

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

SATURDAY 17 JUNE 1944

It seemed as though we were forever on the march. One warm day we were marching through a village that was heavily damaged. Everywhere I looked homes were damaged. I could see windows with the curtains still hanging on them, and passing these ruins I looked inside to see what was left of a home. "What have we done to these poor people and their homes? What must they think of us?" I surely would hate to see my family go through all this misery and grief. This is the price they must pay for their freedom.

While in the town, a lady came to us crying. She said the Germans came and took over their land and homes, but they did not blow them up.

While marching through the village there were dead horses, cows and dogs on the roads. It was horrible. There were dead Germans lying in the streets next to their vehicles and carts. They just never made it to where they were going. Someone went through their pockets and you could see family pictures near their bodies. As we marched through the village, no one spoke. We all kept marching, looking, and keeping our thoughts to ourselves. Not one person smiled, or made wisecracks about what we saw.

I remember the front part of a house still standing. All that remained was a window and a door still on its hinges. Between the window and the door I saw a rose vine clinging to the wall, with big, beautiful red roses. It was alive with all its beauty, indirect defiance to all the death and destruction that surrounded it. It seemed to say, "You can't kill all the beauty which God has created." It stood there as a token to all the good things in life.

Seeing the roses gave me a good feeling; a reminder that all things in life are not violent. I walked over and picked three of them, putting one rose in my helmet, one in the barrel of my rifle and the other I held in my hand. After we left the village, the troopers began talking again.

Many remarks were about a body in the road. When I passed the body, I noticed the head was gone and the torso had a big hole in the stomach. The hole was an ashtray for cigarette butts. My decency was stunned; such disrespect for the remains of a human body. At the time I could not understand why the troopers behaved like this, but I realize now that they must have believed a soldier's life is to be discarded like a piece of trash.

As I walked by, I threw the rose in among all that rubbish.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

VINDEFONTAINE

(H) Company was advancing through an open field towards a group of houses. The field was covered with weeds about a foot high. K. O. Benson was to my left, a few feet in front of me. We tried to keep a distance between ourselves as we were running and firing our weapons. We were cursing and shouting at the German who was firing at us with bursts of machine gun fire. Benson spun around and hit the ground.

Crawling over to him I asked if he was hit. He had a dazed look on his face, but after a few seconds he said he thought not.

The blast from the machinegun had hit his canteen and shovel which spun him around. He felt a pain in his backside, and later told me he'd been hit on the cheek of his behind.

The machine gun had the entire company pinned down and you could hear shouts from the men, "Has anyone seen where the shots are coming from?" I knew and shouted for them to watch my tracers.

Putting a full clip of tracers in my rifle, I fired at the corner of a field. When they saw where I fired the tracers, the entire company opened fire. The machine gun was silenced and we advanced toward the houses.

We left that small village the next day. We stopped in a field and were told to set up a machine gun position near the road. At this point we were hungry and tired. We left our weapons near a tree and looked for a good gun spot near the road. We found one.

Looking up the road we saw two Germans with their machinegun, walking in a crouched position. We almost died from fright! Here we were looking at two Germans on the road below us, and we didn't have one weapon between us.

We froze in our tracks and motioned with our arms to K. O. Benson that we needed our weapons. He got the message and crawled up to us. We could hear the Germans talking below us. They were setting up their machine gun in the ditch just below. K. O. Benson heard the voices and motioned for us to get set for action.

He stood up with his sub-Thomson, put the gun over the hedgerow and emptied the entire clip of ammo. Then we all ran to get our weapons and waited for an attack, but it never came.

When we felt it was safe, we jumped down to the road and there were the two dead Germans alongside their machinegun. From that time on I never was without my weapon and ammo. It was a lesson well learned.

Night came upon us quickly and it was safer for two of us to stay together. One of us could sleep, while the other stood guard. Sergeant Medford and I decided that I would sleep first and then switch. I made a spot in the hedgerow where I fell asleep.

Before I knew it, the sergeant was shaking me, saying I was snoring so loudly the Germans could hear me. That scared the hell out of me, so we switched and he slept while I stood guard. He started to snore also, so I had to wake him.

The whole night was spent trying to get in a few winks between the snores.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

TUESDAY 20 JUNE 1944

Pretot

(H) Company was advancing through an open field toward the small village of Pretot. The weeds were about waist high and we used the cover as best we could by crouching low. We advanced toward the village and when about halfway across the field the Germans began firing rifle and mortar shells at us. We were pinned for a while, and then I decided that I'd better get the hell out of that field.

There was a river to my left and I crawled over to it and jumped into the cold water. It was waist high and the bank of the river was just about shoulder high. It afforded us good protection and a good firing position into the village.

Following the river, we went into the left side of the village. The order was given to fire at all windows in the roofs of the houses, knowing that the Germans were observing our movements and directing their mortar fire on us. I spotted a four-section window and fired one shot at it, causing the four panels of glass to go crashing into the house.

