

Harold Oliver Isaac Kulju

(aka Harold (Steve) Canyon)

By Irving T. Shanley

Harold Kulju was born on the west bank of the Kings River, Reedley, California, January 20, 1924. He attended Riverview Grammar School before transferring to Chester Rowel Grammar School in Fresno, California. He also attended Washington Junior High, Fresno High, Reedley Joint Union High School and finally, Alhambra High School in Martinez, California. Harold dropped out of high school to join the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) for three months, and then went to work for Kaiser Shipyards at Mare Island for two weeks. He then became a member of the California State Guard until October 13, 1941 at which time he was drafted into the United States Army and immediately volunteered for parachute duty.

When he was initially drafted he was sent to Sacramento, California but subsequently sent home when the authorities discovered he was too young. He was drafted a second time and sent to the Presidio of Monterey and then to Fort Benning, Georgia for a brief stay before joining up with Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment just being formed at Camp Blanding, Florida. After 13 grueling weeks of intense training in the basic military subjects, including close order drill, care and cleaning of weapons, marksmanship, physical conditioning, and judo, Harold and his Battalion were transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia for three weeks of parachute training. During the final week of training, he and his comrades were required to make five parachute jumps from a C47 over Lawson Field and were then presented their coveted silver parachute wings by the Regimental Commander, Colonel Roy E. Lindquist, and his staff.

After becoming qualified parachutists, Harold and his Regiment were transferred to the newly built Camp Mackall, North Carolina for nine months of tactical training, including maneuvers in South Carolina and Tennessee. In December 1943, the Regiment was sent to Camp Shanks, New York where they boarded the USAT James Parker December 28, 1943 for shipment to Port Stewart, Northern Ireland for two more months of training. They were then moved by ferry to Scotland and then by train to Nottingham, England in Sherwood Forest where it is rumored Robin Hood and his merry band of thieves roamed the countryside taking from the rich and giving to the poor.

Normandy

In late May 1944 the Regiment was transported to nearby airfields to await the order for their first combat parachute jump. On June 5, the men of the 508th were told they were to jump into Normandy, France as part of the 82nd Airborne Division commanded by Major General Matthew Ridgeway and Brigadier General James (Slim Jim) Gavin. Harold says that "We loaded up in C47s the night of June 5, 1944. I was loaded so heavily I could hardly walk. Besides the two parachutes, I carried two fragmentation grenades, a carbine with folding stock, a forty-pound radio battery, three K rations, three D rations, two cartons of cigarettes, a change of underwear and socks, and ammunition (40 rounds were used to silence a machine gun). We wore two sets of trousers and shirt."

"As we approached our DZ we were reminded of the fourth of July at home. The tracers and white-hot shell fragments filled the air. My plane was being hit up front with ack-ack and as I approached the door to jump, the plane began its death spiral. I rolled over the threshold. I believe I was the last man out of the C47 and I was the number six man in the stick. Colonel Thomas J.B. Shanley, my Battalion Commander, was number one."

"Tracers were coming up everywhere. There were so many tracers going through my chute I was afraid they would set it on fire. I heard a gammon grenade go off below me. It knocked out a

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German bunker, which I think, was firing at me and whoever threw the grenade. I landed about 30 feet in front of the bunker. I [had] taped my trench knife to my boot and had difficulty getting it. I tore it out and cut all my straps and ran to a hedgerow a short distance away. Immediately two Germans approached me on the opposite side of the hedgerow. When they reached my position they ducked and one rose up with his rifle. I had unscrewed the cap on my gammon grenade and when his shoulders appeared I tossed it just as he fired. The bullet went through my outer pair of pants and the concussion from the grenade knocked me out. When I came to I could hear the two Germans moaning as my grenade had done its job. I tasted gunpowder for a long time afterwards.”

