508 FINISHES 3 WEEKS OF INTENSIVE FIGHTING

325 in third campaign

By J. C. Reynolds

The story of the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, during a day and a night of the battle of Mook, Holland, 1st to 3rd Oct. 1944

I knew that the village was on the other side of the hill. I stopped before I reached the top. Behind me lay the green forests of Holland. Everything was quiet and in peace down there, and the droplets of rain shone like diamonds as they gaily danced from the pine trees to the ground. The sun was well up and busy at work taking the chill from the earth. Yes, today was a wonderful day . . . back here. I turned and walked on down the other side.

Mook lay before me. Mook, small Dutch canal town. Mook, last stop on the battle ground from which the Germans had retreated and through which our troops had advanced. Yes, Mook literally lay there. I felt like a ghost walking his lonely tour through a town without a single person, a town of broken glass, bricks, and smouldering ruins.

I saw an American soldier disappear around a deserted wrecked tank. I followed and called to him. When he stopped, I saw the white brassard with the red cross on his leftarm. We talked as we went towards his Battalion Medical Station. It was located in the ruins of a small Dutch house. The front rooms were in darkness. I became conscious of faces peering from the depths of those rooms . . . the resting wounded awaiting evacuation to the hospital. The two medical officers were in the attached stable in the rear, treating recent patients and simultaneously directing the arrangements of litters and decrepid furniture. There were no wasted movements or moments here. With tired eyes and drawn faces, the medics effortlessly treated the wounded, made hurried reports, unpacked medical supplies and carried litters. The medical officer told me that these litter squads had gone five days without rest. I passed through the hall and out on to the street.

BETWEEN THE FORESTS THEY FOUGHT.

The front lines were straight ahead, just beyond the village and across the field. I stopped by a Battalion Command Post. Here I learned that nature had been playing a trick on our men, a trick that Jerry was fully aware of and prepared to play [illegible] I, and those few behind which our men advanced, stealthily moved across the open ground. Suddenly, as though swept away by a huge hand, the fog lifted within fire distance and the troops lay startlingly exposed to the enemy. The Company on the flank bore the brunt of this weather phenomenon, as the handful of men still alive could attest to.

We were to attack in a couple of hours. Along a dirt road leading to the canal, I passed handfuls of our resting troops. Beards were heavy and faces dirty behind final smokes. „I've lived about seven lives since morning," said a powerfully-built buck sergeant as he struck a match.

I was met by lonely scarred men, almost childlike in expression, with great effort stumbling to the medical stations in the rear.

I came to a ruined church, scaled the wall and crept out to the moss-covered banks of the canal. I threw a match into the water. It glided softly away. No, there was nothing disrupting these waters. They were peaceful enough to be those in a Biblical setting, flowing gently, oblivious to what was occurring beyond its banks. I took an apple from my pocket which I had picked up along the road. I thought of the church on my left, of the way it could have looked, of the people that once went there. The rumble of guns in the distance continued. I had a strange shivering sensation as I took a final look from the church wall at the calm waters of the canal.

Attack ready! I was just in time. Several British tanks stood along the road with engines idling like a far distant [illegible]. A column of men silently moved alo[illegible] a hedgerow to the road and climbed on the rear of the armored giants. One of the young soldiers determinedly took his place aloft the front of the first tank. He swung one arm over the barrel of the menacingly protruding cannon. His other arm adjusted his rifle partly across his body. I stood for a moment fascinated by the boy's face. Strong features, determined, with quiet brown eyes. The other companies poured from the seemingly inexhaustible hedgerow. Bearded faces looked up, broke into smiles and spoke friendly jibes at the youth on the first tank. It worked, for a slow smile appeared on his face and developed into a grin. He was still grinning as the steel tanks rolled forward.

„GENERAL JIM'S HERE"

I fell in with the forward moving dispersed column. A tall, lonely figure in paratrooper uniform appeared as though by magic. He had the large, ever present rifle slung diagonally across his back. His stride was long, silent and confident. „General Jim's here," was passed up along the column. What a feeling of pride those words caused.

