Reflections: When the Old Wound Aches

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By NELSON BRYANT

WEST TISBURY, Mass.

WHEN the barometer drops, and a cold, wet wind comes out of the northeast, my old wound aches and sometimes reminds me of when my fellow paratroopers and I jumped into Normandy a few hours before dawn on D-Day 50 years ago.

For many years I exploited that wound, made less than a week after my first combat jump by a machine-gun bullet that entered my chest and exited through my shoulder blade. Until I was in my late 50's, I would contrive to steer post-dinner conversation around to the war, and then, if sufficiently unhinged by emotion and drink, I would tear off my shirt and invite guests to poke their fingers in the fore and aft indentations. There were times when I set fire to the hair on my chest to add a bit of dra-

Of war, heroism and the plain of life; a few second thoughts about D-Day.

ma to my antics and to better reveal the little entrance scar.

"Wear the silver badge of courage, drop like an eagle on your prey," the airborne recruiting posters had said, and the scars were symbols, albeit fading, of my having heeded that call.

Now having passed three score and 10, I have, I believe, put my participation in the Normandy and Holland jumps and the Battle of the Bulge in reasonable perspective. A decade ago, I wrote that taking part in those campaigns with the 82d Airborne Division overshadowed all that followed, including love, marriage, career and children. That is no longer true. I have belatedly come to understand that slogging across the plain of everyday life with dignity and as much honesty as one can muster calls for as much heroism, if only because the struggle never ends, as assaulting a flaming hill.

Were it not for the old wound aching, months could pass before I thought of lying alongside a hedgerow, condoms taped over the holes made by the bullet, trying to swallow some of the soup a buddy was serving me from his fire-blackened helmet, or before I again recalled the first German soldier I killed as he walked along a dirt road in Normandy on the birdsong dawn of June 6 not knowing that I had him in my sights from the hillside above, slowly taking up the slack in the trigger and thinking all the while that the act was indecent, that it would be justified only if he was firing at me.

A few hours later, that dangerous reluctance departed in a short, fierce fire fight that took the lives of several of my buddies.

THERE are also recollections of absurd encounters as when, the second morning after D-Day, I headed up a scouting patrol of three. I was given that task not because of my rank (I was a private first class) but because I had a smattering of French, enough to allow me to converse with the natives of the region. A mile or so from our own front line we came upon a farmhouse whose occupants greeted us warmly. The daughter of the household, a handsome, strapping 6-footer, told me that there were no Germans in the vicinity. She then asked if they could have the silk parachutes (she had petticoats and such things in mind) that she had found in one of their pastures. I unhesitatingly responded, as befitted my lofty rank, that they were hers for the taking.

A big table was carried out into the dooryard, draped with white linen and laden with bread, cheese, cognac and wine, and the scouting patrol became a celebration of the invasion. I still wince as I think of what could have happened during our garrulous, lurching return to our little redoubt on Hill 30.

My Normandy endeavors ended the following day on a patrol led by Maj. Shields Warren Jr. The single bullet that hurled me on my back was one of a burst that riddled my fellow scout who whispered, "Help me, help me," then died.

The patrol surged on, encountered more resistance

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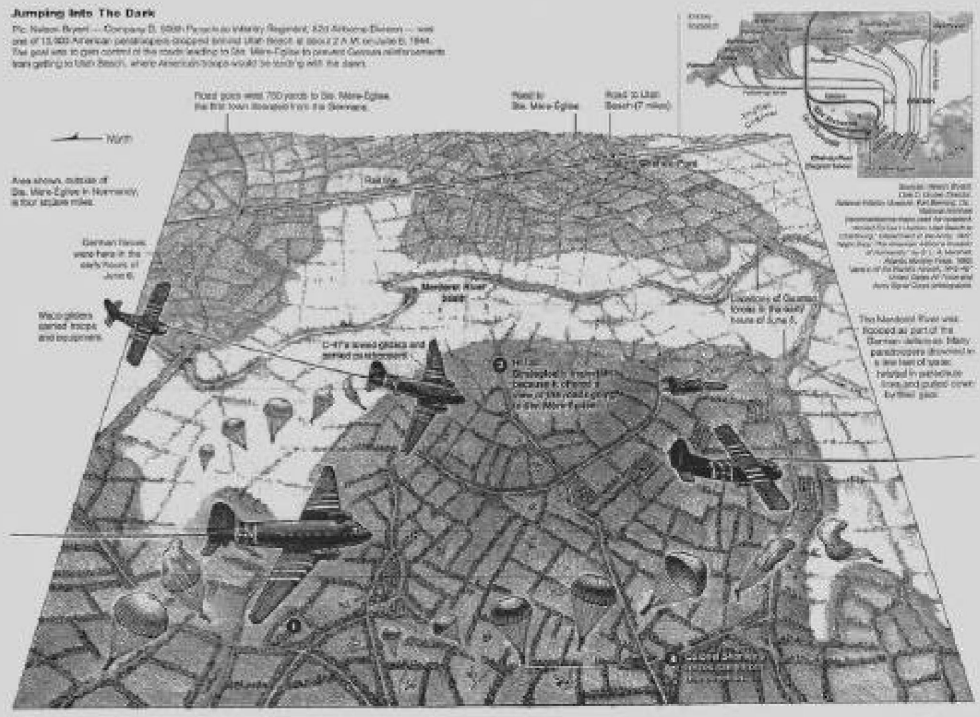
U.S. Army Photograph

