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340 W. Virginia Ave.
Glendora; California
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Mr. Cornelius Ryan
203 E. 48th St.
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Ryan.

Col. Vandervoort my Battalion Commander during World War II has asked that I write to you and give you my recollection of the events that took place on the day of the invasion of Europe, June 6, 1944. Of course I am only too happy to do anything which he requests as we shared some pretty trying experiences and I have nothing but admiration for the Colonel.

I must begin however by apologizing for my very poor memory for names, places etc. My memory of many of the events is very clear, but after 15 years I cannot recall specific details such as times, places, names etc. With this limitation in mind I hope you will forgive me if the account seems somewhat disconnected. I hope that some of this material will be useful to you and wish you the best of luck in your efforts to document the part played by the Airborne on this very important day in our history.

I was a First Lieutenant in command of the light machine gun platoon of Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, of the 82nd Airborne Division. Company Commander was Capt. Bill Schmeeze, Battalion Commander was Lt. Col. Benjamin Vandervoort, Regimental Commander was Col. Wm. Ekman, Ass't Division Commander was Brig. General James Gavin, Division Commander was Major General Mathew Ridgeway.

Some 24 hours prior to the jump we were assembled at our takeoff airdrome near Leicester, England. For several months we had been training for this mission and all of us knew every terrain characteristic of the country around our scheduled drop zone in France, near a place called St. Sauveur Le Vicomte. However just a day or two prior to the

invasion word came through that it was necessary to change our entire objective due to the fact that the Germans had apparently gotten wind of the location of the drop zone and had prepared it for the attack. Our objective was changed to a place called St. Mere Eglise and we had little or no time to become familiar with the new location.

We took off about 11 PM on the night of June 5, 1944 and headed for France. We could see lots of enemy activity in the distance but the trip across the channel was uneventful for our flight. About 1 AM of June 6th we got the word to "stand up and hook up", and about ten minutes later the green light came on and we went out the door into the darkness below. As jumpmaster and the first one out of my plane I had to go back down the line of men in the plane prior to the jump and check each one for proper hook up of his static line. On returning I stood in the door ready to jump when the Corporal behind me tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to my own static line which I had failed to hook up. I quickly made the necessary hook up and turned and went out the door as the green light had come on in the meantime.

I landed flat on my back in a small orchard, completely exhausted and so bound up in equipment I could hardly move. About that time a figure appeared in the darkness and I couldn't decide if it was friend or foe. I got my pistol out and waited until he was about three feet from me. I had decided that I wasn't going to wait very long before I pulled the trigger, but that I would give him a split second to say the code word. I said "George" and he said "Washington" and we both sighed with relief. We picked up several more men as we walked toward the assembly point where I was finally able to get almost all of my men and their equipment together. Colonel Vandervoort instructed me to set my platoon up in a defensive position about one mile north and east of the town of St. Mere Eglise. There was no enemy activity in our area at this time although I could hear some firing in the distance.

We found the area assigned to us by the Battalion Commander and I established three machine gun positions which I felt would give us good protection. I then set up a platoon command post and together with my runner took turns wrapping up in a parachute in order to get a little sleep. Dawn of June 6th was just breaking as I started out to check the three positions to make sure everything was in order and find out if the men needed anything in the way of equipment or food. There was at the time sporadic firing in the distance but we had not seen or heard anything of the Germans in our area up to that point, at least that was the misconception I was under at the moment. As I approached the first position I called out to the Corporal who was in charge, the answer came back in the form of a long burst from what was unmistakably a German machine gun and one or two machine pistols. The bullets hit the dirt at our feet and the two of us hit the ditch beside the road. What had happened became very clear to me at this point. The Germans had infiltrated our positions during the night and had either killed or captured the men I had placed in this position. As I lay there in the ditch with bullets whizzing over my head I was not only scared I was thoroughly disgusted with myself for being outsmarted by the enemy. I was worried and concerned about my men, and at the moment felt helpless to do anything about the situation. We couldn't get up without exposing ourselves to their fire, but I soon discovered that as long as we stayed flat on our stomachs in the ditch we were protected from their fire. They were set up at the junction of two irrigation ditches and were unable to depress the muzzels of their guns any further and couldn't see us due to the relative height of their position. I then decided that we should turn around in the ditch and attempt to crawl back to our own positions. We had gone about half way with the bullets clipping the tall grass over our head, when my runner who was now ahead of me panicked and got up to run. I tackled him as just as a long burst of German fire hit all round us. From then on I kept one hand on his foot as we continued to crawl up the ditch. We were making fairly good progress when an American

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machine gun began firing at us from our own positions. Since we were approaching from the direction of the enemy and were unable to stand up to identify ourselves I could see no way out of our predicament. This time however the Germans came to our rescue. The first barrage of German Artillery fire came into the position and forced the American Machine gunner to abandon his position just long enough for us to jump up and make a run for it. We arrived at the machine gun just as the gunner did who by the way turned out to be one of my own men. Just for a moment I considered the irony of being killed by a machine gunner I had spent 6 hours trying to train

