite unit against a conventional force. The airborne perfected the weaponry and tactics they employed during the Word War Two. The United States military later used their

adaptations of guerilla warfare during the Korean War, Vietnam and even in recent history during the First and Second Gulf Wars.

Unfortunately, the jump school curriculum concentrated on teaching the airborne set combat tactics, large-scale unit movements, and commands. When they did study small group actions, they learned platoon size movements. The positive outcome on D-Day was the result more of field training than of classroom study.

Major Winters attributes much of his combat tactics and strategy to the Army manual. He also enjoyed the activities in the airborne that required him to exercise his intellect and what he had learned throughout his life. Classroom instruction covered everything from tactics and strategy to munitions and ranging. Winters writes: "Classes covered myriad military topics ranging from demonstrations on the functions of supply to firepower demonstrations on fortifications with tanks and trucks."¹ The training the airborne received at Camp Toccoa, and other camps like it also taught them how to survive when caught behind enemy lines with little or no equipment.

Most of the paratroopers could not name the tactics they used while in Normandy, but they were certain that what they were doing was effective. Rapport states, "Thus men in strange fields were trying to find their buddies, locate a familiar landmark, and get on toward memorized missions."² Paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st did everything they could to regroup as quickly as possible on hitting the ground. PFC Charles Miller explains what his training taught him to do when he landed in a foreign

¹ Winters, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 12.

² Northwood and Rapport, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 95.

land: "I landed without event. And, getting out of my equipment, of course I set out to 'roll up the stick' and find my men, any men that I could take command of them and move to our objective."³ It was vital that a single paratrooper find a companion because one paratrooper could be ineffective but two or more was a lethal fighting force. Once they did regroup, they engaged German targets as soon as they appeared. Both the 82nd and 101st paratroopers were adept at finding fellow troopers on the ground. Whether from fear or excitement to join the fight and or sheer blood lust the paratroopers excelled at fighting German soldiers and reducing their positions.

The act of killing was the most fundamental tactic learned and then practiced. Some paratroopers hid in the hedgerows and ditches of France but most, when encountered by German soldiers, fought ferociously and more often than not, they won. Albert M. Hassenzahl recalls his first combat experience: "This lead Kraut, he came face to face with me not, oh, more than 30 inches, 36 inches away from my face. And he looked in my face and everything happened in seconds. I had shifted my-oh, milliseconds really, I had shifted my Tommy gun so that it was pointed forward, and as soon as he saw me and I knew he saw me, I let him have a burst from the Tommy gun. And then all hell broke loose. The other Krauts and the patrol reacted and they were firing at the top of the embankment."⁴ The paratroopers were trained to kill without hesitation and Hassenzahl, thousands of paratroopers killed their enemies without a second thought in the lethal shadows of D-Day. Paratrooper Alvin H. Karges

³ Miller quoted in Nordyke, *All American, All the Way*, 210.

⁴ Albert Michael Hassenzahl Collection, 12/118/1998, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/5222>, 10.

remembers: "Our mission is to capture or kill, as far as what they're going in now. And that's what it is. But you don't think about it. You know, I never thought about it really."⁵ Before paratroopers left England, they were very specifically told that their primary mission was to kill. They killed the enemy in every way possible, attacking in small groups, in large groups, from the shadows, in plain sight, with rifles or any other weapons they may have had on them.

Weapons systems and other military technologies were the tools of their lethal trade. Part of a paratrooper's training was to understand and be able to use a variety of different weapons. The airborne received the most advanced set of weaponry among Allied forces. The paratroopers trained with every weapon used by the different airborne combat teams. Each man could substitute himself in a variety positions in a fire team. Frederic W. Byers explains: "The Rifleman's Medal was the type gun that you used on the gun-course, now in the airborne we had to know every gun from a .45 caliber automatic to a .37 millimeter anti-tank gun, we had to be able to handle each one of those guns efficiently, so that whatever position we was in we could take over."⁶ This ability was important to the paratroopers when they landed in France because it allowed them, when often without a weapon, to fight using the resources that were at their disposal. T/5 Frank Brumbaugh states: "We were ordered not to shoot unless it was totally in self defense. Since I couldn't make any noise, I tossed a white phosphorous grenade down at their feet through the hedgerow. It makes a small pop

⁵ Alvin H. Karges Collection, 08/04/2002, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/2218>, 13.

