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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 508TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY (82D AIRBORNE DIVISION) NORMANDY, FRANCE, 5-10 JUNE 1944 (NORMANDY CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of a Regimental Demolition Officer)

Type of Operation Described: REGIMENT IN AN AIRBORNE ATTACK

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(Personal Experience of a Regimental Demolition Officer)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, during the Normandy, France, campaign for the period 5 - 10 June 1944.

The participation of the Regiment was as an assault unit of the "Second Front", this latter being considered the final, and knockout, phase of the grand strategy to eliminate National Socialism and Hitler, and to reduce and return "Fortress Europa" to its original and less war-like tenants. (1)

The demands for a cross-channel invasion of the Continent had been heavy, constant and urgent almost from the moment Germany completed her conquest of France. (2) Postponements of this invasion had commenced in 1942 when the Allies, notably the Americans and British, felt that an adequate force was not available, in addition to an inability to properly mount the force for the sea-borne movement. Almost simultaneously with the preceding factors, political pressure that could not be dissipated was appearing, calling for an invasion of the "soft under-belly" of Europe. (3) The assumption of the Italian campaign forced a setback to a channel-coast D-Day but within a short time the Joint Chiefs of Staff realized that further delays would only make the task that much more

(1) A-1, p. 1; (2) A-2, p. 28; (3) A-2, p. 316.

difficult, hence the Spring of 1944 was selected as the time to produce the all-out effort. (4)

Selection of the target area posed many problems, not the least of which were estimates of enemy capabilities and actions to the vast logistical hurdles. Likewise, a target date that would allow for proper preparation, yet not waste a moment, was required. The decision finally agreed upon made the Cotentin peninsula of Normandy, France, the scene of the execution of the commencement of Operation OVERLORD, with Y-Day selected as 1 June 1944 and D-Day to be shortly thereafter. (5)

THE GENERAL PLAN OF ASSAULT - FIRST U. S. ARMY

The initial assault across the beaches between Cherbourg and Le Havre was to be made with the First U. S. Army on the right (west) and the Second British Army on the left (east). The two armies would be under the 21st Army Group British, commanded by General Bernard L. Montgomery. Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley would command the First U. S. Army. (6)

For purposes of continuity, the plans and actions of only the First U. S. Army are discussed, and that phase of Operation OVERLORD, NEPTUNE , which consisted of the establishment of the beachhead and the opening moves toward the capture of Cherbourg. (7)

First U. S. Army was composed of V Corps and VII Corps with their landing zones generally northeast to southeast of Ste. Mere Eglise, and labelled Utah and Omaha beaches respectively. The first wave of troops was scheduled to go

(4) A-1, p. 2, 5; (5) A-1, p. 2, 5 ; (6, 7) A-3, p. 3, 5.

down the ramps of their assault craft at 0630 hours on D-Day with the 4th Infantry Division leading the VII Corps effort and the 90th Infantry Division in the Corps follow-up position. (8)

The 82d Airborne Division, to be attached to the VII Corps upon landing, had as its general mission the task of clearing and securing specific inland, operational areas, protecting the flanks of VII Corps as it came inland and turned north to Cherbourg, and preventing enemy reserves from reinforcing their coastal defenses. (9)

THE ENEMY SITUATION

In the general operational area of the 82d Airborne Division, north of the line Coutances - Carentan in the Cherbourg peninsula, intelligence sources placed the total number of enemy troops at approximately 75,000. (10)

Three infantry divisions were reliably identified as being the 91st, 243d and 709th. The remainder of the forces was made up of marine, naval, coast artillery, airfield, flak and assorted corps and ground force troops. In addition, there were approximately 10,000 Organization Todt workers. (10a)

The general quality of the enemy was mixed as to age, morale, physical condition, nationality and battle experience, but these people were expected to fight well, at least as long as they were manning guns and positions. The three divisions located in the area were classified as static and were composed of older men and men unfit for arduous field duty. Foreigners and prisoners of war comprised a large percentage of the total strength. The divisions were immobile and intended for coastal

(8) A-1, p. 6; (9) A-1, p. 1; (10) a, A-8, intelligence annex.

defense. (10b)

The German plan of defense called for the coastal line to be heavily fortified with concrete emplacements, strong points, underwater obstacles, etc. Behind this line, from 50 to 200 miles from the coast, were the mobile reserves. The key to the German scheme of defense was the rapid counter-attack commitment of reserves. (10c)

It was accepted that every unit would have a definite anti-airborne plan, with personnel designated and appropriate transportation, arms and equipment allotted and held in readiness.

