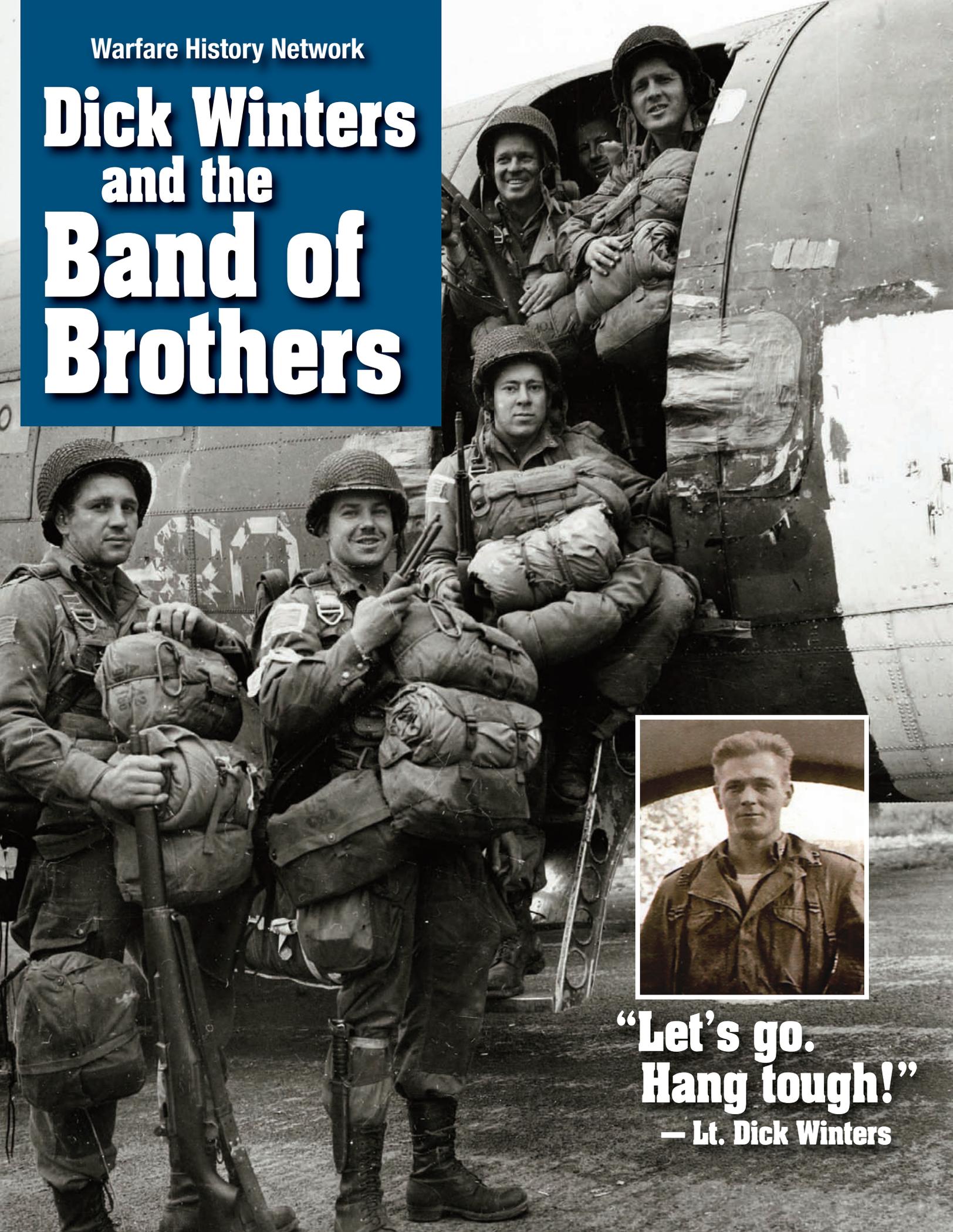


Warfare History Network

Dick Winters and the Band of Brothers



**“Let’s go.
Hang tough!”**

— Lt. Dick Winters

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Dick Winters and the Band of Brothers

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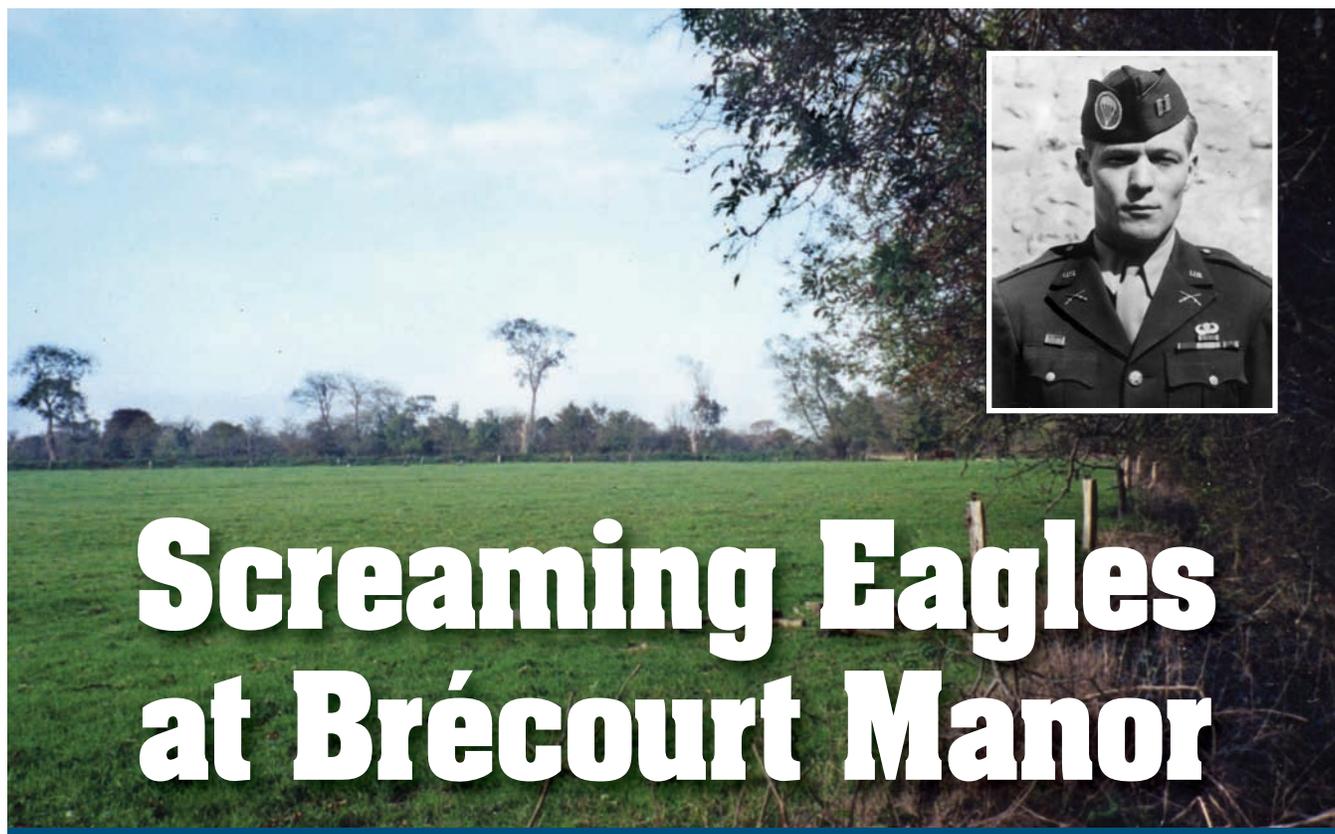
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The “Band of Brothers” faced off against German artillerymen in a fight for a crucial battery on D-Day.

By KEVIN M. HYMEL

The Mission was simple:

“There’s fire along the hedgerow there. Take care of it.”

The order went to First Lieutenant Richard “Dick” Winters, the acting commander of Easy Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. The order came from the battalion’s operations officer, Captain Clarence Hester, who, with a sweep of his hand, showed Winters the area he was to attack. The sound of the enemy fire was close and unmistakable. German artillery was raining fire down on Utah Beach, the westernmost invasion beach along the Normandy coast, where at that very moment American soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division were struggling ashore. It was the 8:30 in the morning of D-Day—June 6, 1944.

The mission should have gone to Easy Company’s commander, First Lieutenant Thomas Meehan III, but he was nowhere to be found. (It was later learned that Meehan, along with an entire stick

ABOVE: Today just a quiet, open pasture, this field at Brécourt Manor, between Le Grand Chemin and Ste. Marie-du-Mont, was the site of a four-gun German battery and the scene of fierce fighting between the gunners and a handful of 101st Airborne Division troops on D-Day, June 6, 1944. **INSET:** Lieutenant Richard Winters, who took over command of Easy Company when its CO, Thomas Meehan III, died when his C-47 crashed.

of 18 paratroopers, died when their C-47 “Sky-train” transport plane, chalk #66, was hit by anti-aircraft fire and crashed near Beuzeville-au-Plain, France.) Winters, Easy’s 1st Platoon commander, became the acting commander by default.

Winters, like every paratrooper around him, had jumped into Normandy some seven hours earlier and had had most of his equipment ripped off his body during the violent exit from his C-47. Fortunately, he had picked up a discarded M-1 rifle and a few grenades during his trek to the small town of Le Grand Chemin, where the battalion had set up temporary headquarters.

Winters could count only 11 Easy Company men from a unit that normally numbered nearly 200. With him were Lieutenant Lynn “Buck” Compton, Staff Sergeant Carwood Lipton, Staff Sergeant Bill Guarnere, Sergeants Don Malarkey and Myron Ranney, Corporals Joseph Liebgott, John Plesha, and Joe Toye, and Privates Walter Hendrix, Robert “Popeye” Wynn, and Cleveland Petty.

Fortunately, Winters was also able to gather a few more volunteers from other 506th units who had been misdropped during the chaotic aerial assault; Privates John Hall of Alpha Company, Gerald Lorraine, and Virgil “Red” Kimberling of Headquarters Company agreed to join the attack. Then Private Walter Hicks from Fox Company showed up and offered to help. “Hicks,” Winters said, “see if anyone else from F Company wants to go along.” Hicks brought back Sergeant Julius “Rusty” Houck. Winters now had 17 men, including himself.

Winters had one wild card in his group. Bill Guarnere had learned before the jump that his brother had been killed in Italy. He was not only angry and wanting to kill every German, but he did not trust Winters. “I respected Winters as an officer,” Guarnere later wrote, “but no one proved themselves in combat yet.” Earlier that morning, when the men had encountered a horse-drawn supply train, Guarnere had let loose, slaughtering men and animals with his rifle. “I had so much anger I might have turned around and shot him [Winters] if he had tried to stop me.”

Winters gathered his team along a road just outside the village of Le Grand Chemin, about five miles inland. “Just weapons and ammo,” Winters told the men. “Leave everything else here.” Sergeant Lipton instinctively dropped his musette bag, which held some blocks of TNT and percussion caps. He would later regret it.

Winters led his small force across a field toward the guns, crawling ahead of them along a hedgerow, until he could get a view of the enemy battery. He saw four 105mm artillery pieces firing from a trench, dug in behind a hedgerow. Three guns faced east and one faced north, protecting the battery’s left flank. The position resembled an L-shape with zigzagging trenches connecting each gun pit.



Lieutenant Lynn “Buck” Compton was an expert grenade thrower; Sergeant Don Malarkey risked his life for a souvenir; Staff Sergeant “Wild Bill” Guarnere unexpectedly missed his target; Staff Sergeant Carwood Lipton was deadly with an M-1.

The field itself was surrounded by hedgerows—thick earthen walls cluttered with trees and overgrowth—as tough and as impenetrable as a stone fortress. Behind the 105s, at the opposite side of the field, a few machine-gun nests protected the battery’s rear. At the far end of the field, opposite the approach of Winters’s force, ran a small country road, on the other side of which stood a barn and a house—Brécourt Manor.

Winters did not know it, but his troops were up against approximately 50 enemy soldiers from the 6th Battery of the 90th German Regimental Artillery. The locals considered the young German gunners to be fanatic Nazis. Earlier that day German Lt. Col. Friedrich von der Heydte, an experienced paratrooper and commander of the 6th Fallschirmjäger Regiment, had climbed the church tower at nearby Sainte Marie du Mont and saw the Allied invasion fleet off Utah Beach. He rushed to the 6th Battery at 8 AM and immediately ordered the weapons manned and firing. By the time Winters had received his orders, the gunners at Brécourt Manor had already repulsed one probing attack from elements of the 506th.

Winters devised a simple but direct strategy following the principle of fire and maneuver: he would attack the first gun by laying down machine-gun fire while his assault force made its way across an open field. Right on their heels would be a secondary force that would spike the guns. Once the first gun was taken, the men would then work their way down the trench to each consecutive gun, knocking it out until the battery was silenced.



The main house at Brécourt Manor has changed little since 1944.

The First Gun

Winters placed one .30-caliber machine gun, manned by Petty and Liebgott, in a position that allowed his assault team to get into place. He then divided his men into two teams and led them closer to the big guns. He placed another machine gun, manned by Plesha and Hendrix, along a hedge directly facing the first gun, warning the men not to fire unless they had a direct target—they were too exposed. He then ordered Lipton and Ranney to work their way along the hedgerow to their right and provide flank protection.

As Winters and the men crawled across the field to the battery’s trenches, Winters noticed a bobbing German helmet. He fired two shots and the helmet dropped below the parapet of the trench. He then ordered Malarkey to lead the assault.

Malarkey recalled that he “took a deep breath and, carbine in front of me, started snaking my way forward on elbows and knees, rifle poised, staying low in the foot-high Normandy grass.”

Suddenly, Winters realized that Malarkey had only grenades and was out of carbine ammunition. He shouted, “Wait, Malark, get back here!” Malarkey returned and Winters told him to get more ammo while he ordered Compton forward. “[Winters] probably saved my life,” recalled Malarkey, “which wouldn’t be the last time.”

Compton, armed with a borrowed Thompson he had never fired before, crawled through the grass while Winters and the others provided covering fire. Compton climbed over a hedgerow and

eyed two Germans loading and firing one of the artillery pieces toward the 4th Infantry Division coming ashore at Utah Beach.

Although he was only supposed to observe, Compton jumped from the hedgerow into the trench and charged the Germans. About halfway down the trench he planted himself and raised his Thompson sub-machine gun to his waist, “like Jimmy Cagney in a gangster movie,” he later recalled. The Germans spun around and gaped in horror at their uninvited visitor. Compton pulled the trigger but nothing happened, except for a slight “plunk” sound from the weapon—the firing pin had broken.

“I looked at the Germans. They looked at me in surprise. There were two of them and one of me. They were armed to the hilt. I wasn’t,” Compton said.

As the three men stood staring at each other, Guarnere ran up beside Compton and opened fire with his Thompson. One German crumpled and the other jumped out of the trench and took off across the field. Compton, a former college baseball star with aspirations of making the major leagues, yanked out a grenade and hurled it at him. It exploded right above the man’s head, killing him instantly.

Bill Guarnere recalled, “The Germans ran like hell down the trench in the other direction. Winters and the other guys were right behind us, and all of us started lobbing grenades and shooting everything we had. Tossing grenades and attacking, it was stupid, but we did it so quick, so fast, they thought an entire company was attacking. We caught them with their pants down.”

