THIRTY FOUR DAYS IN NORMANDY IN 1944

By Colonel Mark J. Alexander

For several years I've been promising my son, Mark, Jr., that I would write of my experiences in the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944. At that time I was Executive Officer of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division. After fighting in the invasions of Sicily and Italy, we had been training in Ireland and England for about six months in preparation for the invasion of Europe. Only a few of us knew that our next objective was Normandy, France.

We displaced from our training areas in England to the airfields on June 3 with intent to jump into Normandy on the morning of June 5. However, stormy weather over the English Channel caused Eisenhower to delay one day, and the invasion was made June 6, 1944. My Regiment, the 505th, jumped at 1:30 to 2:30 AM on the morning of June 6, preceded by our pathfinders with a lead of 45 minutes.

After we displaced to the airfields, I am proud that General Matthew B. Ridgeway, the Division Commander, came to me and said that he had decided to jump into Normandy with my Regiment rather than go by ship and boat, and would I pick a plane and jumpmaster whereby he had the best chance of landing in the chosen landing area. I picked an experienced jumpmaster, Lieutenant Dean Garber of Headquarters Company, and a plane on the right side of the flight formation where the jumpmaster could best see the beckoning lights of the pathfinders. The General sat in with Headquarters Company for loading and jump instructions on the 4th of June. This, I believe was to be the General's fifth jump. The General jumped with Headquarters Company as planned landing within 100 yards of proposed drop area where his field command post was planned, and was soon joined by elements of his Division staff.

After a delay of 24 hours, General Eisenhower finally gave the order to launch the invasion on the morning of June 6. We had been nervously standing by at the airfields for some 36 hours and the men were ready to go. Training and timing of an invasion by 150,000 men and support units was a tremendous undertaking. In addition to combat and service troops, thousands of ships and 821 C47 airborne troop transports were involved. This included 20 pathfinder ships and three hours later, 103 airplanes, each towing a WACO glider carrying glider troopers, jeeps, antitank guns, and supplies.

Finally, on June 5th, we received the anxiously awaited orders to "GO" on the morning of June 6, 1944. Takeoff and assembly of aircraft from several airfields, and circling to get into formation takes a great deal of time. We were circling in the air a half hour before heading for Normandy in a flight of V's. In my ship with me as jumpmaster were 18 men from our Regimental Headquarters S2, Captain Patrick Gibbons, my orderly, Chick Eitelman, and others. The other half of the Regimental staff were in another plane with the Regimental Commander, Colonel Ekman, and our regimental S3, Major John Norton.

After assembly in formation we headed for Normandy. There was a quarter moon and an occasional cloud. Standing in the open door of the C47, I could see thousands of ships below. We headed southwest to pass northeast of the islands of Guernsey and Jersey, turning back to the southeast to cross the Normandy coast between the French towns of Bricquebec and Saint Sauveur le Vicomte to jump in the area immediately southwest of Sainte Mere Eglise. We were subject to heavy antiaircraft fire as we came into the vicinity of the two islands and intensive fire as we crossed the coast into Normandy. Intermittent clouds covered the 1200-foot approach elevation at which we were flying. We were to fly lower to an elevation of 800 feet for the jump. Flying in the intermittent clouds caused the formation to begin to disperse--some higher--some lower.

In my plane we were in the clouds for almost all of the flight across Normandy. The red warning light came on and I waited for the green jump light as we flew through the clouds. I was afraid to jump without the green light for fear the other aircraft might be flying right behind us and at a lower elevation. I was about to jump without the green light because I knew we had passed over the intended drop area. We were still flying in the clouds and rapidly approaching the north coast of Normandy when the green light finally came on. I led the jump into the clouds at an estimated elevation of 800 feet as we landed very quickly.

I landed on a stump in a highly forested area. The stock of my carbine, carried slung across my chest, hit the stump first and the gun sight raked across and cut a small gash in my left jaw. I had landed about 200 feet from a small house and barn. My jump stick of 18 men rolled back along the line of flight and soon joined me. Captain Patrick Gibbons, our S2, spoke passable French, and after talking to the farm family, we calculated that we were about two and one half miles north of Sainte Mere Eglise, and to the northeast of Neuville au Plain. After rounding up our jumpers and collecting all our equipment, it was still dark, but with an indication that morning light would soon be upon us, we moved out in column toward Sainte Mere Eglise. As the sky began to lighten we met Major Kellum with about 40 men who had also been dropped north northwest of Sainte Mere Eglise and were headed for their 1st Battalion objective on the Mederet River at La Fiere.

