

FOR STUDENTS  
AND ADULTS

# PARATROOPER

★ A Summer Series ★

On May 29, the United States dedicated the National World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. On June 6, the world observed the 60th anniversary of D-Day. In this Newspaper-in-Education series a paratrooper re-lives one of the most important military operations in history.



Paratrooper Don Reiland of the 82nd Airborne in December 1944.

## '...NOTHING CAN STOP IT NOW!'

By Don Reiland

We didn't know where we would be jumping, except that it would be several miles inland of the invasion beaches and in the middle of German defenders.

As we prepared to board our planes on the evening of June 5, 1944, it was still light because of British Double-Daylight Time. The airport in England was a gigantic sight as hundreds of planes churned their motors with a roar that shook my already nervous stomach.

Strapped into a parachute harness, barely able to walk under the weight of a hundred pounds of weapons and explosives, then pushed up into the plane, I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the event that would propel us that evening. Nothing could stop it. I felt infinitesimal, as astronauts must have felt later as they were about to roar into space. The astronauts, of course, knew a good deal about where they were going. My comrades and I in the 82nd Airborne Division knew nothing about what awaited us.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower was repeatedly advised that he was sending two fine Airborne divisions to almost certain annihilation—the 82nd and the 101st. Fortunately, word of this never reached my comrades and me. When Eisenhower bade farewell to the 101st Airborne paratroopers just before they boarded their planes, they could see the strain in his face. They told him: "Don't worry about us General, worry about

the Germans because they won't know what hit them!"

In both divisions, all of us had blackened our faces, and some had added warpaint. With our jump suits bulging with ammunition, enough plastic explosives to blow up a small bridge, grenades hanging everywhere, we were surely a sight in the twilight as we grunted up the ladders into the planes.

With tears appearing, Ike turned to Maxwell Taylor, the commander of the 101st Airborne, and said: "Max, I don't know if your men will scare the enemy, but they scare the hell out of me!" After the last plane was airborne, Ike observed: "**It's on, and nothing can stop it now!**"

Don Reiland's email is [crispin82@comcast.net](mailto:crispin82@comcast.net)

LEARN WITH THE NEWS

On D-Day paratroopers provided an inland front for the Normandy beach invasion by engaging and disabling German troops behind enemy lines. Military operations often involve coordination of different kinds of troops and equipment. Find an example of military action in the newspaper. Write a description of the kinds of troops and equipment needed to make the operation a success. Then write what each type adds to the effectiveness of the operation.

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## 'WE WERE ON OUR WAY'

By Don Reiland

As soon as we took our place in the plane most of us promptly discarded our spare parachute, because jumping at 500 feet discounted any "second chance." As usual, I used the spare as a pillow as I crunched up on the floor for a nap. The churning up of hundreds of planes overwhelmed conversation, but I don't think anyone felt like talking anyway. The enormity of it all was beginning to sink in and everyone was soon deep into their own thoughts.

One of my concerns was that I might chicken out. The only things that alleviated that horrible prospect were the tacit expectations of my family and friends—and my determination not to let any of them down.

As our plane taxied down the runway and swung around to get in line for the takeoff, we could see planes everywhere, the entire airport packed with planes. This was many times more planes than during our five rehearsal jumps. Now, seemingly overnight, they had been painted with three white stripes for identification on each wing and the fuselage. It was all so different, and thus upsetting.

The roar of hundreds of motors was absolutely deafening. For the first few years after the war my stomach would churn whenever I went to an airport. But



Courtesy: Air Force Photo Library.

*C-47s transported paratroopers all though WWII.*

it was "GO," and there was no turning back. We were on our way to who knows where and in a couple of hours we would meet the enemy. It was gigantic and I felt small and vulnerable.

As our plane circled for hour after hour I finally assured myself that nothing would deter me—I was going out that door. By now, my fear of jumping was minor. But it didn't help to recall that this jump would be my 13th.