THE REGIMENTAL MISSION AND PLAN

With a sufficient background knowledge of First Army's plans and desires, the 82d Airborne Division outlined its mission as follows:

"To land astride the Merderet River and to seize, clear and secure the general area Neuville au Plain - Ste. Mere Eglise - Chef Du Pont - Etienville - Amfreville. In addition, it was to destroy the crossings over the Douve River and be prepared to advance to the west on VII Corps order." (11) (See Map A)

As one of the assault regiments of the 82d Airborne Division, the 508th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team was ordered on D minus 1 - D-Day to land by parachute to:

(1) Seize and destroy the crossings of the Douve River at Beuzeville-La Bastille and Etienville.

(2) Seize, organize and defend the general area Renouf - Etienville.

(10, b, c) A-8, intelligence annex; (11) A-4, p. 2.

(3) Assemble one battalion without delay in the vicinity of Guetteville as Force A reserve. (Force A consisted of all parachute elements committed before dawn of D-Day; Force B, glider elements committed before and after dawn of D-Day, and Force C to be committed by sea to land between D plus 2 and D plus 7.)

(4) Clear and secure the regimental sector and maintain aggressive patrolling to the limits of that sector.

(5) Be prepared on Division order, to advance to the west to the line of the Douve River. (12)

CT 508 consisted of: 508th Parachute Infantry less detachments;
Company B, 307th Engineer Battalion (A/B), less one platoon, attached upon landing of Force A;
Battery B, 80th A/B AA Battalion, attached upon landing of Force B. (13)

To accomplish the prescribed tasks, the Regiment assigned missions as follows: (See Map A)

(1) 1st Battalion, with demolition section attached, will constitute Force A reserve and will move to area generally south of Guetteville.

(2) 3d Battalion, with demolition section attached, will seize, clear, organize and defend the area generally east and south of Renouf. One company will be designated as Regimental reserve and will not be committed without authority of Regimental CO. Upon arrival of 2d Battalion in Regimental reserve area, this company will be released to Battalion CO.

(12, 13) A-5, p. 1; personal knowledge.

(3) 2d Battalion, with demolition section and Company B, 307th A/B Engineers less one platoon, attached, will destroy the bridges across the Douve River at Etienville and Beuzeville-La Bastille. Upon completion of demolitions, the Battalion, less attachments, will: (a) Revert to Regimental reserve; clear the Regimental area, less the 3d Battalion sector, of all enemy resistance and occupy and prepare for defense; (b) Designate one company, under Battalion control, to protect the southern flank of the Regiment by seizing and defending Picauville and preventing reconstruction of blown bridges at Etienville and Beuzeville-La Bastille.

(4) Battery B, 80th A/B AA Battalion, will place guns in direct support of Regiment at predetermined positions. (14)

Y-Day, the day by which all planning was to be completed and troops held in readiness, had been established as 1 June 1944. The briefing of Regimental staffs was accomplished on Y minus 60 and Battalion staffs on Y minus 30. (15)

Force A planned to approach the Cherbourg peninsula from the west, flying between Alderney and Guernsey Islands, and making a landfall in the vicinity of Surtainville. The Force was to drop between 0100 and 0315 hours on the night of D minus 1-D-Day on three drop zones. The broad missions of the two other parachute assault regiments were as follows: (a) The 505th Parachute Infantry was to land east of the Merderet River about 1000 yards northwest of Ste Mere Eglise

(14) A-5, p. 1; (15) A-4, p. 1, 3.

and secure the general area Neuville Au Plein - Ste Mere Eglise - Chef Du Pont - Le Port; (b) The 507th Parachute Infantry was to land west of the Merderet River about 1000 yards north of Amfreville and secure the general area Amfreville - Gourbesville. Force A Headquarters was to land with the 508th Parachute Infantry and locate within the Regimental sector. (16)