We had not gone far when we came to the main road leading northwest to Monteberg and Cherbourg. We heard motor vehicles approaching from the northwest. We ambushed about 20 Germans with a two and one half ton truck loaded with radio equipment, and eight or ten motorcycles, two of which quickly turned and escaped to the northwest. At this point in time and distance, my orderly, Chick Eitelmanm and I headed for our Regimental and Division Command Posts to be located just southwest of Sainte Mere Eglise. Major Kellum and his group of 1st Battalion men headed for their objective at La Fiere.

When I arrived at our Regimental CP, I found that Major Norton, our S3, and three or four Regimental Headquarters men were there and in action with a radio. Colonel Eckman, the Commanding Officer of the 505th had been there and had headed for Sainte Mere Eglise and La Fiere, which were our main Regimental objectives. We had radio communications with Lieutenant Colonel Vandervoort and Lieutenant Colonel Krause in Sainte Mere Eglise. They were being attacked from both the east and west. Major McGinty and Captain Roysdon with the 1st Battalion at La Fiere had reported being attacked by strong German forces supported by Renault tanks.

In the morning a small group of Germans had passed from east to west just to the south of our CP and they had been firing over our heads and causing leaves to fall in the CP area. About 60 or 70 glider pilots from the early morning flight had collected near the CP of the Division Headquarters. I went to General Ridgeway at the adjacent Division CP and asked if I could have the glider pilots for a perimeter defense of the CP and he readily approved. I divided the pilots into four small squads and put them under command of a Major pilot and had them take up a defensive position with three units on the perimeter and a small squad of 10 glider pilots to go to the area that is attacked.

At our CP, we were receiving reports that the 2nd and 3rd Battalions were being attacked at Sainte Mere Eglise (our main Regimental objective)--the 3rd Battalion from the southeast and the 2nd Battalion from the northwest, along the main road from Cherbourg. The 1st Battalion at La Fiere was being attacked by German Infantry supported by Renault tanks. Then we learned that the 1st Battalion Executive Officer, Major McGinty was killed and late in the morning that the Battalion CO, Major Kellum, and the Battalion S3, Captain Roysdon, had been killed.

We had been unable to make contact with Lieutenant Colonel Eckman. I talked it over with Major Norton, our S3, at the command post and decided I should head for La Fiere and the 1st Battalion defending the bridge at La Fiere. I took my orderly, Corporal Chick Eitelman, with me. On the way, we had a scrimmage with several Germans and Chick got one through his kneecap. Chick strongly objected but I ordered him back to HQ where he received medical treatment. I proceeded to La Fiere.

On the way to La Fiere, I found a group of about 40 101st and 508th men lying in a ditch along the road. Supposedly, someone had held them as a reserve. I did not know who so I rounded them up and took them with me to La Fiere. We arrived at the railroad crossing above La Fiere at about 1:30 or 2:00 o'clock. I scouted the position and found that most of A Company with Captain Red Dolan were well organized and in a good situation on the right side of the road facing the Mederet River and bridge. I approved Captain Dolan having moved his Company back 150 yards from the intense mortar and machine gun fire along the riverbank. On the left of the road was a mixed group of C Company, 505th men occupying a house (called a manor), and some 507th men under the command of, I believe, a Captain Rae on the ridge above the manor. On the bridge was a disabled Renault tank from earlier fighting. The whole position was receiving heavy fire from the west bank around Cauquign--mortar, machine gun, and occasionally 88mm. through my binoculars I spotted two German tanks screened behind the buildings in the village of Cauquign across the river.

I had located one of our 57mm antitank guns abandoned in a defilade position about 75 yards above the bridge and on the left side of the road. There were two holes through the shield apparently from an earlier duel with the Renault tanks, and there was no gun sight. There were six rounds of armor-piercing ammunition. I put Elmo Bell and two other men on the gun. I told them that if there was another tank attack, to bore sight the gun and when they were out of ammunition, to abandon it. I headed back to the railroad junction with the dirt road just as General Gavin came in from Chef du Pont. Seeing that we were doing OK at La Fiere, he instructed me to take command of the position. I asked him if he wanted me on this side of the river, both sides, or the other side. Be instructed me to stay where we were on the east or near side, and to hold fast not allowing passage to the Germans. At that time he was more concerned about the situation at Chef du Pont.