When I had gone into the river many of the troopers followed me, and took advantage of the excellent cover, which the riverbank provided. Red Haroldson was behind me when we were advancing on the village. As we continued down river, we kept firing at places where we thought the Germans might be hiding. Haroldson was about a foot behind me, firing away, and the blast of his rifle made my ears ring. "Damn it, Red, stay about ten feet behind me." He kept his distance and never said a word.

The troopers arrived at the village and were climbing a high stonewall. To climb over we had to help each other. When it was my turn, I climbed out of the river and was at the wall, then gave the signal to Haroldson to come over.

He climbed out of the water and took one step. A shell exploded alongside of him and he spun around, and then fell back into the river.

Later I was told by John Downes that he had died. To this day I feel partially responsible for his death. If I hadn't told him to stay behind me, chances are we would have left the river together. Perhaps he'd be alive today.

Once over the wall I was walking among the housed-in village. The troopers stayed close to the side of the stone houses and were very cautious when crossing at intersections. The streets were filled with standing troopers, talking about the Germans having escaped the trap. The officers told us to stop talking and start searching the buildings for Germans. We dreaded to hear that.

The orders were to enter the homes and barns and flush out the Germans. I felt that behind every door and in every barn the Germans were waiting for us. I hated to do it.

Two troopers said they would enter a doorway to a home, and I was to flush out the barn.

With my rifle in a hip firing position I used it to open the barn door, and stood close to the wall. In a flash two Germans came running out with their hands above their heads, yelling something in German. They took me by such surprise I almost dropped my rifle!

I shouted to them to halt. I kept repeating the word "comrade" and pointing to the barn. They said no, no comrades. Then I gave them to another trooper who brought them to a field where the prisoners were assembled.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

Cautiously I went back to the barn and with a pounding heart, shouted in German "Give up!" There was no reply so I braved it and entered. There was a machinegun and ammo. These two prisoners may have been the ones who fired at us when we were advancing on the houses.

I ran across the street and walked close to the side of a house. Reaching a partially open door, I pushed it with my rifle, then waited a few minutes. I could feel my heart beating rapidly; I really feared those first steps into an open doorway. Peeking in, I stepped back quickly. I noticed a flight of steps and a doorway at the top. I moved quickly inside, and waited.

I felt it was safe so I went into a room, which was empty. While searching it, I heard a noise upstairs. Checking my rifle I put in a full clip with eight shells then slammed a round in the chamber and walked toward the stairs.

Walking up the steps and trying to make as little noise as possible, I thought I may soon die. Keeping my rifle pointed at the door, it seemed to take forever to reach it. My back was against the wall and the rifle still pointed at the door while I listened for sounds. I could hear movements inside and my heart was pounding so fast that I thought it was trying to leave my body. With the muzzle of my rifle I lifted the wooden door latch and shoved the door open wide, quickly glancing all around.

What I saw was a group of people, all huddled together, frightened half out of their senses. Old men and young women clutching each other. Some had children in their arms, squeezing them close to their bodies with their backs to me, trying to protect them from harm.

Holding my rifle in readiness I said, "Germans, where are the Germans?" The women and children were crying hysterically and the old men stood with starry eyes, just looking at me. I asked the old man if he understood English and he shook his head, no. I took a step inside the room and they all stiffened up. The cries became all the louder. I motioned with my rifle to the women and children to go to the other side of the room, so I could see if they were hiding Germans. They moved very quickly when I approached them with my rifle.

I satisfied myself that there were no Germans in the room, so I tried to talk to the French people and calm them, to let them know I meant no harm to them. Pointing to the American flag on my sleeve, I did the best I could to make them understand. I pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered them to the men, which they accepted, and I gave my chocolate candy to the women and children.

After I lit a cigarette I thought how strange it was that we kept looking at each other but could not understand one another. One of the men made a motion to me, which I understood to mean that he wanted me to have a drink with him. I refused and smiled and before I knew it, the others were smiling, too. I said goodbye and left to join the other troopers who were still milling around in the streets.

When I was going down those steps I felt happy that I didn't open fire when I heard the noises. I could have killed many innocent people. But the feeling was ambiguous, because the next time I may not be so lucky. I heard noises and yet didn't throw a grenade in, nor did I fire my weapon while entering. Being considerate may cost me my life.

At the intersection, the troopers held a few German prisoners. One of the prisoners went berserk and started shouting and running down the road. The troopers yelled at him to halt, but he kept running. McDonald said, "I'll get him."

He put his rifle to his shoulder and fired one shot. The German fell to the ground. "That's for DeLoach."

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

FRIDAY 23 JUNE 1944

THE BOOK

After the orders were given to locate a new defensive position, H Company was assigned to a large apple orchard. As we marched in squad formation, the platoon Sergeant directed me to a field inside the orchard. "Porcella, set yourself here, your field of fire is in that direction", pointing to the section I was to guard.

