

The Fate of One Stick In A Company

Clyde Smith of A Co. listed 16 men who parachuted unto Normandy from his stick. They were Lt. Henry LeFebvre, Sgt. James Myers, Cpl. Kenneth Hook, T/5 Lester Green, and the following Pfc's and Pvt's; James Stassola Robert Benthin, Vincent Dushensky, Clyde Smith, Johnny Roberts, Charles Sciandra, Robert Savage, Raymond Perry, Edward Focht, Robert Union, Robert White and Richard Hunt.

These 16 men were a part of A Company's 3rd platoon judged in the Tennessee maneuvers as the best rifle platoon in the 508 Regiment. The platoon also won the 1st Battalion competition in Ireland as the best rifle platoon. When training for D-Day in Nottingham they would always cover a bridge at night while engineers placed their charges and simulated blowing the bridge. Just before D-Day the exact bridge was identified as the one over the Merderet River at Pont l'Abbe.¹

The night of 5 June, Lt. Henry LeFebvre and his stick of paratroopers climbed aboard a C-47 bound for Normandy and the bridge at Pont l'Abbe. When they hit the coast of Normandy they were greeted by a "sea of tracers". LeFebvre recalled the scene:

"As I looked down at 400 feet above the ground all I could see were tracer bullets headed straight for me. We were getting a number of bullets through the wing and fuselage. They made a sound like a bass drum and they made flashes of green light as they passed through the fuselage. Fortunately no one was hit".

Shrapnel from antiaircraft guns exploded all around the plane as Lt. LeFebvre stood in the door waiting for the green light. Just before the jump a large piece of shrapnel came up through the bottom of the plane and on through the roof -- just missing the lieutenant.

Hank LeFebvre led his stick out the door as the green light went on. He landed in the middle of a small field surrounded by hedgerows. LeFebvre described the Normandy hedgerow country:

"Each of the fields in this area of Normandy were not more than 50 yards square and were outlined on all four sides by hedgerows. A hedgerow consisted of a berm of earth about 3 feet thick and about 3 feet high. On top of the berm were thick bushes growing to a height of 6 to 10 feet. In addition, each berm had drainage ditches on both side about 2 feet deep. What we found were thousands of little fields, each an island unto itself. Men could be fighting and dying in one field, and people could be taking a break in the next."

As soon as LeFebvre hit the ground he heard a German shouting at his troops giving urgent commands in an excited tone of voice. Hurriedly the lieutenant cut away his parachute harness and in his haste he inadvertently cut through his rifle sling. While trying to get out of his chute, a cow nearby with a bell around her neck keep looking at him and shaking her head and ringing the bell.

The lieutenant managed to get out of his harness and slither 10 yards toward the opposite corner from the Germans when he heard a pistol pop which he recognized to be a flare pistol. In a few seconds the whole area was flooded with light from a parachute flare and the German fired a hail of bullets into Lefebvre's parachute and equipment left behind. Hank LeFebvre hugged the ground and was thankful that he had blackened his hands and face before takeoff.

When the flare went out the Jerries stopped firing and Hank continued to crawl toward the corner of the field away from the Jerries. There he ran into a pathfinder. The two almost shot each other before they could identify friend or foe. The two paratroopers proceeded along the hedgerow into the next field. LeFebvre described what happened to them there:

"We heard the sound of German voices coming toward us. We ducked down into a drainage ditch along the hedgerow and waited for them to pass. Unfortunately for us they did not pass. Just on the other side of the hedgerow I heard the unmistakable sound

of a machine gun being set up. The snap of the trails being extended and the sound of the bolt going back and forth as the belt was feed [sic]through. It appeared that we were in the middle of a German platoon. We could hear them talking quite clearly just on the other side of the berm of earth.

What to do? There was no way to throw a grenade through that hedgerow. We had to whisper very quietly. I thought that we could sneak out of our position. but the dry brambles and weeds would crackle loudly and we could hear. "Vas is los?"

We would freeze.

I recalled from our briefing that the troops landing on the Normandy coast would relieve us by D-Day + 1 so I figured we would just stay put until the Germans were forced to move. The sea borne invasion didn't make it to us as planned.

My pathfinder friend almost got his hand stepped on by a German who was apparently going out to a platoon outpost on our side of the berm. His hand was on the edge of the ditch in which we were hiding and suddenly these two legs went by us.

Our days and nights were spent huddled together. Each move in the ditch caused a lot of noise due to the dry brambles and weeds. I was sure the Germans would be driven out by our forces momentarily. So we waited. We lived on a little water and D ration chocolate bars. It was three nights before we finally heard the Germans packing up to leave - about 0400 hrs. when they left. After a few minutes making sure they were gone we left our hiding place and proceeding down the hedgerow until we came to a road. After checking my compass for an easterly direction, we started out and shortly ran into our own forces. It was a tense confrontation as everyone was jumpy. I parted company with my pathfinder friend and never saw him again.