D-DAY MINUS

On or about Y-Day, the Regiment, less the base and seaborne echelons, moved to the special camps established on the airfields from which the troops would enplane. The 1st and 3d Battalions were situated at Folkingham, and the 2d Battalion and Regimental Headquarters Company at Saltby. Also at the latter field were Force A Headquarters and Company B (-), 307th A/B Engineers. These airfields were located in the midlands of England in the vicinity of Nottingham. (17)

All personnel were quartered within hangars, and the messing and housekeeping facilities were handled by Quartermaster companies purposely allocated for these duties. With the exception of liaison parties, all personnel were sealed within their areas and strict guard and counter-intelligence measures were in effect. (18)

It was at these airfields where enlisted personnel received their briefing on the various missions. Situation rooms had been set up in large tents, containing sand tables, aerial photos, maps, etc. Personnel were briefed and checked, not only on their own particular missions, but were acquainted

(16) A-4, p. 1, 3; (17,18) Personal knowledge.

with missions of surrounding units. (19)

Maps were issued and details memorized, English pounds exchanged for French francs, escape kits distributed, weapons inspected and oiled, and the many hundreds of details necessary to the success of the mission were gone over, again and again. Planes were loaded with the heavy bundles containing radios, engineer equipment, heavy weapons and ammunition, rations, medical supplies, etc. In addition to the racks utilized underneath the planes, bundles were placed in the cabins of the planes to be thrown out of the door with the first man to jump. (20)

By 4 June 1944, all was in readiness for the invasion but the Allied D-Day was postponed for 24 hours due to weather conditions, and at 2315 hours, 5 June 1944, the first planes of the Regiment were winging their way to France. One half hour prior to the takeoff of the main body, the Regimental pathfinder team had departed to precede the Regiment and mark the drop zone to be used. (21)

D-DAY

The planes of the Troop Carrier fleet effected the rendezvous with their air cover near the southern tip of England and, as the planes were to pass over the seaborne invasion fleet, the cabin and wing lights of the planes were left on for identification purposes during this period in order to avoid the tragic mistake committed in a previous airborne assault when American parachutists were shot down by friendly naval and ground forces. (22)

(19,20,21) Personal knowledge; (22) A-6, p. 33.

Most of the personnel in the planes slept during the flight to the French coast. The flight across the channel was at low level to avoid alerting enemy radar as much as possible. In this connection, there were also diversionary flights and dummy drops to further attempt confusion. The weather was extremely clear and visibility was excellent. A wide swing was made around the tip of the Cherbourg peninsula and through the interval between the Channel Islands. It was at this point that the Regiment had its first taste of enemy action through his attempts to bring down planes with machine gun fire from Alderney Island. Fortunately, his range was very short. At this time the parachutists were alerted and the command was given to "Stand up and hook up". As the landfall was made the planes dropped to 700 feet and passed over the town of Surtainville, the town being easily identified with the help of a bright moon. Up to this point the visibility had been excellent and the formation of the planes had been a tight and well-controlled V of V's. However, between this landfall and the drop zones, a heavy cloud formation tended to separate the elements of the flight and this scattering was further aggravated by the evasive action taken by the individual planes when heavy antiaircraft fire and enemy night fighter activity was encountered. By the time the area of the drop zones was reached, the planes were well scattered and were flying at excessive speeds and altitudes, higher and lower than those ideal for jumping. (23)

Despite the fact that the majority of the planes did not see any marked drop zones, when what was thought to be the

(23) Personal knowledge.

drop zone was reached, the green light and signal to "Go" was given and the Regiment landed in France between 0208 and 0220 hours, 6 June 1944. (24)

The Regiment now faced the most difficult accomplishment a parachute unit encounters - a night assembly. The Battalions had planned to effect their assemblies through the use of lights, but due to the nature of the terrain obscuring any light less than 40 feet high (the Regiment's were only 25 feet) plus those lights lost and smashed, only one light was known to be erected and utilized and that was from Regimental Headquarters Company. (25)