⁶ Frederic Wayne Byers. 11/24/2004. Frederic Wayne Byers Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/30166>, 3.

when it goes off, very little noise. It will devastate anything in the area, and it can't be put out."⁷ Such flexibility and adaptability was crucial for the paratroopers, for many landed in France with little other than a pocket knife.

Another combat tactic employed by the airborne was psychological in nature. Before D-Day the German army was inundated with news articles detailing the makeup of the airborne. As noted earlier much of the German army believed that the American airborne divisions were comprised of criminals, murderers, and psychopaths. The paratroopers did everything they could to facilitate this incorrect assumption, for instance, shaving their heads like Mohawk Indians.⁸ They applied war paint to their faces and darkened their skin with charcoal and green paint. This costuming served both a psychological and tactical purpose. Not only did their appearance strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, it also prevent the reflection of light off of their skin and increased their ability to blend into the shadowy environment that they jumped into.⁹ The face paint and shaved heads also identified the paratroopers with the Native American warrior tradition much admired in some army circles.

Along with destroying lines of communication, the paratroopers sowed confusion among the German units so much that they were unable to counterattack the invasion forces effectively at the beach head. Koskimaki notes this confusion was the division's true victory. Koskimaki describes the extent of the disruption:

⁷ Nordyke, *All American, All the Way*, 217.

⁸ Keegan, *Six Armies*, 74.

⁹ Webster, *Parachute Infantry*, 36. Northwood and Rapport, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 79.

Reports of parachute landings over a widely scattered area from Caen on the east, to the Brittany Peninsula on the west, Cherbourg on the north, and St. Lo on the south, continued to upset the Germans. Reports of the landings on the invasion beaches were considered to be diversionary tactics. It was difficult for reinforcements to be rushed to all the reported parachute and glider landings areas. There were just too many of these landings reported. Accounts of landings involving men from a few lost planes often resulted in exaggerated numbers being reported.¹⁰

The mass confusion inflicted by the airborne was more valuable than the capture of any bridge, city or beach. However unintentional, the airborne was everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and the German troops ran hither and yon and did not concentrate to counterattack. Eighty Second Airborne historian Nordyke writes: "Because the paratroopers were so scattered, the headquarters of every German division on the Cotentin Peninsula were receiving reports of parachute landings. This caused the German commanders on the scene to overestimate the number of paratroopers that had been dropped. This in turn mad them hesitant to strike decisively until they could get a better picture of what was happening."¹¹ Without accurate information on where they were attacked it was impossible for German units to move into defensive positions.

The other fundamental tactic was individual survival. General Gavin remembers that when landing on the ground in enemy territory, the primary focus of a paratrooper was that of self-preservation not objectives. Gavin writes: "Then your total faculties are concerned with survival, and that means carrying out things you have been trained to

¹⁰ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, 371.

¹¹ Nordyke, *All American, All the Way*, 221.

do as well as you possibly can.”¹² Among these challenges were pulling themselves from marshes, dismounting from trees, and locating other paratroopers. With many paratroopers not trying to regroup and reform after the drop, the German Army had time to realize the importance of the bridges and the city of Carentan as well as the other causeways bisecting the invasion front.

The German troops stationed in Normandy were trained for defensive actions and fared well when attacked by the American airborne. Keegan writes: “The danger to this open flank would come, it was believed, from the two German divisions which it was known had long been stationed in the Cotentin, the 709th on the east coast and the 243rd on the west, and the recently arrived 91st, which had unfortunately been positioned exactly astride the airborne area. Moreover, while the 709th and 243rd were static formations-what the Germans called *bodenstandige* ‘ground holding.’”¹³ They heavily fortified both positions before the paratroopers attacked them. These German troops were later found to be weak as attacking units but excelled at fortified defense these ground holders that, as Koskimaki remembers, forced the airborne to fail capturing some of their objectives. Koskimaki recalls, “Objectives assigned to the 101st Airborne Division were not all taken by the end of D-Day. The bridges west of Carentan were still held in strength by Germans who realized the importance of them for their

¹² Gavin, *On to Berlin*, 117.