American paratroopers pictured in flight on their way to landing sites in France on D-Day.

Nelson Bryant was the outdoors columnist for The New York Times from 1967 to 1990, when he retired.

Jumping Into The Dark

Pfc. Nelson Bryant — Company D, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division — was one of 13,000 American paratroopers dropped behind Utah Beach at about 2 A.M. on June 6, 1944. The goal was to gain control of the roads leading to Ste. Mère-Eglise to prevent German reinforcements from getting to Utah Beach, where American troops would be landing with the dawn.



Most of the paratroopers missed their drop areas, by many miles, in some cases. Because of this, sections separated from their units banded together with the first Americans they found.

❶ Private Bryant landed about here in the early hours of June 6. The first person he found was his commanding officer, Lieut. Norman McVicar. Lieutenant McVicar was dangling free because the ground, hanging from a tree. Private Bryant cut him down, and they continued southeast to Hill 30. ❷ the rendezvous point for the 505th Regiment. They picked up soldiers, including some from the 505th, along the way, and by mid-morning had about 50 soldiers.

They made radio contact with their battalion commander, Lieut. Col. John B. Shanley. ❸ who had about 40 soldiers with him, and who had been under enemy fire one mile southwest.

Highway to rendezvous with Lieutenant McVicar. Colonel Shanley picked up 200 paratroopers while, together in an open field, set out as officials. They had been there 12 hours waiting for orders.

Lieutenant McVicar's forces stumbled onto those of Maj. Shields Warren Jr. After some small skirmishes with the Germans, they met up with the Shanley forces and all gathered on Hill 30. ❹ where they spent their first night.

Private Bryant, a scout, took part in a series of reconnaissance patrols. On a daytime patrol led by Major Warren a few days after D-Day, Private Bryant and a fellow scout were hit by machine-gun fire. Private Bryant was alive through the others, the other scout was killed.

The patrol encountered heavy resistance and pulled back. Private Bryant, severely wounded, walked back to Hill 30 to avoid capture by the Germans.

A few days later, ambulances picked up the wounded on Hill 30 and took them to field hospitals on the beach. Those seniors were later squirrel back to Britain.

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than it could handle, and retreated under fire. Major Warren bent over me and said, "Nelson, if you don't want to be taken prisoner, you'll have to get off your butt and get the hell out of here."

I got off my butt, put my left arm over the shoulders of a fellow paratrooper and managed a stumbling trot back to Hill 30 where, dazed with a new clarity, I joined the other wounded. I don't remember whether we spent one, two or three nights there before a linkup with American armor troops from Utah Beach allowed us to be evacuated. I passed out as I was being loaded into an ambulance that took us to a tent hospital on the shore of the English Channel, and when I came to I was lying in the aperture a sun and a fine rain was falling.

An older man's face, gaunt and unprepossessing, emerged from the dark clouds above me.

"Poor Nelson," he said. "How long have you been here?"

"I don't know," I replied, wondering how he knew my name, wondering if he was God. (A chaplain, he had looked at the metal identification tags that hung from my neck.)

My confusion ended when he told some passing G.I.'s to take me into a large tent, where a weary surgeon glanced at me and cursed my chest wound.

Recuperating in a hospital in Wales, I was at first overwhelmed by the vitalities of my flesh, but by early July I was sneaking, and soon afterward, jogging, in the surrounding woods. I wanted to get back in shape, to erase the cramped shoulder effect caused by my damaged right lung, and as my body mended, my desire to avoid further conflict began to fade.