Initial enemy reaction to the landing was prompt and severe, and fairly heavy small arms and machine gun fire on the ground made a proper reorganization impossible. An unusual and significant feature developed in that after the landing of the troops, except for those Germans actually engaged with the parachutists, the majority of the enemy attempted little aggressive action until daybreak. (25a) The Regiment had been scattered widely in the drop with the bulk of the force landing east of the planned drop zone, and some personnel dropping almost in Cherbourg. Little or no equipment was recovered from the containers due to the resistance on the drop and because much of the equipment had landed in the Merderet River and its swamps and tributaries. (26)

The Regiment was divided into many small groups, each of which began to fight its way individually to assemblies. Company G had been dropped practically intact and reorganized with most of its personnel and equipment in the vicinity of

(24) A-7, p. 1; personal knowledge; (25,25a) A-9, p. 6, 13;
(26) Personal knowledge.

Ste Mere Eglise. There had been very little resistance on the ground in their particular area to interfere with a prompt reorganization. (27) Due to the considerable dispersion and error in the drop, the accomplishment of the assigned mission of the Regiment became stalemated. With this circumstance in mind, actions were directed toward accomplishing what was considered the next most important mission, the securing of a crossing over the Merderet River. (28)

The Regiment generally assembled in four groups (see Map A) - Group L commanded by Colonel Lindquist, Regimental CO; Group W commanded by Major Warren, 1st Battalion Executive Officer (later Battalion CO when Lt. Col. Batcheller was KIA); Group S commanded by Lt. Col. Shanley, 2d Battalion CO and Group G, which was Company G under Captain Novak. Each group was a composite unit consisting of parachutists from each Regiment of both airborne divisions, with the majority being members of the 508th. (29)

Group L assembled in the vicinity of La Fiere, fought its way south along the railroad embankment to where the highway crossed the railroad 2500 yards west of Ste Mere Eglise. It then turned southwest along the highway to cross the Merderet River and move to an area northeast of Etienville with the hope of contacting other elements of the Regiment and carrying out the mission assigned. However, the Group encountered a German strongpoint defending the bridge across the Merderet River 800 yards west of the railroad. (a) With some assistance

(a) This position contained 18 men, and civilian reports stated that the night of 5-6 June was the first time the position was manned during the entire German occupation.

(27) Personal knowledge; Statement of Captain Frank Novak, [illegible] 12 June 1944. (28) A.C. p. 2. (29) Personal knowledge; Statements of Group Commanders.

from members of a company of the 505th (whose original mission was to seize this bridge), the Group wiped out the German unit but was unable to cross the river due to heavy enemy fire from the western approaches to the bridge. It then retraced its steps, captured La Fiere about 1300 hours, and having made contact with the Commanding General of Force A, was relieved by the 1st Battalion of the 505th. The Group then took up a defensive position around the railroad viaduct and the crossing of the Ste Mere Eglise road. The enemy, later identified as the 91st Infantry Division, generally held positions along the west banks of the Merderet River. (30)

Group W, originally 25 strong, organized south of the planned DZ and fought its way north to a point about 500 yards east of Picauville where the strength was increased to about 50 when it picked up the 508th Pathfinder team. (The team stated that their equipment had been smashed on the drop and they were unable to function properly.) The Group then continued moving north, seizing a position on high ground south of Guetteville with the intention of attacking the town. By now, only 100 strong and having no weapons other than carbines and M-1's, the plan for an attack was sidetracked when a force of Germans, estimated at a battalion and reinforced with light tanks and self-propelled guns, attacked out of Guetteville. The attack was beaten off and the Group continued to snipe at the enemy until about 1900 hours when the engagement was broken off and the Group joined Group S, with whom it had made contact, about 1000 yards east of Picauville. The ground

(30) A-4, p. 6; A-7, p. 1.

formerly held south of Guetteville had been the area previously designated for the Force A reserve (1st Battalion). (31)