Silence, broken only by the murmur of the creeping tanks. The column advanced, twisting and winding close to the hedgerows. The canal came into sight again. I didn't care to look. Halt signal. We squatted low to the ground. „Move across to the trench." I turned and joined the others as they dashed toward the enemy built trench along the banks of the canal. Silence. We moved back to the road. A little firing started further forward. I saw one boy from the unit in the rear make a lightning dash for the trench we had just left. I watched him as he disappeared over the side. I didn't have time to look away before I was startled by a terrific explosion and the sight of that boy flying out of the trench as though seized by powerful hands and tossed up onto the ground. He lay motionless in the midst of the clearing smoke. In search of protection he had chosen the one spot a hundred yards where a mine had been carefully placed.

Still forward. Then it came! All hell broke loose. The air screamed with death tokens. Clods of dirt and moss flew as though taking sides in the battle. Sand rained as the shells hit. Machine guns tic-tacked as though attempting to put continuity to both sound and mistles. My head started to pound as though it was a huge anvil continually swelling under the powerful blows of a mighty hammer.

They had said that our enemy down there was third rate. He was old or diseased. They must have pulled a fast switch, then, because he sure looked young and healthy to me as he was hauled out and taken prisoner. Put up one hell of a fight along with it.

THEY HAD BEATEN THE ENEMY.

I moved along the canal where I could see the effects of our artillery. Our men had advanced and had the objective. It was now a question of holding it. Things quieted down and I went back to the village. Some English boys were having tea beside their tank which they had just brought back out. They swore by our men up there. „Great in battle," they said, „with plenty of guts . . . and it takes plenty to do what they've done."

Night was closing in. With the darkness came silence, expectant waiting and fatigue. I returned to the church yard and, propped against the wall, waited. I thought of the men I had seen, of the things they had done in battle beating the enemy back; of heroism and death working so closely together; of the chaplain I had talked to who „was more convinced of a Divine Being than ever before."

I returned to the lines. At dawn, things quieted down again. A terrific bombardment had been the prelude to the resuming of the battle. Ambulances and jeeps were speeding along the roads evacuating the wounded. The medics were working at a feverish pace. I turned and walked from Mook, back up the hill. I was nearly to the top again. I turned and looked back. There was Mook as I had first seen it. There was the canal flowing as always. Beyond the city were the valiant men of that heroic 325th Glider Regiment. They had fought hard, lost many, but gained their objective. They were weary and exhausted, but were victorious. They had beaten the enemy and accomplished their mission.

I turned and walked on. In the distance I saw two long columns of men moving toward me. I smiled as I knew the men back there would when they saw „Deutchee" drop tail and take for a fox-hole when the Luftwaffe soared over that night. Excitement reached a really alarming peek, however, when the brown beast, after a terrific warm up dash, took a flying leap at an unconcerned passing Allied motorcyclist. What a splash!

„Deutchee" turned Mata-Hari a few nights ago during an enemy artillery barrage, and for all we know she's back with the Stuhlegruber boys.

DOBERMAN PINCHED BY MPS

DOG SPY ESCAPES FOLD OF PROVOST-MARSHAL OR PANZER PLUTO PLAYS POSSUM AFTER M.P.'S PINCH PINSCHER

The MP's of the 82nd Airborne Division M.P. Platoon dropped their military dignity long enough to pinch a Doberman-Pinscher from the Division Defense Platoon. The German born, bred, and trained dog turned tail on his former lord and masters and took up office hours beneath the Provost Marshal's desk.

In hopes of grooming a real blood hound, the MP's really thought they had something when they saw „Deutchee" drop tail and take for a fox-hole when the Luftwaffe soared over that night. Excitement reached a really alarming peek, however, when the brown beast, after a terrific warm up dash, took a flying leap at an unconcerned passing Allied motorcyclist. What a splash!

