

Read this first

To: Nicolas Dumont

From: R.L. Vannatter

I was born Robert Lee Vannatter Jr. March 8, 1921 in a coal mining community named Gamoca, West Virginia, the oldest of seven children.

My father worked as Chief Electrician at the mines. He died at age thirty-eight, having spent two years in the hospital for tuberculosis. At eighteen I started to work in the coal mines to support my family.

I enlisted in the army June 15, 1942 at Fort Thomas, Kentucky. The Army offered inducements of extra pay, special uniforms, and the promise to be among the roughest and toughest outfit in the Army to those who would volunteer to join the Paratroops; I didn't hesitate.

I found that the training was vigorous and tough to endure. First, a special basic training camp at Camp Cook, South Carolina for three months for physical and mental conditioning and the use of weapons. Then on to the Paratroop training school at Fort Benning, Georgia where the training became even more vigorous. Finally, we earned our boots and wings after five jumps from an airplane.

I was assigned to the 507 Parachute Infantry Regiment now being formed at Fort Benning. After completing a thirty day communications school, I was assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Co.

Now completely formed, on March 21, 1943, the Regiment was shipped to its' base camp at Alliance Air Base, Alliance, Nebraska. While at Alliance, at our request, my friend William D. (Bill) Howell and I were transferred to Headquarters Co. 1st Battalion. Bill and I were foxhole buddies during the war and remain in close contact.

At Alliance we continued our physical endurance training, such as long marches over the Nebraska sand dunes in the heat of the summer. We engaged in simulated tactical problems where we enhanced our own specialty skills. We received specialized training beyond that of the regular infantry, such as learning how to drive a tank and to use its' weapons. We also thrilled the local townspeople by performing practice parachute jumps.

The Regiment left the Alliance Air Base 20 November, 1943 for Camp Shanks, New York to prepare for the move overseas. While in Camp Shanks we were given one day passes to New York City. However, it was embarrassing to the troopers because we were not allowed to wear our paratrooper boots, wings, patches, or anything that would identify us as a Parachute Regiment.

The Regiment left Camp Shanks and sailed in convoy from New York Harbor, 5 December 1943 on the British Transport "Strathnaver." The "Strathnaver" anchored at Liverpool, England where

we were transferred to the American Liberty Ship, "Susan B. Anthony" and transported to Belfast, Northern Ireland. From there we were transported over land to Portrush, December 17, 1943. Portrush was a delightful town with upscale restaurants and shopping areas, but having the Irish quaintness of thatched-roof homes, and men still wore nickers, and carried shillelaghs. We occupied Irish family homes, and had a hard time keeping warm during those winter months, trying to keep an ember glowing in the peat moss being used for fuel instead of coal.

We weren't in Portrush very long. On March 11, 1944 we departed to Tallerton, England, near Nottingham. The English people were very generous, and extremely tolerant of the thousands of American Troops now stationed there, but it was made easy by realizing that we were there to help. We were able to walk through the Sherwood forest and reflect on the Robin Hood stories we had learned as children in America. We could take weekend trips to London, and see the legendary Big Ben Clock, as well as the famous London Bridge, remembered from our childhood lyrics of "London Bridge is falling down." I would have all these stories to tell the family and friends back home.

Training in England was more for the benefit of the Regimental, Battalion, and Co. Commanders. Tactical Problems were set up and executed. For the troops it was the same old thing; digging fox holes, only this time through pure white chalk, typical of the White Cliffs of Dover. While in England I was promoted to Corporal (T-5).

Finally, on May 28, 1944, the Regiment left Tallerton for the airports preparatory to D-Day. Here we were briefed as to our mission, issued ammunition, grenades, K-rations, gas masks, parachutes, etc. These and other standard issue items (including canteen, ammo pouches, bayonet, etc.) were designed to be easily attached to the belt, or other places on the body. Gammon grenades were put in a canteen cover and attached to the belt.

For me, I was to be the Battalion Commander's (Lt. Col. Ostberg) radio operator. I carried the large SCR-300 radio plus an extra battery, which alone weighed about thirty pounds. The radio had shoulder straps, but it was held against my stomach below my reserve chute; I don't recall how. The musette bag held the spare battery, plus extra socks, underwear, cigarettes, candy bars, and k-rations. I believe it was suspended from my belt by its' shoulder straps, and hung between my legs. Other k-rations were stuffed in the large patch pockets of our paratroopers uniform. My M1 Garand rifle was slung over my shoulder and held vertically on my right side, secured under the belly strap of my chute. My knife was strapped to my boot. Two bandoleers of ammo were slung criss-crossed over my shoulder. There was no standard method for attaching items to our body. Each was left to their own

devices, and the help of a buddy. I weighed in at 305 pounds; my body weight was 150 pounds.