¹³ Keegan, *Six Armies*, 74.

own plans.”¹⁴ Among these was the 101st Airborne’s failure to capture the bridges west of Carentan and the city itself.

Although the resolve, persistence, improvisation, and speed of the paratroopers were the source of their success, the tools that they used were also important to their combat prowess. These tools allowed them to accomplish their objectives, stay alive and engage larger enemy forces. The American airborne was lucky enough to receive some of the most innovative and modern weaponry and technology available to the Allies and more generally some of the most advanced of the time period. Since the war popular media has publicized the look, feel and sound of the weapons the Allies used during D-Day.¹⁵

Paratrooper weapons such as the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) and the Thompson sub-machinegun (Tommy gun) had been popularized through the news coverage of the prohibition era mafia wars. Bonnie and Clyde toted the extremely effective BAR and mobsters such as Machinegun Kelly shot his Tommy gun. Ironically, although untested in war by 1941, they became part of the airborne’s armament in World War Two.

The amount of equipment carried by the paratroopers on D-Day is one of the most well known images of D-Day. Thousands of young men wearing baggy pants and parachutes carried double or more of their body weight in equipment, rations and weaponry. Paratrooper Fred Gordon remembers all of the equipment he had to carry

¹⁴ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, 372.

¹⁵ Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*, 31.

on that night during his oral history with his interviewer Harold Phillips. He remembers: “Trench tools and gun. And in combat you carried grenades with you. And, you know, then we had a second parachute, which was a reserve chute that hung on our chest. And, of course, when we went on the invasion, we had a pack there almost like a backpack, you know, that we had just chuck full. It was heavy all together.”¹⁶ The paratroopers may not have cared for or knew what most of the equipment they carried was for but the one thing they loved and could not live without was well known around the world. The M1 rifle was by far the most effective tool of the American infantry troop. The airborne jumped into combat with this weapon.

It also carried an alternate version that was modified specifically for the airborne. The Carbine version of the M1 rifle allowed the paratrooper to fold the metal stalk of the gun into itself. Thus, the paratrooper could jump with the rifle on him instead of in a jump bag.¹⁷ Small alterations in the weapon’s specifications allowed the airborne to better manipulate it in their particular circumstance. The M1 Carbine’s space and weight saving technology allowed that particular paratrooper an unprecedented amount of movement and control of the war’s most accurate infantry rifle. The carbine was American ingenuity at its finest. Beevor writes: “On top of all these smaller items came an entrenching tool and the soldier’s personal weapon, usually a carbine with a folding stock partially disassembled in a bag known as a ‘violin

¹⁶ Fred Gordon. 12/10/2001. Fred Gordon Collection, Hamming Library Archives, *Library of Congress*, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/968>, 5.

¹⁷ Craig Riesch, *U.S. M1 Carbines, Wartime Production, 6th Revised and Expanded Edition*, New York: North Cape Publications, 2007, 124.

case' which was strapped across their chest."¹⁸ The paratroopers issued the carbine were far less likely to lose their weapon during the jump and could immediately enter combat once they landed.

For the officers and NCO's the weapon of choice was something different entirely. The Thompson sub-machinegun was not made for accuracy. It was loaded with high power .45-caliber ACP rounds that were fed into the fully automatic machinegun by a stick or a drum ranging in capacity from twenty to one hundred rounds. The Thompson was made for clearing trenches in the First World War but its production did not matriculate fast enough. The only downside to the "Tommy Gun" was its short range and the rate at which it used ammunition. At 1200 rounds per minute (RPM) the Thompson went through ammunition at a very fast rate, and on D-Day, ammunition replenishment was unlikely. General Matthew Ridgway jumped into every major combat zone during the Second World War. He understood the true necessities of paratroopers in combat. General Ridgway and the soldiers who fought all over the African and European continents knew what equipment they needed and what they did not. For those soldiers who participated in the combat jumps in North Africa, Sicily and France knew that ammunition in the field comes at a high price and as such they stocked up on as much as possible.