While discussing the situation with General Gavin, Lieutenant Colonel Maloney with about 75 men from the 507th came in from the direction of Chef du Pont. General Gavin attached them to me and I instructed them to take up a position on the left side of the road facing the bridge above the manor. General Gavin, and Colonel Lindquist with about 50 or 60 men who had been held in reserve back from the road by General Gavin, headed for Chef du Pont. Later in the afternoon, General Gavin came back and took Lieutenant Colonel Maloney and most of his men on the double to strengthen the weak position being held at the Mederet crossing near Chef du Pont.

We organized the defensive position of miscellaneous men on the left side of the road--some C Company men forward in the manor, and about 40 men from the 507th under Captain Rae on the high ground above the manor. About that time I and another soldier dug two 507th men out of a hedgerow where they had been hit and half buried by a 88mm round from the other side of the river. The men were still alive. I had previously agreed with Captain Dolan that he was right to move his men back where they were not under direct observation from Couquigon on the far side of the river. The mortar fire was bad all over our position with sporadic machine gun fire as well.

We were heavily shelled with mortar, machine gun fire, and an occasional 88mm for the rest of the day. At one time in checking out our position and looking for wounded along the river bank with medic Kelly Byers, we were caught in an exposed position, and we had to lay in a foxhole previously dug in the shale by a company man for about 25 minutes while the Germans saturated the area with mortar fire. We had located an A Company man with a dollar-size piece of shrapnel of his skull blown off and still alive. We gave him a shot of morphine but judged it would be better to come back for him after dark with a stretcher. That medic, Kelly, was a real good man.

On June 7th we were constantly under fire. I could occasionally see German infantry moving about in the village of Cauquigny, but they made only a couple of half-hearted attempts to reach the bridge. We had no long-range firepower other than a few rounds of mortar, which had to be held in reserve for any serious effort the Germans might make to cross the bridge. Later in the day (D+1), the 2nd Battalion of the 325th, which had landed by glider that day, moved into a reserve position to our rear. They were later attached to the 505th. June 8 (D+2), we, the 1st Battalion, initially remained in position and were, later in the afternoon, relieved by elements of the 507th. Later that day we were moved to take the position of the 3rd Battalion, 505th at Granville, the 3rd Battalion being put in reserve.

Incidentally, to indicate what the 1st Battalion had been confronted with at La Fiere and the river crossing, General Ridgeway wrote to me in May 1972 and said that the taking of Couquigny by the 325th on June 9, 1944 was, and I quote, “the hottest single incident I experienced in all my combat service both in Europe and later in Korea.” On the 8th of June, I had remained in command of the 1st Battalion. We were given orders to attack to the north-northwest on line with the 8th Regiment on our right and the 325th Glider Regiment on our left. The 325th was soon left behind, The 2nd Battalion trailing the 1st Battalion of the 505th. We progressed with little resistance to beyond Granville on June 8. On the 9th of June we took Monteberg Station. The 8th Regiment on our right was slow and about one-fourth mile behind. The 1st Battalion was wide open on our left and right flanks with the 2nd Battalion following in column.

In the attack on the 9th to take Monteberg Station, the Regimental Commander, LTC Bill Eckman, had requested that I give the attack order. My order was for the 1st Battalion to lead, followed closely by the 2nd Battalion. After the 1st Battalion had taken Monteberg Station, the 2nd Battalion was to take the lead by turning to the left by 45 degrees and take La Ham. The first part of the attack worked fine and the 1st Battalion with a beautiful smoke screen got into and cleared Monteberg Station with minimum losses. The 2nd Battalion was one-half hour late in following, giving the Germans time to get set on the other side of the village and they stopped the

2nd Battalion cold just beyond the village. In a reconnaissance with my artillery observer, I had spotted a German multiple-firing railroad gun; I think a 40mm Pom-Pom north of the village. We brought in artillery fire on the gun and silenced it. The 1st Battalion was receiving a great deal of fire, including a lot of screaming mimis from the north on our right flank.