I walked through the high weeds looking for a good spot to dig my foxhole, when I saw the body of a German soldier, lying face down, about three feet in front of a foxhole. Walking to the body I poked it with my rifle. The Germans were known to booby trap their dead, so it would have been dangerous to turn him over. Looking into the foxhole I picked up a large rock that was near by and threw it into the hole. Nothing happened so I felt secure in using the German foxhole.

As darkness surrounded the field, I became very uneasy. The night air was damp and cold and the outline of that body made me jittery. "I wish I had another trooper with me" I thought, but the closest man was in the next field. It was going to be a long night!

I dreaded to be standing on guard alone - it's enough to make one's flesh crawl. The slightest sound was cause for alarm. If the night passed without incidence, it gave you an enormous peace of mind.

As soon as it was full daylight I made myself a cup of hot coffee. The troopers began checking with each other - one trooper called to me and I responded with "I'm O.K.". The shouting went on until all men were accounted for.

Later, a trooper came across the field and stopped when he saw me. Looking at the German he asked if I shot him last night. Shaking my head, I said "No", He then asked if I had searched him for important papers or maps. Again, I shook my head, so he immediately grabbed the arm of the soldier and turned him over. Going through his pockets, he emptied the contents on the ground.

While doing all this, he explained that he had orders to look for papers and maps that may be found on the dead Germans, he left me in awe - I couldn't believe what I had seen - he showed no fear of this body being booby trapped.

After he left me I noticed a small book near the body. Picking it up I quickly glanced at it, and thought "I'll mail it home - it will make a good souvenir someday".

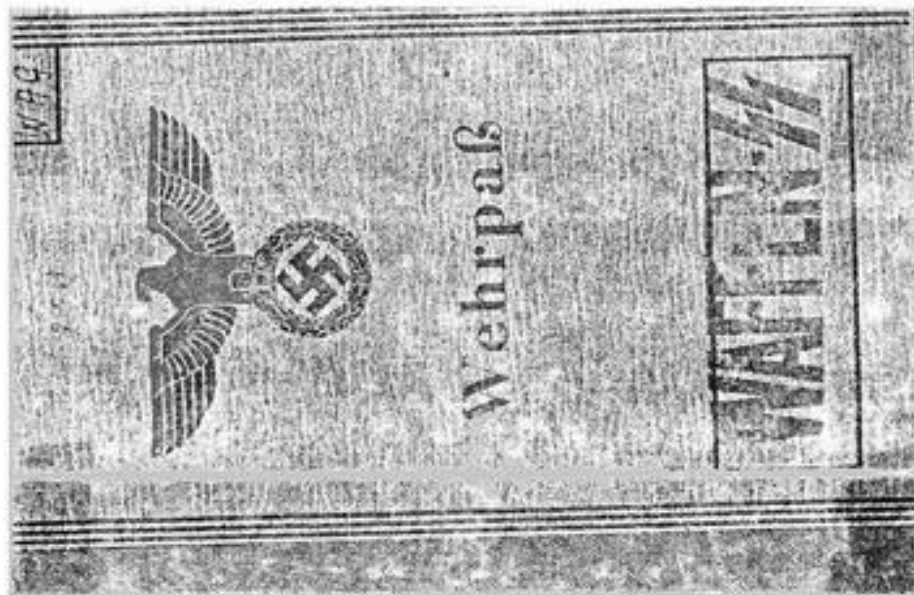
About 25 years after the war, my wife found a box containing my war souvenirs and asked if I wanted to keep the articles. Emptying the contents onto the table I immediately remembered the German soldier's record book.

The cover of the book has the eagle with spread wings, holding in its claws the Nazi symbol. Also boldly stamped in large letters "WAFFEN S.S."

The first page gives his name - Gottfried Wagner, who belonged to the 6th S.S Kavalerie Division. His height - 171 centimeters. Birth date - 24 November 1926. Occupation - plumber. The last entry in his book was 20 June 1944.

Strange as it may be - his birthday is the same as my wife. After the war I became a plumber - my first son was born on 20 June 1947 and my father died on the same date in 1951.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS



I. Angaben zur Person			
1	Familienname	Wagner	
2	Vorname (Nachname - unterstreichen)	Gottfried	
3	Geburtsort, -monat, -jahr	24. 11. 16	
4	Geburtsort (Vorname - nachtr.) (z. B. Köln, Reg. Bezirk)	Pitel Pitel	
5	Staatsangehörigkeit (auch Fremde)	ungarisch <input type="radio"/>	
6	Religiöses Bekenntnis	ev.	Zahl der leb. Kinder
7	Familienstand	ledig	
8	Beruf (auch Berufsverhältnisse)	erlernte Klemmer zuletzt ausgeübt	
9	Ehren	Vater: Gottfried Wagner Mutter: Maria Wagner Klemmer Leibesbesitzer	

Von den Bestimmungen auf Seite 54, 55 und 56 habe ich Kenntnis genommen Gottfried Wagner (Persönliche Unterschrift des Inhabers - Rufname, Familienname)	
Größe in Zentimetern 171 Augenfarbe blau Haarfarbe blond Blutgruppe	Besondere Kennzeichen (z. B. Brillenträger)

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

SUNDAY 25 JUNE 1944

The word was passed along of a possible visit from General Gavin and that we were to clean up around the foxholes. I thought, "With everything in ruins around us, what does a few cans or food wrappers mean?"

