

THE FRENCH RABBIT THAT HELPED WIN THE BATTLE OF NORMANDY

by D. Zane Schlemmer

(This short true story is dedicated to my grandchildren and to all the children and descendants of a very brave French rabbit about whom you will read.)

THE FRENCH RABBIT

He -- I use "he" because it was a very large athletic rabbit -- wasn't a small cuddly domestic rabbit -- he was a big bluish-gray wild rabbit with large hind legs and long ears, which were either laid back or standing straight up, depending upon what he was doing -- much like our American jack rabbit. He lived in the thickets of the French hedgerows and feasted upon the lush green pasture grasses in the Norman fields, where he grazed the Norman cows with their large udders and large brown eyes. Whether he lived alone or with a rabbit family, I was never to learn.

THE NORMAN FIELD

The field was a large pasture field about the size of a football or soccer field alongside a small French country road. In more peaceful times, the field's limestone soil grew rich lush green grasses which the cows ate and turned into the Normandy milk and cream, the finest in all of France. The field was surrounded by rocky earthen hedgerows upon which grew trees, briar bushes, and thickets, which over many decades became like field walls with only an opening with a gate, so that the cows could enter the fields. These fields were the home of our French rabbit.

THE SITUATION

It was 12 June 1944. Six days earlier, we American paratroopers had jumped at night into Normandy, France to spearhead the D-Day invasion to keep the German Army tanks from reaching our landing beaches, and to liberate the French peoples, who had lived under the German Army occupation for over four years. After jumping behind the German lines, we had held for five long days and nights before the beach-landing troops reached us and brought us necessary re-supply of weapons, ammunition, and food. With these much needed supplies we could now advance further inland. Thus, we were given the tasks of a night-time river crossing, assaulting and taking a little French town (Beuzeville-la-Bastille), then fighting our way forward some five miles to capture and occupy another French town (Baupte), where a German Panzer (armored) Battalion was located. After we crossed the river, we would be without support until a river bridge could be rebuilt by our engineers. After crossing the river and a brisk fight, we took Beuzeville-la-Bastille. Many years later, a French Count who lived in a large French chateau at Beuzeville-la-Bastille, thanked us for the fast liberation which had saved his chateau. For the German soldiers had only the day before piled all of his furniture to the ceiling of his great room and had told him they would set fire to it should the Americans come. Fortunately we surprised them by our night attack and they didn't have time to fire his home. While knocking out two German tanks en route, we proceeded forward down a narrow French country road until early afternoon when we reached "the field." By this time we were quite weary from having been up all night, from the river crossing and fight while carrying all of our weapons, ammunition, and belongings, as well as knowing that we would probably be faced with a pitched battle for the town of Baupte before we could complete our mission

THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE FRENCH RABBIT

We arrived at the field in which hedgerows the French rabbit lived. Just as we put on our bayonets and formed a skirmish line to assault across this field, the French rabbit appeared at the left end of the field. With his large ears straight up and alert he stood up to look around, probably from the unfamiliar sounds of our preparations. The sudden realization of so many strangers there must have panicked him, for he started running across the large field from left to right. With his mad dash, everyone with guns ready (rifles, pistols, submachine guns, automatic rifles) started shooting at this madly dashing French rabbit. He jumped and bounded, leaped and dove, skipped and vaulted, whirled and twirled, dodged and pirouetted, spun and darted, and plunged and arched. Such a display of broken field running that would have put the finest of professional football runners to shame. Finally, with his ears laid straight back, with one great bounding leap, he dove into the hedgerow bushes amid flying leaves and debris from the accompanying volley of bullets that followed him.

It seemed that everyone was both shooting and laughing and cheering for this brave and daring rabbit who had just outrun and out-maneuvered the firepower of most of two companies of American paratroopers, most of whom were expert marksmen. I think that we each were secretly cheering for this rabbit as he neared the edge of the field in his flight. We all had a great deal of empathy and feeling for he was an “underdog” and had won his battle with flying colors. It was also probably best for everyone that this French rabbit had won his race for I’m certain that had he been hit or stopped, each and everyone who was firing at him would have claimed to have been the one who stopped him so it saved many later discussions and arguments.

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

The firing action, the shouting, cheering, and laughter combined with command whistles blowing to cease firing, and the shouted commands, had put an end to our weariness which we each had felt and the adrenal rush created a desire to now get on with the attack which we were facing. Meanwhile, the sounds of the noisy encounter with the French rabbit was heard by the German defenders of Baupte evidently creating their fears of a far larger attacking force than were our two companies of unsupported paratroopers. Thinking that they were vastly outnumbered, their desire to fight wavered, while at the same time our desire to attack was enhanced. With this difference, after a pitched battle, we drove the German Army soldiers from the town of Baupte, captured their armored motor pool with all their remaining vehicles and supplies, and dug in for the expected German counterattack to come.

SO LET’S HEAR IT FOR ONE VERY BRAVE FRENCH RABBIT!

D. Zane Schlemmer was a 19-year old American paratroop Sergeant with the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division in Normandy, France during this rabbit encounter.