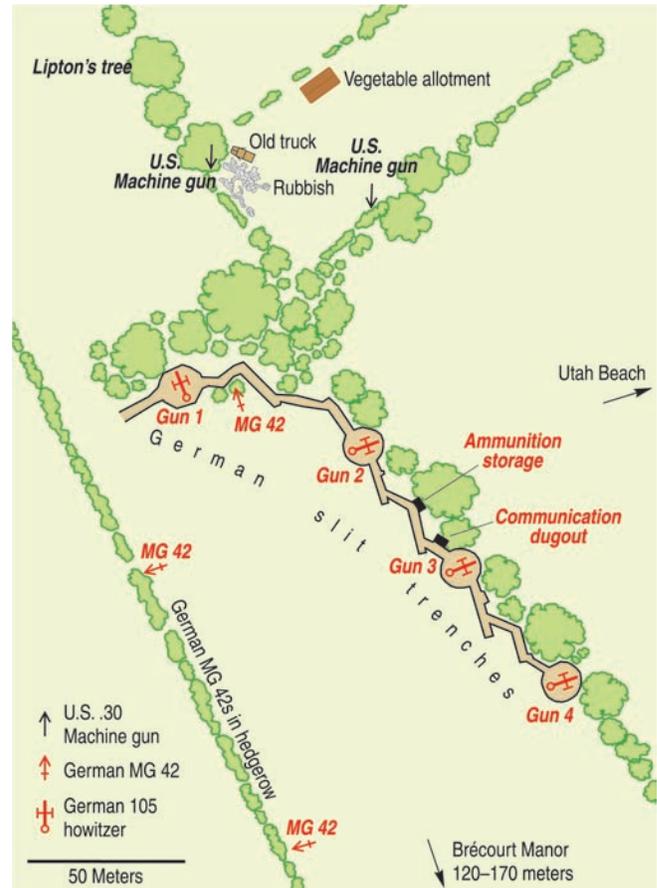
Compton then waved the rest of the team forward. They piled into the trench and continued lobbing grenades at the other Germans. The first 105 was now in American hands.

Meanwhile, Lipton and Ranney had arrived at their flanking position but realized they could not spot the Germans through the heavy undergrowth. Hearing the assault, they quickly climbed two trees. The trees were small and weak, forcing Lipton to carefully balance himself on a branch close to the trunk. From his ringside seat, he could see Germans in both prepared positions and lying prone in the field, firing on Winters’s assault force. None of them had yet spotted him or Ranney.

Lipton fired two shots at one of the prone Germans, but the man seemed to simply duck down. Lipton then fired at a dirt mound to check the sighting on his rifle. The dirt exploded exactly where he aimed. Knowing that his first two shots had hit their target, he then opened up on the Germans.

The Second Gun

Back at the first gun, a German grenade exploded in Popeye Wynn's trench, hitting him in the buttocks. “I’m sorry lieutenant,” he called to Winters, “I goofed, I goofed! I’m sorry!” The men barely had time to help him out. They had the Germans on the run and did not want to let up, lest the



The battery at Brécourt Manor was located only about 2,000 yards from Utah Beach. This sketch shows the position of the German guns.

enemy realize how small a force they were fighting.

A German “potato-masher” stick grenade landed in the trench near the Americans and everyone dove forward as it landed between Joe Toye’s legs. “Joe!” hollered Winters, “Move for Christ’s sake, move!” and Toye flipped over and scrambled to run. The grenade exploded, but the stock of Toye’s rifle caught most of the blast; Toye received only some wooden splinters and was able to continue the fight. Guarnere noted, “He was lucky; the rifle took the brunt of it. Otherwise he’d be singing soprano.”

The team then resumed firing down the trench at the Germans, three of whom leapt out and fled across the field, offering perfect targets. Winters hollered for Lorraine and Guarnere, who were standing close by. All three opened fire. Winters hit his man in the head and Lorraine caught his man with a blast from his Thompson. Guarnere, so full of adrenaline and rage, missed his target. “I never missed!” he thought angrily. “Never missed!”

Guarnere’s German switched directions and headed toward one of the guns. He had only taken two steps when Winters drilled him in the back. Guarnere calmed down enough to pump the wounded German full of lead. Then a fourth enemy soldier popped up about 100 yards away and began running. Winters assumed a prone position, took a steady bead on the man, and felled him with one shot. “This entire engagement must have taken about 15 or 20 seconds since we had rushed the initial gun position,” Winters later noted.

Malarkey, meanwhile, noticed two Germans down the trench setting up a machine gun but, as he threw a grenade, Winters also opened fire on them, hitting one man in the hip, the other in the shoulder. Malarkey then climbed out of the trench and, spraying the area with his Thompson, headed toward the second 105. The Germans were fleeing as he slid next to a dead German under the gun. He noticed another dead German in the field, with a case on his hip, which he assumed held a Luger pistol. He bolted for the German to grab a souvenir. “Malarkey, you idiot!” Winters shouted. “Get back here!”

But it was too late. Malarkey reached the dead German and grabbed for the case, which turned out to hold only an artillery-sighting device. “Damn!” was his only thought. The Germans, who had held their fire during Malarkey’s dash, now began blazing away at him. He charged back to the safety of the 105 as bullets kicked up dirt around his feet, “like a late-spring hailstorm back in Oregon,” he later recalled. As he dove into the gun pit, his helmet fell off. He lay on his back, panting while bullets smacked into the gun above him, dropping burning fragments onto his face.

As Malarkey rolled over, he heard Guarnere call to him: “Malark, we’ll time the bursts.” Guarnere was in the trench about five feet from him. So Malarkey and Guarnere began counting the dead time between the enemy’s machine-gun bursts. “Okay,” called Guarnere, “next burst ends, get your ass over here.” Silence, then Guarnere shouted, “Now!” Malarkey bolted and made it to cover. “Way to go,” Guarnere congratulated him, “you stupid mick!”

Meanwhile, Winters prepared the men for the assault on the second gun, ordering Compton and Toye to provide covering fire. Winters then backtracked down the trench where he came across Wynn, lying on the ground and continuing to apologize for being shot. Winters ordered him to make his way back to battalion headquarters alone since he could not spare a man to assist him. The loss of Wynn was soon made up for when Lieutenant Bob Brewer, one of Easy Company’s assistant platoon commanders, joined the assault force. German fire was increasing.

Compton noted that he and Brewer “spotted an empty gun emplacement, maybe 12 feet in diameter, and jumped in, bullets still streaming over us.”

They saw a large ammunition box with a German grenade lying on top of it; somebody bumped



One of the German 105mm guns knocked out by Easy Company's violent assault.

the box. The grenade rolled off and the pin fell out. Compton yelled "Look out!" but there was little they could do but brace themselves against the embankments. The grenade exploded. When the smoke cleared, everyone was covered in dirt but no one was hurt.

The explosion was enough to scare one German into surrendering. He ran toward the Americans with his hands raised, crying. One of the Americans—"a desk jockey from headquarters," as Compton put it—belted the new prisoner in the mouth using a pair of brass knuckles built into the handle of his trench knife. The German began bleeding and spitting out teeth. "Probably broke his jaw," Compton said. "It was senseless. The prisoner wasn't offering us any resistance." Compton grabbed the trooper by the arm and spun him around. "I gave our guy hell for doing it. Malarkey says I threatened the guy with a court-martial, but I don't remember that. I was too mad." Compton told him "to get his ass out of there. We didn't need his crap."

While this was going on in the trenches, Lipton and Ranney, in their tree perches, started receiving fire. Lipton had managed to get off between 20 and 30 rounds before the Germans finally realized they were getting hit from above. Some turned left and opened fire on the two exposed troopers. "Bullets were clipping branches and cracking all around me as I scrambled down," recalled Lipton. He made it to the ground without a scratch.

Lipton then hurried over to the other men, coming across Popeye Wynn on his way. He sprinkled some sulfa powder into Wynn's wound, bandaged it, then dragged him to a farm cart. Once Lipton reached the first gun position, Winters told him they had nothing with which to disable the 105—nor any of the other guns for that matter. Remembering the TNT in his musette bag, Lipton crawled back toward Le Grand Chemin and retrieved it.

On his return trip, he came across a group of American officers and men, all headed in his direction. The officer ahead of Lipton turned back and asked him where he could find the headquarters. Lipton looked at the man behind him, Warrant Officer J.G. Andrew Hill, who started to answer, but before he could say a word, a bullet struck Hill in the forehead, killing him instantly.

Back at the first gun, the German who had been hit with the brass knuckles continued to moan

and groan. Winters finally went over to him and kicked him in the pants, ordering him to walk in the direction of battalion headquarters. Just as the man got up to leave, Winters noticed three Germans inexplicably walking casually toward his location. He directed two of his men to set the range of their rifles to about 200 yards. When the Germans stopped and seemed to listen to something, Winters called out, “ready ... aim....”

Suddenly Lorraine opened up with his Thompson, which Winters thought “isn’t worth a damn over fifty-to-seventy yards.” One of the Germans went down, wounded, but the German machine guns quickly responded, tearing across the top of Winters’s trench. An opportunity had been wasted.

Winters did not intend to waste another on the second gun. Realizing that German machine-gun fire had slackened as they got closer to the first gun position, Winters deduced that by charging the second gun, with good covering fire, his men would not be exposed to as much enemy fire. He ordered three men to remain at the first gun to supply the covering fire, then, like a coiled spring, the rest of the men charged the second gun, throwing grenades and yelling along the way. The men quickly captured the second 105.

The Third Gun

With two guns captured and two to go, Winters sent a runner back to battalion headquarters for more ammunition and men. He also noticed that Petty, who had been manning one of the machine guns between the first and second 105s, had been hit in the neck. Winters ordered Malarkey to take over the weapon.

An American soldier, hidden in the Normandy terrain, fires on some Germans. At Brecourt Manor the Airborne troops utilized the German trenches for protection while they captured each artillery gun.



The Germans, meanwhile, were trying to wrest the high ground from the Americans. A German officer, rifle in hand, approached the manor house and asked the owner if he could use the second story as a sniper’s nest. Mr. Charles DeVallavieille, a retired colonel who had fought in World War I, refused. He lied and said the house did not have any windows. The German did not protest and left. For the rest of the battle, the house was never occupied by the Germans, save for two wounded men. Only a few Germans retreated through the yard. Altogether, eight civilians occupied the house, including a two-month-old baby, but none were injured in the battle.

After about a half hour, two machine-gun crews arrived from battalion. Winters put them in place for the assault on the third gun. This attack was a little different. With ammunition running dangerously low, there would be no more random fire. Instead each trooper picked his targets and made sure every shot counted. The men charged the weapon.

Compton later wrote in his memoirs, “A big tall kid [Pfc. John Hall] came down the trench

and ran by me. He had served as a waiter in the officers' mess, where I knew him, but he wasn't in my platoon and I didn't know his name. From the trench, I saw him spin around and sprint back toward me. He took a bullet in the back and collapsed in front of me, dead."

Again, nobody had time to stop for the dead or wounded; mourning would have to wait. The rest of Winters's men bolted forward and quickly captured the third gun.

The Fourth Gun

For a second time, a few Germans ran forward with their hands over their heads, calling out, "No make me dead!" Winters counted six in all and sent them back to headquarters with an escort, along with a request for more ammunition and men.

Concerned about a flank attack, Winters ordered Malarkey to take up a position back where they had first launched the attack and guard the area. "It was a lonely job," Malarkey confessed. He would remain there for the rest of the battle, hurling grenades and firing at any Germans he saw.

Captain Hester showed up in the trenches and gave Winters three blocks of TNT and an incendiary grenade to spike the captured 105s. He also told Winters that Lieutenant Ronald Speirs from Dog Company would soon arrive with a five-man reinforcement team. Winters used the waiting time to destroy the guns and gather any intelligence. He spiked the first gun himself by dropping one block of TNT down its barrel. To detonate it, someone else pulled the fuse on a German potato-masher and slipped it down the barrel. The mix exploded inside the weapon; it would never fire again. For the second and third guns, he gave the rest of the TNT to Hicks and Kimberling, who also dropped some grenades down the barrels, disabling them.

At gun number two, Winters discovered a German map that marked out every battery along the entire coast and their fields of fire. He also noticed something odd: belts of wood-tipped ammunition. "Were the Germans that desperate for lead?" he wondered.

Speirs finally arrived with his reinforcements, including Privates Art "Jumbo" DiMarzio, and Ray Taylor. Once Winters briefed Speirs, the fresh officer charged the last gun, blazing away with his Thompson as he ran.

Seeing Speirs tear off toward the enemy, one of the men said in amazement, "Look at that crazy mother—go!!" Right on Speirs' heels charged Bill Guarnere. "I was so hyped up," recalled Guarnere, "I followed right behind him." Behind Guarnere ran the other Dog Company men and the two Fox Company troopers, Hicks and Houch.

As the men ran down the trench, Houch rose to throw a grenade, but just as he released it, a burst of automatic-weapons fire stitched his back and shoulders, killing him. Hicks was struck in the shin with a bullet that mushroomed when it hit and tore up his calf. "I think I slowed one down," he told the trooper who bandaged his wound. (Hicks claimed that Compton bandaged his leg, but



Once the airborne troops neutralized the batteries within range of Utah Beach, 4th Infantry Division soldiers, shown here, found it easier to move inland.



Four days after the invasion, an American M-4A2 Sherman tank moves past groups of Germans who have surrendered to American infantrymen “somewhere in Normandy.”

Compton has no recollection of it. Lieutenant Brewer may have been the one to bandage Hicks’s leg.)

The fury of Speirs’s attack scared the Germans right out of the last gun pit. They jumped out and began to run just as Speirs leapt in, feet first. He opened up on the fleeing Germans until an enemy grenade exploded near him. The last gun was finally in American hands; the landings at Utah Beach would not be bothered by this battery.

As the firing abated, Guarnere picked up a pair of German binoculars and was using them to examine the German machine-gun positions when he suddenly collapsed. Joe Toye spotted him and, thinking his friend was dead, smacked him on the back of the helmet. Guarnere jumped. “He scared the hell out of me and I scared the hell out of him,” remembered Guarnere. With his adrenaline spent and the mission completed, Guarnere had simply fallen asleep.

End of the Battle

The mission at last complete, Winters ordered the men to make their way back to headquarters at Le Grand Chemin. He pulled out the machine gunners first, followed by the riflemen. Guarnere spotted Malarkey at his lonely post and called to him, “Malark, pull back to the trench.” Malarkey followed, dropping a fragmentation grenade down the tube of the first 105 for good measure as he went.

To cover the withdrawal, Malarkey manned a 60mm mortar while Toye and Guarnere fired .30 caliber machine guns across the field. They blasted the hedgerows along the street near the fourth gun. Malarkey fired so many rounds he buried his mortar in the ground. He had lost his base plate during his jump and was forced to bore-sight his weapon. His firing shattered every window in the manor house, but did not harm any of the civilians inside.

As Winters withdrew, he noticed a wounded German who was trying to operate his machine gun. Winters raised his rifle and blew a hole in the man’s head.

As he made his way back to headquarters, Winters came across the body of Warrant Officer Hill, who lay dead with his right arm sticking straight up in the air, his watch exposed. As machine-gun rounds whizzed overhead, Winters crawled past him, then turned around and reached up Hill's wrist to pull off his watch. "You are nuts," Winters thought to himself. "This watch isn't worth it."

The big guns of Brécourt Manor were silenced but several German machine-gun positions remained, capable of troubling any unlucky American who passed by. Winters wanted to clean out the entire position but he didn't have enough men. After refreshing himself with a swig of hard cider, he found about 30 Easy Company men, led by Lieutenants Harry Welsh and Warren Roush, who had been scattered far and wide during the drop.

In addition, Lieutenant Lewis Nixon, the battalion's intelligence officer, soon arrived, riding the lead on two tanks that had just clanked up from Utah Beach. Winters at last had more men for his final attack. He found Malarkey and Toye asleep in a barn. "Malark, Toye!" he called. "Let's go. Hang tough!" That was all they needed. The two men followed Winters out of the barn.

Winters led his new force back to the field, approaching this time behind the machine-gun nests. The men ran alongside the tanks, firing at anything that moved. There was no opposition. Soon all was quiet, with the exception of a few moans and groans from the remaining wounded Germans. There would be no more trouble from Brécourt Manor. The three-hour battle finally over, Winters was the last man to leave.