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508 BEARING BRUNT ON WIDE DEFENSE SECTOR. IST TO ENTER GERMANY

The air over the DZ was filled with flak but no other gunfire was heard as our 1st and 2nd Battalions reached the ground and began to assemble. The 3rd Battalion, jumping near the edge of the DZ came down squarely upon a 20 mm. anti-aircraft position. The crew fled in panic and joined a small party of die-hard enemy firing from the edge of the area. These were driven off and the assembly completed. The battalions moved out to their objectives.

Companies A and B immediately moved into the town of Nijmegen to secure the bridge spanning the Waal River. Fighting their way through strange city streets on an dark night, both companies reached the center of the city where German resistance stiffened and mounting counter-attacks made the night an ogre's ordeal. One platoon of Company A pushed ahead and reached the southern approach to the Nijmegen bridge. Here this patrol managed to knock out a building which was believed to house the controls for the destruction of the bridge by enemy demolitions. Forced by heavy shellfire to withdraw, the patrol was unable to make contact with the company and so for three nights remained in the city. A British tank column moving in was stopped by enemy obstacles. Elements of Company A joined the British and spearheaded them through the streets toward the bridge which was later gained intact. On the 18th, Company B had been forced to fall back when enemy artillery registered on their position and the buildings surrounding were set afire. Later, Company B moved to Wyler where, all day, the men fought off a battalion of German SS troops. Before nightfall they pulled back to another position and set up an iron-clad „keep out", „verboten to S.S. defense".

Company C meanwhile did their job to perfection fighting a spectacular battle for Hill 97.5 after three previous attempts by other units had failed to wrest it from the Germans. This Company launched an attack which carried the hill and then withstood six successive counter-assaults by heavy artillery, mortars and twice their number of infantry. When ammunition was down to five rounds per man, the defenders defiantly rejected a German proposal of surrender and, though cut off from the main body, held out until relieved five days later.

During this action, the 508 2nd Battalion had skirted the city and moved toward the Maas-Waal Canal Bridge, encountering machine guns and 20 mm cannon en route. Lt. Lloyd G. Polette, leading the point, personally destroyed one 20 mm gun and a machine gun position. Next day his platoon of 20 men stormed the bridge after a bloody fight and secured that crossing.

This same day, German troops overran the DZ and portions of the 1st and 2nd Battalion, returned to clear that area, just a few minutes before scheduled glider landings. The 2nd Battalion remained to secure the zone from further attacks.

FIRST TO CROSS GERMAN BORDER.

The 3rd Battalion, moving out after assembly on the 17th, fought a bitter action for Berg-en-Dal and its important road junction. On the 18th, Company H pushed down to Beek and struck three times in one night before tearing the enemy hold from that point. Company H was the first airborne unit to push the German frontier and hold. Company G, battled through the eastern section of Nijmegen and fought tenaciously for the Waal (Rhine) River bridge until heavy artillery and mortar bombardment which they could not combat caused their withdrawal. Company I swung out into the flats east of Beek and destroyed enemy strong points. The battalion then attacked with British tanks and pushed its lines east to include the open ground before Beek.

All battalions were relieved and pulled back to reorganize and gain a short breather. The regiment moved up again held a sector of the Division MLR which the enemy blasted with heavy guns and continually attacked but could never penetrate.

„Market" Day

The spirit behind the 82ND Division

Often overlooked in the history of any operation is D-day minus one, that last day of waiting and ordering when preparations are completed after days of constant alert, and the soldier suddenly finds himself all packed and ready. For what?

Especially in an airborne operation where weather may suddenly change the date of departure, this period of last minute waiting may continue for days, each day bringing the tension of departure, followed by the let-down of another delay.

The Dutch Airborne invasion came off as planned. The Division left its base in England for several different airports on September 15. Some still thought it would be a dry-run, but nobody knew. This looked like the real thing to most, and regardless, every man knew he must be ready. There is no second guessing in combat.