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LEARN WITH THE NEWS

In the D-Day invasion of Normandy, the importance of the operation was far greater than individual soldiers or units. In many activities or undertakings today, the overall goals are greater than the roles that single individuals play. Find an example in the newspaper today or this week. Write a short comparison of D-Day and this activity or undertaking. Draw a Venn diagram to aid your comparison, if you like.

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## 'THE SKY LOOKED LIKE THE FOURTH OF JULY'

By Don Reiland

As soon as our plane crossed over into Normandy, we stood up and hooked up. Of course, we didn't know it was Normandy. It could have been Holland or anywhere. Standing in the door just behind my lieutenant, I could see the ground, but as it rushed by at 500 feet it was difficult to recognize anything. Every so often a thick cloud would obscure the moon for a few seconds—a scary sight.

As anti-aircraft bursts lit the darkness and bullets pinged into the fuselage, I was shaken by the fact that someone was trying to kill me. That triggered a new fear: I wanted to live at least long enough to make it all worthwhile and that translated into killing a few of the enemy. That simple urge, I soon learned, was about the only thing that lessened fear. Shooting back became the relief pill.

My good friend Mario Parletta said that while shuffling toward the door to jump, he felt like a zombie going through a routine he knew well yet with no feeling but fear. For the very first time I was overwhelmed with the urge to get the heck out of the plane—now!

The sky looked like the Fourth of July. The pings of bullets hitting the fuselage increased, and the plane began lurching badly. I am sure all of us felt we would be better off on the ground—somewhere, anywhere—than being blown out of the sky. My lieutenant had his hands on each side of the door and was poised to jump. Then,



A World War II paratrooper jump.

Courtesy: The National Archives.

as the plane made a particularly heavy lurch, he reached inside and groped for something substantial to hold. The crunch of 17 paratroopers behind us made me feel that one more lurch and the lieutenant and I both would be hurled out the door. My eyes darted from the fireworks outside to the light panel just over my right shoulder. When several bullets hit the plane, I felt sure that someone would be hit. It was torturous waiting for the light to jump. At last, it went on, the lieutenant shouted "Let's go!" and as he disappeared I dove out of the plane.

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LEARN WITH THE NEWS

The paratroopers who jumped on D-Day needed courage, determination and discipline. These qualities are called character traits. What other character traits make people strong or admired? Find examples among newsmakers featured in the stories and photos in the newspaper. Pick three and write out how the traits benefit the individuals involved. Were any of those traits also displayed by soldiers on D-Day or in another military operation?

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## 'THE BRUTAL REALITIES OF WAR'

By Don Reiland

After the opening jolt of the jump, my attention was distracted by watching a C-47 engulfed in flames, yet seemingly flying level. Forgetting that I was carrying extra weight, I felt I was plunging too fast and looked up to see if my parachute had fully opened. We must have jumped below 500 feet, because just as I looked up I landed. In the terrifying confusion, some planes flew so low that there was not enough time for anyone's chute to open, and one plane was back over the English Channel when the paratroopers jumped.

I plunged into about four feet of water in a field flooded by the Germans. I was dragged backwards underwater by my chute. Parachutes often have an uncanny way of remaining full with air and dragging you without mercy. Every time I struggled to my feet, gagging and wobbly on the uneven bottom, the chute would jerk me under again. My rifle pushed up under my neck, and I could not reach down to the knife strapped to my boot.

Desperately, I reached into my collar pocket and pulled out my switchblade knife and frantically cut my harness to freedom. It was more than a week later when we were given fresh underwear that I saw my inner thighs caked with blood, a testimony to the numbing effect of fear. Apparently, I self-inflicted a wound barely an inch from a place I would rather not harm. Another paratrooper, facing the same dilemma, cut off a finger and didn't realize it until several hours later.



Courtesy: The National Archives.

All over Europe, U.S. soldiers had to show vigilance in ground fighting after D-Day.