All was confusion back in our own position. The Germans had infiltrated so well and struck so suddenly that no one knew what was going on. I managed to round up the remnants of my platoon and set up one machine gun to keep firing at the German position so they wouldn't attempt to advance further. I then had one of my men who was armed with a carbine and rifle grenades start firing grenades into their protected position. The best discovery of all however was a mortar man from one of the rifle companies with a complete mortar and a supply of ammunition. In parachute drops this is a rare find as often some vital part will be missing as a result of the drop. With the grenades and mortar shells falling into their position the Germans had no choice but to move out. They couldn't go back up the same ditch they had used to get into the position as we had set up a machine gun to cover their return and besides no doubt their orders were to go forward and wipe us out. One by one they attempted to go over the top of their protective embankment and into the ditch I had used to retreat only an hour earlier. There were about twenty men in the position and about half of them made it into the ditch, the other half were killed or wounded as they came out. Having become so familiar with that ditch earlier I knew we couldn't reach them with our rifles and machine guns due to the difference in elevation of our positions.

I decided that the only way of reaching them was to go around on the flank and get up above them and throw grenades into the ditch at the places I could observe the tall grass moving. We were so pinned down by artillery fire that I was unable to find anyone to go with me, and I hadn't seen hide nor hare of my runner since our narrow escape earlier. Equipment was scattered all over and I found about ~~ten~~ ordinary ~~hand~~ fragmentation grenades and one Gammon grenade. The gammon grenade is a British invention primarily designed to knock out tanks. It was about the size of a soft ball and because of its power I chose this as my first grenade. From my position on the flank I waited until I saw the grass move. I scrambled up the side of an embankment ran across about 50 yards of open ground which brought me to a position right over the ditch in which the Germans were working their way into our main defenses. I got rid of the Gammon grenade and headed back to the protection of my ditch. I disappeared over the side just as a German raised up out of the ditch and fired at me with a machine pistol. I waited for a loud explosion that never came, my Gammon grenade misfired. Since they now knew where I was I was hesitant about going back. At about this moment a Lieutenant from the Airborne Engineers I believe came running up the road in a crouched position. He said he had three or four men with him and would like to help. We crawled up the embankment so I could show him what I was trying to do. As we cautiously poked our heads up over the top a machine gun cut loose from the German ditch, we both slid back down the embankment. When the firing stopped I got up but he didn't, so I rolled him over. He was shot right through the head.

I decided to give it another try as the Germans were getting in closer all the time which I could tell by the movement of the tall grass in the ditch which they occupied. I pulled the pins on two grenades and started across the open area. This time they went off just as I got back to the protection of my own position. The firing from their

position stopped, and I carefully looked over the top of the embankment. Believe it or not a white flag was waving back and forth on the end of a tree limb. Soon a German soldier climbed up over the top carrying the white flag and started in our direction. Two or three of the dead lieutenants men were with me and they were all for shooting him. I pointed out that he didn't have any arms and that we had to honor any attempt to surrender. He turned out to be a German doctor about 35 who spoke fluent english. He explained that many of their men were dead and wounded and that they would like to give up. He looked all around and seem'd surprised that there were only two or three men in the position. I told him we would not stop firing unless he returned and got all of the Germans to throw down their arms and to come out with their hands over their heads. He agreed to do this and after he returned we sat there waiting for something to happen. We did not have to wait long however as shortly after he disappeared into their position we were the recipients of the heaviest barrage of artillery and mortar fire I had experienced in the war up to that point. It was obvious that the Doctors surrender was all part of a very clever German plot. As a result we now had to abandon this position and I returned to the area where the rest of my men were entrenched.

The German firing was very light now and with 10 or 15 men we started a counter attack towards the very positions my men had been driven from at dawn. We reached the position ~~w~~ alongside the ditch where the Germans had been holed up and I saw that my grenades had done the job. Those that were not killed by the grenades got up to run and were cut down by machine gun fire from our main positions. There were about 15 dead and wounded Germans lying about the position.

As we reached the junction of the two irrigation ditches and were setting our machine guns into position again we heard the drone of aircraft and looked up to see a skyfull of C-47 cargo planes pulling American Gliders. As ~~x~~ I recall the time was about 8 Am however I am

not too sure about this. The planes made one circle and ~~sa~~ started to cut loose the gliders. We watched helplessly while one glider after another attempted to land in the fields around us and crashed on hitting a tree or a ditch or other obstacle. When a glider would hit something solid all the equipment inside would ~~take~~ take loose and come crashing through the nose of the glider ~~with~~ killing and injuring the men in front of it. I doubt if 10% of the gliders landing on that field did so without crashing, and very few of the men who landed were in shape to fight. ~~We~~

