

FIRST LIEUTENANT LESTER WINNER POLLOM

The following article, entitled, "Paratrooper recalls D-Day," was written by Nancy Smith for the June 5, 1994 edition of the Lawrence Journal-World.

Army paratrooper Lieutenant Les Pollom jumped into history at 2 AM, June 6, 1944, one of the lead soldiers in the mightiest invasion force ever assembled -- the D-Day invasion of Normandy. The 28-year-old Pollom carried a carbine, 40 rounds of ammunition, a .45 caliber revolver, a knife in his right boot, four hand grenades, 12 pounds of TNT strapped to each leg and 12 dynamite caps strapped to each ankle. His "escape kit" consisted of a detailed map of Europe printed on silk cloth, a hacksaw blade, a compass and \$300.

"I landed in a French farmhouse courtyard just west of Ste. Mere Eglise," he said. The knife in his boot immediately came in handy. Before Pollom could free himself from his parachute, a German soldier attacked him. "He thought he had me," Pollom recalled. "He was my first kill. There were many more after that."

A demolitions expert, Pollom was executive officer in Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, in the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division. One of 13,000 US paratroopers to arrive on the German-held Normandy coast of France that day, he and the others were to establish a protective shield for US assault forces landing at 'Utah' and 'Omaha' beaches. Ste. Mere Eglise was the first French town liberated by the Allies. The Germans didn't give it up without a fight, but the Americans quickly gained a reputation for their combat actions. "My regiment was known as the Red Devils," Pollom said. "The Germans called us 'the devils in baggy pants.'"

Pollom, a Topeka native, entered Kansas State University in the fall of 1934 and joined the US Army's Reserve Officer Training Corps. ROTC was required. He studied economics and business administration. In 1938, just a few hours short of a degree, he went to work for Quaker Oats. In 1942, his orders arrived to report for military duty. In training on the east coast, Pollom read a newspaper account of the daring paratroopers. "The most elegant people in the service were paratroopers, so I made application," he said. At the time, volunteers were badly needed. "It was brutal training," he said, "We trained as a regiment and they fell by the wayside." The attitude was, "If you've got enough guts to be here, let's see 'em."

By the time Pollom's class finished jump school and put on its wings, only 25 to 30 percent of the original members remained. "They thought they were the best in the world and they probably were. They had an esprit de corps that wouldn't quit." In 1943 after battle training in Pinehurst, North Carolina, the regiment shipped overseas. They landed in Belfast and lived in a Quonset hut camp in the Irish countryside for three months before moving on to Nottingham, in central England. There, they waited for D-Day -- training, always training. Pollom found he had a natural talent as a marksman. That skill, along with an instinct for trouble and the discipline of paratrooper training, kept him alive when the fighting began.

After dropping into Normandy, Pollom and his men fought 33 consecutive days without backup. He went in with 160 soldiers and came out with 16. In Normandy, he earned his Silver Star by swimming the flooded Merderet River under enemy fire to obtain Plasma for injured soldiers. "We saved some of 'em that way," he said. Also, in Normandy, Pollom's group took a German motor pool "and had more food than we'd seen in a month." He found an accordion with German General Erwin Rommel's name on it. General Rommel, "Desert Fox" of the North African campaign, commanded the German divisions stationed in Normandy. After 33 days of fighting, Pollom and his men were sent back to England for a five-day leave and more training -- with new recruits. "The hardest thing to do is train a soldier to save his own life," he said. "The real test doesn't come until the battle begins, and no man knows for sure which way he will go until then. Those who couldn't bring themselves to kill met certain death," Pollom said. "Others,

like myself, just kept moving on, doing what had to be done.”

On Sunday, September 17, 1944, Pollom and his fellow paratroopers left England for German-occupied Holland and their second combat jump. “Our mission was to cross the Rhine,” he said. “And we did, but we didn’t have support -- Montgomery was slow getting there.” The British General Bernard Montgomery, in charge of allied ground forces, encountered unfriendly terrain in Holland. “It was deadly country for tanks,” Pollom said, “You can’t get off the roads.” The British became the proverbial sitting ducks. German guns also hit the plane carrying Pollom and other paratroopers to their drop zone. “The port engine caught fire,” he said, “we jumped almost in the middle of the German Panzer Army. The British almost lost everybody -- 18,000 to 19,000. It was a bloody mess. We had some glory-seeking generals. We lost two and a half times as many people there as in Normandy.”