The peace and quiet didn't last long. At a rapid pace the artillery shells started dropping, causing many of us to dive head first into the foxhole.

One trooper didn't make it in time, though. Pfc, Coons was caught outside cleaning up as ordered, and was wounded in the attack. He is now listed among the dead.

SUNDAY 25 JUNE 1944

I was sleeping in my foxhole when Sergeant Slagel woke me. "You have to report to Captain Dress; you're the runner for the day." While leaving the foxhole I saw that the area was covered with holes from artillery shells. There were hundreds of them, and many trees were damaged. The thought came to me that if a shell had landed in my foxhole I would have died without knowing what hit me. If and when my turn comes to die, that's the way I would prefer to go.

Captain Dress was speaking to General Gavin and, as I approached, I saluted. The captain said, "Porcella, you are to escort the General to inspect the machine gun positions." "Yes, sir." Saluting the captain I turned to General Gavin and said, "Follow me, sir."

The General did not look like the commander of the 82nd Airborne. His sleeves were rolled up, the chinstrap was hanging from his helmet to one side and he wore no stars on his shoulder strap. He gave the appearance of an ordinary trooper, carrying a rifle.

After putting a round of ammo in the chamber of my rifle, which I held at port arms, I moved out at a quick pace, crouching well below the hedgerow. I advised the General to keep as low as possible because there were reports of snipers in the area.

As we moved along the hedgerow, artillery shells began falling in a nearby field. I quickly dove into the shallow hedgerow, with the General right behind, landing on top of me. "Move over, son" he said. I pressed myself against the bank allowing the General to get in closer. The shells fell into the middle of the field for about twenty minutes, then there was a lull, and we moved out. Leaving the safety of the hedgerow, I showed the General where our machine guns were. He seemed pleased with their locations and the field of fire they were covering. He made idle chatter with the troopers, wished them good luck and shook their hands before leaving.

Captain Dress was waiting for us to return to the command post, "I see you made it alright, General. Did you get caught in the artillery fire?" "We both made it to the ditch on time," the General replied.

I saluted again and started back to report to Sergeant Slagel when the General said, "Thank you, trooper" and shook my hand. It made me feel proud to have escorted him to the troopers in the field. The men were glad when General Gavin left the area. They felt the Germans knew the General was there, and that was the reason for all the artillery barrages.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

MONDAY 26 JUNE 1944

The Germans kept-us pinned down by machine gun fire. With four grenades in readiness and my rifle pointed at the top of the ridge, I could feel the tension slowly mounting inside me. The machine guns fell silent and I listened for enemy movement. The nearest troopers to my position were about fifty feet on either side. I was bewildered to hear movement in front of my position for there were troopers in the next hedgerow. I wondered if they were all killed when the Germans opened fire. I gripped my rifle a little tighter and saying a prayer, was ready for action.

The noise came closer and my heart was beating rapidly. I crouched low and kept my rifle pointed in the direction of the noise. My mouth seemed dry and I was perspiring. I could hear someone slowly climbing up the hedgerow in front of me and I became all the more tense. Suddenly I saw two arms come over the top followed by a blonde head.

It was Lieutenant Grabbe. I was very excited and I said, "What the hell are you doing here? You're supposed to be in the next field!" He said, "Help me, Porcella - I'm shot." Quickly I helped him over the hedgerow and laid him down. The front of his combat jacket was stained with blood.

I ran for the medics and returned to Lieutenant Grabbe. He was very calm as we put him on the stretcher. He looked at me with big blue eyes and never said a word as they carried him away to the aid station. He died later from his wounds.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

MONDAY 26 JUNE 1944

The death of Lt. Grabbe was a tragic loss to the men of his platoon and to all who knew him. He was an outstanding officer; his leadership in combat would be missed. Lt. Richardson was transferred to Company H, to take command of Lt. Grabbe's platoon. His transfer to this platoon was of the utmost concern to the troopers, for very little was known about him, and his ability to lead was in question.

After a light morning rain, the day turned into a bright, warm sunny afternoon. The sunshine was a welcome relief after the rains.

Company G replaced H Company from the main line of resistance. The company assembled on the road and the order was given to march, in single file, on either side of the road. About 15 minutes after we began to march, the Germans directed their fire at us. At the sound of the first explosion, the troopers ran for protection into the ditches on each side of the road. The artillery shells were exploding all around us, some exploding on the road, but most of them landed in the fields.

When the shelling stopped, I raised my head to look at the road. Suddenly I heard the report of artillery. There was a shell sliding down the road. I shouted to the troopers in front of me, "Look out - there's a dud going down the road - it may have a delayed action fuse in it." A few troopers left the ditch and climbed over the hedgerow, where the shell finally stepped.