While we were still clearing the village, Lieutenant Colonel Ekman, the 505th Commanding Officer, came up and wanted to know what I was doing waiting on the east side of the bridge. I told him I was waiting until the Battalion had cleared the village. We were standing at the northeast corner of the arching bridge over the railroad. In spite of my telling him that a German machine gun located on the road to La Ham was firing on the bridge, he started to cross it. The Germans opened fire on him and he had to make a running jump off the rear end of the bridge. Colonel Ekman left to check on the 2nd Battalion. I was concerned about having Germans on our left and right flanks. The 2nd Battalion had moved into position between the 1st Battalion and La Ham but were making no progress. Lieutenant Cooperider and I went down to the railroad track about 200 yards to the southeast when we saw three Germans crossing the railroad track to get in behind us. Cooperider said, "Let's get the hell out of here," and we returned to the village. After we cleared the village and the 2nd Battalion had passed through, I set up a CP about 75 yards east of the railroad overpass.

Shortly thereafter I had been on the third floor of a small factory with William Hall, my runner/bodyguard, trying to locate with my field glasses the German gun location to the north. I was walking back toward the railroad overpass when I spotted one of the 2nd Battalion Company Commanders walking back to the east away from the 2nd Battalion front. I asked him what he was doing there in the 1st Battalion area. He said he was not going to stay up there on the northwest edge of the village where all the screaming mimis were falling. I told him they were falling all over the area, talked to him for about ten minutes telling him that he was responsible for the welfare of his men. I gave him a break and sent him back to his company. I never told anyone of this incident until years later when my wife and I were visiting the Vandervoorts at their home in South Carolina. After hearing of the incident, Vandervoort told me that he believed that was why he was held up in his Battalion's attack toward La Ham. Later, Vandervoort said, this captain became a fair company commander.

About 2100 hours the night of the 10th, I had been patrolling our position and was returning to our CP when the Supply Officer of the 2nd Battalion and his driver came down the road with a jeep load of ammunition. The jeep hit a mine in the road and I saw them blown up in the air about fifteen feet. I ran over to them. The driver had been killed and Lieutenant Donnelly was in bad shape and could not see. One of the lieutenants and I carried him into the CP, gave him a shot of morphine and tried to comfort him. Although he could not see he asked me, "Is that you, Colonel Alexander?" I assured him it was and that we would soon have him back with the medics, and I thought he would be OK. I did not learn that he lived until, not long ago, I talked with his wife in Pennsylvania. She said he had always suffered from disabilities but had led a rather normal life and raised a family. He died in 1991.

The 325th came up on our left flank on the 10th of June, with the 8th Regiment on our right. Late on the 10th our 1st and 2nd Battalions were relieved and moved to reserve in an area near Picauville. I was still in command of the 1st Battalion on the 15th of June. Lieutenant Colonel Walter Winton had taken my place as Executive Officer of the 505th. On June 15th the 1st and 2nd Battalions launched an attack to the west--objective: St. Sauveur le Vicomte-- to speed up cutting off the peninsula and isolating Cherbourg with the 1st Battalion on the right and the 2nd Battalion on the left. To our left was the 508th and on our right the 9th Infantry Division. In leading off, the 1st Battalion had to pass through elements of the 9th Division on our right. It was a green Regiment that was bogged down in a hedgerow and was getting shot to pieces by German mortar fire. Our experienced Battalion drove the Germans back, and as I once said, we passed through the 9th like a dose of salts, and at the end of the day we had progressed about halfway to the Douve River north of Crosville, where we sat down for the night.

We had experienced only sporadic resistance mainly from a stonewalled farmhouse and buildings. We had a few casualties including Lieutenant Gerard Johnson who had suffered a round through his shoulder and a new First Lieutenant replacement shot through the knee. We were again ahead of the 2nd Battalion even though I had given LTC Vandervoort my two tanks when he was held up by a rock-walled farmhouse complex. We were again open on our right flank. On the 16th of June we launched our attack at dawn and had stiff resistance from an 88mm gun position but by 1400 hours, we had reached the road paralleling the Douve River and were again ahead of the 2nd Battalion on our left. I could hear them fighting on the main road to the southeast. The 9th, on our right, was far behind. I sat up in a defensive position on the river road defending from the northeast and the southwest. We had no more than taken up our defense when a German command car with four occupants drove right into us from the north along the

river road. Our men shot them to pieces. I don't know how it happened but German artillery major survived the incident. Some Frenchman on a bicycle saw the action, turned around and pedaled madly back northeast on the river road. I'm sure he informed the Germans of our position. Shortly thereafter I spotted German tanks on a road junction about three quarters of a mile to the northeast on the river road. I had my artillery observer bring down a concentration of fire. When the smoke cleared the tanks had gone and I saw no further German action in that area.