I found only five men from my platoon. From that point on, the 3rd platoon of five men and one officer was the point for A Co. I am so proud of these men who were exposed to the first fire of every engagement. They were always there -- brave, courageous and bold. They did an outstanding job and we all returned to England in one piece."

Clyde Smith landed right next to a hedgerow. Before he was able to free himself from the chute harness he saw the tops of two helmets on the other side of the hedge and almost called to ask for help. As he hesitated Clyde recognized that the voices were speaking German. That made him decide to free his rifle first and just as he did so a German came though an opening in the hedge a few yards away from him. Clyde fired and saw the Jerry drop in a sitting position and then back on his back. Quickly Clyde cut off his parachute harness and ran in the opposite direction.

Clyde Smith was able to link up with Johnny Roberts from his stick and another trooper, Kevin Cregan. Every direction the three troopers turned they would run into Germans. They got close to James Myers and Kenneth Hooks but they were pinned down and could not get together. Sgt. Myers was killed on June 9 and Hooks was taken prisoner on June 8, two days after D Day. Smith came across some wires which appeared to him to be telephone connections between German units. He moved down the line cutting the wire in several places to make repairs more difficult for the enemy. The wire led him toward a German gun emplacement and soon drew their fire. Clyde hugged the ground in tall grass as the bullets zinged above his head. The firing stopped. As he lay there thinking about his next move suddenly he felt a shock and pain in the small of his back. A Jerry had sneaked up behind him and struck hum with his rifle butt. Clyde was quickly overpowered and taken prisoner.

Later Johnny Roberts was captured. Johnny and Clyde were POWs together in Dresden, Germany for many months.

Edward Focht, James Stassola and Robert Union were killed and James Perry was wounded on D-Day. Lester Green and Charles Sciandra were captured on D-Day and Vincent Dushensky was listed as missing.

Richard Hunt landed in a field of grain which was about three feet high. Hunt snapped his cricket but heard no response. He looked around for his next move and saw a medium sized tree not too far away and decided the tree was a good assembly point. Cautiously he crawled through the tall grain circling around so as not to give away his true direction. From behind the tree he looked back to his starting point and saw a Kraut on top of his discarded parachute. He also saw two men struggling to free an orange equipment bundle parachute from a tree. He couldn't tell if they were friend or foe until the Kraut on top of his chute shot at them. Hunt described his thoughts and actions that followed:

"How am I going to get that Kraut without giving away my position? The sound of my carbine will draw fire toward me. Having already heard some armor firing their cannons and having gotten a gammon grenade prepared if one of those tanks came along, I decided to throw the grenade. That's how I took care of that Kraut sitting on top on my chute.

After the grenade exploded, I ran about 150 feet to the hedgerow where the guys had been pulling on the orange parachute. I dove over the hedge and upon standing up found three M-1s stuck up my nose. They thought maybe I was the one who had been shooting at them. Capt. Adams, Sgt. Taylor and Dale Albertson of A Co., Frank Circelli of Hg. 1st., Cpl James Green and Lt. Ray Murray from Hg. 3rd. were in the group. (Circelli, Green and Murray are cited in Lord's HISTORY OF THE 508 PARACHUTE INFANTRY. P. 45.) We moved out at daybreak and were later trapped in a field until D+4 when the 90th Inf. Div. rescued us."

Bob White explained what happened to him on D-Day

"After my chute opened, I looked up and saw a blown panel. I pulled the reserve and fed it out in front me to make sure it would open. It caught just before I hit the ground.

That white chute on top of the tall grain in the moon light really drew the fire from Jerry. I crawled out from under it in a hurry. The Krauts were still firing at it after I was long gone.

Then they spotted me crawling with just my backpack showing above the grass. Machine gun bullets ripped through my pack. I said, 'I'll get rid of that sucker.' I unhooked my rifle belt and turned on my side to slip the harness over my shoulder and a bullet went through the sleeve of my jump jacket - just under the American flag. I crawled away flat on my belly -and fast as a snake.

The first trooper I met was A. B. Cannon of A Co., then later Capt Adams and his group. That's when Dick Hunt and I became lead scouts - a job we kept the rest of the war. 'Hunt and White take the point,' that's what we heard every time A Company moved out."

ⁱ [Jumpmaster note: The headcount shown in the photo of Lefebvre's stick includes 17 enlisted men which contradicts Clyde Smith's count. Those sixteen are mentioned in this story but the seventeenth, Pfc Roland B. Hicks, is not. He survived the war and is believed to have died in April 1987 in Columbia, SC.]