This was the first time we had seen an unexploded shell going down the middle of a road.

TUESDAY 27 JUNE 1944

The sun was shining on this peaceful morning. We were in our fox-holes along side of the hedgerows, and there was not a sound to be heard. We hoped the Germans would not start firing and start a battle. It was so very peaceful and warm; it made you forget where you were. You could never really relax though, and we were well aware of it, but we did enjoy the sunshine and peacefulness of the morning.

Most of us were making coffee in our canteen cups, which we heated by burning pieces of gammon grenade. We carried it so that we could cook and heat water for coffee. This gammon grenade was a substance, which looked like a bar of brown soap. It came in a four by four by ten-inch block. You could stuff this block into a specially made sleeve, which had a detonator on the top. If you put enough of it in the sleeve, it had enough power to blow up a tank. We used it primarily for cooking.

While we were having coffee, we heard the sound of a small plane. We quickly came back to reality and all our weapons were pointed into the air. Someone shouted, "It's one of our observation planes trying to spot the Germans." We could hear shouts of "Why don't you go back where you came from, we like the peace and quiet!" - and many other remarks. The officers told us to shut up and be prepared for action.

We heard the firing of a mortar shell and in a few seconds, the wing exploded and the plane came spiraling down with a crash. All of us were bewildered and startled at the sight of this. Some troopers and medics rushed over to help the two men in the plane.

Apparently the flight observer had spotted some German action and gave the coordinates while the plane flew over the position of the mortar squad, just as the order was given to fire. We had blown up our own plane and had two casualties that day.

After the furor had died down and we returned to our position, the remainder of that day was peaceful.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

MONDAY 3 JULY 1944

We were on the move now and I remember that we marched well into the night. When the orders were given to halt, our officers gave us positions in the dark, on the side of the road. We stayed there until just before daybreak, then moved forward and took up positions in a line above a hedgerow. We were informed that the plan was to fire machine guns, mortar and artillery and just at the start of daylight, the orders will be given to go over the top and keep going.

Before the attack, John Delury and I were discussing the orders that we had been given about going over the top. I said that when we get the order I would go over as fast as I could, running, shooting and hollering, and hope the Germans would not get me. It is deadly for anyone who lags behind. Just a few minutes before the signal was to be given, I turned to Delury and asked him how he felt. He admitted that he was all tensed

up and I told him I felt the same way. Just before I was ready to go over the top, I told Delury that I felt calm, and maybe we'd die in this battle. John said, "We'll soon find out." With that we shook hands and wished each other good luck. Then the signal was given to start the attack.

Over the top went all the troopers, shouting, cursing and shooting. I was going so fast that, without realizing it, I was leading the attack. To my surprise when I looked behind me, the entire body of men was following me, hedgerow after hedgerow. As I was approaching the next hedgerow, I heard the sound of a machine gun. Immediately I took cover in a ditch and looked to my rear. I could see no one in the field. 89

Then came another burst of machine gun fire and I saw the bullets go up the side of a barn wall. After that last burst of fire, I called to the men and asked if they were all right. Some replied that they were O.K. and asked if I saw where the shot came from. I replied, "No," and tried to see where the Germans were firing from. The word was passed down to me that Shipley and Polasky were hit by the fire of the machineguns. They were in the last wave to go over the top. Shipley mentioned to Delury and I that he did not want to go over in the first wave. That decision cost him his life.

I crawled back to where Polasky was lying. He was on his back and seemed relaxed. When I was next to him I asked him how he felt. He said, "Well, I guess they got me, Tom" and then died. His death had an effect on me; we had been together since Camp Blanding, Florida. I was really upset. I put my rifle next to him and took his.

I returned to my forward position in the hedgerow, when Captain Dress asked why I had stopped. I told him about the machine gun firing, that we had lost two men in the rear and that he had better get his ass down or the sniper would get him. He gave me a dirty look and kept walking upright with his sub-Thomson slung over his shoulder. I yelled again at him to take cover, but he looked at me as though I had called him a dirty name. A few minutes later I heard a rifle shot and wondered who got hit. Word was passed along that Captain Dress wanted to see Porcella. "What the hell does he want me for? I'm not a non-com."

In a crouched position with my rifle ready to fire, I kept below the hedgerow and with leaps and bounds headed in the direction that I had last seen the Captain walking. On the far side of a gate I could see Captain Dress and a few troopers with a medic. I could see the captain was hit in the leg. I had given him warning to be careful, but then . . . well, officers don't listen to privates.

He had been hit in the upper part of his leg, and he had a look on his face that told me that he should have listened to what I said. "Porcella, I was told that your rifle is not ejecting the shells automatically." He offered me his sub-Thomson. I politely refused, explaining that I had picked up Polasky's rifle.