The lack of firing in the 2nd Battalion area led me to believe that they had also reached the river. Leaving a platoon-sized roadblock on the river road, I gathered the Battalion and started them moving southwest on the river road to where the main road crossed the Douve river. I went ahead with my orderly and a radio operator. When I arrived at the bridge I met Colonel Ekman and General Ridgeway. The last of the 2nd Battalion had just crossed the half-blown bridge. Ekman ordered me to bring up the 1st Battalion. I told him they were already on the way and the lead elements began arriving as I spoke. I directed them to speed up the crossing behind the 2nd Battalion.

Ridgeway informed me that he had 15 batteries of artillery to back us in the establishment of the bridgehead. My 1st Battalion crossed the bridge unopposed immediately behind the 2nd Battalion. We took up a position on the high ground in the northeast part of St. Sauveur le Vicomte, and the 2nd Battalion was positioned straight ahead. Soon the 508th was brought up and took up a position in the southwest part of the town. A very firm bridgehead had been established. The following day, the 9th Division crossed the bridge and in two days reached the west coast of the Normandy peninsula cutting off any movement by the Germans from northeast to the southwest or vice versa, enabling General Collins and his Corps to intensify their drive to the north northeast to capture Cherbourg.

Late on the 16th the 1st Battalion occupied the high ground in the northern part of St. Sauveur le Vicomte, I had set up my command post in one of the nearby farmhouses. One of the Battalion Headquarters men came to me and said he was going to cook me a delicious duck dinner with potatoes and tomatoes from a garden and a duck from a pond. Later, my staff and I sat down at a kitchen table prepared to eat our hot meal for the first time in 10 days.

The field telephone rang. It was a call from Colonel Ekman. He said that General Ridgeway had called and wanted me to report to Colonel Roy E. Lindquist, Commanding Officer of the 508th, as soon as possible. He said that I would be the Regimental Executive Officer of the 508th and that they needed me there. In a few minutes, the telephone rang again and General Ridgeway confirmed the order. I said to General Ridgeway that I was a 505 man--and he said, "you WERE!" So, I jumped into a jeep, left my duck dinner to Major Bill Hagen, my replacement, and reported to Colonel Lindquist. I received a rather cold reception. The senior officers of the 508th had been together for about one and a half years and I was an outsider.

The 508th, along with the other three regiments of the division, were deployed in defensive positions facing the southwest and held those positions along with other units while General Collins carried out his assault and defeat of the German units defending Cherbourg. This defensive position was held from June 18th to the morning of July 3rd with not a great deal of action other than harassing fire from both sides. On the morning of July 3rd, the Division and other units were unleashed on a drive to the southwest to take La Haye du Puits. In the defensive period from June 18th to the morning of July 3rd, not a great deal happened. We received infrequent incoming mortar and artillery fire. However, as Executive Officer, I had little to do and had Colonel Lindquist's approval to frequently check out the Regiment's defensive positions. Most of the time I would take my orderly, Virgil McGuire, with me, but about half the time I went alone.

One evening I was restless. It was a very dark night with a cloudy sky and we were in a wooded area straddling a dirt road, which ran into the enemy's positions. I decided to check some of our positions, one in particular that protruded into the German position. I quietly moved down the dirt road through the trees. All at once I realized I was hearing German voices on both sides of me. Very quietly, I turned around and sneaked back to where I had come from. I finally located our roadblock. Both men were asleep but not for long. Another night I had been out checking our deployment and it started to rain again. I returned to our command post and my orderly, McGuire, had somewhere procured a pup tent and two blankets. Alongside the tent McGuire had dug a trench as we had been receiving occasional mortar fire in the bivouac area. There was mud in the bottom of the slit trench so I moved into the pup tent with my two blankets and was soon sound asleep. I awakened to the sound of mortar fire and explosions but was too comfortable to move into the muddy slit trench and went back to sleep. Again I awakened to the sound of nearby explosions. One round landed very close, and with the next flash and explosion, I could see four holes in the top of the pup tent. Yes, I got up and took my two blankets and moved into the

muddy slit trench.