Aftermath

For his leading role in the battle, Winters was recommended for the Medal of Honor. It was downgraded, however, to a Distinguished Service Cross. There was an unwritten agreement among the airborne division commanders who fought on D-Day that only one Medal of Honor would be awarded per division during Operation Overlord/Neptune. (Lt. Col. Robert G. Cole, commanding the 3rd Battalion, 101st Airborne, earned the award for leading a bayonet charge against German positions near Carentan on June 11, but was killed in Holland during Operation Market-Garden before he could receive it.) Several groups have since tried unsuccessfully to upgrade Winters's commendation.

The fight for Brécourt Manor proved the leadership of the 2nd Battalion's officers and the fighting quality of its men. Winters had devised a quick, sound strategy and saved the lives of at least two of his men through his attention to detail and quick thinking. Compton led by example and did not tolerate poor behavior, even amid a battle. Speirs charged, hell-for-leather, the last gun. None of the officers hesitated during those trying hours in the trenches. The airborne noncommissioned



The farm lanes and hedgerows of Normandy were littered with the bodies of dead combatants.

officers and enlisted men also proved themselves warriors. Fighting for the first time, on little sleep, outnumbered, and in an unfamiliar area, they bested a part of the veteran German war machine.

The battle was a victory for the entire 2nd Battalion of the 506th. Lieutenant Winters led elements of Easy and Fox Companies, as well as paratroopers from battalion headquarters, to capture the first three guns. Dog Company, supported by a few Fox men and a single Easy man, captured the final gun. Teamwork and training proved invaluable to the men who wore the Screaming Eagle on their shoulder.

The battle for Brécourt Manor has become the stuff of legend. Besides being one of the best documented small-unit actions of D-Day, in 1992, historian Stephen Ambrose published *Band of Brothers*, a history of Easy Company's exploits in World War II; the battle is well depicted in its pages. In 2002, HBO premiered a television miniseries of the same title, recreating the battle for a national audience.

In addition, Dick Winters, who corresponded with the veterans of Brécourt for Ambrose's book, donated his entire collection to the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Aspiring leaders can now examine the battle, and other Easy Company experiences, for themselves.

Altogether, 21 paratroopers attacked approximately 50 Germans and successfully disabled four artillery pieces. Winters noted in his autobiography, "In all, we had suffered four dead, six wounded, and we had inflicted 15 dead and 12 captured on the enemy." It was a lopsided victory for the outnumbered paratroopers.

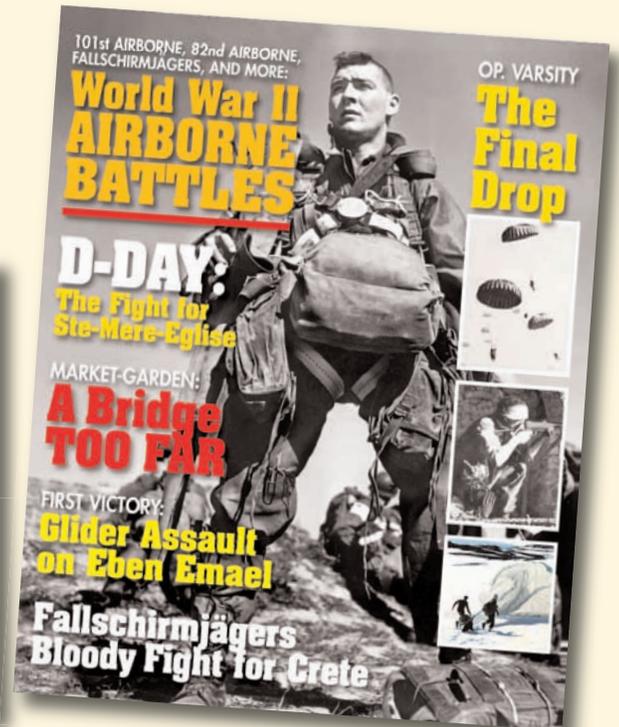
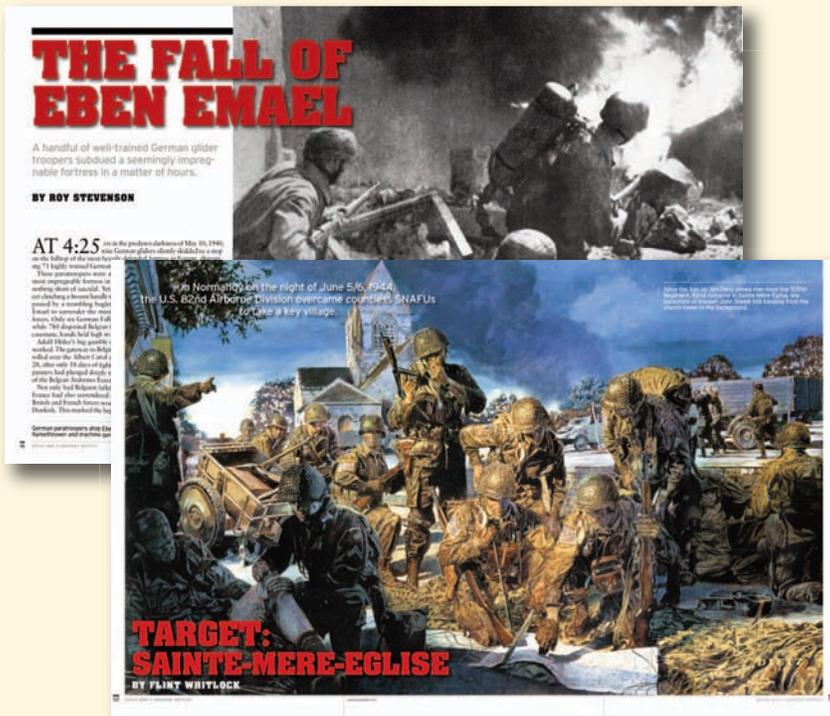
Winters said, "Even though Easy Company was still widely scattered, the small portion that fought at Brécourt had demonstrated the remarkable ability of the airborne trooper to fight, albeit outnumbered, and to win."

Buck Compton had his own view of the battle's outcome. "History has shown that troops landing at Utah Beach had an easier time landing due in part to what was accomplished at Brécourt. I'm happy about that. If our actions saved any of our boys' lives, that's part of what we were there to do."

He added, "There's a sense of guilt that will always be part of the war for me. It's the guilt I feel from making mistakes. It's the guilt I feel because I survived. Surviving a war is such a tricky thing. Why does one man live through a chaotic situation when another man doesn't? Out of all the horror of war, the guilt of survival is one of the things that haunts me most to this day. I will never know why I survived when so many others did not. When it comes to understanding any of this, I have long since given up trying." □

The American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions,
Britain's Red Devils and Germany's Fallschirmjäger:

WWII Airborne Battles SPECIAL ISSUE



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Facing more than two companies of Hitler's Elite SS at the "Island," Dick Winters and the men of Easy Company demonstrated unparalleled courage under fire.

By MAJOR DICK WINTERS, with COLONEL COLE C. KINGSEED

The military career of Major Dick Winters, former commander of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, was brief, but distinguished nonetheless. His success as a combat commander during World War II was virtually unequalled. Taking command of Easy Company on D-Day, Winters led the fabled "band of brothers" throughout the Normandy campaign. In September 1944, then-Captain Winters jumped into Holland at the head of his men as part of Operation Market-Garden. After two weeks of grueling combat around Nijmegen and Uden, Easy Company moved on October 2 to the "Island," an area between the Lower Rhine and the Waal Rivers. Three days later, Winters led Easy Company in an assault that decimated two enemy companies and repelled a heavy German attack. Following is Major Winters's personal account of the action that he termed "my apogee as a company commander." This selection is an excerpt from his book *Beyond Band of Brothers*, with Cole Kingseed, published by Berkley Caliber Books in February 2006.

Now that Uden was secured, Easy Company and the remainder of the 101st Airborne Division received

ABOVE: Two Easy Company paratroopers hold the line during fighting at the "Island" in October 1944.

orders to move to the “Island,” a long narrow area north of Nijmegen between the Lower Rhine and the Waal Rivers. The ground between the dikes of the two rivers was flat farm land, spotted with small villages and towns. The dikes along the rivers were twenty feet high and the fields were crisscrossed with drainage ditches that were covered with heavy vegetation. There were roads on the top of the dikes and narrow roadways through the adjoining farm land. The farming was concentrated and lush with fields of carrots, beets, and cabbages, interspersed with fruit orchards. For the upcoming operation the 101st Airborne Division was attached to the British XII Corps. On October 2, the 506th PIR moved by trucks over the bridge at Nijmegen and was the first unit of the 101st to move to the Island. Intelligence reported that the German 363d Volksgrenadier Division was in the vicinity and received orders to clear the Island. The 363d Volksgrenadier Division had been cut up in Normandy, but now had been reinforced and was anxious to return to battle.

The following day our regiment relieved the frontline positions held by the British 43d Wessex Infantry Division, which was covering a line of approximately six miles in length. The 43d Division had suffered heavy casualties in their attempt to seize the crossings of the Lower Rhine and to evacuate the British 1st Airborne Division that had jumped at Arnhem. As we approached the forward positions, the British Tommies were withdrawing in trucks. Taking a good look at them, I had never seen more thoroughly dispirited soldiers. Two weeks of combat had totally drained their morale and had thoroughly demoralized the troops. Colonel Strayer’s 2d Battalion now dispersed its line on the south bank of the Rhine, covering an area of over three miles in length, starting at a point one-half mile east of Heteren and extending two and one half miles west of Randwijk toward Opheusden. The 3d Battalion lay on our right flank with 1st Battalion in reserve. Easy Company held the right of the battalion line, with Dog Company on the left flank, and Fox Company in reserve. Colonel Strayer established battalion headquarters at Hemmen, a village just to the rear of our front lines. Each company had responsibility to cover one and one half miles of front, far in excess of the normal distance for company defensive positions. The line could only be covered by strategically placing outposts at the most likely avenues of enemy approach and where I calculated enemy infiltration would occur. Company headquarters would keep contact with these outposts by means of radio, wire, and contact patrols. I placed the second and third platoons on line and kept my first platoon in reserve. Easy Company’s entire complement of personnel consisted of five officers and 130 enlisted men present for duty.

There was little action the first two days but around 0400 on October 5, the enemy attacked in strength with machine gun and mortar support on our flank, striking 3d Battalion headquarters and killing the battalion commander. Simultaneously on our front, a patrol of four men led by Sergeant Art Youman left Randwijk to observe enemy activity and to adjust artillery fire from an outpost on the south bank



Captain Richard D. Winters poses for a photo at the Schoonderlogt estate, south of Arnhem, Holland. Winters and several of his 101st Airborne troops were decorated for their heroic assault against German artillery positions at Brécourt Manor on D-day.



Incoming artillery sends U.S. soldiers scurrying for cover along a roadside in Holland. The 101st Airborne Division jumped into Holland as part of Operation Market Garden in September 1944.

of the Rhine River. The patrol included Youman and Privates First Class Roderick Strohl, Jim Alley, and Joe Lesniewski. The patrol returned at 0420 with all four wounded by small-arms fire and hand grenades. Alley had caught the worst of it. He had thirty-two holes in his left side, face, neck, and arm and would spend the next two months in the hospital. Everyone in the patrol was out of breath. One look at them and you knew that they had been in combat and had faced death in the night. There was absolutely no question about it. Strohl reported that they had encountered a large body of Germans at the crossroads three quarters of a mile east of Easy Company's command post. In his estimation, the Germans had achieved a major breakthrough of our lines. Strohl also reported that the enemy had a machine gun that was firing randomly to the south. As they had approached the machine gun, his patrol had come under fire.

Due to the potential seriousness of the situation, I decided to investigate myself. Taking Sergeant Leo Boyle from the company headquarters (he carried the SCR 300 radio), and one squad from 1st Platoon, which at this time was still the reserve platoon, I organized the patrol and started off as fast as possible to analyze the situation. As we approached the crossroads, I could see and hear intermittent machine gun fire, with tracers flying off toward the south. This firing made no sense to me because I knew there was absolutely nothing down that road for nearly three and a half miles—and that would be the 2d Battalion headquarters at Hemmen.

At this point I halted the patrol and tried to make contact with the Canadian soldier who was our forward observer for artillery support. I wanted the observer to place a concentration of artillery fire on that crossroads, but I could not raise him on the radio. Leaving the patrol in charge of Sergeant Boyle, I conducted a short reconnaissance myself to determine which was the best way to get closer to that crossroads. I saw that the river side of the dike had a ditch about two-to-two-and-a-half-feet deep that ran parallel to the dike road. This would provide us better cover. Leaving two men as guards for our

rear and right flank protection, I took the remainder of the squad up and over the dike to the north side. We then followed the ditch toward the crossroads and the machine gun. Approximately 250 yards from the crossroads, I again halted the patrol and crawled up the ditch by myself to scout out the situation. As I got closer to the crossroads, I heard voices and then I observed seven enemy soldiers silhouetted against the night sky, standing on top of the dike by the machine gun. They were wearing long winter overcoats and distinctive helmets. I crawled until I was about twenty-five yards behind them in the drainage ditch at the bottom of the dike. I thought to myself, "This is just like the movie 'All Quiet on the Western Front.'"

I returned to the patrol and informed them of the enemy dispositions. The instructions were clear: "We must crawl up there with absolutely no noise, keep low, and we must hurry." I could see that we would not have the cover of night with us much longer. We reached a position about forty yards from the machine gun as dawn approached. I halted the patrol and instructed Sergeant Dukeman and Corporal Christenson to set up our machine gun. I then went to each man and in a whisper assigned each a target on the German machine gun crew with instructions to fire on my command. Next I stepped back and raising my voice a bit louder, said, "Ready, Aim, Fire!" The rifle fire was good, but our machine gun fired a bit high. Three Germans started running for the other side of the dike. I joined in with my M-1, as did everybody else. In short order we accounted for all seven enemy soldiers.

No sooner had we eliminated the German gun crew than we started receiving some light rifle fire from the east side of the roadway that ran from the dike to the river. I immediately withdrew the patrol down the same ditch by which we had approached the crossroads for about 200 yards to another drainage ditch that ran parallel to the roadway from which we were receiving the rifle fire. I had one major problem because the Germans on the other side of that roadway were at least combat patrol size and I only had one rifle squad at my disposal. I radioed Lieutenant Harry Welsh at the company CP to send up the balance of 1st Platoon and also 1st Lieutenant Frank Reis from the battalion headquarters company with his section of light machine guns. At this time we received some rifle grenade fire from the direction of a culvert that ran under the road to the river. Without any direction, the men immediately returned that fire and destroyed the German position. In the ensuing exchange, we lost Sergeant William H. Dukeman, a man we all respected. "Duke" was a Toccoa man who was beloved by everyone in the company.

While waiting for the rest of the platoon to join us, I went out fifty yards into the field between the two lines to contemplate the situation we were facing. After careful reflection, three things were immediately apparent: first, the Germans were behind a good solid roadway embankment. We were in a shallow ditch, with no safe route for withdrawal. Second, the Germans were in a good position to outflank us to our right and catch us in this open flat field with no cover. Lastly, if the Germans had a force of any size, they could advance right down that roadway south and there would be nothing to stop them until they hit the battalion command post. Determining that we could not stay where we were and refusing to retreat, I decided to attack. To surrender the initiative to the enemy was indefensible. I figured that when you are in a face-off, the guy who gets off the first shot usually wins. There was really no other decision to make than to take the battle directly to the enemy. I asked God to give me strength.

By the time the balance of the 1st Platoon arrived, full daylight reached our position. I called Lieutenants Reis and Peacock, the latter being the leader of 1st Platoon, and Staff Sergeant Floyd Talbert together and gave them the following orders: "Talbert, take 3d Squad to the right. Peacock, take the left with 1st Squad, and I'll take 2d Squad right up the middle. Reis, I want your machine guns placed between the columns and I want good covering fire until we reach that roadway. Then, lift your fire and move up and join us. Fix bayonets and get in line as quickly as possible. Peacock, when everybody is in position,

I'll give you a hand signal and you drop a smoke grenade to signal our jump-off."