The captain was placed on a stretcher and moved to an aid station. I never saw him again in Normandy.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

An officer gave the "all clear" signal and we were off to another destination, unknown to us. We assembled on the road, keeping a twenty-foot distance between each soldier and marched down the road at a very cautious pace. A short time had gone by when we heard shots and were forced to take cover in the ditch again. We later got the word that it was O.K. to proceed, the noise we heard was a couple of troopers firing at a dead German who was lying in the middle of the road. When I got near the body I noticed there were many bullet holes in it.

This shooting of a dead man still sickened me, but I realized the troopers were saying to themselves, "This is for Polasky and Shipley," and it was a way of relieving their anger. There was no weapon near the dead man, so we surmised that the retreating Germans had picked up the guns while making a hasty withdrawal.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

TUESDAY 4 JULY 1944

It had been three days since we were given any food rations. The sun was shining and it was good to receive our food. We welcomed whatever they gave us to eat, with no complaints. The best part of the rations was the powdered coffee, which we quickly brewed. We were content to eat and rest and enjoyed the warmth of the sunshine. We were hoping to stay there for a few days, and get some much-needed rest.

The troopers were in the hedgerows and some were in among the trees, enjoying their first cup of coffee in days, and eating the rations. The word came to us that we would start an attack at 12:00 noon, to celebrate the Fourth of July. It was to be a regimental attack. At this point, we could care less the reason for the attack, when or where it was to take place. The troopers were tired and combat fatigue began to show on us. Many of us were starry-eyed.

I was about finished with my coffee when the sergeants began shouting, "Let's go, on the double." Bedlam broke loose and troopers were running in all directions to get to their squads and proper formations.

My rifle got slung over my shoulder; I was running and trying to put my canteen cup in its case, all the while keeping my eye on John Delury who was running ahead of me. It was mass confusion at the time, but somehow we all managed to fall into our proper place. We were all running into a large field.

Ahead of the on-rushing troopers we could hear and see shells bursting. Then we became concerned as to who was doing the shelling. We took cover; some of the troopers hit the ground with the first exploding shell.

We were then informed that we were advancing with rolling artillery and ordered to keep moving up the hill. At this point we were well into the middle of this large field. The shells were whistling above our heads and bursting a short distance from us. It was terrifying knowing so well that if a shell fell short it would land among us. Midway in this field, the artillery stopped and suddenly machine gun bullets were firing at us and mortar shells began exploding all around.

Immediately I hit the ground and crawled to a hedgerow. I yelled to Delury and he answered me. I asked if he had contact with anyone in front of him. He answered no, and said that he thought they had all been killed from the machine gun and mortar fire. He asked where I was and I told him I was in the hedgerow.

The grass was high and Delury started to crawl toward me. I kept talking so he could follow the direction of my voice. Finally he arrived and I was darned glad to see him. He complained about all the crawling he had to do to reach me. The hedgerow was about five feet deep, and here we had excellent protection. We could not understand why we were in an open field making an attack.

We were exhausted and rested for a few minutes. Delury and I believed we were the only ones alive from Company H. We started with about eighty men. Both of us hollered as loud as we could, trying to contact some of the troopers. We received no answer and decided to go up the hedgerow, in the direction of the attack. While we were advancing we heard someone call for Company H men. Delury and I pointed our rifles in the direction of the voice.

It was Sergeant Jenkin and he said that we got the orders to pull back to the rear. He asked if anyone else was with us. We replied no and then asked where the hell are all the men. He told us we were almost wiped out and he was trying to assemble as many as he could to prepare for a counter-attack. We ran down the hedgerow as fast as we could.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

The sergeant said to halt at the corner of the field and when we got there, to go straight. Delury said no, go right. Just as we arrived at the far corner of the field, a shell landed just about where we would have been if we had gone straight. John Delury's premonition saved our lives.

We contacted Lieutenant Gary and with him was Charles Muffley. We kept asking about the rest of the men. The lieutenant just looked at us and wouldn't answer. Delury and I looked at each other as though we could read each other's thoughts. I felt a numbness come over me when all I saw was one lieutenant, one sergeant and three privates; all the remained of our company.

Lieutenant Gary immediately gave us orders to take up positions and be prepared for a counter-attack on the far side of the road. I wondered how five men were going to stand off a counter-attack. Fear gripped us all. A barrage of German artillery started to fall. We scattered to the hedgerows. Muffley and I were in the hedgerow together. The lieutenant, sergeant and Delury took off somewhere for cover. It was a concentrated artillery barrage, but seemed to be falling a long way from us. The Germans were known to quickly change their range and drop the shells short in order to catch us without protection.

Muffley and I were hugging the ground when the shells seemed to be getting closer. Muffley asked, "Tom, what are we going to do?" "Muffley, I'm going to start praying." He said he didn't know how to pray, so I told him I would pray for both of us. After about an hour the shells stopped falling. Muffley and I went across the road and joined what was left of our company.

After a while a few troopers came down from the hill. Up to this time I counted thirty men, and they all seemed to have a blank stare on their faces. The best way to describe their expressions is to say they seemed lost in their own worlds. Those of us who never made it up the hill tried to get information from those who were there.