“Then I was approached by an American trooper. We talked and then noticed someone else approaching. I challenged him with 'flash' and he replied 'thunder,' so I knew he was American. Next there was an orange ball and a bullet hit my helmet between the eyes. I rolled over and started swearing and he fired once more and the bullet went through my hip pocket tearing my maps of France. He then quit firing as my swearing registered. I then dove into dry brush as two Germans were approaching. My gun wasn't loaded as we had orders not to load up until we organized. My knife was under me and I dared not move as the Germans were standing over me. I had to go to the bathroom so I went. I guess the Germans thought they were looking at blood so they moved on.”

“As daylight approached I heard someone nearby. I challenged him with 'flash' and he took one more step, which saved his life as I saw his paratrooper boots. He was searching his memory for the reply. He and I joined forces with the other troopers and we came upon a German truck with two Germans sitting in it. Someone threw a gammon grenade hitting the windshield. The two Germans jumped out and ran up the road with one of the troopers shooting at them. We heard that a battalion of Germans was coming down the road so the five of us set up an ambush. But the Germans found out we were there probably from the two Germans that left the truck. They started firing behind us so we vacated the area. One trooper got hit in the leg. The Germans continued firing after we had gone a mile away.”

“We then found Colonel Shanley's group. We heard there were troopers trapped on an island in a flooded area so we went to rescue them. A German machine gun was zeroed in on an opening they had to cross. I went over to one side and opened up with my carbine. The machine gunner would fire a burst when I ducked and then I'd pop up and fire a few rounds. My gun got so hot the wood was smoking. Anyway, the German quit firing. That night we went to Hill 30. On Hill 30 we finally got a radio working and made contact with a couple of guys holding a bridge. We asked them if they had contact with anyone else and they said they had contact with Regiment. So Colonel Shanley told me to give them the map coordinates to relay hoping that Regiment could contact Division Artillery. Just as the Germans were loading their artillery pieces, our Division Artillery laid a barrage directly on them. The shells flew over our heads so close I believe we could have touched them. After the artillery shelling we got some of the German rations which consisted of bread, and cheese in a toothpaste tube. I guess we were pretty hungry. I sat on a bloated German corpse and ate the bread and cheese. When we organized I looked in the second hedgerow and saw a man wearing purple trousers. It turned out to be Louis Gillot, a Frenchman who had joined up with us when a crashing glider woke him up. He loaded up a cart with wounded and took them to the hospital.”

“At daylight on June 7 a small group of us went on patrol looking for parapacks (equipment bundles). We were shot at by a German sniper. We looked for him but couldn't find him. We didn't find any parapacks either. That night Lou Manion and I went on duty at an OP (observation post) about 30 yards in front of our lines. There was a ditch there, which we watched all night.”

“After Hill 30, we were assigned the mission of capturing the town of Bauppte. On the road to Bauppte we knocked out three German tanks and dispatched the operators. When we got ready for the attack on Bauppte, we lined up along a hedgerow. The Germans were about 100 yards away in the next hedgerow. I was Colonel Shanley's radio operator and he instructed me to tell the

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artillery where and when to start shelling. The shelling never happened and it was too late to call off the attack. Shanley gave me additional instructions to relay to the artillery to lay down a barrage further away from our front line. The artillery was not ready to fire and we went over the top World War I style and got halfway to our objective before the Germans realized we were there. The guy on my left got hit with a 20mm shell, which threw him clear across the dirt road. I heard Gillot yelling at me and pointing to my right. I hit the dirt just as a machine gun opened up and clipped the antenna off my radio. I could receive radio transmissions but I could not transmit. Louis Gillot took a German prisoner during this battle. We were supported by three TD's (tank destroyers) and I was assigned liaison to provide radio for them. Their radio was AM so each time they transmitted they would have to move because the AM transmissions could be picked up by the Germans and the Germans would fire on them. Once they didn't move and the TD commander got hit with a piece of shrapnel that didn't penetrate his body. A TD is no place for an infantryman. The TD's make too much noise but when the machine guns opened up on us, I felt pretty good and safe with the TD's. I don't remember the hill we took that day but it was rainy and most of the ground troops' cigarettes got wet so we gave them some of ours."