Paratroopers never had enough of some things while in a combat zone. They always discussed and hoped for a hot meal, warm bed, and hot shower. Such amenities

¹⁸ Beevor, *D-Day*, 26.

elevated the morale of any soldier, but they were not the most crucial items in the preservation of a paratrooper in a combat zone. Ammunition was something with infinite value because of its finite supply. Every round paratroopers fired meant they had less then when they ceased firing. The paratroopers were issued 150 rounds of ammunition on June 5, 1944. That number went quickly when in firefights or battle. Veteran paratroopers did everything they could do supplement the amount of ammunition they carried. Some went so far as to wear extra bandoliers around their chests much like Mexican Revolutionary hero Pancho Villa and his soldiers. Beevor writes: "Paratroopers also went back for extra ammunition, overloading themselves. The greatest fear was to face an enemy with an empty gun. Bandoliers were slung crossways over their chests 'Pancho Villa style,' canteens were filled to the brim, and pouches packed with spare socks and underwear."¹⁹ These paratroopers, understood that if they were misdropped or unlucky, they would not be reinforced or resupplied for days, if not weeks. Without munitions they might be forced to surrender or be outright killed.

In the realm of technology, the army was forced to create new ways to deal with old problems. For light parachute infantry dealing with heavy armor was always a daunting challenge. The army could not arm the airborne with the heavy artillery or armor necessary to destroy the light and heavy tanks deployed by the German army. For these confrontations the Allied research-and-development teams invented the Bazooka, the Gammon grenade, and the PIAT. Each of these weapons was created for

¹⁹ Ibid.

the use by light infantry units to destroy or disable the powerful armored weapons systems, particularly Panzer tanks, fielded by the Germans.

Perhaps the most interesting of these weapons is the Gammon grenade, which was intended for use by a single paratrooper engaging a light to medium armored vehicle. The sticky exterior and high explosive composition provided more than enough explosive power to destroy even the strongest German armor. Keegan describes the Gammon grenade: "Those were what Burgett's blocks of TNT, Hawkins mine and Gammon grenade (a lump of plastic explosive stuffed into a stockinet bag) were meant to be. The Gammon grenade would, if accurately thrown, adhere to the outside of a tank and, when it exploded, cause a 'scab' to detach itself from the internal face of the armor, cannon about inside the fighting compartment and kill the crew."²⁰ The paratroopers had to improvise using the weapons they had with the target they were engaged with. Ambrose writes: "Otway destroyed the guns by dropping gammon grenades down the barrels."²¹ Another method of destroying hard targets was the Bazooka or PIAT. This, weapon was a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) shot from a tube about a yard long. Although safer to use than the Gammon grenade, the bazooka still required the paratrooper to come uncomfortably close to the armored vehicle before firing it. Its effective range was about thirty yards. Keegan notes, "The bazooka, with which one man in each rifle squad was equipped, would achieve the same result, and at slightly less risk to the attacker, since its range was several times greater than a grenade

²⁰ Keegan, *Six Armies*, 79.

²¹ Ambrose, *D-Day*, 230.

throw.”²² Another source of tank-killing fire power was the light artillery piece that the U.S. Army dropped in Normandy but in most cases Germans captured those weapons.

Each paratrooper cross trained on the weapons carried by his comrades in his squad or fire team. The standard parachute infantry division consisted of machine gun, bazooka and assault teams. Weigley writes: “In the July 1943 infantry division, a rifle company consisted of three rifle platoons plus a weapons platoon armed with two .30-caliber and one .50-caliber machine guns, three 60mm mortars, and three bazookas.”²³ However, the airborne also had some light artillery at its disposal. These batteries could not be dropped directly with the paratroopers but instead had to be dropped by themselves or with a glider. These batteries were meant to provide the airborne with a way to counter any heavy German tank assault. The batteries were usually too big to drop by themselves. In order to provide a solution to this problem they broke the 75 and 85mm howitzers to bundles of different pieces. Paratrooper Lewis writes: “They had never at that time taken a 75-millimeter howitzer and broken it up into six components, made six bundles and daisy chained it under a C-47. And then, when we got the training to be able to do this and we got the green light, that means we went out to the plane and jumped at the same time these 82nd-85-millimeter howitzers were dropped the same time we were, and it was a total failure because, as I will explain later, we were so scattered.”²⁴ If assembled correctly the 75 and 85mm anti-tank artillery pieces would have allowed the paratroopers to attack German tank battalions

²² Ibid.