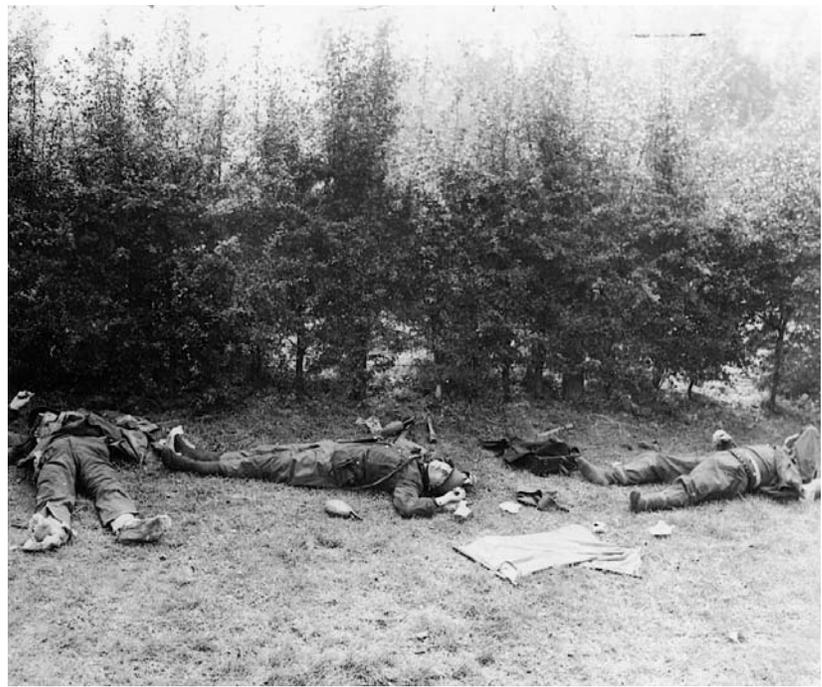
I then assembled the second squad and explained the plan. Don Hoobler was standing right in front of me. When I said, "Fix bayonets," he took a big swallow. I can still remember seeing his Adam's apple make a difficult trip up and down his throat. Hoobler's adrenalin was flowing.

My adrenalin was pumping too. I had never been so pumped up in my life. On the smoke signal, the base of fire commenced and all three columns started their dash across the 175 to 200 yards of level field. I was a good athlete in school, but I am sure that I ran the 200 yards faster than I had ever run 200 yards in my

life. Hidden in the grass were strings of barbed wire, about the height of the tops of our shoes. I tripped once or twice but continued running. Oddly enough, I seemed to be floating more than running as I rapidly outpaced everyone else in the platoon. When I reached the road leading to the dike, I was completely alone, oblivious to where the rest of the men were located.

The roadway from the dike tapered from being twenty feet high at the dike to a level of about three feet in front of me. I simply took a running jump onto the roadway. Good God! Right in front of me was a sentry on outpost, who still had his head down, ducking the covering fire from Lieutenant Reis. To my right was a solid mass of infantry, all packed together, lying down at the juncture of the dike and the road, on which I was standing and which led to the river. They, too, still had their heads down to duck under that base of fire. Since it was already cold in October, the enemy were all wearing their long winter overcoats and had their backpacks on, all of which hindered their movement. Every single man was facing the dike and I was in their rear. I realized what the size of a company formation of paratroopers looked like and I knew this was much larger than one of our companies. Other than a lone sentry, who was directly in front of me, the rear of this mass of men was about fifteen yards away and the front of the company was no more than an additional fifty yards from my position.

I wheeled and dropped back to my side of the road, pulled the pin of a hand grenade, and tossed it over. At the same time, the German sentry lobbed a potato masher back to me. As soon as I threw the grenade, I realized that I had goofed. I had kept a band of tape around the handle of my grenades to avoid an accident in case the pin was pulled accidentally. Fortunately, the enemy's grenade also failed to explode. I immediately jumped back up on top of the road. The sentry was still hunched down covering his head with his arms waiting for my grenade to explode. He was only three or four yards away. After all these years, I can still see him smiling at me as I stood on top of the dike. It wasn't necessary to take an aimed shot. I simply shot from the hip. That shot startled the entire company and they started to rise and turn toward me en masse. After killing the sentry, I simply pivoted to my right and kept firing right into that solid mass of troops.



Stripped of their shoes and other much-needed supplies by their comrades, the bodies of three German soldiers lie in the Dutch countryside.

The movements of the enemy seemed surreal to me. When they rose up, their reaction seemed to be so slow. When they turned to look over their shoulders at the sound of my firing, it was in slow motion, and when they started to raise their rifles to fire, they seemed so lethargic. I cannot give you a reason for this mental trance that I was in other than to say that everybody around me seemed out of synchronization. I was the only one who seemed normal. I never experienced anything like this in combat before or since. I immediately emptied the first clip of eight rounds and, still standing in the middle of the road, I put in a second clip. Still shooting from the hip, I emptied that clip into the enemy. By now I could see some of the Germans throwing their rifles to their shoulders to start shooting at me, but they were caught up in the pushing and shoving so they were unable to get a good shot at me. Most of the mob was just running away. After finishing the second clip, I dropped back to my side of the road for cover. Looking to my right I could see Talbert sprinting to reach the dike. Crouched over, he was still a good ten yards from the road. Right behind him was Sergeant Rader running straight up with that long stride of his. My column was still struggling to reach the road. Tripping over the wire, they were at least twenty yards away. Lieutenant Peacock was leading his column, but he was also about twenty yards from the road.

Not waiting for the remainder of the platoon, I inserted a third clip and started popping up, taking a shot or two, and then dropping back down. The Germans, in the meantime, began running as best they could, but those long winter overcoats and packs shortened their strides as they ran away from me along the foot of the dike toward the east. By now, Talbert, Rader and his crew were in position and they immediately commenced a deadly accurate fire. "Fire at will," I commanded. You could not have written a better script than this. Talbert's and Rader's squads had a duck shoot straight into the rear of that mass of retreating men. It was virtually impossible to miss. Without effective leadership to calm them down and to make this battle organized chaos, the enemy's retreat disintegrated into a rout.

At this time, another German company arrived from about 100 yards away, east of the road crossing. They had been in the vicinity of the windmill adjacent to the river. When they joined the company that we had routed, the increased mass of troops produced a target-rich environment. My column by now had reached the road and PFC Roy W. Cobb placed his machine gun and delivered long-distance fire on the retreating Germans. Cobb was a hard-nosed individual if you ever saw one, a regular army man who clearly understood combat. Cobb's fire was extremely effective, as was the fire of Talbert's squad, since Talbert had a straight shot at a distance of 250 yards. Peacock's group, on my left, now engaged the enemy, inflicting six dead and nine prisoners on the retreating Germans. As the enemy fled along the dike to the roadway leading back to the river, we could observe their withdrawal at all times. I now called artillery support and we maintained effective fire on the Germans as they ran as fast as they could



Rapidly moving across the low-lying Dutch countryside, an American soldier leaps over a drainage ditch. After the initial phase of Operation Market Garden, the fighting in Holland became more protracted.

toward the river.

My immediate intention was to pursue them toward the river and cut off their retreat. I requested an additional platoon from battalion, and they ordered a platoon from Fox Company to come to my support. While waiting for the platoon to arrive, we reorganized. My casualties were one man dead and four wounded. Tech/5 Joseph D. Liebgott had been slightly wounded in the arm, but he was ambulatory so I assigned him the mission of escorting seven German prisoners to the rear. Liebgott had earned the reputation of being one of Easy's best combat soldiers, but we had all heard stories that he was very rough on prisoners. Liebgott was one of Easy Company's killers, so I deemed it appropriate to take a bit of caution. When he heard me say, "Take the prisoners back to the battalion command post," he replied, "Oh boy! I'll take care of them." In his exuberance Liebgott stood up and paced back and forth and he was obviously very nervous and concerned.

I stopped him in his tracks. "There are seven prisoners and I want seven prisoners turned over to battalion."

Liebgott was highly incensed and started to throw a tantrum. Somewhat unsure of how he would react, I then dropped my M-1 to my hip, threw off the safety, and said, "Liebgott, drop all your ammunition and empty your rifle." There was much grumbling and swearing, but he did as I had ordered. "Now," I said, "you can put one round in your rifle. If you drop a prisoner, the rest will jump you." One of the German prisoners, an officer, evidently understood this exchange. After he understood my orders, he relaxed and sat down. Liebgott returned seven prisoners to battalion headquarters that day—I personally checked with Nixon.

When the platoon from Fox Company finally arrived, I distributed ammunition and then made plans to advance toward the river. I intended to set up a base of fire, and then move half the unit forward 100 yards, stop and set up another base of fire, and then have the second half of the platoon leapfrog 100 yards. We would again establish a base of fire and repeat the maneuver in this manner to the river, a distance of 600 yards. At the river end of this road was a ferry that connected the village of Renkun on the north side of the Rhine with a factory on the Rhine River's south bank. Obviously, the Germans had used this crossing to get these two companies to the Island from Arnhem. Now they wanted to return to the ferry to withdraw across the river.

We conducted four leapfrog movements with little trouble other than receiving a light concentration of artillery fire, which fell harmlessly on our left flank. As we reached the factory buildings, we were hit by an attack on our right rear flank by a force that I estimated at seventy-five men. Looking at my tactical position from the factory, I realized that I was getting myself into a bottleneck. By now, Easy Company was really close to the river and we were looking up at the German artillery and mortar positions. And now, on my right rear flank, I had what was left of those two German companies pinching in on my flank and attempting to cut off the withdrawal of my two platoons. I decided it was better to call it a day, withdraw, and live to fight tomorrow. Consequently, we withdrew to the dike, leapfrogging in reverse, but always laying down a base of fire.

All went as planned, but just as we were pulling the last groups over the dike, the enemy cut loose with a terrific concentration of mortar and artillery fire right on that crossroads. They had that point zeroed in just perfectly. Before we could move the troops either right or left away from the crossroads, we suffered eighteen casualties, all wounded. I grabbed the SCR 300 radio and went to the top of the dike to try and return some artillery on the Germans. I put the radio down by my left shoulder and was coordinating artillery fire as rapidly as I could. I also called battalion and asked for medics and ambulances to extract the wounded. Lieutenant Jackson "Doc" Neavles, the assistant battalion surgeon, replied and wanted to know how many casualties. I told him we needed help for "two baseball teams." Neavles

wasn't very sharp where sports were concerned, and asked me to put that message in clear language. I replied, "Get the hell off the radio so I can get some more artillery support, or we'll need enough for three baseball teams."

About that time a concentration of mortar rounds hit right behind me and I heard a "ting." I took off my helmet to examine it, thinking I'd been hit on the helmet. There was no sign of damage, so I put it back on and then I noticed that the antenna to the radio sitting by my left shoulder had been clipped off right at the top of the radio. Eventually, the artillery and mortar fire ceased, but we had suffered far too many casualties to continue the engagement. Fortunately none was killed in weathering that mortar and artillery concentration. Sergeant Leo Boyle was one of those hit. He had been my right-hand man all day, and he was in a foxhole right behind me when he was hit. That was the end of the war for Boyle, a very good, loyal friend. The ambulances came and picked up the wounded. I set up a couple of strong points to cover the crossroad, but did not put one on the crossroad since the Germans had already used the intersection as a target reference point. About this time Captain Nixon showed up and asked me, "How's everything going?"

"Give me a drink of water," I replied as I sat down on the edge of the dike. Until that point, I had not realized how exhausted I was. He handed me his canteen and as I went to lift the canteen, my hand was visibly shaking. I'd often seen Nixon's hand shake when he had one too many drinks, but this was the first time that I had ever seen my own hand shake. Nixon's shaking hands were the result of guzzling a shot of Vat 69 and were due to the shock of his nervous system gearing up. I felt my shaking hands were the result of my nervous system settling down, recovering from exertion and excitement.

How we had survived, I had no idea. We were certainly *very* lucky, as we had probably faced 300 plus troops. Fortunately the German leadership was abysmal. This was a far cry from what we had experienced in Normandy, where the enemy marksmanship and grazing fire inflicted a far greater number of casualties on Easy Company. At no time during our current battle had there been any evidence of German commanders directing well-aimed and concentrated fire until their artillery had opened up as we reached the

river. This lack of fire discipline was seen originally by the indiscriminate firing of the machine guns early in the morning.

Once we had eliminated the enemy machine gun crew, the Germans magnified their mistakes by letting our initial squad get away with sitting in that open field, waiting for the balance of the platoon and the machine gun section to come forward from the company CP. While we waited, we were located in a shallow trench—they had a road bank for a firing line. We sat there for at least one hour without the enemy exercising the slightest bit of initiative. Additionally, the German officers allowed their company to bunch up in one gigantic mass once the battle started.

Taking advantage of the minimal cover afforded by their foxhole, a pair of American soldiers provides suppressing fire in an effort to dislodge a German sniper.



Finally, the Germans compounded their errors by permitting us to pin them down with two machine guns while the remainder of 1st Platoon made a dash across 200 yards of a perfectly flat field. To allow roughly thirty-five men rout two companies of elite troops hardly spoke well of the leadership of the enemy.

In my estimation, this action by E Company was the highlight of all Easy Company's engagements during the entire war and it also served as my apogee as company commander. Easy's destruction of the German artillery battery at Brecourt Manor on D-Day was extremely important in its contribution to the successful



At the "Island" dike after Easy Company destroyed two German infantry companies on October 5, 1944

landing at Utah Beach, but this action demonstrated Easy Company's overall superiority, of every man, of every phase of infantry tactics: patrol, defense, attack under a base of fire, withdrawal, and, above all, superior marksmanship with rifles, machine guns, and mortar fire. All this was done against numerically superior forces that had an advantage of ten to one in manpower and excellent observation for artillery and mortar support. Since early morning, we had sustained twenty-two casualties from the fifty-five or so soldiers who were engaged. Nixon and I estimated the enemy casualties as fifty killed, eleven captured, and countless wounded. I guess I had contributed my share, but killing never made me happy. Satisfied, yes, because I knew I had done my job; but never happy.

There was no superior officer or staff officer present to witness any part of the engagement. Therefore, it was up to me to write up the account. Describing this action, I intentionally wrote the entire narrative without once using the word "I." My reason was simple—I wanted to ensure that all credit went to the men who deserved it. I was not bucking for a personal decoration or any personal acknowledgement of my abilities as a combat commander. On October 16, I recommended that 1st Platoon and the first section of the light machine gun platoon of Headquarters Company be cited for gallantry in action. In compiling my recommendation, I noted that 1st Platoon had spearheaded the company attack at Carentan. In Holland they had led the attack on Nuenen during which fifteen men of the platoon were killed or injured. Now they had been instrumental in the destruction of two companies of SS troops. God, I was proud of these men! Eleven days later, Colonel Sink issued a regimental general order that cited 1st Platoon, Easy Company for "their daring and aggressive spirit and sound tactical ability" against a vastly superior enemy force. That citation was reward enough for me.

My real satisfaction lay in the eyes of the men. In a sense, Staff Sergeant Talbert was representative of the entire company. From that day onward, there was a look in his eye of respect, and a look in my eye of respect for him and the others who had participated in the attack. The key to a successful combat leader is to earn respect, not because of rank, but because you are a man. In a letter dated after the war, Tab attempted to summarize our relationship: "The things we had are damn near sacred to me." The feeling was mutual as October 5 sealed feelings of camaraderie and friendship that were beyond words. You can't describe it. You have to live through it, but you never question it.