June 5 was the planned D-Day. On the evening and night of June 4, weather conditions prompted a 24 hour delay. The clouds were an eerie sight. I wondered if it was an omen that we should not do what we were bound to do. Weather conditions for the following day were improved, but not ideal by any means. Nevertheless, we all recall that on June 6, 1944 around 2:30 AM, the skies in Normandy, France were filled with thousands of paratroopers. This was the day. This was D-Day.

At the airport in England I had to be helped on the plane, as did others, because of the heavy equipment we were carrying. Every pilot had a picture of a pretty girl, or a slogan painted on their airplane. Mine was "You really cant miss it" (a play on the English manner of speaking). Not a comforting thought however.

Records show that the planes took off from various airports in England at 11:30 PM, June 5, 1944. I must have loaded at about 11:00 PM. I had the second seat on the right side of the plane next to the Col. It took all of three hours for the planes to rendezvous, establish their flight patterns, and to reach their drop zones.

We picked up antiaircraft fire as soon as we hit the coast of Normandy. I'm sure that others, as well as I, hoped we would reach our drop zone soon before the plane would be shot down. Then came the routine sequence of commands, "Stand up and hook up, check equipment, stand in the door, go." At that moment, someone halfway back in the line called out "two-thirty-eight." I knew he was marking the time to be recorded as a momentous time in history. The war was on.

I landed about 1.5 to 2 miles north of Chef-De-Pont near the railroad, in three or four feet of water, which was the overflow of the intentionally flooded Merderet River. (A map of the area is attached. It is copied from the book "507th Parachute Infantry Regiment" by Dominique Francois, page 40.) The tinted yellow dot near the intersection of the river and the railroad is a good approximation of where I landed.

Normandy

Having landed in the water, sinking quickly to the bottom, and lying flat on my back, my first effort was to roll over on my stomach so I could stand up. I released my parachute harness, but it didn't pull away from my body. That, plus the heavy equipment on top of me made it difficult to roll over. After three or four tries I was desperately in need of air. Pulling my feet up under my buttocks as far as I could, I pushed with all my might to lift my head above the water. I couldn't tell for sure if my nose

was above water, but I breathed in, inhaling a little air and a little water. When my body was off the bottom I made a quick twist, and was able to roll over. I stood up immediately gasping for air and coughing up some of the water I had inhaled. I was exhausted and weak.

The first thing I saw was a blinking red light about 200 feet away. It, among many others, had been placed there by troopers called Path Finders, who had jumped an hour or so ahead of us. Their purpose was to provide assembly points for those whose landing sights were pretty well scattered. I realized right away that this was a well conceived idea.

When I reached the red light I saw that it was located on a small dry spot of about 100 square feet. Lt. Col. Ostberg was there with two other men. Since I was to be the Colonel's radio operator, my first order of business was to get the radio working. I doubted that it would, having been soaked in water for several minutes. It never did.

When it became apparent that no one else would come to our assembly point, the Col. led us to a railroad about 300 feet to the east, past where I had landed. Then he led us south to toward Chef-Du-Pont. On the way we met General Gavin wading through the swamp from the west with about 35 men. He turned them over to Lt. Col. Ostberg, and returned to the swamp, keeping about two or three with him. We continued on to Chef-Du-Pont with the mission to seize and hold. The principal objective was to secure the bridge across the Merderet River for our troops, tanks, and vehicles coming in from the beach.

When we reached Chef-Du-Pont we turned southwest toward the bridge at the extreme end of town. The Col. maintained his position at the head of the column, himself on the right side of the road, myself on the left. I tried now and then to get the radio to work, but no luck. I finally left it by the side of the road. I had already gotten rid of the musette bag/extra battery, gas mask, and bandoleers of ammo. I was now more ready for battle.

We went basically unopposed through the one-street town until we came within about 200 feet of the bridge. At that point, the Germans opened fire. They were in fox holes lining both sides of the road, stretching from the bridge toward us. Sharpshooters were picking our men off from homes on a high knoll to our left. A Lieutenant came running past me and said "Cover me corporal," as he ran toward a dirt road leading to the knoll; he was shot immediately. I wondered what I could have done. He and others who had been shot were left to lie there. There was nothing we could do, especially in the heat of the battle. There were no Medics among us at that time.