²³ Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 24.

²⁴ Lewis, Veterans History Project, 3.

when in defensive positions. Like the paratroopers themselves the pieces of the artillery were widely scattered over tens of miles. Lewis remembers: "One 75-millimeter howitzer was put into activity that the rest of them were not. We were so scattered."²⁵ Unfortunately for the paratroopers most of the para-dropped artillery pieces were lost to the marshes, captured, destroyed or lost during the scattered drop.

The .30 and .50-caliber machineguns were integral to the airborne's tactical offensive capabilities. Without the machineguns the paratroopers could lay down a solid base of fire. The airborne's heavier machineguns had to be disassembled and dropped in separate bags. Koskimaki illustrates a situation that occurred to PFC Sherwood C. Trotter: "I also lost a complete .30-caliber air-cooled machine gun (I was a gunner for 3rd platoon) which was in one of those bags the English had devised. It had been tied to one leg and the bag also contained a couple of belts of machine-gun ammo."²⁶ Few landed in France with their weapon intact. Most spent the first hour or two of their time in France searching the dark ditches and hedgerows for a weapon, any kind of weapon.

However advanced the weapons of the airborne were, if they could not find them they were useless. Few common themes are as evident as the search for weapons and equipment on D-Day. Both the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions lost the majority of their equipment and munitions and as such spent valuable time looking for them. Hastings writes: "Instead of a powerful paratroop unit at the assembly point, there were

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Koskimaki, *D-Day with the Screaming Eagles*, 69.

only a few dozen men. Richardson decided that the moment had come to make good his lack of a weapon. He picked up a machine-gun from the bundle attached to a collapsed parachute."²⁷ Paratroopers did everything they could to find a weapon as quickly as possible. Some of the paratroopers risked their lives to locate a bundle or lone rifle others picked up one of the many German weapons lying around. This experience brought some undue attention to Sergeant Guarnere when he picked up a German heavy machinegun. He remembers: "I went looking for a gun, and found a Thompson submachine gun. I also took a German MG-42 off a dead kraut and started shooting it, but the gun made a noise that was distinctly German. The German gun went *brrrrrrrt*. The American guns went *bap-bap-bap-bap*. Every time I started shooting it, the Americans started shooting at me! I got shot at by a dozen or so of our own men."²⁸ It was not uncommon for the paratroopers to pick up German weapons in the field. German stick grenades, Lugers and anti tank weapons were some of the most popular pieces to acquire.

In some cases the airborne found the German made weapons to be far superior than those of their Allied counterparts and the paratroopers did everything they could to scavenge some German weapons, often carrying them throughout the war. One particular case was the German antitank weapon. The *Faustpetrone* had a longer range and a more powerful warhead than the American-made Bazooka. General Gavin writes: "We were still plagued with the lack of antitank weapons. In Normandy, for the first

²⁷ Hastings, *Overlord*, 76.

²⁸ Guarnere and Heffron, *Brothers in Battle*, 62.

time, we came across a small German rocket based on the same principle as our bazooka. It was called '*Fauspetrone.*' It was a shaped charge warhead slightly larger than the bazooka. When I first found these weapons in German positions we overran, I did not know what they were, but we soon found out when we fired them. They were quite effective."²⁹ Scavenging for and successfully using enemy weapons was (and still is) a classic practice of the guerilla combatant, which the paratroopers quickly became on D-Day.

Speed in attack or quick response was another airborne tactic. When confronted by enemy targets the paratroopers were adept at moving quickly between each one.