It was devastating to hear the gurgling cries for help from drowning comrades as I slogged toward the nearest embankment but, sadly, it was my initiation into the brutal realities of war: objective first. Off on the far embankment a train was burning furiously, and later the troopers who set it ablaze told us they took off when they saw it was loaded with land mines. Later we learned the "land mines" were Norman cheese.

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LEARN WITH THE NEWS

Don Reiland's account of his landing on D-Day is full of action words and vivid detail. That makes readers feel a part of the events he describes. Newspaper writers in the news, sports, features and entertainment sections also try to take readers inside the action of events. Find an example in the paper. Circle all the words and details in the story that make the action come alive. Then write a sentence or two taking readers inside some action you have been part of.

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## 'TO CONFUSE AND DISRUPT THE ENEMY'

By Don Reiland

On a small road, I joined about 70 paratroopers who were from different companies, regiments and even divisions. We had been scattered all over the countryside and were trying to get organized.

We fully understood that our mission was to kill as many of the enemy as possible. Our commanders repeatedly reminded us that there were "No Limits!" and that "No One Is Counting!" If only a few of us encountered a much larger force, we were to quickly shoot as many as we could, take off into the thick hedgerows, regroup, and then hunt down some more of the enemy. There were dozens of incidents in which one, two or three paratroopers used this hit-and-run method, wiping out hundreds of Germans before dawn. The purpose of this bloody policy was to confuse and disrupt the enemy. There is ample evidence that it was highly successful.

While sporadic fighting went on all night, the Germans built up their superior forces at dawn and were determined to deny us our objectives. Adolf Hitler had ordered the Germans to "fight to the last blood!" and D-Day became very bloody.

It soon became clear the Allies' job was made more difficult by loss of much needed equipment. All radios had been lost, and our commanders had no contact with the assault forces. Depressingly, we had no way of knowing if the D-Day landings from the sea had succeeded.

Despite our desperate situation, the out-in-front leadership of the officers enabled us to hold on and prevent a disaster. General James Gavin observed in his book that at some of the locations of the most vicious battles that raged on D-Day it was difficult to walk without stepping on bodies. Gradually, I learned that I was not a gung-ho hero but, thankfully, was able to do my duty and carry out orders from my captain. I witnessed many extraordinary feats of courage by many paratroopers, but on the few occasions when my comrades said I acted without regard for myself, it was probably—like the majority—because I was ordered to do so.

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LEARN WITH THE NEWS

The paratroopers who landed on D-Day had to adapt quickly to changing events. They had to make fast decisions when situations changed and try new approaches. In today's world, soldiers, politicians, business leaders and others often have to change approaches when situations change. Find an example in the newspaper. Write a sentence describing how the situation changed or is changing. Write a second sentence describing a new approach that might be taken—and why.

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## 'THE RIDGE HAD TO BE TAKEN'

By Don Reiland

The Allies' success in getting ashore and holding a few square miles on D-Day still left them in the tenuous position of being bottled up on a narrow peninsula. It would take many weeks to get all the



Don Reiland (second from left) in late 1943.

men and tanks ashore to create General George Patton's Third Army that would break out and defeat the Germans all across France. Thus, the 82nd, along with other units, had to keep fighting to expand our hold on Normandy.

After over a month of vicious combat, without relief or replacements, the 82nd Airborne was exhausted and badly depleted, with losses from killed and wounded of about 65 percent. General Dwight Eisenhower, looking ahead to a determined stand by Germany at its borders, envisioned a crucial need for the Airborne. He thus ordered an immediate withdrawal of the Airborne, and a return to England for rebuilding of strength.

However, Patton's Third Army was now ashore, ready to break out of the confines of Normandy and push the enemy across France. Unfortunately, a commanding ridge was still held by the Germans, and the field commanders wanted it taken.

It was Hill 95, better known as La Poterie Ridge, and it comprised the largest and thickest woods we had seen in Normandy. The enemy was determined to hold on to their last major advantage.

The Allied army troops had already tried and failed.