October 5 marked my last combat action as commander of Easy Company and the last day that I fired my weapon in combat. On October 9, Colonel Sink assigned me to 2d Battalion headquarters to serve as battalion executive officer. The episode in the HBO series that depicted Sink visiting Easy Company on the dike after we had destroyed the two German companies to ask if I thought I could handle a battalion was fairly accurate, but the timing was wrong. This conversation actually occurred while we were at Mourmelon-le-Grand after we were pulled off the front line in November. First Lieutenant Fred Heyliger temporarily assumed command of Easy Company until First Lieutenant Norman S. Dike, Jr. arrived from regimental headquarters to assume command of the company with which I had served for two years. Heyliger had been an 81mm mortar platoon leader in Headquarters Company of 2d Battalion. He had two combat jumps to his credit and was well respected in Easy Company.

Leaving Easy Company was the hardest thing I had done in my life. Life in an infantry company is extremely intimate and the result is that men share their collective experiences each and every day. As I reflected on my two years in the company, from a platoon leader at Toccoa to Easy's commanding officer since D-Day, I knew that I was leaving the greatest group of men with whom I had ever served. From the tyrannical tenure of Captain Sobel through my relief, Easy Company had trained and fought as a cohesive unit. At Toccoa, Sobel had constantly screamed at the men and he forced each soldier to stand on his own. You were not supposed to help one another. If you did, Sobel withheld your pass and placed you on extra duty. He was trying to wash the men out. This brought the men closer together as they helped each other with their sprains, in carrying heavy equipment, such as crew-served weapons, mortars, and base plates. Easy Company had to work together to get through each day, and this cohesion intensified as the weeks passed. In time, I noticed that when the men started receiving packages from home, they shared within their squad and within their platoon. When we deployed to England in 1943 the cooperation manifested itself even more when the noncommissioned officers mutinied because of their fear of going into battle with Captain Sobel. The rebellion was based on true fear of what lay ahead. Fortunately, Colonel Sink had intervened to diffuse a highly dangerous situation. And later, of course, when we entered combat, the men continued to share the good and the bad, the tough times and the easy times. From D-Day onward, combat further cemented the closeness that united Easy Company. Stress and combat created a special bond that only exists in an infantry company at war. Hardship and death brought the men together as close as any family or any husband and wife. It was this bond that made Easy Company "a band of brothers" that exists to this day. I was fortunate enough to have been a part of it, but the cohesion that existed in the company was hardly the result of my leadership. The company belonged to the men—the officers were merely the caretakers. □



The “Island” Today

The famed “Island” dike where Dick Winters fired his last shot of the war looks much today as it did on October 5, 1944.

A modern view of the terrain at the “Island” reveals the depression through which Major Richard Winters led his company.

Many of the terrain features are still there: the shallow ditch where Winters and his men began their charge, the second ditch where he led the men forward to kill seven Germans, the culvert that ran under the road, and the factory where the day’s actions ended. There have, however, been a few changes in the 60-plus years since Easy Company’s definitive action: Fences run along the road, cattle graze, and bales of hay line the road during harvest time. There are no longer traces of fox holes dug into the sides of the dike, but the factory is still there, producing bricks and other masonry products.

Following Winters footsteps to the top of the road, the panorama of the German position reveals an easy killing ground, and the road is high enough to offer the perfect position for hip shots from an M1 rifle. Winters had no need to aim from this high ground at such close range. Looking down from this position, it seems amazing that none of the Germans were able to fire a level shot at Winters in such an exposed place.

Much of the terrain surrounding the Island consists of lowlands cross-stitched with raised dikes, also known as levies—many of which serve as roads. The area is in many ways similar to the checkerboard design of France’s hedgerow country—minus the heavy brush. The sea-level climate is mild, even in November, unlike Bastogne which is in hill country.

The 2001 HBO miniseries, *Band of Brothers*, reenacted Easy Company’s action at the dike to the detail. Although filmed in Hertfordshire, England, the set designers were able to almost perfectly recreate the Dutch terrain (the grass in Holland is a much brighter green). With the exception of a few changed lines (the miniseries has Easy Company simply opening fire on the seven Germans instead of reacting to Winters’s command), and some artistic license with a few actions (the surrendering Germans emerged from a clump of reeds, not the culvert), it was an excellent representation of what actually happened.

Kevin M. Hymel

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Buck Compton, the storied “Band of Brothers” platoon leader, tells of his wartime and postwar exploits.

By **FLINT WHITLOCK**

Thanks to the late historian Stephen Ambrose, his book *Band of Brothers*, and the HBO series of the same title, the legendary, extraordinary exploits of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 101st Airborne Division, have become well known to a whole new generation.

And one of the most extraordinary men who served with that outfit is Lynn “Buck” Compton. His life story would make a great film or TV series in its own right. It has made for a great recently released book, *Call of Duty: My Life Before, During, and After the Band of Brothers*, written with Marcus Brotherton and including a foreword by John McCain.

To begin at the beginning, Compton was born in Los Angeles, California, on New Year’s Eve 1921. As might be expected, the young man hated his first name. “My mother’s father was from Lynn, Massachusetts,” he said, “and named Lyndley in honor of the town, so that’s where my name came from. But to me, Lynn was a girl’s name and always will be.”

He resolved to change it. Always a baseball fan, his favorite team was the L.A. Angels, a minor-league

Scrambling forward through a shower of earth and rock, American soldiers seek cover during Operation Market Garden. German artillery fire rains down from deadly 88mm multipurpose field guns.

team in south Los Angeles. The team had a player named Truck Hannah, whose real name was James Harrison Hannah. Compton, at an early age, thought: “If he could have a nickname, why couldn’t I? One day in grammar school, I rolled around in my head the name—Truck Compton. Sounded tough, but I also sounded like a copycat. How about Buck? That was close enough for jazz. It was settled—Buck Compton was my new name. I informed all my friends that Buck was the only name I’d answer to. That was OK by them—nobody wanted a friend who had a sissy’s name.”

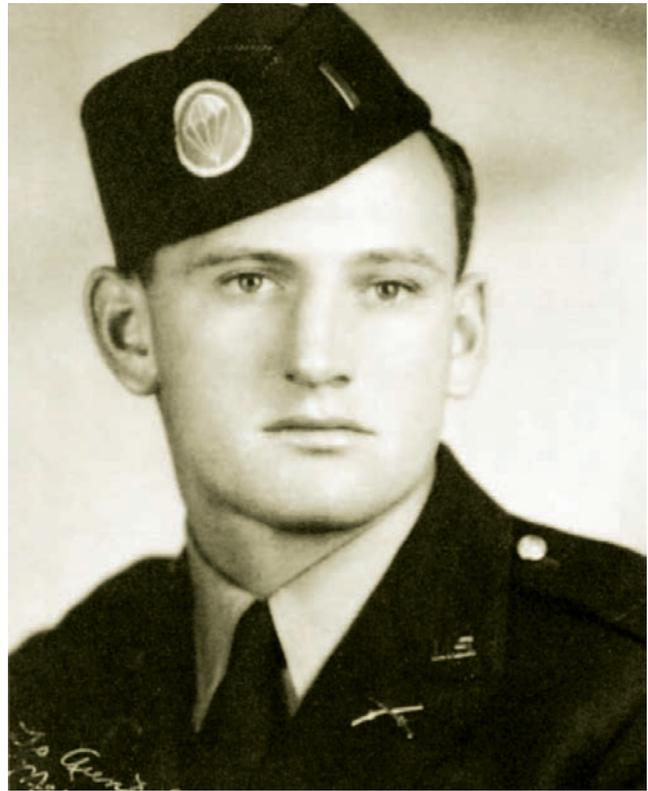
Growing up in Los Angeles, he also became a movie fan and a young extra in several films, even appearing in a few scenes with up-and-coming child actor Mickey Rooney. Unhappy with Compton’s efforts in the silent classic, *Modern Times*, star and director Charlie Chaplin fired him from the set. The Compton family lived a lower-middle-class existence during the Great Depression, and the loss of the meager movie extra income brought home by Buck was keenly felt. To take up part of the slack, he earned a few dollars a week as a caddy at a local golf course as well as a newspaper delivery boy.

Besides being an avid baseball fan, Compton developed into a standout player. After he entered high school, he continued to pursue his interest in the game, becoming the all-league catcher his senior year. He also went out for the football team where the coach, a brusque, demanding man, never settled for less than 100 percent effort. It was a lesson Buck Compton never forgot. “Coach Bert’s voice helped push me through a lot of hard times, including the war years,” he said. “His presence became a part of me. Whatever mud or snow we were in, if our ammunition ran low or we didn’t eat for some time, Coach Bert was there. His voice ingrained its way into my head. I couldn’t shake that booming voice if I tried.”

In 1939, Compton graduated from high school and was offered a football scholarship to UCLA. But before he could enter college, tragedy struck; Buck’s father, plagued by feelings of inadequacy and alcoholism, committed suicide.

Crushed by the loss of his father and struggling to comfort his distraught mother, Compton said his high school football coach became a “tower of strength” for him and helped him get through that difficult time. He related, “Coach Bert became an example of what it means to be truly strong. Even when life throws you down, somehow you get up and continue; if you can help others in the process, you do that then, too.”

Compton then entered UCLA with his football scholarship but was required to work four hours a day on campus for 50 cents an hour. From 6 until 8 AM each day, he picked up trash, then attended class, then spent his afternoons at football practice, then had another two hours in the evening picking up trash again. “Hoo boy,” he laughed, “I was really a big man on campus!”



This portrait of the young Buck Compton was taken in the village of Aldbourne, England, just before Christmas 1943.

During a meaningless game in his freshman year, while playing center, he was blindsided by an opponent with a block that nearly destroyed his knee. But he toughed it out and continued to play, albeit heavily taped up.

In his junior year, Compton went out for the UCLA baseball team and became the starting catcher (one of his teammates was Jackie Robinson). Compton was also named to the all-league team and later inducted into the UCLA Baseball Hall of Fame; he hoped that a major-league career was just around the corner.

While in school, Compton joined a fraternity. One of his fraternity brothers was Captain Dick Jensen, General George Patton's personal aide who was later killed during the fighting in North Africa.

At UCLA, Compton was also enrolled in the ROTC program. "I didn't know of anybody who was bothered by having to do two years of ROTC," he said. "Our education was being subsidized by the American taxpayers, so none of us considered it unreasonable to give a couple of years' military training in exchange for it. When I hear today of major state universities trying to bar armed forces recruiters on campus, that strikes me as unconscionable."

Although Buck Compton hoped to be playing major-league baseball when he graduated in 1943, life had other plans for him. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and other installations in the Pacific. Within days, the United States was at war with both Japan and Nazi Germany.

"After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor," Compton said, "the climate in America changed almost overnight. There was a lot of concern that the Japanese would follow up Pearl Harbor by bombing the United States mainland. On campus, everybody's outlook suddenly got very serious. We all knew active duty lay ahead. The only question was which branch of service a guy would go into."

The war did not touch Compton immediately; he remained in school expecting to receive his draft notice any day. After playing against Georgia in the January 1943 Rose Bowl game (UCLA lost, 9-0), Compton received his induction notice; he was to report to the Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. As he waited at L.A.'s Union Station for the train that would take him and several hundred other recruits eastward, Compton mused that everyone seemed to be feeling a sense of duty. "We had been waiting for our call, and this was it. It was our responsibility to go and fight," he said. "Young men heading off to war have no idea of the darkness that lies ahead. We certainly didn't, anyway. The atmosphere on the train bordered on a party."

The festive atmosphere vanished once the recruits reached Columbus, Georgia, on the outskirts of Fort Benning. Buck Compton was anxious to get into uniform, begin OCS, and prove that he had what it took to be an officer and a leader of men.

It would take a while. "Our status in Officers Candidate School felt strange," he said. "We were neither



Airborne veteran Lynn "Buck" Compton is shown in his catcher's gear while playing baseball for UCLA. Compton proved himself a fine athlete and later played minor league baseball.

fish nor fowl. We weren't sworn in yet as soldiers, but we were officially on active duty with a unit. We didn't have rank yet, and we dressed like privates. It would take the full 90 days at Benning until we received our commissions." Finally, Compton and the others in his class received the gold bars of second lieutenants and eagerly anticipated their upcoming assignments.

As it turned out, Compton received orders directing him to report to the 176th Infantry Regiment, a component of the Virginia National Guard at Benning, where his duty each day was teaching a one-hour class in aircraft identification. The rest of his day was spent sleeping late, eating, relaxing, eating, going for a swim at the officers' club, eating, and just plain goofing off. If this was the Army during wartime, he was mightily bored by it.

Then one day Compton was assigned to play baseball for the regimental team. As the majority of major-league ballplayers were in the service, the regimental teams were quite good. "Nearly all baseball players were prevented from seeing combat," observed Compton. "The great Joe DiMaggio, as well as Hank Greenberg, the Tigers' star power hitter, were among the many ballplayers who asked for combat duty but had it denied."

Also at Benning was Bob Waterfield, who had been the star quarterback at UCLA when Compton was there. Waterfield was in the process of organizing an on-post football team and wanted Compton to be his assistant coach. At the time, Waterfield was married to the sexy movie starlet Jane Russell, and they lived in on-post housing. When out in the field on maneuvers, Waterfield even requested that Compton escort his wife to dances and parties.

Compton recalled that one day, when he was visiting the Waterfield quarters, "Bob seemed totally engrossed in the playbook he was mapping out, and I remember thinking that if I were married to Jane Russell, I'd never give football a second glance."

Compton continued to play baseball for the regimental team but was growing more discontented by the day. Although many soldiers would have given their eyeteeth for the privilege of playing baseball for the duration in a safe, cushy, stateside setting, he felt that there was a job to be done and a war to be won—and it would not be won on the baseball diamond.

Knowing that the regimental commander would likely quash his application to transfer to another outfit, Compton learned that transfers were being automatically approved for anyone wanting to become a pilot or join the paratroops. He noted, "Flight training took a full year to make it up the ranks from cadet to pilot. I thought the war would be over in a year—we all did. But jump training only took a month." Compton put in for jump school.

"Overseas was where the action was. I wanted to be in the action. I wanted to win," said the ever-competitive Compton, who looked forward to learning how to leap out of airplanes.

The parachute school was right there at Fort Benning, where Compton and several hundred others, officers and enlisted men alike, were put through the rigorous, physically and mentally demanding challenge of airborne training.

For four weeks Compton gutted it out, determined to earn the coveted, silver-winged badge of a paratrooper. At last the course was completed and Compton received his wings. He was then assigned to the 515th PIR, which would soon become a part of the newly formed 17th Airborne Division at Camp Mackall, North Carolina.

Shortly after joining the 17th Airborne, Compton received new orders directing him to report to the 101st Airborne Division, which was already in training in England. One of Compton's former football teammates at UCLA had seen his name on a list of airborne officers, pulled a few strings, and had him sent to the 101st.

In December 1943, Compton and several thousand soldiers crossed the Atlantic on the former luxury

liner *Queen Elizabeth*, which had been converted into a troopship. Once the ship docked in Scotland, Compton took a train southward to the small, picturesque English village of Aldbourne, where he found E Company, 506th PIR, commanded by 1st Lt. Thomas Meehan, encamped. They had been there since August 1942.

The officers of E Company were quartered in a large, two-story manor house located on Aldbourne's town square, while the enlisted men were housed in stables adjacent to the manor house and also in Quonset huts. It was cold, wet, and clammy. Heat and hot water were in short supply, but there were gripes aplenty.

Compton was taken to meet the 1st Platoon commander, 1st Lt. Dick Winters, and his assistant, Lieutenant Harry Welsh. Winters impressed Compton greatly. "He was from eastern Pennsylvania," Compton recalled, "and had grown up with a strict Mennonite background. He was a hard worker, serious, and had paid his own way through college." He had also earned his commission through OCS and had been one of the original members of Easy Company, surviving all the hell that Captain Herbert Sobol, the company commander at Camp Toccoa, Georgia, could dish out.

Compton's first job was as assistant platoon leader of the 2nd Platoon. He said, "This was it. This was why I quit playing baseball and volunteered to be a paratrooper." He also noted that his life would never be the same. The company was made up of about 150 soldiers, and the 506th PIR had nine companies, or almost 1,500 men. In total, with all of its organic units, the 101st Airborne Division had about 10,000 soldiers.