Nordyke describes an assault:

A German in a gun emplacement on the north side of the road, with tall weeds and grass growing around it, raised up and started to draw a bead on Mattingly. I yelled at Mattingly; and Mattingly, having been looking at Ward down the road, looked to his right, swing his weapon around and shot the German. He emptied the clip in his rifle, all eight rounds. He dropped his rifle to the roadbed, fell flat, pulled out a grenade and tossed it over where that German had been standing. Four other Germans rose up and their up their hands. Mattingly reached down and got his empty rifle and pointed over, and five Germans directly across the road in another gun emplacement got up and their up their hands.³⁰

A paratrooper's ability to quickly adjust between targets is one of the most important traits instilled in them at jump training and boot camp. Mastery of weapons was integral to his success and he had to fire them in a split second. That personal drive, that ability to recover quickly from disaster enabled the airborne to score a few successes against the German Army on June 6.

²⁹ Gavin, *On to Berlin*, 155.

³⁰ Nordyke, *All American, All the Way*, 254.

Despite problems in execution on June 6, dropping artillery, heavy machineguns and mortars independently of a parachute stick demonstrated the American military's forward thinking. The weapons and munitions gathered and used by the paratroopers enabled them to secure the flanks of the Allied invasion on the Normandy beaches. Once again Ambrose writes: "But although the airborne assault had not been a complete success in the sense of accomplishing all assigned missions, the troopers had done enough that night to justify the operation."³¹ No less critical to their successes as rangers was the bond between paratroopers in combat. Sergeant Burns remembers: "When you're 50 miles behind the German front, you learn to trust your own unit. You don't put lot of faith into promises or other outfits. However, we knew the 505th and 504th were dependable."³²

The paratrooper's uncompromising faith in each other—their élan and cohesion—enabled them to survive the most deadly circumstances. The popular media's celebration of the "brotherhood" forged through combat only touched the surface of the emotional significance of the bond between paratroopers. Nicholas J. Cull of the University of Leicester notes in his article "Tom Hanks and Stephen Spielberg. Band of Brothers": "There is plenty of evidence in Ambrose's text and the on-screen testimony of veterans that this is exactly how the men of Easy Company felt, but the fact that those soldiers believed this about each other should not obscure the harder questions about the nature of war, and specifically wars outside the European theater of World

³¹ Ambrose, *D-Day*, 227.

³² Burns, *Jump into the Valley of the Shadow*, 117.

War II.”³³ Those emotional bonds helped them cope with trauma they underwent every day. Beevor writes: “Gavin clearly created a strong impression. One of his listeners said that, after his quiet talk, ‘I believe we would have gone to hell with him.’”³⁴ One of his paratroopers exclaimed during a pre-invasion pep talk.

The weaponry, tactics, and élan used by the airborne all helped to prolong the survival of the paratroopers in a situation where death was nearly a certainty. Without their knowledge of a variety of weapons, their use of a variety of tactics and strategies they would not have been as successful as they were. Although some still criticized the efforts of the paratroopers, regardless of the training or equipment, they were still able to act in a manner according to the reputation of the American military. The paratrooper’s seamless use of the knowledge imparted to them while in the United States while in Europe only increased their image. The combination of their own elitism, their training, and the equipment imparted to them and the foreword thinking of the individual paratroopers themselves allowed them to succeed even where others proclaimed that they had failed.

³³ Nicholas J. Cull, “Tom Hanks and Stephen Spielberg, Band of Brothers,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 3, 2002, 992.

³⁴ Beevor, *D-Day*, 24.

Chapter 6-Conclusion

Throughout the last sixty-four and a half years controversy has surrounded the objectives of the airborne divisions on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Before D-Day much of the General Staff of Supreme Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower believed that the airborne operations that they had planned would not only fail, but would cost the lives of the paratroopers and valuable resources that could be better spent elsewhere for the invasion effort. The General Staff believed that an early morning night drop before the dawn beach landings would only create thousands of cut off and surrounded troops that would later need rescuing. They believed that these forces could be better spent in aiding the forces landing on Utah and Omaha beaches.