My company, Company G, 507th Parachute Regiment, was hastily assigned to attack and secure the Eastern end of

the ridge. About 45 of us, the exhausted remains of the 164 who jumped on D-Day, gathered along a sunken dirt road leading to a farmer's barn at the edge of the woods. There was barely an hour of daylight left, and those of us who were familiar with a thick forest knew that it was already dark under the high trees. In total silence in the twilight, you could see the grim faces staring at the ominous woods. Fifty years later, all of my comrades would vividly remember everything that happened.

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LEARN WITH THE NEWS

After the Allied forces landed on D-Day, they still faced great challenges securing the area and pushing the enemy back. The U.S. military today faces similar challenges after waging wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Find a news story about activities of U.S. forces in one of these nations. Write a paragraph describing the biggest challenges faced by the military so far. Write a second describing what you think will be the biggest challenges to be faced in the future.

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## A BARRAGE 'UNLIKE ANY WE HAD EXPERIENCED'

By Don Reiland

As we arrived, the army troops were straggling out of the woods carrying their wounded, looking blank and beaten. Nary a word was exchanged. While we felt for them, their slow withdrawal meant we would have to attack in the dark. It also meant we had to stare at the woods for another 30 minutes or so.

All of us knew that, despite the odds against us, our beloved Captain Ben Schwartzwalder, the only officer left, would not falter in his duty. In return, we vowed we would not let him down.

The captain, suffering with a wounded hand that was later found to be seriously infected, had little to say in view of the dismal scene. It was obvious that the defeated, retreating troops were considerably larger in number than our tattered remnants.

Those of us who were familiar with a forest at night could readily visualize the perils of coordinating an attack. The only way we could stick together would be by loud vocal communication. From this, the enemy would know where we were, while we would have no idea of where they were. They would know exactly when to begin their artillery and mortar barrage.

By the same token, from our experience, we would then learn where they were. The intense German discipline did not allow for much variance, and we

would know the exact distance from the barrage area to where they were entrenched. Nevertheless, when the barrage began it was unlike any we had ever experienced.

Many of the shells exploded when they hit branches high up in the trees, and you could hear the fragments smashing through leaves and branches on the way down. Most of us responded instinctively to the barrage by flattening on the ground.

Unfortunately, during this barrage my comrade, Mario Parletta, suffered a massively shattered leg. After all his close brushes with death on D-Day, he was wounded less than 30 minutes from the end of our last battle.

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LEARN WITH THE NEWS

**At La Poterie Ridge, Allied forces overcame a great challenge by breaking down the problem and thinking through a solution. Their use of vocal communication put them in danger, but it also enabled them to locate the enemy. Problems often can be solved by breaking them down. In the newspaper, find a problem faced by government, business or sports leaders. In teams, break the problem down into at least three parts. Brainstorm an approach for each part. Then write a possible solution to the problem as a whole.**

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**'WE WERE  
A MERE  
10 YARDS  
APART'**

By Don Reiland

As we moved forward, the enemy let loose and revealed their location by their muzzle blasts. In the darkness they could not see us, thus losing their advantage. We would reveal our location when we opened up, but it would be too late for most of them.

A member of my company, whom we called the Wyoming sheepherder, just stood upright and sprayed their positions with his Thompson .45 sub-machine gun. He had always wanted one and finally got one when the previous owner was killed. I had my usual two extra clips in my hand and probably blasted over 25 rounds in a few seconds. We were a mere 10 yards apart, and we just couldn't miss.

Then the Germans tossed a concussion grenade, and the captain, myself and two others were knocked to the ground. I don't think any of us were unconscious, because as I got up the toe-to-toe firing was still ferocious. However, I could barely hear. The captain grabbed me and shouted to go down the hill and tell the group he had sent to circle behind the enemy to come



For months after D-Day, U.S. ground troops came under intense fire securing territory.

Courtesy: The National Archives.

back with the Browning Automatic, our only big weapon.