Second Lieutenant Buck Compton also discovered that it was difficult for a newcomer, especially a "90-day wonder," to be welcomed into the ranks of a proud, closely knit, and well-trained group of soldiers.

As only one-ninth of the regiment, E Company, noted Compton, "still comprised a stalwart and elite group of men. I doubt if anyone would ever describe E Company as 'average.' Throughout the course of the war, the unit encountered situations that required extraordinary bravery, as many units did. I am honored to be included in their ranks. But when I joined the unit in December 1943, it took me a while to feel like I belonged."

Like many second lieutenants, Compton quickly learned that it was the sergeants who did much of the "leading" in a platoon and company, and he was blessed with having some exceptionally fine sergeants, men such as Don Malarkey, Bill Guarnere, and Joe Toye.

Compton said that he would tell one of his NCOs what needed to be done, and the sergeant would make sure it got done. "I just sort of stood around and watched them perform. I never found any occasion to administer any kind of discipline or chew anybody out, the way some officers do."

He also ingratiated himself with his men by refusing to build barriers between himself as an officer and them as enlisted men; he enjoyed shooting the bull and playing poker with them. Lieutenant Winters disapproved of such fraternization, and he and Compton once got into a heated argument about such un-officerly behavior.

In the end, Compton realized the reason for such rules. An officer might be reluctant to order an enlisted "buddy" into carrying out a deadly mission but, as he said, "I've never found it easy to order anybody around. I'd rather ask someone for something than demand it. It was not in my nature to be anything other than myself. If I consider somebody a friend, enlisted man or otherwise, I don't hide it."

Compton's easygoing attitude is probably one reason why so many of his men grew to have such affection for him. One of his men, Edward "Babe" Heffron, said later, "Buck is not only one of the nicest men I've ever known, a very humble man, but out of all the officers in Easy Company, Buck was closest to the guys."



General Anthony McAuliffe of the 101st Airborne Division addresses a gathering of troops prior to the launching of Operation Market Garden in the skies over Holland. McAuliffe later gained fame at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge.

During the first half of 1944, training for the invasion of the European continent continued at an ever-quickening pace. Several practice jumps a week were scheduled, and the airborne troops rarely went anywhere at a walk. It was always double time. When they weren't jumping out of airplanes, the paratroops were on the rifle or grenade range, or the bayonet course, or improving their hand-to-hand fighting skills.

While training in England, Buck Compton broke an ankle, but it healed quickly and within a few weeks he was back taking part in maneuvers with the rest of his platoon. He knew something big was in the works; throughout the spring of 1944 huge swarms of B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers, on their way to bomb enemy targets, covered the sky above Aldbourne, and scuttlebutt was rife with speculation about the impending invasion of France. Compton could not wait for it to begin.

In May 1944, the division was alerted that the "big step-off" was imminent, and E Company was moved from Aldbourne to an encampment at Upton Airfield near Devon on the southern coast.

"Tension grew in anticipation of what we knew would soon come," he recalled. "We went through days of extensive briefings, and were shown maps and sand tables and told to memorize everything we saw."

Their specific mission soon became clear. While over 150,000 seaborne troops were scheduled to hit five invasion beaches along the Normandy coast, three airborne divisions, two American and one British, would precede the beach landings and be dropped behind enemy lines to sow confusion, attack enemy positions from the rear, and seal off routes the Germans would likely use to smash into the flanks of the invasion sites.

The 101st Airborne's mission was to drop in the vicinity of Ste.-Marie-du-Mont, seize four causeways behind Utah Beach at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula, and prevent any German incursions into the invasion area where the 4th Infantry Division would be wading ashore.

The paratroops knew that if they failed, the 4th could be driven back into the sea. They also knew that



Laden with combat gear, American airborne troops await orders to stand up, hook up, and jump. These troops were the vanguard of the Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944.

if the 4th failed to secure the beachhead, there would be no rescue for the airborne divisions. So both the airborne and seaborne troops were vitally dependent upon each other's success. Delayed for a day by a major storm ravaging the English Channel, Operation Overlord got under way late on the night of June 5, 1944.

As troopships, support ships, and warships left their ports along the southern coast of England, the heavily laden airborne forces (each man carried between 70 and 100 pounds of equipment) were gathering at their airfields, climbing into hundreds of aircraft of the United States Army Air Forces Troop Carrier Command that would deliver them to hostile shores (it took two C-47s to carry one 40-man platoon), and taking off into the dark night.

The flight across the Channel was routine; the skies belonged to the Allies. About three-quarters of the way to France, Compton noted, "Our crew chief came back and took the door off the airplane, leaving a hole in the side."

As the first man in his "stick" of paratroopers, Compton shuffled to the doorway and looked out. The black sky all around was filled with transport planes in formation. Down below, the French coastline came into view. Then, as they crossed the beaches, "tracer bullets and antiaircraft started to appear," he said, "red, blue, and green tracers, spectacular and deadly against the night sky.

"As we neared our drop zone, the weather grew overcast, and more and more antiaircraft flak began to hit near our plane. Nothing ever hit our plane directly that I was aware of. Some flak I could see exploding outside the door in the fog bank. Mostly it was just a crackling sound. I had never met our pilot, so I knew nothing about him. I assumed he was on course and would slow down enough to let us jump. What else could I assume?"

The red light near the door went on, signaling the men that it was time to stand up, hook their static

lines to the steel cable that ran the length of the interior of the fuselage, and prepare to jump. Stomachs tightened as the anti-aircraft fire became more intense. In other planes, Compton learned later, panic ensued as bullets and shells and shrapnel ripped through the thin aluminum skin and the unprotected bodies of paratroopers. Some troops bailed out over the water while others, their planes on fire, rode their craft down to a fiery end.

Suddenly, sooner than Compton expected, the red light went off and the green “jump” light came on. Operating on instinct born of endless training, Compton and his men moved quickly and threw themselves out into the black, blazing night. He hoped that they were somewhere over their drop zone.

The C-47's pilot had not, as Compton had assumed, throttled down. The plane was still rushing along at top speed.

The shock of the prop blast was more than Compton expected; it broke the plastic chin cup off his helmet and ripped the leg bag containing his carbine, mortar rounds, and extra equipment off his leg.

As he descended, Compton could hear the sounds of gunfire below but none came close to him. “I drifted into an orchard—some sort of enclosed field with hedges all around it. My landing was good, a two-footer. Everything was eerily quiet. A few cows mooed in the distance. I was completely alone.” Compton did not find out until later that his company commander, Lieutenant Meehan, was killed when his transport plane was shot down.

While lying in the darkened field, Compton reflected that, except for his trench knife, a canteen, and a couple of grenades, he was completely without equipment of any kind. “Neither my first jump at Benning nor my first jump into enemy territory had gone anything according to plan. Nothing had been on schedule. Nothing had been smooth. What could possibly come next?”

He would soon find out.

The 101st Airborne Division's first combat jump had been part success, part disaster. Like its sister airborne division, the 82nd, units were scattered far from their intended drop zones. Vital equipment was missing. Officers and NCOs were lost, injured, or dead. Thousands of men had no idea where they were, or where the other men in their platoons were.

As Compton learned later, “Some paratroopers were shot on the way down, and some fell into land that had been flooded by the Germans and drowned. Some fell on trees, buildings, or antiglider poles.”

The confusion did serve one good purpose. The Germans had little idea of the true scope and nature of what was happening. In addition to the widely dispersed paratroop landings, dummy parachutists had also been dropped by the Allies, giving the impression of a much larger airborne invasion than had actually taken place. German commanders did not know whether to send their troops in one direction or another, or to just sit tight and wait for further orders.

While trying to get his bearings in the dark, Compton could hear gunfire off in the distance, could see tracers still criss-crossing the night sky, could hear the steady drone of aircraft engines delivering more paratroopers, could see the dim forms of men floating down from the sky.

“Theoretically,” he said, “I should have been running into guys from my own platoon, but I wasn't even running into guys from my own division!”

Suddenly another airborne soldier landed about 20 yards away from him in the orchard; he was from the 82nd. The two of them headed out in the direction they were supposed to go: toward the beach.

As they walked, other stragglers from other outfits began joining them. They came across a lieutenant from D Company, 506th PIR, who had broken his leg upon landing. Seeing Compton without a weapon, he gave him his Thompson submachine gun and waited to be found by either American medics or German troops.

The ad hoc squad continued on. At times other American troops were added, and German troops,



Several of them arriving aboard a jeep, troopers of the 101st Airborne Division enter the important Norman town of Carentan on June 14, 1944. The fighting at Carentan was heavy, and the Americans withstood several German counterattacks.

too, gave themselves up to the marching paratroopers. As the sky gradually lightened, the sounds of the battle coming from Utah Beach began to punch the air.

Compton remembered, “One shell from a ship flew in like a freight train and landed about 50 feet away from us. It thudded, shaking the ground, and stuck fast—a dud. If it had exploded, it would have killed us for sure.”

Compton’s group marched on, listening to the sound of the naval guns and outgoing German artillery becoming louder and more intense. Up ahead, taking cover beside a building, he saw Lieutenant Winters; Sergeants Malarkey, Guarnera, and Toyne; and a handful of other enlisted men. Altogether the ensemble numbered about a dozen men. Compton breathed a sign of relief.

Pulling out a map, Winters told Compton that they were at an estate known as Breccourt Manor, about three miles west of Utah Beach. Suddenly, a battery of German 105mm guns began firing nearby, their rounds heading toward Utah Beach. Winters directed Compton to recon the area; Compton moved toward the sound of the guns while the GIs kept the Germans’ heads down with machine-gun fire. He soon discovered the battery of four guns, connected by trenches, firing on the causeways the 4th Infantry Division was using to march inland.

Compton jumped into one of the trenches, aimed his borrowed Thompson at two surprised, well-armed enemy soldiers, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. The firing pin was broken. The Germans prepared to fire.

At that moment, Sergeant Bill Guarnera, who without Compton knowing it had followed the lieutenant across the field and into the trench, blasted one of the enemy soldiers with his rifle. The other soldier scrambled out of the trench and began running away, but Compton lobbed a grenade at him.

“It detonated in the air right above the German’s head, killing him instantly,” he said. “That was my first kill. Ask me today what it’s like to kill a man in combat and I don’t say much. I have no idea who he was, what he did outside the war, or if he had a wife or family. You just don’t think. A man is trying to kill you, and you either kill him first or be killed waiting to assess the situation. I doubt if the choice I made to throw the grenade was even conscious. A sense of duty had long since taken over. We knew what our orders were, and we followed through as best we knew how.”

The battle for Breccourt Manor went on for hours, with both sides trading machine-gun fire. Compton

said, “I don’t remember when victory was at last declared at Brecourt. All the German guns were eventually destroyed, and Winters must have ordered a fallback to our original starting point. History has shown that troops landing at Utah Beach had an easier landing due in part to what was accomplished at Brecourt. I’m happy about that. If our actions saved any of our boys’ lives, that’s part of what we were there to do.”

For his deeds at Brecourt Manor, Compton was awarded the Silver Star. It was only later that he discovered that the dozen Americans had taken on 60 Germans.

The days following D-Day were something of a blur for Buck Compton. He recalled surviving nearby grenade and mortar explosions without a scratch, but the exhaustion of combat has dimmed his memory of that period.

One painful incident stuck in his mind, however. He and a private were patrolling along a hedgerow and spotted two other soldiers skulking along another hedgerow about 50 yards away. Compton noticed that both were wearing German camouflage ponchos of the type usually worn by SS troops, and one was carrying a Mauser rifle.

Compton and the private opened fire, killing both men. It was only when they went to examine the bodies that they discovered the dead men were both Americans; why they were wearing German ponchos and carrying a German rifle Compton never knew, but the incident still disturbs him greatly.

“Out of all the horror of war,” he said, “the guilt of survival is one of the things that haunts me most to this day. I will never know why I survived when so many others did not. When it comes to understanding any of this, I have long since given up trying.”

One of the key cities in Normandy is Carentan, between Utah and Omaha Beaches. Whoever controlled Carentan controlled an important road network through Normandy. Both sides knew this, and the Germans were just as intent upon holding Carentan as the Americans were in taking it away from them. The tough German 6th PIR was securely entrenched in part of the city’s outskirts—the part that American troops were ordered to seize.

The battle for Carentan began with an American artillery bombardment that lasted several days. Then U.S. P-38 fighters worked over the town from the air. With Lieutenant Winters now in command of the cobbled-together E Company, the entire 2nd Battalion was ordered to make a night approach to Carentan, then was ordered to turn around and return to its positions.

The paratroopers, back in their foxholes, then began taking enemy artillery fire. After the shelling subsided, the battalion was ordered once more to advance into the city. Compton described the place as being “like a ghost town. It was a shambles—crumbled buildings, dead Germans lying all over. We walked down the main street and out the other side. I’d estimate we saw a dead body every 10 feet or less. Most of the bodies had been pretty well mutilated by our artillery. I didn’t see any townspeople; they may have been hunkered down in their basements.”

As they left the shattered city and reentered the rural area beyond, the paratroopers were sprayed with machine-gun fire. A pitched battle lasted a while, then some Sherman tanks arrived and silenced the enemy. E Company moved back into Carentan, where it stayed for a few days, awaiting new orders. But combat was finished for them. After a month in France, the 101st, along with the 82nd, was ordered to return to England to prepare for whatever new mission might emerge.

While other Allied units crossed the English Channel to take part in Operation Cobra, the breakout from Normandy, and the dash toward Paris, the airborne divisions enjoyed a more-or-less “normal” military life of training, training, and more training.

Interspersed with the training periods, though, was plenty of relaxation and leave time. The soldiers explored London and other sites on their days off, even being invited to dinner at the homes of Aldbourne

residents who, in spite of rationing and wartime shortages, were more than generous to the young Yanks far from home.

Several times during that summer the division was alerted for combat jumps, but the missions were cancelled; the Allies were making such swift progress across France that the land armies had secured the intended drop zones before the airborne troops could be dropped on them.

It was not until September 1944 that the airborne troops, still encamped in England, received another assignment. This one was code-named Operation Market Garden and had been devised as a way of avoiding the fortifications along the Siegfried Line. The plan called for airborne troops to land behind the defenses, secure bridges over the Rhine River in German-occupied Holland, and make a lightning thrust into the Ruhr, the industrial heart of Germany. There was even hope and speculation that, if successful, Market Garden could end the war in Europe before Christmas.

For this bold operation, the normally cautious British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery detailed three British and Canadian airborne divisions to take the bridge at Arnhem. Simultaneously, the American 82nd Division would grab the bridge at Nijmegen while the 101st would assault and hold the crossing over the Wilhelmina Canal at Eindhoven.

Just as almost everything went wrong during the first hours of Operation Overlord but turned out right, almost everything went right during the first phase of Operation Market Garden but then went horribly wrong.

The initial parachute landings were flawless. There was little enemy fire, and Dutch civilians cheered the arrival of the Allies in their towns. But then the whole plan started to unravel. There were more German units in the vicinity than intelligence had accounted for. Some airborne units dropped into the midst of enemy formations and were cut to pieces. Radios did not work. The armored columns that were supposed to arrive to reinforce the lightly armed paratroops were late and were decimated. Airborne units were surrounded and cut to pieces.

In a fierce battle in a farmyard at the village of Hegel during the German counterattack, Compton was hit in the buttocks by a bullet. He was evacuated to an aid station in Eindhoven on the hood of a jeep.

Compton realized the mission was a costly failure: "When E Company jumped on that sunny day in September, we had 154 men. By the time Easy Company left for France in November, 88 days later, a third of the company was either dead or wounded."

After receiving initial medical treatment, Compton was sent back to a civilian hospital in Oxford, England, to recuperate. A little more than a month later he was back with E Company, now billeted in Reims, France. As he slowly regained his strength, the 101st continued to train for whatever new mission might come its way.