The 16th brought the briefing. It was definitely to be Holland. A pure airborne show to seize the bridges and clear the trail for the British 2nd Army's armored advance into Holland. What would we meet? Nobody knew. On the northern flank of the Siegfried Line we, of the 82nd, were to land by parachute and glider. Through three successive invasions we had conquered the foe and liberated the friend. But this was a new kind of mission. Jumping in front of the British 2nd Army, we were to clear a vast area near the German border, seize and hold all key bridges, and wait until the British 2nd Army passed through. Flanked by the German Reichwald, a reported German Tiger tank park, the men knew not what to expect. It could be a „milk-run" or it could be the bloodiest fight to date.

Re-supply and reinforcements like the initial assault would have to be entirely airborne. There were no sea lanes or ground approaches either close or open. Airborne meant weather. Would it rain or would the sun stay with us?

These were the questions that raced through each and every jumper or glider-man's brain.

Heavy flak, a long overland route, air support and protection, flimsy gliders, no sealed-in gas tanks on the C-47's, sweating out the jump, glider crashes, machine-gun fire, hedgerows, landing obstacles, and a million other thoughts, past experiences and hearsay crowded the GI craniums. Land, run like hell for the nearest ditch, fire back, then what?

These were the thoughts in every man's mind. They had been through everything and always victorious. Why? General „Jim" says, „It's the quality of the troops," and the troops say, „It's the leaders like General „Jim". What it is we don't know, but at any rate here was another mission to sweat out.

Anxious waiting, last-minute instructions, a review of the plans, a wet brow and over-anticipation? Oh, No!!! Not the 82nd.

A swing concert, a movie, a football game and a wrestling match. And those that didn't like any of these just slept through it all. Was this the day before they were to face possible death? It was amazing.

At all of the airports, the men slept in huge hangers. Into each, on schedule, went one of the two great Division swing bands. The bandsmen must stay back and do every imaginable kind of [illegible] when the Division goes to combat, but the men respect these musicians. Better than that, they take great pride in them, because these jumping swingsters have not only qualified for their parachutists' wings but have produced a quality of swing which is top professional-plus. This is their job.

Filing in from one of the other airports came a Division band under the direction of Sgt. Woods, its tallented conductor. Placing their cardboard music stands on the cement hanger floor, the men hurriedly shuffled through the sheet music and struck out with „American Patrol." 600 men hit the deck in unison. The cots were empty. In the accustical splendor of the metal hanger shell the swing was resplendent. Feet were stamping and arms were flailing as tune after tune rebounded off the soundboards of the hanger walls. Hundreds surged around the bandstand to sing, whistle and clap to a trumpet ride or a drum break. This was it! Terrific music and, what is more important, it caught the spirit of the men. Rookies, like myself, buried in shame any doubts they had about the marrow and swelled with pride to the tunes of their fine band and the spirit of their fine Division.

No longer worried about anything and with the attitude of an „All American" soldier for the first time, I turned around to see if it had affected others the same way. There they were. Six GI's playing pepper with a brand new softball; two sergeants blowing up a football for a little game of pass; a corporal trading so ks with his squad to the beat of the music. Some still snored away oblivious to worry of any kind, but by in all, the majority swung with the music.

Neither were these men all „jive." Just as inspiring to most were the sentimental, almost nostalgic, „I'll Get By" and „I'll Be Seeing You In All The Old Familiar Places." These men were sentimental as well as reckless and heroic. Behind these diversified characteristics was the real man, the serious soldier.

If I had to pick one man in that crowd to exemplify the spirit of the 82nd soldier, I believe I should choose a lone private over on his bed whistling madly, and sharpening the eight-inch blade of his trench knife on his rifle strap to the rhythm of a trumpet solo on the „All-American Soldier". This was, and is, the spirit of this 82nd All-American Airborne Division, the pre-invasion jitters that every soldier is supposed to get. If there were any butterflys in these stomachs, they were jumping to that music.

So was the spirit of the average 82nd Airborne soldier when he boarded his glider or plane for „Market Day," D-Day of the operation market, the invasion of German-occupied Holland. This had also been the spirit, the glorious victorious spirit, that won so valiantly in Sicily, Salerno, Anzio, and Normandy.