On the morning of July 3rd, the 82nd Airborne Division and other divisions were unleashed on a drive to the southwest. Our 82nd objective was La Haye du Puits. General Collins had finally taken the port of Cherbourg, which was badly needed to bring in supplies for our forces. Eisenhower could now direct his armies to drive east into France. But first there was a main effort to cut off the German forces located between American forces and the British and Canadian forces to the north. We were in a defensive position to the northeast of La Daudaie. Our first day's objective on July 3rd was to drive southwest about 6,000 yards, just short of Blanchelande and clear the left slope of Hill 131 with the 505th to take the hill. The following day, July 4th, we were to take Hill 95, about 4,000 yards to our southwest. On the morning of July 3rd, Colonel Lindquist had me give the attack order. The 505th would be on our right and the 325th would be on our left. Our Regimental attack was 2nd and 3rd Battalions abreast with the 1st Battalion following in close reserve. The attack went well until I think I heard over my radio that LTC Shanley, leading the 2nd Battalion, had tripped the wire to a bouncing betty and caught a ball in the back of his neck. The loss of Colonel Shanley was critical leaving only an inexperienced officer to lead the Battalion. I requested and received permission from Colonel Lindquist to go forward and lead the Battalion. I immediately went forward to the 2nd Battalion, which was involved in cleaning up a German defensive position. The Battalion was unorganized and some men were looting the captured Germans.

I sent Colonel Shanley back to the medics and proceeded to get the Battalion organized and moving toward our objective for the day. We closed on it about an hour before dark. After my 2nd Battalion had proceeded to about 1,000 yards short of our objective I heard firing to our rear. I took one man with me to backtrack and see what was holding up the 1st Battalion. As we took a bend in the dirt road and looked down the hill, we could see Germans in a deep drainage ditch firing at our oncoming 1st Battalion, the Regimental reserve. My runner and I knocked off a couple of them from our hillside position and they started crawling off in the ditch of the oncoming 1st Battalion. I grabbed the point rifle squad and directed them in cutting off the escaping Germans. We captured 25 or 26 Germans led by an SS lieutenant. I still have his P38 pistol. Major Warren came up, saw the last of the action, and remarked that I would make a good platoon leader. These Germans had moved laterally to get out from in front of the 505th Regiment on our right. If Major Warren, the 1st Battalion Commander, had maintained contact with the leading 2nd Battalion, as he should have, there would have been no room for the Germans to move laterally from in front of the 505th, and I explained this to him.

After seeing to it that the 2nd Battalion was in a good defensive position for the night, there was still a half hour of daylight remaining, so I set out to make a reconnaissance for the following morning, July 4th, at dawn. I found that there was an open valley about one quarter mile across between us and the Germans. I moved to the left forward edge of a wooded area, crawled behind a stone wall, pulled a rock out of the wall, and with my field glasses, had spotted two German gun positions on Hill 95. About that time one of the men came walking up to my position and I called to him to get down as the Germans could see him. He kept coming and then ran like hell when the Germans put an 88 round into the wall just ahead of him. I never learned who the soldier was. I don't think he wanted me to know. As soon as darkness closed in, I left my observation post and returned to the Battalion, which was located on the back slope of a small rise. I talked on a field telephone with Colonel Lindquist and told him that for the attack next morning I was going to move the Battalion to the left into a tree-covered ridge leading to Hill 95 and not have to cross the open valley and be subject to direct fire from the German guns on Hill 95.

I had no sooner hung the phone back on a tree when the Germans lucked out. They put a mortar round into the top of the tree. I think I heard it coming but took a dive too late. I was hit in the back by two shell fragments. It felt like someone had stuck a fence post in my back and all I could do was lay there and cuss and think of all the times they were shooting at me and missed. They finally lobbed one over the hill and got me. Doctor Montgomery and the medics got to me right away, taped my chest tight closing the wound so that I would not have a blowhole and collapsed lung. They called Regiment for a jeep and put me in the front seat with the driver. On the way to the hospital we stopped briefly at the Regimental CP and I had a few words with Colonel Lindquist but I could not talk very well. When we arrived at the field hospital, there was a ground fog. I put my foot down to dismount from the jeep, saw two orderlies coming with a stretcher, and I can only remember falling to the ground. The next thing I remember two doctors were trying to take an x-ray of my chest. I was bare from my waist up but still wearing my pants. I had the shakes and could not hold still for the x-ray. When I came to after surgery. Major General Ridgeway was sitting on a stool by my cot holding my hand. He was talking to me but I do not remember what he said as I was only semiconscious.