The controversy existing over the airborne divisions during the early hours of June 6, 1944 is a simple one. Critics held that the airborne was unable to complete its objectives due to extremely inaccurate drops and an inability to mobilize quickly enough to capture the German garrisons off guard. Based upon significant research it can be proven that most of the historical thought on the subject suggests that the paratroopers were in fact not effective during the early morning of June 6, 1944. Critics have come to the conclusion based on the airborne's inability to complete all of their objectives as well as their inability to mobilize into a coherent order of battle and move as one group to their objectives. There are many reasons as to why these setbacks occurred. Historians such as S.L.A. Marshall, Napier Crookenden and Stephen E. Ambrose believe that extremely poor drop zone conditions forced the C-47 Dakota pilots to drop their sticks at the inappropriate times. Furthermore there was a belief that the soldiers had

that they had survived the jump and therefore had accomplished their goals and it was now time to survive instead of completing the objectives given to them.

Although historical thought on the subject leans toward suggesting that the airborne operations on D-Day were not effective, the men themselves never believed that. Although not completing all of their objectives they were still effective in that they were able to distract, destroy and cause confusion and havoc amongst the German garrisons all across the Norman Coast and the Cherbourg Peninsula. Memoirs from members of the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions tell a completely different story. These brave paratroopers related a story of extreme heroism and courage under fire. These memoirs note the confusion and terrible inaccuracy of the drop itself but also tell the ability of each individual paratrooper to regroup with other paratroopers and move toward their objectives. The memoirs of these paratroopers paint a different picture from what the historical record has created over the last sixty-four and a half years. Here a clear line is drawn between what historians of the field believed and what the paratroopers who were there believed about the actions they committed on June 6, 1944. The question as to whether or not the paratroopers were or were not effective toward the overall success of D-Day is a complex one to answer. Based on research from both historical texts and memoirs I will try and negotiate a clear and unbiased answer. First, however, the history of the airborne prior to D-Day is necessary in order to understand the circumstances in which these paratroopers fought and died in France.

Throughout the research summarized throughout this thesis there has been an in depth discussion as to whether or not the airborne was effective on D-Day. Whether this question can be answered accurately or not is determined by the objectives given to the airborne by General Eisenhower and the General Staff. Most historians write that although the paratroopers were successful in completing the majority of its objectives they were still unable to complete all of them. Due to the fact that the airborne was unable to capture the bridges to the west of Carentan, secure the causeways on the flanks of the invasion beaches and to capture the city of Carentan itself the operation as a whole was a failure. A large grey area exists between whether or not the airborne operations as a whole were successful and effective because they completed the majority of their objectives or whether the paratroopers themselves failed because they were unable to complete all of the goals given to them while in England.

The objectives given to the Airborne were intended to be as clear cut as the order to jump when the light turned green. Unfortunately there exists a large controversy about what their objectives actually were. The controversy surrounds whether or not the confusion they caused and the lines of communication they cut were objectives or merely targets of opportunity. Although these targets of opportunity may have been more useful than the goals given to them by the Allied commanders many believed, at the time, that it was not enough. Many historians write that although they were told to cause as much havoc as possible and to destroy any target of opportunity they came upon that assignment was not one of their primary objectives. The paratroopers on the other hand, write less about what their objectives were and were

not and more about the experiences that they had and the successes and failures that went with those experiences. Some, however, do write about what their objectives were and few actually make a note of saying that one of their primary objectives was to create havoc and attack targets of opportunity.

No one can assume that the paratroopers were not aware of what were and what not their objectives were. It has been said many times that the airborne was one of the best trained, disciplined and combat ready divisions in the entire world. The paratroopers were forced to deal with one of the worst combat jumps in the history of the airborne. History has written the operations of the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions as a successful failure. They were able to complete the majority of their objectives. So much so in fact that the Allied invasion forces on the beach were able to leave the beach almost immediately after it was taken. In addition to their objectives the paratroopers were able to create more than their fair share of havoc and confusion. They also cut a large majority of the lines of communication that the German Army had in place. They were also able to kill German runners carrying orders, kill commanders as they rushed from their homes to the invasion beaches and destroyed any troops moving north towards Utah and Omaha beaches to reinforce the static troops defend from the invasion. Whether or not these goals were primary objectives, they were the reasons the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions were able to do what it did.