We started hauling the wounded glidermen and pilots into our position out of the German artillery fire and did what little we could in the way of first aid. We did not have a medic with us at the time. I gave one badly injured glider pilot a shot of morphine from my first aid kit and while I was trying to help another soldier one of my men gave the same pilot another shot of the same sedative. About this time we received heavy bursts of German machine gun fire and from the sound of it they had regrouped and were starting into our position again. It was apparent to me that we couldn't hold this position but I hesitated to leave as I knew we ^{would} never make it out trying to carry these wounded people. I finally decided that we would have to leave them there and hope that the Germans would treat them alright. As we scrambled out one end of the position the Germans scrambled in the other. We couldn't use our mortar or rifle grenade now as two ~~many~~ many of our own wounded were in the position with the Germans. By working our way around to the flank however we could prevent them from ~~&~~ reinforcing the position or retreating out of it. For some reason, unknown to me, they decided to try to get out of there and we killed or wounded several as they tried. When we knew there were only a few left in the position we rushed it and captured the rest. I figured later that they had suddenly lost communications with their artillery and mortars and didn't want to stand their ground without this help, although this is just a guess on my part.

We found ~~our~~ ^{our} glider people still there although one had died in the meantime. One of my men started to give a badly injured glider pilot a shot of morphine when he weakly raised his hand to say that he had two shots from us previously and one from the Germans and that he couldn't feel a thing. Shortly

Shortly after that I received orders to return the platoon to headquarters in St. Mere Eglise for another assignment. So we moved out of there taking with us the 8 or 10 German prisoners we had and all the wounded we could carry. The Germans seem^d to have withdrawn from this area altogether and we were unmolested as I reassembled the platoon. I left men to guard the wounded and on arriving at headquarters sent stretcher bearers back for them

It was now about noon and we had only been in France a few hours but I felt as if we had been there for months. I had scarcely had time to look around and realize that the country looked a lot like parts of California.


Col. Vandervoort told me that the German^s were now making their main effort to knockout our bridgehead at St. Mere Eglise by attacking with tanks and armored cars along the main road leading into the town from the Northeast. He instructed me to place my platoon in position about one block the other side of the hospital on the east side of the main road. On arriving in the position we found the few American soldiers present in great disorder, with many dead and badly wounded soldiers lying about. There was a German armored car on the road at the time firing into the town with a small cannon. A lieutenant and a soldier were trying to fire a bazooka at it but were unable to get it to function. I placed my men in position but told them not to fire at tanks or armored cars ~~with~~ as our light machine guns would do nothing but attract their fire. I told them to wait for the infantry which ~~was~~ most always accompany the armor and then to open up with the machine guns.

I had just gotten into a hole myself when the German Infantry came . They ran right into our position and I knew that we would have to retreat if we were ever going to fight another day. I hollered at the men to fall back firing and took off myself leaving my pack which contained all my worldly possessions at the moment. We lost three men getting out of there but luckily most of the platoon arrived safely at the new positions around the hospital where we again set up the guns and started firing. While there I took a couple of wounded men into the hospital where I was greeted by a sight I shall never forget. Here were a couple of German Doctors working alongside a couple of American Airborne Doctors ~~of~~ what had once been a dining room table. They were sawing off arms, legs, etc. and throwing the discarded limbs into a pile. The whole place was a mess of blood and bandages and I felt considerably better when I got back outside. By now the German fire had lessened and I decided to rush the position ~~and~~ again and try to regain it. We did this and in most cases jumped back into the holes just as the Germans were jumping out. Needless to say many of them ~~did~~ failed to get out in time. I managed to get back into the same hole I had vacated just previously as I was ~~at~~ determined to get my pack back if at all possible. I found my pack alright but unfortunately the German in the hole just ahead of me had taken my "K" rations and a very favorite Dunhill pipe which I found only after much effort while on leave in Belfast Ireland.

That German Armored Car was still up on the road and there was nothing we could do to stop him with our light weapons. Only now he was joined by a German tank, and for the first time that day I became really worried about our situation. I knew that American Armored units were supposed to get through to us as soon as they landed on the beach but had no way of knowing whether this part of the operation had been a success or failure. As if to answer my questions I heard the

unmistakable sound of a Sherman tank firing and looked up to see the the German Armored car go up in flames. Two more well placed shots disposed of the German tank before I could look up to see where the tank was. When I did I was greeted by the wonderful sight of three or four American tanks with a good friend of mine J.J. Smith rifling on top of the lead one. Unknown to me "J J " had been sent to the beaches to lead the tanks into our position and it was obvious that he had accomplished his mission.

The rest of " D Day " is kind of a blur in my memory but the Germans did little to make it miserable. They were apparently regrouping for battles that were yet to come. With the arrival of the tanks our beachhead in Europe was temporarily secure and I was willing to settle for that. As I recall it was about three or four in the afternoon when the tanks arrived, at least that is when I first saw one, and believe me it was a very welcome sight.


Charles E. Sammon