The next time I awakened, Father Connelly was bending over me praying. I remember telling him that I was not a catholic. He told me to just be quiet and that he was taking care of things. When I came to again, the nurse came to me, looked at my dog tags, and said your dog tags only say you are a Christian, but you are a catholic now for Father Connelly just gave you the last rites. I remember my stay in the field hospital. I was hooked up with tubing in just about all my orifices until the fifth day, at which time, 34 days after floating into Normandy on a parachute in the dark of night, I was put on a stretcher, carried by ambulance to a British hospital ship which crossed the channel to Portsmouth, England. There, I was loaded onto a hospital train, which carried me to a base hospital in central England. I was confined there for about 40 days before being transferred to a recuperative hospital facility near Portsmouth where I stayed until about September 20th.

AFTERMATH

On September 12th the hospital commander called me to his office and said that General Gavin, who was now the Commanding General of the 82nd Airborne Division, had called and wanted to know if I could be released for duty with the Division. He said he had a job for me wherein I would work only about an hour a day. The hospital commander said that he didn't believe him and that I needed more time to heal.

On September 18th, I learned that my 82nd Airborne Division and two other airborne divisions had invaded Holland the day before. My division had dropped near Nijmegen, the 101st at Eindhoven, the British 6th Airborne Division at Arnhem, and a Polish Brigade between Arnhem and Nijmegen. The story of this invasion was written up in "A Bridge too Far." The three airborne divisions and the Polish Brigade were to open and hold a corridor whereby the British armor could make a fast and deep penetration to Arnhem and cross the Rhine River.

General Montgomery and the British had underestimated the problem in carrying out such a deep penetration on a very narrow front and the British armor was stopped cold about two miles beyond Nijmegen. Our 82nd Division people were very upset because they had lost heavily in the Waal River crossing in canvas boats and in securing the city of Nijmegen so that the British armor could advance toward Arnhem. After crossing on the bridge, secured primarily by American forces, the British armored division stopped to brew a cup of tea, and the British were roundly cursed by our 82nd men of the 504th Regiment, as they had lost 46 KIA and 50 or more wounded in crossing the Waal River in their canvas boats under heavy fire from the Germans. The 505th had had heavy losses in securing the near end of the bridge.

The previous action had been completed just prior to my arrival in Nijmegen. I was told by the Chief of Staff, Colonel Wienecke, that the 82nd Division was to be relieved and pulled back to Reims, France in 30 days and go into reserve for replacements, re-equipment, etc. Also, inasmuch as I was not fully recovered from my chest wound, I was to proceed and go as camp commander for Camp Sissonne, France. I was to organize the old French training base to receive and accommodate the 82nd Airborne Division in 30 days. This was near Reims, France. The Division eventually returned to Camp Sissonne in late October. I stayed on as camp commander until January 20, 1945. At that time, not having fully recovered from the lung wound, I was ZI'd[1] and returned to the states as Director of Training at the Parachute School, Fort Benning, Georgia.

During most of my time at Benning we carried on with intensive training fully expecting to be sent to the Pacific Theater to carry on with the fighting against the Japanese. When the atomic bombs were dropped, the war came to an end and those who intended to stay in the army started scrambling for the best assignments. I had applied for regular army and passed the written exams but about 30 days later the Surgeon General turned me down because of the lung wound and the piece of shrapnel still lodged in my left lung. Discharged from active duty in November 1945, I applied for and was assigned in a reserve officer administrative capacity. Later, I was assigned as a mobilization designee at the Command and General Staff School at Leavenworth, Kansas. In 1959, I developed a malignant tumor and had to drop out of the reserves thus ending my military service. Mark Alexander passed away in May 2004.

[1] The term "ZI" was a mnemonic for "Zone of Interior", meaning the United States. Being "ZI'd" meant you were going home.