"We captured the entire German motor pool which included numerous vehicles and supplies. I sat down in a shell crater to eat some captured rations when a US Army P-51 fighter plane came swooping down to attack. I pulled out the orange cloth we were given to identify our friendly positions and that seemed to satisfy the pilot that we were friendly troops. One of our lieutenants (Bolger) jumped on a scout car and was firing the 50-caliber machine gun mounted on its top when he was hit by a German sniper. Colonel Shanley went back to Baupste after the war and talked to a civilian who had hidden in the basement of his house and watched the entire action. The man on Colonel Shanley's left got hit in the arm by a sniper. One of our machine gunners came up, threw his weapon on top of the hedgerow and let the sniper have the whole belt of ammo. We were supplied with water-cooled machine guns when we made contact with the beach-landed troops."

"We then went to Hill 95. In going there, we had to cross an open area, which the Germans had covered with machine gun fire and a few troopers got hit crossing that area. I ran across and dove over the hedgerow feeling a bullet on each cheek. The Germans were shelling us and I got hit by a piece of shrapnel but it didn't do any damage. I was then assigned to the mortar observation post about 100 yards in front of our MLR (main line of resistance). I saw some movement along a hedgerow coming towards our hill so I called for four rounds per mortar. The mortar platoon had acquired a truckload of ammunition and two more mortars, which gave them six guns. When the shells landed, the cows scattered all over the field. I then saw some Germans regrouping for a counterattack and asked for four more rounds per gun. I saw the flash of a windshield right where the first shell landed. I called back and told the mortar platoon to keep them coming."

"Then four Germans came out of the woods carrying a stretcher and waving a white flag. I took a bead on one of them when a lieutenant with four or five men said he wanted to take them prisoner. So I stood up exposing myself so the stretcher-bearers would know where to come. They had a mortar in their stretcher and began firing. Their first round landed about 15 feet behind me. I wasn't there for the encore. The lieutenant captured the four Germans and took them to Regimental Headquarters for questioning. I heard later that the four Germans took cover when our first mortar barrage hit. Then, during the lull, they attempted to regroup when the second salvo hit them. That's when they decided they would have to put me out of commission."

Holland

"As we approached our DZ, I could see a C47 burning on the ground. Our DZ was a potato field. It was broad daylight on a Sunday afternoon September 17, 1944 and it was easy to organize our units on the DZ. We gathered our equipment from the parapacks and headed toward the suburbs of Nijmegen. We were marching in a column of twos and the civilians were standing along the roadside cheering and clapping. I was at the head of the column with Otho Holmes who was the 2nd Battalion Commander. A German machine gun opened up about a block away kicking up dust all around me and I dove for a low spot. A couple of troopers went behind the houses towards the machine gun. The civilians disappeared. I don't know what happened to the machine

gunners. “

We set up camp in a park-like setting. There was a hospital nearby with a children's ward. We heard some Germans wanted to surrender so a patrol went out to get them. I was part of that patrol. The Germans had apparently changed their minds and weren't there. Another trooper and I were left guarding an ammo dump for two weeks. While we were guarding the ammo dump, I raised the Dutch flag as the other trooper strummed a guitar.“

"The Germans sent some planes in to strafe the road nearby where the English were moving up. I strapped the tripod of a machine gun to a tree as machine guns lying on the ground on a tripod couldn't shoot up into the air. As the first planes came over I squeezed the trigger and the gun jammed. The headspace was not adjusted properly. I put another gun on the tripod and the same thing happened. I had no tool to adjust the headspace. A couple of troopers came over saying they were being overrun and wanted to borrow a couple of English tanks. According to the troopers, the English refused to use their tanks, as they were afraid of losing them. The nurses at the hospital fed us a meal a day. The Dutch underground (Orange) sent a man to guard the ammo dump while we went looking for food. The Orange were hard pressed to feed their own so we found a bakery that sold us a loaf of bread. We were finally relieved from guarding the ammo dump and loaded a truck with dead troopers. Then we joined our outfit. The Germans were shelling us with their 280mm artillery weapons. Even the duds shook the ground as they hit. There was a spy who would go back where he had a radio hidden and would give the Germans map coordinates for their artillery. There were two troopers in a slit trench next to mine during the heavy shelling who jumped out of their trench and ran about 30 yards and hit the dirt. A shell landed on their trench. One asked the other why he had left the apparent safety of their trench and he replied that he didn't know.”