The controversy that exists over the effectiveness of the paratroopers on D-Day remains regardless of the amount of good that they did. The 82nd Airborne Division has

been blamed and accused of being a diversionary tactic that cost the invasion forces thousands of men, materials and money that could have been spent elsewhere. While the 101st Airborne Division was blamed for being so scattered and disoriented it took the 4th Infantry Division and the rest of the regular army weeks to find and reinforce paratroopers trapped behind enemy lines. Both are also blamed for being unable to reach and complete their objectives even though they had nothing to do with the scattered drop and the evasive maneuvers the pilots were forced to take. The paratroopers were literally dropped into a situation that was doomed for failure. In the eyes of their commanders and the military historians of the time the airborne could not have been a success without the successful large scale drop and regrouping of its men. The paratroopers themselves were able to turn the negative they were given into a positive. Most paratroopers write about how they were less concerned with their objectives and more concerned with surviving and regrouping. Although, few to this day, can argue that surviving D-Day was not a success in its self. Although the men of D-Day did whatever they could to survive they spent far too much time searching for a weapon or searching for their fellow paratroopers. If the airborne had been dropped properly by the Dakota pilots they would have been able to gather their heavy equipment, for example light artillery pieces and heavy machineguns. However, while surviving and regrouping the paratroopers of the airborne were able to cause significant damage on the German Army defending the area.

The paratroopers on June 6 had little concern about the controversy because they knew the job that they did; they are aware of the objectives they did and did not

complete and they have heard the stories of the men of the 4th Infantry Division while they were on the beachheads. Historians write all about objectives and combat action while the paratroopers who were actually there write about the sometimes heroic sometimes lethargic experiences that they had as soon as they jumped out of the plane. Historians such as Napier Crookenden, Stephen E. Ambrose, S.L.A. Marshall and Cornelius Ryan were all right about what the paratroopers accomplished on D-Day. Some write about the successes and some write about the failures but none really discuss the paratroopers themselves and what they did. However, the historians are very careful about the objectives that they write about. Few mention that the confusion and havoc the paratroopers caused was a primary objective and those who do, write about it as if it were their saving grace. As time has progressed over the last seventy years since D-Day the perspectives of the American objectives have changed. Now, knowing the outcome of the war, the American public and military historians alike are less concerned with the destruction of set hard targets and objectives and far more concerned with the importance of the actions of the young Americans.

Nevertheless Major Richard Winters, Donald Burgett and George E. Koskimaki and many others were all paratroopers who jumped into France on D-Day. All of them write about what their objectives were and like the historians of the field few write that the confusion and havoc they caused were objectives. However none of these paratroopers write about these objectives in detail. Most only devote a paragraph or two explaining what their major goals were. Immediately after they do this they move on to what they were actually capable of doing. Small groups of paratroopers were

more than capable of forming small units of two or three and attacking defensible enemy positions or destroying lines of communication. Moreover, later in the day the paratroopers were able to form larger units and move onto an objective. Whether or not these objectives were assigned to them or not are not important but what was important is that the paratroopers had little or no difficulty moving towards them and trying to accomplish them.

The controversy surrounding the effectiveness of the airborne on D-Day has surrounded them for the last sixty five years. The true dilemma exists within the objectives they were assigned themselves. Historians and paratroopers alike have difficulty deciding what was and what was not an objective. Regardless of the controversy history has proved one thing true. The paratroopers were able to confuse the enemy, destroy lines of communication, capture objectives and destroy batteries of artillery that were killing Americans on the beachheads. Although the paratroopers were not able to complete one hundred percent of their objectives they did accomplish their primary objective which was to allow the Allied invasion forces to leave the beachheads. If the paratroopers were unable to accomplish anything else, that would have been enough. In addition to that they were able to accomplish many more objectives and caused the German Army to act as erratically as they did. In summation, the effectiveness of the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions on D-Day is clear. They were an extremely effective fighting force. Although they did not reform and mobilize as expected they were still able to harass the enemy and complete objectives. Regardless of their inability to complete all of their objectives they were able to accomplish what

their main goal as soldiers was: kill as many of the enemy as possible and to win the war.

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