Group S, originally of platoon strength, assembled north of Picauville, fought off a group of Germans reinforced with four light tanks and a battery of light artillery during the morning. (This was apparently the same force engaged by Group W.) About noon, Group S broke off the action and moved east, picking up about 150 more officers and men, and occupied a defensive position about 1000 yards east of Picauville where it was later joined by Group W with whom it had made contact by SCR 300. The combined groups now totaled about 350, with three LMG's, one BAR and one 60mm mortar tube, plus individual arms. With so few heavy weapons and so large an enemy force between them and their mission (civilians reported that Picauville was a German bivouac area with a present strength of 500 and that Etienville contained over 500), Group S/W moved off to accomplish the one mission it thought possible - secure a crossing of the Merderet River. At nightfall, the group moved under cover of darkness to Hill 30, just west of the Merderet River and southeast of Guetteville, and organized for all-around defense. (32) During the initial actions of Group S, the commanding general of the German 91st Infantry Division, Lieutenant General Falley, was killed by an officer of the group. (33) He had left his CP in a chateau in Picauville, with his driver, with the intent of proceeding to Ste Mere Eglise to get an estimate of the situation there. This knowledge was gained from the driver who was taken PW.

(31) A-7, p. 1, 2; A-4, p. 6; A-9, p. 6; (32) A-7, p. 2; A-4, p. 6; A-9, p. 8, personal knowledge; (33) Personal knowledge; statement of Captain Malcolm Brannen, 3d Bn, 11 June 1944.

Group G moved from its assembly area near Ste Mere Eglise and secured the east end of the causeway across the Merderet River at Chef Du Pont and occupied positions defending the bridge there after routing about a company of Germans who had been defending the town and the bridge from well dug-in positions. (34)

D PLUS 1

From its position at the railway underpass, Group L was ordered north toward Neuville Au Plain to clear the area and protect the Division's north flank against penetration. The Group remained in a defensive position from 0630 hours through the morning until it was again ordered by Division to move to Chef Du Pont, joining and consolidating with Group G and mopping up numerous German strongpoints surrounding the town. At 2330 hours, a patrol from the Group, headed by Lt. Walter Ling, crossed the Merderet River, made contact with Group S/W and returned to Group G, now the location of the Regimental CP. (35)

Group S/W had completed the organization of Hill 30, and constant patrolling resulted in the knocking out of enemy mortar and artillery positions and the destruction of communication lines running west. Approximately ten equipment bundles were recovered in the vicinity but none contained badly needed heavy weapons, rations or medical supplies. Radio contact was established with Group G at Chef Du Pont. A roadblock consisting of two reinforced platoons was set up on the west end of the causeway from Chef Du Pont and made the contact with the patrol from Group L. By 2000 hours,

(34) A-7, p. 2; (35) A-4, p. 8; A-7, p. 2.

the complete area surrounding Hill 30 was under control and the enemy probing which had kept up all day was halted and pushed back. (36)

By 2400 hours, the strength of the Regiment was reported to be 25 per cent.

At 1000 hours, elements of the division, other than the 508th, had made contact with advance units of the 4th Infantry Division just north and east of Ste Mere Eglise.

D PLUS 2

In an attempt to contact the 101st Airborne Division, patrols were dispatched south from Group L (Regt CP) at 0930 hours to the towns of Le Port and Carquebut. The two patrols encountered strong resistance at both localities, so a force of two companies under the command of Captain Royal Taylor was sent out early in the afternoon. Both companies were able to move into Carquebut because of the inaccurate German fire buzzing high over their heads. The enemy moved into positions within buildings, but, as the troops prepared to assault, the Germans came out with their hands up. The force killed 15 and captured 6 officers, 7 NCO's and 102 privates, a much stronger unit than Captain Taylor's. One half of the force was then sent to mop up enemy resistance in Le Port and the other half to Eturville. Approximately 50 more prisoners were taken in both towns and contact was made with elements of the 101st just north of Blosville. Group L was now redisposed and occupied positions east of the Merderet River from Le Port to a point one kilometer north of Chef Du Pont. (37)

(36) A-4, p. 8; A-7, p. 2; (37) A-4, p. 10; A-7, p. 2, 3; Personal knowledge; Statements of Captain Barry Albright and Captain Woodrow Millsaps, 15 Oct 1947.