A hard winter hit northern Europe, the worst, some said, in more than a century. The Allied operation ground to a halt along the German border with Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. Everyone thought that they would just remain in place for the winter, try to stay warm, and then resume the offensive when spring came. It did not quite work out that way.

Adolf Hitler, with both his eastern and western fronts being squeezed by Germany's enemies, decided to gamble on one last throw of the dice. He launched Operation Wacht-am-Rhein, the biggest German offensive since Barbarossa, the June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, in the middle of December 1944.

Hitler's goal was the capture of the Allies' chief supply port at Antwerp, Belgium, and to reach the city his troops would need to take the vital crossroads town of Bastogne, Belgium. The offensive would be known by the Allies as the Battle of the Bulge.

At first, the Germans' surprise assault succeeded brilliantly. Caught totally unaware, American forces were forced to give ground. Thousands of U.S. troops, many completely raw and without prior combat



Marching out of Bastogne in triumph, soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division head for a badly needed rest. The Belgian crossroads town was vital to the Allied defense against the German Ardennes offensive, and the airborne troops held for days against severe attacks until they were relieved by General George S. Patton's U.S. Third Army.

experience, were killed or captured, or they fled for their lives across snowy fields.

With their lines shattered, the Americans needed to bring in divisions from other sectors to plug the gaps; the 101st Airborne was one of those called upon. The division boarded trucks at Reims and spent more than a day trying to reach the front near Bastogne. All along the highway leading into Bastogne, Compton and his men encountered long lines of panicked, demoralized American troops retreating from the enemy.

Without winter clothing and low on ammunition, the 101st was thrown into the breach. The paratroopers marched to the east of Bastogne and were told to dig foxholes in the frozen earth. A dark, damp fog settled over their positions. The temperature plunged to below zero. Soon it began to snow. The sounds of German tanks could be heard. Sporadic small arms and artillery fire hit around paratroopers' foxholes, but the anticipated big attack failed to materialize.

The tension, though, continued day and night. Thanks to the cold and the noise and the German flares that lit up the dark sky, sleep was hard to come by.

Just before Christmas, the Americans got the word that Bastogne was surrounded by the Germans. Compton and his men went without shaving, without washing. He and many of his men came down with frostbite.

Compton recalled, "We were alone, out in the woods, surrounded, desperately low on supplies. We were in day-to-day survival mode. Build the occasional fire. Melt some snow. Find something to eat. Cook it in your helmet. Stay out of harm's way. Just do what you need to do to get through the day."

The Germans sent a demand to Brig. Gen. Anthony McAuliffe, the 101st Airborne Division Artillery's commander, that he surrender his forces in and around Bastogne. McAuliffe's one-word reply has become emblematic of American fighting spirit: "NUTS!"

Then, two days before Christmas, the thick overcast that had kept Allied planes grounded finally lifted and the sun came out. American pilots hammered German formations from the air.

Yet the battle for Bastogne was not over. In fact, for Compton and his men, it had barely begun. In early January, a heavy German barrage shattered the trees in E Company's position and threw branches and red-hot shrapnel around in deadly fashion.

Compton said, "Very suddenly, broad daylight, really bad shelling started coming in—big, heavy stuff. Landing on us was the most shocking display of firepower I had ever seen. It was absolutely merciless. Shrapnel flew and shredded every which way. Bursts of dirt and snow exploded all over. You could feel the ground bounce. You could taste gunpowder in your mouth. For some time, all was complete chaos. Then the shelling stopped almost as suddenly as it began."

Compton's platoon area was a complete shambles of shattered trees, downed limbs, smoldering ground, blood, and bodies. "It's a terrible thing to see your guys like that," he said. "Death was everywhere."

Two of his NCOs, Guarnere and Toyne, were badly wounded. Realizing that his portion of the front line would be unable to hold if the Germans launched a ground attack, Compton took off in a rage for the company command post in an effort to get medics and reinforcements to his position.

By this time, Winters had been promoted and reassigned to battalion headquarters. Taking his place as commander of Easy Company was a haughty lieutenant named Norman Dike; he and Compton had never got along, and Compton was furious that Dike was not at the company command post. Storming back to his platoon's position, Compton could not contain his emotions any longer and broke down sobbing at the loss of so many of his men—many of whom he had been with since Normandy. When it had gone into the line around Bastogne, Easy Company had had 120 men; now, only half that number remained alive and capable of fighting.

A short time later, perhaps thinking that Compton was reacting to the strain of battle, the 506th PIR's commander, Colonel Robert Sink, pulled him off the line and out of combat.

With frostbitten feet, Compton was evacuated to a hospital in a rear area, but he would not stay there. Somehow he managed to get back to his platoon; he wanted at least to say goodbye to his men. It was a short, bittersweet parting.

By the time Buck Compton recuperated from his frostbite, the 101st Airborne was in Austria and the war was nearly over. A friend helped him get the job of running the Army's athletic programs for the GIs in Paris.

It was a cushy job, and there is no doubt that Compton's time in combat earned it for him. Yet, he was troubled that he had survived and so many others had not. "Survival seemed so implausible," he said, reflecting upon that time, "but some had made it to the end. I was one of the lucky ones."

In December 1945, Buck Compton came home from Europe. Discharged from the service, he returned to civilian life in California. But his military career had made a deep and lasting impression on him, and he joined the active reserves, retiring 20 years later as a lieutenant colonel. He reenrolled at UCLA to finish his college education, bought a used car with the money he had saved during the war, and even went out for the baseball team again.

Believing he had what it took to be a professional baseball player, he tried out for and made the AAA Pacific Coast League Spokane Indians. Reluctantly, he turned down the contract and looked around for something else to do. One day a friend suggested that he apply to law school; a career in law was the furthest thing from his mind, but he decided to give it a go. Strings were pulled, and Compton soon found himself enrolled in Loyola University's school of law; the G.I. Bill paid for his tuition and some of his expenses.

One day while in Los Angeles, Compton ran into an old acquaintance, Jack Colbern, a man who had umpired several of his baseball games at UCLA. He suggested that Compton apply for the police force, where his athletic talents could be put to use on the department's semi-pro baseball team.

Intrigued by the idea, Compton applied, was accepted, and soon found himself on the force. As soon as he graduated from the police academy, Compton was assigned to plain-clothes duty, an unheard-of first assignment in any police department today. He also switched his reserve military duty from armor to the Office of Special Investigations (OSI), a unit that had both criminal and counterintelligence functions, and was assigned to Maywood Air Force Base in Los Angeles County.

Although he really had no time for dating, one day his uncle who worked at a movie studio fixed Compton up with a young lady who worked as a secretary there. Her name was Donna. The two of them hit it off perfectly from the first date, and they were married in October 1947. They had two daughters, Syndee and Tracy, and their marriage would last a lifetime.

In June 1949 Compton graduated from law school and passed the bar exam, but he stayed on with the police department. He was transferred to the Detective Bureau, an assignment he called “some of the grimmest work I would ever encounter.”

With his law degree in hand, and through the connections he was making doing police work, Compton left the force in 1951 and was hired as a deputy district attorney for Los Angeles County, the first ex-police officer in L.A. to make such a switch. In this capacity, over the next two decades he found himself involved in a number of high-profile cases, but none more so than the trial of Sirhan Sirhan, the man who shot presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy in June 1968 at L.A.’s Ambassador Hotel.

Compton said, “The senator lived until the early morning hours of June 6, 1968. Ironic for me—June 6 would always be D-Day in my mind. Twenty-four years earlier, June 6, 1944, I had parachuted into Normandy.”

In 1970, California Governor Ronald Reagan appointed Buck Compton to the position of Associate Justice of the California Courts of Appeal.

He remained on the bench hearing appeals and writing opinions until he stepped down in 1990 at age 68. He and Donna then moved to the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington State and built a home to which they retired; their two daughters lived nearby. Sadly, in 1994 Donna developed serious medical problems and passed away suddenly.

In the early 1990s, he was interviewed by historian Stephen Ambrose for a book he was writing about E Company, 506th PIR; it was entitled *Band of Brothers*. The book became a best seller.

Then, after the stunning success of Steven Spielberg’s 1998 World War II epic *Saving Private Ryan*, which did much to rekindle public interest in World War II, plans were made to turn *Band of Brothers* into a 10-part miniseries for HBO. Along with several other E Company veterans, Compton became an unofficial technical adviser for the series, often conversing with and giving tips to actor Neal McDonough, who played him in the film.

Although he was not totally pleased with the artistic license that was taken for dramatic purposes, Compton realized that certain scenes had to be invented or reality altered for the sake of viewer impact.



Former Lieutenant Lynn “Buck” Compton (left) poses with actor Neal McDonough, who portrayed him in the 2001 HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*.

He was pleased, however, with all the attention and recognition that the book and series focused on the members of his old unit.

“The only downside,” he said, “is that not everybody who deserved recognition got it. The starting point of Easy Company was about 150 guys, maybe 200, while we were in combat in Europe. A lot of them did some pretty brave things and suffered a lot of hardship. Many were wounded and killed. All kinds of guys did as much as or more than I did, whose names were never heard of or mentioned.

“That’s not anybody’s fault. It would be simply impossible, if you were in Ambrose’s spot, to write a book that mentioned everybody. The book and the series had to be limited in scope. But I can understand that there are guys who feel left out. Like, Why is Compton mentioned and not me? I don’t know the answer to that. But I hope people will take it that we were representatives of combat soldiers everywhere.”

In thinking of other “combat soldiers everywhere,” Compton acknowledged that there is a certain amount of “glamour” that attaches to paratroopers “due to the fact that we jumped out of airplanes. But we didn’t have it as hard, for instance, as the guys in the 1st or 4th or 29th Divisions, who were grinding it out day after day in Europe, many of whom were not pulled back from the line to England after 30 days like we were. Or beyond that, the poor guys who served in the Pacific. I wouldn’t have traded with the guys in the Pacific for anything. None of them got the recognition we did.”

Compton passed away in February 2012 at the age of 90.

Compton remained fiercely proud of his military service, yet sincerely humble. When thanked for his service, he replied, “I spent three years on active duty, saw some combat in Europe, and suffered a minor wound. I got back in one piece and had the luxury of having a great family life and a rewarding career. I consider three years and a wound a small price to pay for the privilege of being born in America. The people to whom we all must pay our respects and honor for their service are those who gave life and limb in performing their duty.” □

Denver-based Flint Whitlock, author of several books on World War II, is a former Army paratrooper, and is working on a book about the D-Day airborne assault.

From the Publishers of WWII HISTORY Magazine

Battle of the Bulge

70TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL ISSUE



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Valor Studios

Ed Mauser, who fought as a member of the Band of Brothers, hadn't talked about his odyssey—until now.

By KEVIN M. HYMEL

Paratrooper Ed Mauser never forgot the first thing he saw when he leaped from the doorway of his C-47 transport plane in the opening hours of D-Day, June 6, 1944. It was another plane, holding Lieutenant Thomas Meehan, the commander of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, and 18 other paratroopers. “I thought the plane was going to make a landing, it hit the hedgerow and exploded. I knew all the fellows on it.”

Mauser had little time to think about what he had seen. After his parachute deployed, the strap of his leg bag yanked down to his ankle. “I thought I was going to break my legs,” he recalled. He reached down to adjust the strap, but the bag fell off. Within seconds he hit French soil. “It was one of my better landings.”

Immediately, a cow came by, which cheered him because it meant he was not in a minefield. Mauser noticed the cow moving its lips and imagined it was saying: “What’s this midnight stranger doing here?”

Major Richard Winters (fifth from the right, standing) congratulates Easy Company's commander, Lieutenant Ronald Spiers, on leading a successful attack on the town of Foy, in Matt Hall's painting, *Breakout From Bastogne*. In the foreground, lower right hand corner, Private Ed Mauser watches as Tech Sergeant George Luz shares a Hershey bar with some Belgian children. Mauser was later wounded when an enemy shell exploded near him.

He wasted no time getting out of his chute and climbing atop a hedgerow to get his bearings.

Mauser, who fought with Easy Company's 2nd Platoon from Normandy to Austria, never spoke about his war odyssey. For decades he kept a promise to his wife to stay silent. He first learned about the Pearl Harbor attack over the radio, while sitting on the sunporch of his LaSalle, Illinois, home. He was 23 years old and worked at a clock-making company. Two weeks later he was drafted and entered the cavalry in 1942 even though he "didn't know nothing about horses."

By the time he learned, the cavalry had become mechanized.

Sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, Mauser was waiting to be assigned to a unit when he saw paratroops jumping out of planes. "I wondered if they would take me," he said. One week later, he was in the airborne. Once he earned his jump wings, he transferred to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he joined Easy Company.

Once with the unit, Mauser and his new comrades spent the next nine months training, doing a lot of running, walking, push-ups, pull-ups, and climbing over fences. He made friends, including Sal Bolino from Brooklyn, and Eddie Sabo, from Utica, Illinois, near Mauser's hometown.

His stateside training complete, Mauser and the division shipped out for England. His new home was the town of Aldbourn, where he continued training and jumping from planes. While there, he got a letter informing him his 32-year-old sister, Mary, had died of cancer. He showed the letter to his company commander, Captain Herbert Sobel, who gave him a pass to a Red Cross station in nearby Swindon, where he could send money home for Mary's funeral.

Sobel, who Mauser thought was a good company commander, did not last long with Easy Company. In late November, after his noncommissioned officers all wrote letters refusing to serve under him and sent them to the battalion and regimental commanders, Colonel Robert Sink transferred Sobel to a training camp and placed Lieutenant Meehan in command.

As training continued, there were constant reminders of the war. Once, while passing by the latrine, Mauser spied a German V-1 unmanned jet flying overhead. "I could see the flash from the tail and I knew it was a buzz bomb. It seemed like it ran out of gas and fell down." He hugged the latrine wall as the bomb exploded. "I could feel the wall shake."

As the date of the D-Day landings approached, the 101st transferred to Oppottery, in southern England, to prepare for the jump into France. The men spent a week sequestered in tents near an airfield, with guards inside and out of the marshaling wire. On June 3, Mauser and his comrades learned about their objectives when officers displayed maps and sand tables of the region inland from Utah Beach. He also learned, by way of rumor, that the hedgerows in France were going to be tough.

Despite the bad weather on June 4, Mauser prepared for his jump. He was suited up completely



Ed Mauser served in the cavalry before he joined Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division.

when word came that Operation Overlord had been delayed because of storms over the English Channel. “We were disappointed,” admitted Mauser about the 24-hour delay, “but we knew there was no way we were going to get out of it.”

The next day was the real thing. The men were issued motion sickness pills, but Mauser refused to take his. He packed his M1 Garand rifle diagonally across his chest and stuffed his leg bag with a box of ammunition and grenades. Included in his equipment was a toy “cricket” that had been issued to signal other airborne troopers upon landing in the dark. His parachute, reserve chute, and all his equipment weighed about 80 pounds. It took two or three guys to help get him on the plane, “pushing my rear end the whole way.” Once seated in the plane, he took off his reserve chute to lighten his load.

The planes began roaring off their air strips at 10:30 PM, with about 18 troopers per plane. It took two and a half hours to reach the Normandy coast. The whole time Mauser braced himself for fire from the Channel Islands, which intelligence had reported contained German anti-aircraft batteries. But the islands were silent. “The Air Corps must have taken them out,” recalled Mauser.

Mauser’s plane hit the French coast after 1 AM. His plane was flying the rear of a diamond formation with three others. “Plane 66 was in front of me, 67 was to the left, and 68 was to the right. I was in plane 69.” German flak began hitting Mauser’s plane, but fortunately no rounds penetrated the fuselage. The fire had an electric effect on the paratroopers. Men began shouting, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

Everyone stood up and hooked up while the pilot tried to maneuver away from the tracers. “We went from 1,500 feet to 400 at high speed,” Mauser said. When the green jump light went on, Mauser jumped out. The prop blast from the propellers snapped his neck back. “My neck still hurts,” he joked more than 65 years later. Because of the rough exit, he faced backward as he floated to the ground, witnessing the crash of plane 66. “Meehan never should have been in that plane,” Mauser said with regret. “The noncoms get rid of Sobel, and Meehan got killed. He was only 21 years old.”