When a rumor reached me that my outfit was preparing for another jump, I desperately wanted to take part in it. I honor me all whether I left the hospital formally or informally, but by late summer I was back with my comrades — many new faces among them — in Nottingham, England, and on the sunny afternoon of Sept. 17 I found myself in a tall, standup landing in a wide meadow on the outskirts of Nijmegen in the Netherlands. Part of the reason for the gentle landing was that, not yet healing in my shoulder, I kept my gear to a minimum. My armament was a little M3 carbine, a pocketful of shells for it and a couple of grenades. I soon regretted the choice as the crackle, and then the ominous whistle of shells began to fall around me.

The Holland jump took the starch out of me, and when the Battle of the Bulge erupted a few months later I would have been content to sit on the sidelines, but that was not to be.



Nelson Bryant during World War II.



Nelson Bryant on Cape Cod, 1994.

Not after the Bulge campaign did wonders, however, and accounted for one more flare-up of neuropsychiatric behavior. A few days after Germany's unconditional surrender in May 1945, I marched down to company headquarters and requested permission to be classified as the Pacific Theater, where the war had not yet ended. The company commander told me to go back to the barracks and read a good book.

The old wound aches, and most of the time I'm at my friends with all the other physical ineligibles to which my aging carcass has been subjected and reminds me of nothing more the attrition of the passing decades.

Of late, however, I have been dwelling on D-Day, and I am grateful that I was part of it.

I remember with some embarrassment the speech I delivered at my high school graduation in 1941. Laden with patriotic hyperbole, it brought tears to the eyes of the principal, but I cannot forget the sad and disgusting face of one of the town's reticulators who sat in the front row. It was years before I understood his horror of all wars, however just.

I remember with gratitude the rifle range sergeant in basic training at Fort Benning who wouldn't leave me out for shooting my M-1 from my left shoulder. I whispered to him that I had to shoot from that side because my right eye had been nearly blind since birth, that with a bit of the memory — restoring the bad eye twice. First with my right hand, then with my left — I had convinced a pain-threatening physical.

"If you want it that much, I'll let you," he said.

I am grateful to him because making the D-Day jump gave me emotional sustenance in the years that followed.

I had responded to the call as I heard it. In the days and hours of the postwar reckless night, I would let forget ting is the most cruel breathing of our brothers, whose credit, because we were so poor, was a burden during And although I fight none of the responsibility of caring for my family, I know that four aloes, was not enough to make me fail the gambit, that in many ways at least, I was a man.

The old wound aches, and I am an old man filled with wonder at why I have been given so much. I've wrestled with choices, to savor love, friendship and laughter, to dwell on the meaning of the long silence about, while so many of the others with whom I did not down through carving dome of tracer bullets seem so swiftly extinguished. Tomorrow evening, on the anniversary of D-Day, I shall sit on a bolder on the eastern shore of Lake Owego in the Maine wilderness as night falls, looking westward over the hills, thinking of the lost beloved to which I hope a cherished acquaintanship.

A Paratrooper's Load

Troops parachuting into Normandy on D-Day carried over 100 pounds of equipment. The standard list included:

- 1 helmet with liner
- 1 rifle or other gun, bayonet and carrier. (Shown is a Thompson submachine gun; Private Bryant carried an M-1 Garand semi-automatic rifle)
- 60 rounds of ammunition
- 2 hand grenades
- 1 anti-tank grenade
- 1 entrenching tool and cover
- 2 parachutes (backup on chest)
- 1 small switchblade (attached to chest pocket, used to cut parachute lines)
- 1 complete uniform
- 1 knit cap
- 1 change of underwear
- 2 pairs of socks
- 1 canteen and cover
- 1 pair of leather gloves
- 6 packages of K-rations
- 1 spoon
- 1 toilet kit
- 1 first aid pack
- 1 packet sulfur tablets
- 1 escape kit (silk map of France, compass, money for bribes)
- 1 small colored "cricket" (to signal other G.I.'s)
- 1 field bag with suspenders (to carry on back)
- 1 trench knife and leg scabbard
- 1 pair of boots
- 1 impregnated jump suit (protection against chemical warfare)
- 1 gas mask, with 2 filters



Paratrooper climbing into a transport plane for the flight to Normandy.

U.S. Army photo