By about noon we had killed all the Germans on our end of the bridge. A menacing situation

existed at the other end however. Germans were dug in at a well concealed, and well protected position behind the large bridge abutment. The only approach to them was across the bridge. Water surrounded both sides. They had a clean line-of-sight to anyone threatening their position. Anyone attempting to enter the bridge was immediately shot.

I had lost track of the Col. When I didn't see him I assumed he had returned to the rear to reconnoiter a situation that had developed there. I was to find out that it was not the case.

I was surprised to see S/Sgt. Lisenby, the Regt. Demolition Sgt., who had passed by our blinking light assembly point on his way to blow up a bridge. We decided that I would go around a small semicircle of dry land on the left side of the road leading to just under the eastern end of the bridge, while he scooted along the edge of the shoulder to see if one of us could get a line on the guys behind the abutment. I arrived beneath the bridge, but found no practical approach to the abutment. There was no Lisenby. Going back to where I started, I saw that he was lying dead 3 feet from where I left him.

It was probably mid afternoon by then. I believe I was the only NCO remaining in the vicinity of the bridge. A soldier on the right shoulder near the bridge, that I didn't know, called to me saying "Corporal, I think the Col. is dead-it's hard to tell. His whole body, except his head, is in the water, but he is not moving."

After appraising the situation I decided that I should try to rescue him, hoping that he was still alive. The other soldier agreed to help. I surmised that the Col. had tried to gain access to the abutment by skirting along the outside, and below the bridge. A section of dry land extended a short distance the length of the bridge.

A small brick building stood about 10 feet from the shoulder of the road and extended to a point about 20 feet from the Col. I instructed the other soldier that we would enter the building, knock a hole in the back and retrieve the Col. through the hole. This way we would cut our exposure time in half. A 2x4 board, about 3 feet long, found inside the building is all it took to make a 3 foot diameter hole in the poorly constructed building. In less than a minute we had the Col. upon the shoulder of the road. The other soldier took his pistol, I took his binoculars. He was alive. There still were no medics; we left him to survive on his own.

Lt. Col. Maloney showed up with an Officer and a few men. After surveying the situation he left the Officer in charge, and returned to the rear. It was getting dark, and we had not slept for over 36 hours. The threat of a German counterattack against Chef-Du-Pont no longer existed. The officer

directed me to take four men into the basement of a nearby house and spend the night. When we came out the next morning the bridge had been cleared and Lt. Col. Ostberg had been evacuated. He survived only to be killed in a subsequent campaign.

Troops were still widely scattered. On D+4, the Regiment assembled near La Fiere, bringing together those who had attached themselves to other Regiments to join their own companies. The Regiment assembled with about 40 percent of it's original head count. The others had been killed in action, wounded, or captured. Among those captured was our own Regt. Com., Col. Millet.

From then on, for our stay in Normandy, it was mostly hedgerow-to-hedgerow fighting, moving from hot spot-to-hot spot. The hottest of all, as far as my own experience is concerned, happened about D+6. I'm not sure where we were. The company was moving along a paved road when we were suddenly attacked from our left flank by what turned out to be a long row of the powerful German 88mm gun. The guns were lined up behind the second hedgerow from the road. We who were not killed immediately ran to the first hedgerow for cover. The first hedgerow was not very long, so we were bunched pretty close together. The Germans began blasting away the mound of dirt that formed the hedgerow, leaving us unprotected and using the 88s like rifles, shooting at individual soldiers. It was the only time during the war that I was resigned to dying.

Both hedgerows were terminated on our left by a small dirt road leading from the paved road, perpendicular to the hedgerows. A godsend American light tank appeared from nowhere. It moved along the dirt road and positioned itself in line with the German guns, firing right down the line, killing most of the soldiers, and disabling their guns. Luckily the guns were artillery emplacements, and not on self-propelled vehicles. It was difficult to traverse them 90 degrees to fire at the tank. I was no longer resigned to dying.