Group S/W, on Hill 30, was heavily engaged on three sides by German infantry. The enemy attacked the roadblock all day with about a battalion, plus tanks, mortars and artillery. Several sharp tank counterattacks were repulsed. Contact with Group L was denied patrols due to excessive enemy activity and observation. The enemy forces were finally driven off after dark by a night attack made by Lieutenant Woodrow Millsaps, Lieutenant Lloyd Polette (later KIA) and a 30-man group. Severe fighting ensued and about 30 Germans were killed in hand-to-hand action, and the remainder withdrew. No prisoners were taken. At 1600 hours, the Division artillery was in position with seven 75mm pack howitzers on the east side of the Merderet River between Chef Du Pont and Ste Mere Eglise, and through SCR 300 communication relayed from Group S/W to Group L to the artillery, well adjusted fire was placed on assaulting enemy troops. Lieutenant Barry Albright was able to call fires, almost down upon himself, that wiped out a battery of enemy howitzers that were bunched up on a road preparing to occupy firing positions. (38)

D PLUS 3

Acting on Division orders to defend in place, Groups L and S/W had no activity worthy of note during the morning except the destruction of small enemy groups by patrols. At 1130 hours, Group L received verbal orders by phone to move a group of at least Battalion size north to La Fiere to assist in establishing a bridgehead across the Merderet River by the causeway south of La Fiere. Group L moved out, crossed the

(38) A-4, p. 10; A-7, p. 2, 3; Personal Knowledge; Statements of Captain Barry Albright and Captain Woodrow Millsaps, 15 Oct 1947.

river and mopped up the area between Hill 30 and Guetteville and occupied a position on the right flank of Group S/W. The Regiment now had a bridgehead protecting the two crossings of the Merderet River. A provisional group of Service Company personnel and the rear CP remained in Chef Du Pont with the forward CP on Hill 30. Company H was placed in Le Port to protect the Division's south flank. Spasmodic artillery fire was placed on the east bank of the Merderet River throughout the night.

Group S/W, along with Group L, repulsed a sharp enemy counterattack from the direction of Amfreville between 1930 and 2100 hours. At noon, Lieutenant Colonel Mendez, 3d Battalion CO, with ten men, reported into the position. He had been on the move with this small group since D-Day, ambushing Germans and destroying communications as far west as La Bonneville, eight kilometers away.

At 1900 hours, the Regiment received the plans of the 358th Infantry Regiment, 90th Infantry Division, to pass through our lines at 0400 hours, D plus 4 (10 June) in an attack to seize Etienville. (39)

D PLUS 4

The 358th Infantry Regiment attacked through the Regimental position around Hill 30, at 0500 hours, encountering no initial resistance. At 1700 hours, the rear CP moved up to Hill 30, and with the exception of Company H at Le Port and a demolition detachment at Chef Du Pont, the 508th was for the first time assembling as a Regiment in one area since

(39) A-4, p. 11; A-7, p. 3; Personal knowledge.

taking off on 5 June.

The Division was relieved within the Merderet bridgehead by the 90th Division. The area Neuville Au Plain - Ste Mere Eglise - Chef Du Pont had been secured in addition to the Merderet bridgehead despite severe fighting and resistance. Losses had been heavy but the German 91st Infantry Division had been virtually destroyed from top to bottom. (40)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In an analysis and critique of the operations of the Regiment, certain phases shall be touched upon that might be termed peculiar solely to parachute organizations.

1. The prior planning, preparations and orders, both by higher and lower echelons, were exact and complete. However, the status of development of specialized equipment for parachute units was not sufficiently advanced to provide for better and more communication facilities; practical and workable individual homing devices for night assembly; methods of controlling the dropping of equipment containers to assure their safe recovery in good condition, and last, but not least, finer coordination and training with the Air Corps to assure the delivery of the troops over the proper drop zones at the proper times in good fighting condition.

2. Lack of sufficient numbers of automatic weapons and mortars created great handicaps and resulted in many avoidable casualties; however, the unfailing courage, aggressiveness and intelligence displayed at all times by all troops compensated for these handicaps.