They all agreed that our artillery stopped firing too soon and the troopers were caught out in the open, with no protection to advance the attack. We heard remarks such as; "We were wiped out. . ." "caught in cross fire and chopped to pieces by mortar fire. . ." The losses were heavy throughout the regiment. July Fourth 1944 is a day that will be long remembered by the survivors.

After the battle of July 4, we were told of an overlay map that was taken from a German prisoner. The map showed the position of about twenty-eight machine guns and mortars. We lost many lives and had many wounded, then were held in reserve.

The battle of July 4th was over and the troopers were left with memories of what had happened to all those who were wounded and dead on the hill. We huddled in small groups and with heads bowed; no one spoke. Just blank looks on our faces. It was a pitiful sight to see troopers in such a saddened condition, and it was also hard for us to accept the loss of so many men in such a short time.

The shock settled on us as we realized that we were through as a fighting unit at this time. There was not enough of us to continue, so we knew what was left of the regiment would be returning to England. The attack had lasted about forty-five minutes, and (H) Company had almost fifty casualties. It was the last organized attack that was made by the 508th. Our losses were many, and we experienced a terrible emotional shock, which showed on the faces of the survivors.

It is impossible for me to write about the feelings of the others during our last battle. Speaking for myself, it left me with a feeling of emptiness, despair and a feeling of no purpose for all the killing and destruction of human life, which was taken in the name of liberation.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

WEDNESDAY 5 JULY 1044

Colonel Mendez was standing near a gate as I was passing by. I gave him a salute, which he promptly returned. I was about to pass him when he called to me, "How do you feel, Porcella?" I quickly replied, "Not very good, sir." He said it had been a costly battle and he could not understand how we were caught in such a terrible situation. He mentioned that he had lost all his staff officers and that all he had left was a cook. He could see that I was very upset and on the verge of tears when we spoke about it. At the same time, he was holding back his own emotions.

The Colonel invited me to have breakfast with him and mentioned that his cook was scrambling eggs. After accepting the invitation I told him I would be back in a few minutes, for I was on my way to deliver a message to a platoon leader. When I returned he told me to sit down and I was given some of the scrambled eggs. We both ate in silence and it was over coffee that the silence was broken. He told me that the last battle finished us as a fighting unit and it was his opinion that what was left of the regiment would return to England. Colonel Mendez mentioned many things regarding the battle and tried to justify the losses.

I refused to accept his reasons because I felt the attack was poorly executed and that we were led like a bunch of sheep.

"We did well until the rolling artillery stopped, and it stopped too soon. We were caught in the middle of the field. The Germans opened fire with machineguns and mortars and we had no protection! I feel that we could have gone up that hill in the hedgerows and still accomplished our mission. Our losses could have been reduced!" I refused to change my opinion, and I still put the blame on those who gave the orders to cross a field. "How many times, Colonel, did you raise hell with any trooper who crossed an open field and failed to take cover? You gave us extra pushups, and restricted the squads, platoons and companies for failing to take cover. You taught us well, but in this battle we did the very opposite of everything we learned. We followed orders and were made to pay the price for an order that should have been questioned by our officers!" Our conversation went from the battle to speaking of individual troopers who had been killed or wounded; how brave they were, and how fortunate we were to be alive. Then, in silence, we sat with our own thoughts.

How much time passed before I got up and thanked the Colonel for the breakfast, I do not know. I stood looking at him with his head down and when he looked up at me there were tears running down his face. He watched as I wiped the tears from mine. I saluted and left him there with his thoughts.

I entered a farmhouse where I found some Calvados and liberated a bottle for myself. A few seconds after I took a couple of swigs, I thought I was on fire. I took a few more drinks and corked the bottle. It didn't take long for the Calvados to show its effect. In retrospect, I must have looked a sight. A wool cap pulled low on my head, a rifle slung over my shoulder, and a uniform that hadn't been cleaned since D-Day. And not one shave since I left England. I was a very sorry looking paratrooper staggering from one side to the other, a bottle hanging from my left hand, barely holding my rifle on my shoulder with the other.

I stopped short. There was Colonel Mendez coming up the road towards me. Just my luck. He stopped in front of me and asked what I had in the bottle. I stood at attention as best I could and answered, "Calvados, sir." "Porcella, I'd better not see you drunk or I'll shoot you." I stiffened myself at attention, I thought, and told him, "You'd better not miss, sir."

Smiling broadly, I saluted the Colonel. He returned the salute and smiled.

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

FRIDAY 7 JULY 1944

The 90th Division was pushing through our sector at a great speed and although they had the Germans on the run, they had bypassed a small pocket of them. They estimated there were 125 German soldiers dug in a small wooded area. The remains of the 508th were alerted to the possible breakout of these soldiers. Our orders were not to shoot unless fired upon. They advised us that the Germans may want to give up and we were not to provoke a battle.

The evening of July 7 I was in my position in a hedgerow and my time to stand guard. In the darkness every little sound could be heard. My time on guard duty seemed like an eternity. I was straining to hear and trying to see the wooded section where the Germans were. I heard movements in the distant field, listened for a while. Then I woke my sergeant to ask his opinion.