From then on we just routinely met the Germans where ever they were, and drove them deeper into France. After 32 days of combat, we were relieved, along with the whole 82nd Airborne Division, given new uniforms, and returned to England to prepare for another mission. The uniforms had no insignias, making it appear as if we were new recruits. We arrived in England 14 July, 1944. We received new recruits to replace our casualties. We moved our base camp from Nottingham, to Tideworth, to Barton Stacy. I was promoted to Sgt.- Radio Chief.

ARDENNES

We were still in Barton Stacy on 16 Dec, 1944, the day the Germans began their great thrust against the Allied forces, which came to be known as the Battle Of The Bulge. We were placed on alert immediately. The Germans were making deep penetrations into the Allied lines, aided by weather conditions which prohibited the use of Allied planes. Our paratrooper brothers, the 101st Airborne Division, located around Bastogne, was bearing the brunt of the thrust. News media or our own Military media kept us abreast of the situations. Reports were that the 101st, commanded by General McAuliffe, had been surrounded by the Germans. The German General dispatched a messenger under a white flag of truce, saying basically "surrender or be annihilated." We all remember General McAuliffe's response-"Nuts."

Our moment came at an inopportune time. We were served our Christmas dinner in mess kits at the airport. Weather conditions still did not permit a parachute drop, so we were air lifted to an airport near Mourmelon, France on 26, December, and trucked to outpost positions along the Meuse River.

Except for one personal encounter, the things I recall most about the Bulge are the extreme cold, the almost continuous bombardment by German artillery, land mines, booby traps, and the fact that our 1st Bn. Com., Lt. Col. Pearson, as well as my Communications Chief, S/Sgt. Wolfe, were each blown up when their jeeps ran over land mines. Both were critically wounded and evacuated to the U.S. Lt. Col. Pearson was replaced by Major Paul Smith. I was promoted to S/Sgt. and replaced S/Sgt. Wolfe as Communications Chief.

About three weeks after entering the Bulge, the 507 Rgt. was placed in reserve. 1st Bn. Hq. Was set up in an abandoned farm house. My Communication Section found comfort in the adjacent barn. Other elements of Hq. Co. were on outposts. A narrow stream divided the buildings and the paved road we had traveled on, but the driver was able to get the communication jeep-trailer across and up by the barn without too much trouble.

My personal encounter began with a serious note, then with a humorous note, then tragedy. We were at the farm for three days. The weather had warmed up, and was melting the snow. We hadn't paid attention to water rising in the stream. As we were moving out, everyone except those of us who were to be in the jeep, had crossed the stream, and turned left into the woods paralleling the road. The trailer bogged down in the stream. Within two to three minutes, Division Engineers showed up. I found out later that the Major, seeing my situation, had called them for help. It took about 20 minutes to free the jeep-trailer. By that time my Co. was well out of sight. A radio operator rode with the driver and myself. He didn't have a radio because they were all in use by operators who were given assigned

duties.

Being in a hurry to catch up I decided to take the paved road, thinking that we would become abreast, then join them. But they and the road diverged, and I never did see them. I realized that we had come too far, and I would turn around and take my chances through the woods. About that time, we came upon three homes lining the left side of the road. The first home had a white flag hanging from its front porch. Three women were on the front porch pointing and gesturing, drawing our attention to the flag. Suddenly an old man rushed out of the house and yanked down the flag. The women wrested it away from him and placed it where it had been. I wondered "where are we, that the citizens believe we are their enemies?" More surprising was the four or five bursts of artillery too close for comfort on our right side. We scattered toward the homes. The driver had run beyond the third home, and called to us saying "There's an air-raid shelter up here." We all ran toward it. We were alone in a serious situation.

I paused for a moment to stare at a woman lying on the front lawn of the second house. Her leg had been blown off above her knee. I looked back at the women at the first house and wondered why they didn't help. She was crying out "Hilfe," the German word for "Help." I didn't know where we were, but the idea of being somewhere where the people spoke German convinced me that indeed, we had come too far.

The shelter had steps leading about twenty feet below the surface. At the bottom there was a door leading to the right. I warned the others not to try opening it, aware that it might be booby-trapped.

We waited in the shelter to make sure the shelling had stopped. We were startled when the door started to be pushed open from the other side. We readied our weapons, ready to shoot anyone who would appear. When the door was cracked, the first thing we saw was four hands appearing over the top. When their bodies appeared, we recognized right away that they were Italian soldiers wanting to surrender. We knew that the Italians didn't want to fight the Allies, but were forced to by the Germans, so we had no concern or fear of them.