"The Germans then sent some planes in on a strafing run. I dove into a straddle trench, which, fortunately, hadn't been used yet, but my butt was sticking up and when those 20mm shells hit I felt uncomfortable. We received a long message to send on our AM radio. I was assigned to work the generator and another trooper the radio. We really sweated that one out. As soon as I cranked the generator the other trooper began sending the message in Morse code. After he finished and got the "roger," I ran across the road and dove into my foxhole. Almost immediately a shell landed right on the radio. It tore a big hole in the generator and, of course, destroyed the radio. The radio operator wasn't hurt as his foxhole was nearby. One night in a different location we went on patrol. My radio squelch control was faulty and it kept kicking off. One of the troopers would readjust the squelch each time it kicked off. Needless to say, I ended up at the rear of the column. There were about five of us on the patrol. A German machine gun would fire a burst every now and then but the rounds went over our heads. It was cold and my teeth were chattering.”

"In another incident, I saw a German plane trying to bomb the Nijmegen Bridge. He was going so fast that he released his bomb long before he got to the bridge and it would land about the same distance beyond.“

"One night, one of the rifle platoons was assigned the task of assaulting a wooded area and I was assigned as their radio operator. We went through a minefield to reach our jumping-off point. The platoon leader, a 1st Lieutenant, was killed instantly, and the assistant platoon leader, a 2nd Lieutenant, assumed command of the platoon. As we crawled across the field in front of the woods, a German sniper kept shooting at me. Radio operators make good targets. I could see sparks on the ground where the bullets hit. When I got near enough, I charged the sniper. He dropped his weapon and started yelling. I had a German P38 pistol and when I got to him, I put the muzzle against his forehead. I pulled the trigger but the pistol jammed and I had trouble chambering a round. A trooper running by me saw that I was in trouble and he tossed a hand grenade, which, fortunately, went into the German's foxhole. I felt the hot air from the explosion brush past my face. Two troopers grabbed the German on each arm and lifted him screaming from the foxhole. The Lieutenant told me to order our machine guns to fire directly at our positions. I was on the wrong side of a wall when they began firing but it didn't take me long to

get on the right side. We went back to our units with two troopers carrying the dead Lieutenant. He was our only casualty that night.

The Battle of the Bulge

"After the Holland operation, the Regiment closed at a new base camp at Sissonne, France, a former French artillery post in the Reims area on November 14, 1944. We were enjoying routine camp life at Sissonne when on December 16, 1944 the German high command decided to make one last push by throwing 12 of their top-notch divisions against three American divisions trying to hold the thinly held line in the Ardennes in Belgium. We loaded up on large semi-trailers that night and headed for Chevron, Belgium. The 82nd Airborne Division, including the 508th, were at the head of the convoy followed by the 101st Airborne Division. As we crossed the intersection at Bastogne, Belgium, a German tank separated us. We continued on to the northern sector of the bulge and the 101st ended up at Bastogne where they made their famous stand against a superior enemy force. We stopped the Germans at Chevron."

"Lieutenant Tibbets and I and three other men went to see Sergeant Brogles' outpost because we hadn't heard from him all day. We left the jeep about a mile in front of our lines and continued a mile further. The Lieutenant left three men at the crossroad and he and I continued toward a farmhouse. We found Brogles' machine gun at the crossroad, and we found empty K ration boxes in the basement of the farmhouse. At the back of the farmhouse I saw a German sentry. At first I thought it was someone from Brogles' squad so I shouted to the guy. As I came closer to him I saw he was a German. I dove into a manure pile and took aim with my pistol but I had only five cartridges for it and I thought it would be foolish to start a war with only five rounds of ammunition. Tibbets had ducked into a shed so I joined him there. The shed was enclosed with wire mesh and the Lieutenant brought his wire cutters with him. I told him the German couldn't hit us unless he had a machine gun. So we ran out of the shed and weren't fired at. I had the radio and couldn't move as fast but I got out of the shed safely."