After fighting in Holland, Pollom and his regiment moved to a small town near Reims, France. They were told they’d be there until spring, when the crossing of the Rhine in Germany was to be mounted. “Then on December 18, we got orders to be ready to fight in 24 hours. They needed us real bad.” The men were loaded onto cattle trucks and taken into the Ardennes forest. No jump this time. “Our orders were very simple -- ‘stop ‘em or die,’ -- so we did both.” It was the Battle of the Bulge.

Pollom's last day on the battlefield was January 9, 1945. His back, injured in rocky landings on the jumps, finally gave out. “I couldn’t even walk,” he said. A field surgeon sent him to a Paris hospital and then on to England to recover. “The English people were absolutely wonderful,” he said. “I think all the guys fell in love with the English people.”

On returning to duty near the war’s end, Pollom was reassigned to the 29th Infantry Division for occupational guard duty in Frankfurt, Germany. While crossing the English Channel on the way to that assignment, his troop ship was accidentally rammed and Pollom almost drowned. With plenty of battle points to his credit, Pollom returned home November 1, 1945, and resigned his commission. When the Korean War broke out, he was glad he could not be recalled. “I think all my chances had run out,” he said.

Of the war, Pollom said. “I think most families were touched by it.” His only brother, Don B. Pollom, became a U.S. Marine Corps fighter pilot and was lost in action in the Pacific in February 1944. While in combat in Holland in the fall of 1944, Pollom received word of his mother’s death in Topeka from multiple sclerosis. When he came home, only his father and young wife, Beth, were left to greet him. Pollom and his dad, also named Lester, donated one of the carillon bells in Kansas University’s World War II Memorial Campanile in Don Pollom’s honor. Don had attended Kansas University, lettering in football in 1940 and 1941 and in track in 1941 and 1942. And Pollom went to work for Hallmark Cards where he stayed until retirement. He and his wife eventually moved to California, where he owned Hallmark shops and then back to Kansas. “For thirty years after the war, I was hard as nails about it,” he said. “I was fully encased in steel -- too much hand-to-hand combat.” But in 1972, he said he turned into “a bowl of Jell-O.” An old friend invited him to tour the European battlefields. “My wife urged me to go, and then the Holy Ghost got me -- I went into the back of the store and cried,” he said. After that, he said, “I used to pray...that I would be made human again.”

Pollom, now 78 and an avid golfer, moved to Lawrence, Kansas, in 1989 to take advantage of the Alvamar Golf Course. After his wife of 52 years died, he met his second wife, Barbara, a Lawrence art teacher. They were married in 1991. With Barbara, he said, he has been able to share more of his wartime experiences than all the other people in his life put together. Pollom said he still had no desire to return to the battlefields, even for the D-Day 50th anniversary observances now under way. He also lamented that World War II history was not adequately taught in schools to inform young people of the sacrifices that were made by the soldiers. “So far as I’m concerned,

everybody in the 508th ought to have a Silver Star,” he said.

Also on the same page as the above article about Les Pollom is a map of the D- Day landings in Normandy on June 6, 1944. It shows the location of various beaches, including Utah and Omaha. And the following text was written on the map: “On the eve of June 6, 160,000 Allied soldiers assaulted a 50-mile stretch of the Normandy coast, launching a pivotal effort against the Axis forces. The Allied Armada of 700 warships and 2,700 support ships with 2,500 landing craft closed in on the beaches. In the first six days, 326,000 men, 54,000 vehicles and 104,000 tons of stores were landed.

Lieutenant Lester W. Pollom passed away, in Lawrence, Kansas, on July 31, 1996, at the age of 80. His awards and decorations include the Silver Star Medal, the Bronze Star Medal, Parachute Badge, Combat Infantry Badge, American Campaign Medal, Europe-Africa Campaign Medal with four battle stars and invasion arrowhead, National Defense Service Medal, WWII Victory Medal, WWII Occupation Medal, United States Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation, French Fourragere, Belgian Fourragere, and the Militaire Willems Orde Degree of Knight (Orange Lanyard of the Royal Netherlands Army).