Sitting on top of a hedgerow after his mine-detecting cow had wandered off, Mauser saw a figure walking toward him. Not knowing if the man was friend or foe, he pulled out his cricket and clicked it once. It was Sergeant Robert Smith, who told Mauser, “Join the club.”

He was no longer alone. The two soldiers began walking inland, away from Utah Beach, and inaccurate mortar fire began to fall. “It was good that the Germans fired so soon,” explained Mauser. They left that area quickly.

The next paratrooper they ran into was a surprise — Captain Sobel. “Everybody says he didn’t jump, but I can verify that he did,” insisted Mauser. He is correct. General Order No. 12 from the 506th’s



Paratroopers jump from a C-47 over Fort Benning, Georgia, where Mauser earned his wings. He would complete his stateside training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

headquarters lists Sobel as one of the officers receiving the Combat Infantryman Badge for exemplary conduct in the face of the enemy. Sobel was direct with Mauser and Smith. "Follow me," he said. The two men fell in line. "He was the captain," recalled Mauser, "so you did what he told you."

As they walked, Mauser came upon a camera. He went to grab it, but Sobel told him, "Don't touch that camera, it may be booby trapped." Instead, Mauser attached a string to the camera and pulled it away from its resting spot. Nothing happened. "I think Sobel ended up with camera."

The three men walked to the town of Vierville where Mauser saw about 15 paratroopers firing into a house.

He got down on his hands and knees and was crawling along a short stone wall when he noticed a body with a blanket over it. He asked the paratroopers who it was, and they told him it was Benjamin Stoney. "I knew him pretty well." Some historians have argued with Mauser that Stoney was killed on June 8, but Mauser has always been adamant. "I know what I saw and when I saw it."

Mauser then joined the fight. The paratroopers threw grenades into the house, causing it to catch fire. The Germans came running out with their hands up. Even though the paratroopers gathered them up, Mauser knew there were too few Americans to guard them and there was no place to keep them. "We were told no prisoners on the first day," recalled Mauser. "I can just imagine what happened to them."

For his first meal in Europe, Mauser dined on steak. Soldier Cleveland Petty had killed a cow and cut it up for his friends. The men built a small fire to cook their dinner. Mauser told his comrades about the crash of plane 66. As the sun went down a few mortars exploded nearby, but they did not interrupt the meal. For his D-Day bed, Mauser slept in a hedgerow.

A few nights later, Mauser and two other men were cleaning out a village when they entered a house and discovered it empty. Mauser went out back where a few chickens clucked around the yard. He noticed a small barn with a loft. Then he heard something from the barn and noticed a flashlight coming down from the loft. He immediately recognized it as a German pump flashlight. A German exited the barn, shined the flashlight in Mauser's face, and ordered "Halt! Hands up!" Mauser had other plans. He dove to the ground and fired one round from his rifle. The German dropped dead. The episode left Mauser upset. "I jumped right down in the middle of a bunch of chicken crap." It took him almost a week to get the chicken residue washed out of his uniform.

Mauser spent the rest of the month fighting around the hedgerows and swamps of Normandy. "I went 20 days without a shower," he confessed, "I never took off my boots." When the division was ordered off the line, the men were shuttled back to England in a large boat. "It felt good to be back in England." Everyone received a week-long furlough to London. Mauser was disappointed that the pubs closed at



Airborne Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division load equipment onto a C-47 in preparation for a jump. Mauser carried so much equipment for the D-Day assault that his comrades had to shove him into his plane.

10 PM, but he enjoyed that everyone went out singing for the rest of the night. “I didn’t meet any women, though,” he admitted. “I was bashful back then.”

It was while on furlough that Mauser got into trouble. Two MPs confronted him for walking around with an unbuttoned blouse. They brought him back to their headquarters and told him to report back to his unit. When he returned to Easy Company, he reported to Captain Dick Winters, who had taken over the company after Meehan’s death. “What happened in London?” Winters asked. Mauser explained and Winters’s order was direct: “That’s going to cost you \$15.”

Mauser thought it was unfair that he should be reprimanded for such a small offense after surviving the Normandy campaign. “It’s not fair,” he told Winters, who was unwavering: “It’s still going to cost you \$15.” Mauser paid up.

The unit went back to training until Operation Market Garden, the liberation of Holland. “We had just a couple of days to prepare,” explained Mauser. For the September 17, 1944, drop he kept his reserve chute but packed lighter than he had for the D-Day jump. The troopers in his plane passed the time smoking cigarettes. “I thought they were going to burn the plane down.” He said a few prayers for his own safety.

At about noon Mauser jumped out of his plane. “It was a beautiful day,” he recalled. Everything seemed silent, save the rustling of his opening chute. “You could hear a pin drop.” He looked down and saw he was headed to a freshly plowed field. “Oh, what a marvelous feeling!” After the soft landing, he formed up quickly with his company and marched down the highway to Eindhoven. People emerged from their homes to pass out food, wine, and beer. “Young girls came out to hug and kiss you,” remembered Mauser. “I got a hug but not a kiss.”

Once inside Eindhoven, Mauser went on a patrol. He was standing near a building when he saw a German running about 200 yards away. Mauser took aim and shot at the soldier but missed, revealing his position. The Germans, now alerted to the patrol’s presence, opened fire. “We ran back,” explained Mauser. “I could hear the bullets flying past us.” They jumped over a fence into an orchard, but one Easy Company man, Vernon Menze, got hit by a mortar shell before he could make it to safety. “I kind of felt guilty about it,” confessed Mauser. “But that was war.”

With Eindhoven secure, Mauser and his buddies bedded down for the night in a building with cots. The men were resting when an officer came in and shouted, “First squad get on your feet.”

Mauser thought, “Where the hell are we going to go?” The men marched out of the building and ended up in a Dutch dentist’s office where Mauser had a decayed tooth filled. “Other than that, there was no action.” The Germans bombed the area but did little damage.

Once the operation failed to capture the vital bridge at Arnhem, Easy Company was transferred northwest to a slice of land between two rivers, referred to as “the Island.” On October 22, Easy Company was tasked with rescuing about 100 British pilots and paratroopers still stuck behind enemy lines near Arnhem. In pitch-black darkness, the men pushed off in British assault boats with about six troopers



An Airborne soldier lies dead near Ste. Mere du Mont, near Utah Beach. The first dead soldier Mauser encountered was his friend Benjamin Stoney.



American soldiers scramble away from a burning house in Normandy. Mauser fired into a similar house filled with Germans in Vierville.

per boat. Captain Fred “Moose” Heyliger, the company’s new commanding officer, took the boat to the right of Mauser’s.

“We went across and set up our .30-caliber machine gun for protection,” Mauser said.

Guarding the flank, Mauser could not see any of the Britons he had come to rescue; it was just too dark. The whole operation lasted a couple of hours. “I later heard that one of the pilots told Heyliger, ‘You’re the best-looking Yankee I’ve ever seen.’ The operation was over before daylight, which was fortunate. The next day, the Germans bombed the boats on the south side of the river. Mauser received the Bronze Star for his role in the mission.

After the mission, Easy lost another soldier. “I remember this one kid in training who talked so tough that we thought he’d win the war.” But one night, out on the dikes of Holland, Mauser heard someone moaning and crying. It was the tough-talking soldier, shaking in his foxhole. Mauser asked him what was the matter, but he could not answer. “We had to take him out of there.”

During Mauser’s stint on the Island, he had a few good nights of rest. In one instance, he went into a mattress store to bed down. “The owner of the store probably did not like that, but we didn’t ask for permission.” Later, he took up residence in a barn filled with hay, where he dug a hole in the hay and lived like a mole. One night, an NCO ordered everyone out of the barn and into a garden. The men spread out and lay down.

As morning came, the men were ordered to get up and wake up any sleeping soldiers. Mauser got up and shook the man who had been lying next to him all night. It turned out to be a dead German soldier. “I got the hell out of there.”

From Holland the entire division transferred to Mourmelon, France, to absorb replacements and prepare for their next mission, which was expected that spring. Mauser received a four-day pass to Paris. “I had no money, but I had candy bars and cigarettes, and they were better than money.” He stayed in a seven-story hotel where he poured cups of water down on unsuspecting passers by. “I had never been that high before.” He also enjoyed his first subway ride and visited a nightclub.

Back in Mourmelon, Mauser received an odd “Dear John” letter. His girlfriend sent him back his picture. “I knew something was wrong because I gave her a picture of me and she gave me a picture of her.” She never sent him a letter, but he had little time to dwell on it. Soon after the picture arrived, word

went out for the division to pack up and head out.

The Germans had broken through First Army's front line, and the result was the Battle of the Bulge. The 101st was put on trucks and rushed north to Bastogne. They drove all night and arrived to see American soldiers retreating. "You'll never stop them," the soldiers told Mauser. "You'll never stop them." Some of them gave up their ammunition; some did not. "We could hear shelling now and then."

On December 18, 1944, Easy Company occupied the Bois Jacques in already-dug foxholes, three men to a foxhole. "We got surrounded on my birthday," he recalled wryly, "a good present." He could see German tanks, but was confident they could not get through the woods. Life in the foxholes was tough and cold. Rubbing hands together was the only possibility for warmth. Some men put gunny sacks on their feet for warmth, but Mauser could not find any. The men were shelled constantly.

"Some guys refused to leave their foxholes to answer the call of nature," he explained. "They would forget what they had done when jumping back into their holes—resulting in some shouts of 'Oh my God!'"

With fog socking in the battlefield, the only things in the air were buzz bombs, which the men could hear at night. When the fog finally cleared, aircraft began dropping supplies to the besieged paratroopers. Mauser and some comrades ran out and retrieved one tube that landed between the lines. The airdrops brought much needed supplies, especially K rations.

On December 22, a German officer came through the lines with a surrender request for Brig. Maj. Gen. Anthony McAuliffe, the division's temporary commander. When McAuliffe's famous answer, "Nuts!" made the rounds to the troops, Mauser cheered. Despite McAuliffe's tough words, there were times when Mauser worried that the Germans just might overrun Bastogne.

"They had more equipment than we did, but they must have thought we had more equipment than we had." Still, there was hope on the horizon. "I heard Patton was on his way, but we didn't know when he was going to come."

Even though Patton's 4th Armored Division broke the Bastogne siege on December 26, more tough fighting was ahead. The Germans continued to blast the Bois Jacques with artillery, killing Mauser's friends Warren "Skip" Muck and Alex Penkala. "Muck was friendly kid," remembered Mauser. "My foxhole was pretty close to him."

One day when Mauser was standing guard in his foxhole, he put his rifle down and stepped out to relieve himself. Just then a German reconnaissance plane flew low over him. "If I had my gun I could have knocked him down," he asserted. But then he noticed the pilot smile and wave. "I waved and smiled back."

One night Mauser participated in a patrol into Foy, a town northwest of the Bois Jacques. After trekking more than 500 yards over open, snow-covered ground, Mauser's patrol walked two and a half blocks into the town without encountering a German. They decided not to press their luck and headed back to



Dutch civilians show 101st Airborne soldiers the lay of the land in Holland. The locals hugged and kissed their liberators as they made their way into Eindhoven.

the woods. But as they approached their front lines, they came under fire from Fox Company, on the left of Easy. Mauser could hear bullets zinging over his head. "Stop shooting, we're Americans!" Mauser and his comrades shouted, and the firing stopped.

On January 13, the division pushed into Foy. As Easy Company charged the town, Mauser emptied his rifle at white-clad Germans. "I don't know if I hit any of them." With the town taken, Mauser occupied a shell hole for protection. While in his new home, an enemy round exploded in front of him. Rocks and mud tore into his face. Mauser went to the aid station where a medic cleaned his face. "That's a Purple Heart," the medic told him, but the medal was never issued.

Two days later, Mauser got hit again when he was sitting in a barn with his helmet off. A mortar shell dropped in and exploded. Mauser immediately checked his body for wounds and discovered a piece of shrapnel had cut his right wrist down to the bone. A medic wrapped the wrist and, worried it would get infected, sent Mauser to the rear. He ended up in a hospital, ashamed of his status.

"In the operating room, the guy next to me, he was hit in the stomach and hip," recalled Mauser. "I couldn't look at him. I felt silly. I had a small wound and half his body was bleeding."

Mauser got out of the hospital in April and returned to Easy. He reported to the new company commander, Captain Ronald Spiers, who was blunt: "Go back to your unit." Mauser was stunned. "I thought he'd say 'How are you doing,' but nothing! He thought I was a goldbricker, but I kept my mouth shut." Spiers already had a tough reputation within the battalion for shooting prisoners on D-Day. During the Battle of the Bulge, he lined up two young German prisoners and shot them.

"The two kids were bragging," recalled Mauser about the incident. "There were a lot of stories about him killing prisoners. You didn't want to fool with Spiers."

By this time, Nazi Germany was collapsing and the American Army was advancing at will. As Mauser headed east on the autobahn in an amphibious DUKW, he saw thousands of Germans walking the other way. "We cussed them like hell and shook our fists at them."

On the way into the heart of Germany, Mauser visited a concentration camp. "It was all cleared out," he recalled, "with a wire fence all over the yard, even the children's playground was all gravel." He saw the ovens where the Germans did away with so many Jews and visited the living quarters with bunks without any bedding. "It was all empty, but I knew it was going on," he explained. "It was in the newspapers, and we would get word of mouth from other GIs."

When Easy Company reached Berchtesgaden, Mauser was ordered to take three men and check out a farmhouse. They broke through the front door and found two old women. One woman clutched her



With newly acquired rations in hand, a group of paratroopers in surrounded Bastogne returns to the front line. Mauser ran into no man's land to retrieve a supply container dropped by parachute.

stomach and said “Krank, krank.” Mauser realized she was afraid he would rape her, but he just left. He walked outside and saw a man running from the house to the barn. “I said, ‘Let him go, the war’s over.’”

Mauser reported that there was nothing in the house.

Mauser then went to an officers’ barracks and began rifling through drawers and came away with two swastika flags. “What the hell am I going to do with these?” he thought, but took them anyway. He gave one to Eddie Sabo. Another soldier desperately wanted the other one. Mauser offered to sell it to him for \$100. “He couldn’t say yes fast enough.”

The division ended the war in Austria, where life became routine. Mauser had enough points to go home, so he was not worried about being sent to Japan. He was shocked to hear about the atomic bombs leveling Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but he cheered the end of the war.

Mauser shipped home and arrived in Boston in October 1945. He had no girlfriend to return to in Illinois, but he met a girl named Irene at the local bowling alley. “One Sunday I went to church and I said, ‘Irene would you like to go out for dinner and a show?’” They married the next year.

Despite the happy marriage, Irene never wanted Mauser to talk about his experiences with Easy Company. “My wife hated war.” Mauser agreed and never attended any of the unit’s reunions. He once tried to get her to watch the miniseries *Band of Brothers*, but she fell asleep during the first episode.

When Irene passed away in 2008, Mauser began revisiting the past. He reunited with his buddies and returned to Europe twice as a guest of Stephen Ambrose Historical Tours. He was treated as a celebrity everywhere he went and was thanked by locals who survived the war.

When asked today about his most distinct war memory, Mauser quickly recalled the crash of plane 66. “I knew all 18 on board. That lives with me today.”

Edward Mauser passed away in his home in Omaha, Nebraska, on January 21, 2011. When he heard that Major Dick Winters had passed away 11 days earlier, he commented, “He’s leading the way for me ... one last time.” □



Ed Mauser pays tribute to his comrades who died in Lieutenant Thomas Meehan’s airplane at the crash site memorial in Normandy in 2010. The memory of the plane going down stayed with Mauser the rest of his life.