He sure didn't like the idea of being awakened, but after listening to the noises for a few seconds he told me to go and wake up the squad. The entire line was alerted and ready for action, waiting in the darkness for an unseen enemy. Soon as it was daylight you could hear the whole regiment start grumbling. Then the sergeant heard the noises again, and silence took over.

With rifles ready we looked to the field a short distance from us and saw some rabbits. Rabbits!! We both let out a sigh of relief and spread the word that the alert was off. What the men said to me and to the sergeant certainly could never be printed.

SATURDAY 8 JULY 1944

The 8th Division marched through us to continue the attack to the south of our position. The troopers were along the hedgerows watching them going down the road. Some of them asked what regiment we were and when they were told the 508th of the 82nd Airborne they applauded and shouted praise. It seemed strange to be applauded by our fellow soldiers, but the feeling of emotion was high, and tears formed in my eyes.

Many troopers called advice to them and they laughed and asked questions. We told them if you're alive after the first battle, you'd be a seasoned veteran. We have served our time in hell and now it's your turn.

Looking at their clean-shaven faces we felt old after so many days of combat. I had not shaved since D-Day, and was still wearing the same jumpsuit and underclothing. What a smell and sight we must have been to those G.I.'s marching past our position. They applauded us anyway, though, and we were shouting praises as they went down the road.

SUNDAY 9 JULY 1944

Returning from a trip to my favorite farmhouse I again was stopped by Colonel Mendez. Of course he questioned what was in the bottle in my hand. I told him apple cider, and asked if he wanted some. He smiled and declined my offer. "By the way Porcella, where is your helmet?" I replied that I had lost it in the swamp on the initial jump. Then he asked why I hadn't shaved. I said I had lost all my toilet articles when I landed in the water. He reminded me that we are to return to England clean-shaven, and I would be wearing a helmet. "I don't have a helmet or a razor, sir." With a very stern voice he asked me to wait a moment. He returned with a sergeant who was carrying a helmet and a razor. He said to the sergeant, "I'm giving Private Porcella a direct order to shave and wear his helmet, is that understood?" "Yes, sir," said the sergeant. With

JUMP INTO DARKNESS

that the Colonel took the articles and handed them to me. With the helmet on my head, and a bottle in my left hand, I stood at attention and saluted.

As I walked away I thought, "the Colonel must be feeling better; he's all military again." Stopping to drink from the bottle I smiled to myself. "We're all going back to England." We would soon be going back to England, which we considered our second home. This good news gave our morale a boost and relieved the tension, which had overtaken all of us. There was plenty of talk about a ten-day leave in England and all that we would do with our free time. Going to the pubs and meeting women were the highlights of most conversations.

MONDAY 10 JULY 1944

This afternoon the sun was shining and its warmth made you forget that you were in a combat zone. To stop thinking about dying for a little while was a luxury, no matter how brief. It felt good to enjoy the peace and quiet in the morning sun.

TUESDAY 11 JULY 1944"

I don't remember when we left the front line position, or made the preparations to go to England, but my best guess is that we boarded army trucks and were disembarked at a temporary camp. I have little recollection of this camp but I finally was told to get rid of the wool cap, helmet, combat harness and rifle. Somewhere along the process I also gave up my paratrooper uniform and boots. Photographs that I have show that I exchanged these for regular army clothing and boots, and there are no patches of the 82nd Airborne. Why we were not given new paratrooper uniforms is a matter of conjecture. I think we were outfitted as ordinary soldiers so as not to draw attention to the great losses suffered by the proud and powerful Airborne units. Out of sight, out of mind, so to speak. Looking at the photos I recall posing with Dave O'Halloran and a little boy who was wearing a dress. For some reason the group of troopers I was with never made the first shipment to England. We were held back until late and therefore arrived in England in the dark.

Our departure time arrived and we assembled and marched down to the beach towards the boat. We marched in single file, silently, wearing our regular uniforms. We carried no weapons. Our hearts were filled with a tremendously heavy sadness. Such sadness, overwhelming sadness.

WEDNESDAY 12 JULY 1944

We remembered the people of Normandy; their country ravaged, their lives changed forever. We remembered the dead enemy soldiers, who had once been as alive and young and fearful as we. But the hardest memory to bear was that of our good buddies we were leaving in the swamps and fields and hedgerows. Our comrades in arms, our friends, our protectors who were not as lucky. Every so often a trooper would step out of column, turn towards the mainland, and salute. Many of us marched with heads bowed and never looked back.

My thoughts were of all the troopers who died and we were leaving behind. I suddenly felt I was all alone. In wonderment I realized I was returning to England without my buddies. I was the only one of 17 men who jumped with me on D-day to return. Tears ran down my face. I became saturated with the enormity of my loss. Nearing the boat I quickly stepped out from the marching column, turned towards the fields of Normandy and saluted all those we left.

We had come with so many and were leaving with so few.