"We started down the road towards the intersection to warn the three troopers that there were Germans in the area. I radioed the message to whomever was at the receiving end, and as we crossed the bridge, all hell broke loose. A bullet caught the shoulder seam of my overcoat and spun me around. I fell off the roadway and threw my radio into the creek knowing that the icy water would break the tubes and short out the set. I then ran down the creek and they kept shooting at me. I ran a little further and then they stopped firing at me. Our BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) man opened fire on the German half-track but his weapon jammed after firing just four rounds. The German on the half track turned his 20mm gun on him and fired and I was sure he was killed but all five of us got out of there safely and back to our own lines."

"I continued on through the forest and then heard a jeep ahead. I reached a clearing and laid down in the creek and shouted across the clearing for an OK to cross. The Germans had attacked our lines a short distance away and I was not sure it would be safe to cross. I got the OK and walked across the clearing. When I reached the fringe, I was challenged by another trooper who asked who I was and what I was doing there. Then he saw the forty-five on my side and raised his rifle to fire. Just then a Sergeant walked up who knew me. He had a wounded man with him and asked me to take him to the first aid station, which I did. The aid station was located near Colonel Shanley's tent so I reported to the Colonel. I was soaking wet and knew I wouldn't last long in the open so I went to a barn with hay in it to warm up. Some regular soldiers built a fire in the barn in a stove but they burned the barn down."

"Lee Harvey Oswald killed a police officer in Dallas, Texas right after President Kennedy was assassinated. The police officer was chasing Oswald when he went into a theater. The policeman was a paratrooper leading to controversy whether he was the same officer who was on the

patrol.¹”

“We had moved back about 12 miles to straighten out the MLR per British Field Marshall Montgomery. On the move back another trooper and I were left behind. We got tired and decided to spend the night in a barn where there was a halftrack crew. After a while they woke us up and said the Germans were coming. A demolition team was blasting trees down across the road as we were leaving. The intersection where we had gone to look for Sergeant Brogles was nearby. He had apparently walked into a trap set by the Germans. As we moved to the rear, the Germans were shelling the road a short distance ahead of us. I hit the ground next to a dead trooper who had been wounded and then apparently run over by a tank. When we arrived at our destination, a halftrack full of Germans came toward us. One of our tanks fired a round and hit the middle of the halftrack. The Germans jumped out and started running towards the house they had just vacated. There was a truck there and as they ran past the truck, the tank fired another round hitting the truck. Then the tankers fired another round at an upstairs window. Two Germans ran out of the house to a bunker.”

“Later we were camped overlooking a village. I was using a straddle trench at the time and looking directly at a building, which suddenly disappeared in a cloud of dust and smoke. Later I heard that a trooper was carrying a box of grenades into the building and heard a fragmentation grenade primer go off. He dropped the box and ran out the door saving his life. There were over seven gammon grenades in his box, which were set off by the fragmentation grenades.”

“I was worried about my feet so I went to a first aid station which was set up in a building. One look at the medics who looked worse off than their patients made me ashamed of myself so I left without any treatment. Years later back home a VA doctor told me my feet had been frostbitten clear up to my knees.”

“After the war I went to work for Shell Chemical Corporation. After nine years there I decided to be a dairy farmer. Two and a half years later I changed my name and took the LaSalle accounting course, took the CPA test and passed. After meeting the experience requirements, I opened my own office in California and later in Oregon. I then moved back to California and went to work for the state as a government auditor. I retired in 1980.”

¹ [Jefferson Davis "J.D." Tippit](#) entered the U.S. Army on July 21, 1944 and was assigned to the US 17th Airborne Division where he served until June 20, 1946. While possible, it is doubtful that he was the same officer on the patrol described here.