3. Despite the accurate knowledge of the terrain and

(40) Personal knowledge.

drainage system of the operational area before D-Day, a true picture of the difficulties presented by the hedgerows and flooded banks of the rivers could only be understood by those who were forced to assault these hedgerows and those who landed in five feet of water where none was supposed to exist. The proximity of these same rivers, the Douve and Merderet, also accounted in part for the scattered dropping of the personnel due to the confusing of their landmarks by both pilots and jumpmasters.

4. It was fortunate that senior officers of the Regiment were entirely familiar with all the detailed missions of the Division which enabled them to quickly and decisively direct their groups and efforts toward the accomplishment of missions other than their own in the most likely and possible priority of importance.

5. The enemy initially indicated his mettle as evidenced by persistence and stubbornness where feasible and an unwillingness to give ground easily and cheaply. However, had he been able to follow his general techniques successfully, the establishment of the bridgehead might have been more costly and delayed. His losses in men and materiel greatly exceeded our own.

6. Colonel S. L. A. Marshall, GSC, Historical Officer for the European Theatre of Operations, stated this concerning the preliminary operations around La Fiere: "In all of the airborne operations of the ETO, the Merderet bridgehead operation by elements of the 82d Airborne Division was the one attended by the greatest difficulties and handicaps, a large

measure of which was directly due to the faulty circumstances of the drop and the inordinate handicaps of the individual assemblies."

7. For extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty in action in the initial assault on the north coast of Normandy, France, 6 June 1944, a Presidential Unit Citation was awarded the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment under the provisions of General Order No. 26, Headquarters First U. S. Army, 17 June 1944.

LESSONS

The lessons learned and emphasized during the operation were:

1. The value of small unit leadership cannot be over-emphasized in training. In parachute operations particularly, where small, isolated groups are compelled to function for extended periods of time without relief or assistance, the full and exacting exercise of leadership is essential.

2. It is most important that every officer, regardless of grade, and NCO's and enlisted men where practicable and possible, be briefed on the mission of the Division as a whole and understand in a general way the priority of importance of the Division's objectives, and how the subordinate units of the Division intend to seize these objectives.

3. Prompt, aggressive action by each individual is imperative, regardless of enemy interference, and must be insisted upon in training. An individual or unit that "holes up" and does nothing is doomed. An airborne unit has the initiative upon landing; it must retain it.

4. A knowledge of artillery and its adjustment of fire is a "must" for all officers and, if possible, to key NCO's. Even with a small percentage of weapons in action, the support available more than justifies any lacking fires.

5. It is essential and most important that the hours of darkness be used for the seizure of key points and objectives. Enemy reaction becomes increasingly violent with daylight.

6. Adequate and functioning communication facilities are vital to the rapid and successful accomplishment of the mission.

7. The element of surprise presents the possessor with a heavy advantage. In operations of this size and scope, the possession, or lack, of surprise may well be the balance of power.

8. The nature of the terrain made the BAR, with its mobility, fire power, range and weight, a highly desirable weapon. More of them should have been available with at least two to a squad and jumped on the individual.

9. Training policies for the operation were sound, and the use of all opportunities for the injection of realism paid dividends. This was particularly true of night operations.

MAP "A"

NORMANDY FRANCE

508TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY

6-10 JUNE 1944

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YARDS

ST MARTIN

PATROL CONTACT
4TH DIV 07100 JUNE

NEUVILLE AU PLAIN

GOURBESVILLE

STE MERE EGLISE

LA FIERE

AMFREVILLE

7 JUNE

8 JUNE

9 JUNE

7 JUNE

6 JUNE

RENOUF

GUETTEVILLE

7-10 JUNE 30

6 JUNE

6 JUNE

PICAUVILLE

RIVER

6-11 JUNE

CHEF DU PONT

8 JUNE

ETURVILLE

CONTACT WITH 101ST A/B DIV 081000 JUNE

BLOSVILLE

ETIENVILLE

CARQUEBUT

MERDERET

LE PORT

8-11 JUNE

DOUVE RIVER

BEUZEVILLE

LA BASTILLE