It turns out that the radio operator with me was of Italian decent, and spoke the language. He still had relatives in Italy. In his conversation with the prisoners, he discovered that one of them was from the same town as his relatives, and knew the family of one of them. It was a strange coincidence, translations were being passed to the rest of us, and to the other prisoners. We were excited and laughing. It was a humorous occasion.

Sitting at the top of the steps, trying to restore a seriousness to our situation, I saw an American

jeep approaching from where we had driven. It was Lt. Patton, our Communications Officer, and a Capt. that I didn't know. I called to them, and motioned for them to come to the shelter.

About a hundred feet past the shelter, the paved road made a sharp turn to the right. A dirt road, filled with a lot of trees overhang and underbrush, went straight ahead. As we were gathered atop the shelter relating our experience, suddenly a loud shot rang out. We could tell it was from a large gun, probably an German 88mm. Everyone except the Capt. instinctively hit the ground. I looked up and saw that the Captain's head had been sheared off at the shoulder. It seemed that he remained standing for about two or three seconds before his body collapsed.

It had been a German tank hidden among the underbrush on the dirt road. It left immediately. We all felt helpless and angry that there was nothing we could do, having only small caliber carbines as our weapons.

We left right away, the Capt. in the Lt.'s Jeep, and the Italians in mine. The Lt. Directed us to our Co. where we delivered the prisoners to our intelligence Section who took them to a prisoner collection point. The Capt. would have been delivered to his home company, who would have taken him to Grave Registration personnel.

Records show that the 507th Regt. was relieved on Feb 11, 1945, and trucked from Clervaux, Lux. to Chalons-sur-Marne, France to prepare for the airborne operation across the Rhine River (Operation Varsity).

RHINELAND (Varsity)

On March 24, 1945 the 507 spearheaded the parachute jump across the Rhine River, the first to set foot on German soil. My first personal encounter occurred during the jump itself. Please find the enclosed story entitled "Damn You Murphy-*I Think*," written by myself, which explains the encounter.

STORY

We were in Essen, Germany when the war in Europe officially ended. We were making friends with the people, passing out candy bars to children, and trading cigarettes for beer.

Soldiers who had 85 points were immediately eligible for discharge. Points were given for (1) how long in the service, (2) how long over seas, (3) how many combat missions, (4) if they were married, (5) if they had been wounded, etc. As an 82 pointer I was assigned to the 505 Regt, 82nd Division, who pulled the initial occupation of Berlin. After a couple months 82 pointers were eligible for discharge. I was discharged on November 30, 1945 at Fort George G, Meade, Maryland. I had earned two Bronze Star medals.

I am glad that the U.S. had the means, and proud that it had the willingness to participate in a just war to defeat Hitler's war machine. I am very proud to have participated. I am proud of the total support of the war effort by all segments of our society—sacrifices, women replacing men in the factories (affectionately dubbed Rosie the Riveter), buying war bonds, and the unprecedented manufacturing output of planes, tanks, ships, vehicles, and weapons for ourselves, the British, and the Russians. Now, 63 years later, as a more enlightened person, I have a greater appreciation for these things than I did during the war.

I joined my family who had moved from West Virginia to Dayton, Ohio. Jobs were fairly easy to get for returning veterans since industry was reverting from tanks and guns to automobiles and refrigerators. However, I enrolled at the University of Dayton, majoring in Electrical Engineering. After college, in 1951, I moved to California where the Aerospace Industry was booming. I worked for the General Dynamics Corp. at Pomona, CA as a Systems Engineer for 14 years. While there, I got married on February 1, 1953. I finally retired from Lockheed Martin Corp., Missiles and Space Systems Div. in Sunnyvale, CA, the heart of the so-called Silicon Valley, on Oct 31, 1987. While there, my wife died September 18, 1975.

I moved from Sunnyvale to Oregon to Massachusetts, back to Oregon, then to Pleasanton, CA where I presently live in the proximity of my three children and their families.

The 507 Regt. Still holds a reunion every year. War stories still prevail. I would be remiss not to relate the many stories about brave actions by the French citizens. Beyond hand-shakes and hugs, amidst German infested areas, citizens sheltered, fed, and hid lost troopers who had landed far from their intended drop zones, at a great risk to their own lives. I refer you to the book "Down to Earth," page 232, by Martin K.A. Morgan as an example of those who did all that was within their power to

help the invasion succeed-to restore French sovereignty, and dignity of the people.

R. L. Vannatter