

James L. Diel

Describes Work

of Paratroops ^{10/6/44}

Paratroopers Gave Big Odds In Normandy Battle to Secure the Beaches for Invasion on D-Day

Headquarters 101st Airborne Division, E. T. O.—He stood in the bright sun, an unassuming young man of slight but muscular build. Calmly puffing on a cigarette, First Sergeant James L. Diel of Newton of a Parachute Infantry regiment told the story of how the rifle paratroopers of his unit paved the way for the sea-borne invasion which followed hours after the sky warriors dropped out of the early dawn skies on June 6.

As he spoke at this rest camp behind the lines, Sergeant, now Lieutenant, Diel's voice was even and unemotional. In his eyes, however, there was a steady look telling you that the events which began on D-day were not merely a page in the history books for the paratroopers of his company.

It was a bloody and desperate struggle. Outnumbered at every turn, they fought against great odds in a strange land they had only known from maps. But they accomplished their objective—and if any mission in the opening blow of the greatest invasion of all time was important that mission was theirs.

Cleared Causeway

Their initial objective was to clear Causeway No. 2, a road about three miles long leading from the beaches at the eastern neck of the peninsula to the town of St. Marie du Mont. This road was to be used as a beach exit for the troops of the Fourth division after they had gained a foothold on the beaches.

When the paratroopers jumped between 1:15 and 1:20 a. m. from their C-47 transport planes at an altitude ranging from 300 to 400 feet, they had no doubt that their mission had to be accomplished at any cost.

"We landed in the vicinity of St. Mere Eglise," Sergeant Diel recalled. "By the time we reached the causeway, we had managed to assemble about thirty men of the company. We set up roadblocks and proceeded to clean out the hedge rows. They were thick with German snipers."

By 10:00 o'clock that morning the causeway was completely under American control, and three hours later all but thirty of the paratroopers in Company E were assembled along the road. When the Fourth division began filing up the causeway from the embattled beaches, the paratroopers moved out towards Vierville.

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Met Strong Resistance

"That was at four in the afternoon," said Sergeant Diel. "Outside Vierville we ran into strong fire from four 88's the Jerries had planted behind some hedgerows in a field. Our company commander and nine enlisted men assaulted the emplacement with hand grenades. They wiped out the Nazi crew and put the guns out of action.

"We joined other elements of the
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battalion in taking Vierville and then moved on to the west. When we could, we slept beside hedgerows, in ditches and, best of all, in the deepest holes we could find. On the night of the 11th we reached the outskirts of Carentan.

"In the early morning hours of the next day we established ourselves on high ground outside Carentan. That was in preparation for the dawn attack we launched with the break of day."

The defenders of Carentan were the cream of Hitler's army. S. S. troops, the stern, fanatical men of the Nazi elite forces were thrown into the battle together with young German paratroopers. The latter, according to Sergeant Diel, had never jumped from a plane. "Nevertheless, they were tough fighters," he said.

Pushed Nazis Back

When the American attack began, the Germans greeted it with a thick curtain of 88 and mortar fire. By the evening of the 12th the Nazis had been pushed one and one-half miles out of Carentan. But they still had the Americans under heavy fire. It lasted all that night.

The American paratroopers, after setting up defensive positions along the hedgerows which held the Germans for the night, attacked again on the dawn of the 13th only to discover that the Nazis had launched a counter-attack at precisely the same moment.

The fighting raged all morning without any decisive results. In the afternoon the Germans made a bid for a knock-out blow.

"They threw in three of their medium tanks," Sergeant Diel said. "All of them were mounted with 88's. But the tanks didn't get very far. Two of them were knocked out by our bazookas. The third tank turned tail and beat it out of a hot spot. That, I think, marked the time when the battle swung in our favor."

Occupied Carentan

When the paratroopers moved into Carentan, it signified that this important hinge position linking the two main American beaches was under firm American control.

"We served as occupation troops in Carentan for one week," continued Sergeant Diel. "The French were pretty cooperative and observed regulations. We never had much trouble with them. The town had been blasted to bits, but the French carried on business as usual."

"The Germans had evidently pulled out of Carentan in a big hurry. We found eight Nazi tanks at a German army tank school in the town.

"Our outfit was billeted in what had formerly been a school for girls. There were plenty of Nazi posters on the walls when we moved in.

Later the paratroopers saw five days of duty at and around the front lines outside Carentan. Units of an infantry division finally relieved them and the paratroopers were sent to a bivouac area near Cherbourg. They were held in reserve against possible German suicide attacks which never materialized. Then they moved on to this rest camp.

Paid \$400 for a Steer

Some of the paratroopers recalled with good humor the many cows, killed in crossfire or by mines which they cut up for steaks. The thick Normandy steaks were fried in mess gear with butter bought from French farmers or lard from their "10-in-1" rations.

As long as cattle casualties could be attributed to the fortunes of battle, the French farmers had no complaint. But when the paratroopers somewhere near Cherbourg, slaughtered a steer long after the last shot had been fired, the French owner registered a heated argument.

"The company had to dig down and collect \$400 for that steer," was Sergeant Diel's rueful remark. "I think that's too high a price for steak." He smiled. "That was the only major setback of our Normandy campaign."