Mostly deaf and groggy, I staggered downhill, following a small stream, falling into the water several times. Finding the group, they told me they could see an open field and that the surviving enemy had retreated. We must be shooting at the dead and dying, I thought. The nightmarish battle was over and we had carried out our mission.

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LEARN WITH THE NEWS

When Don Reiland's company fought toe-to-toe with German forces, it required great courage by individual soldiers. In assignments around the world today, U.S. soldiers also must show courage in carrying out their duties. In the newspaper, find an example of a U.S. military operation taking place in the world. Write out three ways soldiers involved show courage. Then find a non-military example of someone showing courage and explain the significance of this kind of courage.

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## 'THE FIRST CIVILIZED THING...IN A MONTH'

By Don Reiland

When daylight mercifully arrived, thankful that no counter-attack had occurred, I got up from my foxhole and walked about. I counted 43 of our company left. Sitting on the edge of my foxhole, I cried uncontrollably. I think my tears were from exhaustion, or perhaps for the end of Company G, knowing that a counter-attack would surely wipe us out. Suddenly, I saw the captain standing before me.

Had he seen me crying? Or was he sad about the near-total destruction of his command? If he was, he disguised it perfectly. All he said was that for some unfathomable reason a real Red Cross truck was parked at the bottom of the hill and would I care to accompany him to take a look at what goodies we could enjoy. I thought, he never ceases to amaze me. In his own special way, he cares. I am convinced of that. But, he had to maintain the strong, calm poise of a commander.

This is his way of saying thanks, or maybe sorry I had to scream at you last night. He was a football coach at a small college and later would gain national attention and affection as the record-breaking coach of Syracuse University. You've seen coaches on the sideline, who grab a player by his shirt, pull him close to shout into his ear then, roughly shove him onto the field. Well, that was Captain Ben.

Of course, he knew from headquarters that the enemy had pulled way back, thus discounting any major counter-attack. Sure



Reiland recovering from D-Day injuries.

enough, there was the Red Cross truck managed by two of the most beautiful American women I had ever seen. One had silver in her hair but, to me, she was a movie star. Life still went on in the world, and I was exalted. This was the first civilized thing we had seen in over a month.

When the captain asked for cigars, he was told they were available only to enlisted men. I was gruffly grabbed and pulled to the side to rekindle my memory: "You smoke cigars!!" I got my captain a handful of cigars and his eyes sparkled. "Get that hand looked at," I said to him. "As a favor, please, sir." As he lighted up, he smiled.

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LEARN WITH THE NEWS

In war, and in life, people often experience great emotional stress. Find an example in the newspaper from coverage of U.S. military forces or from other news events. Write a list of emotions people might experience from the event. Then write a paragraph or two explaining ways the person could deal positively with the emotions experienced.

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## 'WE DESPERATELY SOUGHT LIFE'

By Don Reiland

The rest of the day was unusually quiet except for Germans coming by to surrender. They had been straggling in all day, totally confused by the 82nd's four-pronged attack.

Two 15-year-old German soldiers came through and we stopped them to talk. We had heard about Germany's bottom-of-the-barrel desperation in drafting teenagers. Like most German youth they could speak some English. However, when they learned we were paratroopers, one of them started to cry. They said they had been told that we did not take prisoners. I was amazed how gentle my comrades acted in trying to calm their fears.

It confirmed what I had been feeling all day concerning my comrades and myself: We were sick of killing and desperately sought life.

The next morning as we were having coffee and breakfast out of cans, some 300 new Allied soldiers swarmed all over the ridge. None of us could recall seeing that many soldiers since D-Day. They looked like they had just arrived from a parade, so clean and well-attired. I looked around at my comrades and was shocked. We looked like filthy bums! And probably smelled worse. They had lots of officers who were smartly arranging where everyone should dig in and place all their weapons. Such marvelous big weapons and boxes of ammunition.

It all looked so organized and West Pointy that we just stared in wonder. That



Don Reiland with a street sign thanking troops for liberation.

is, until a flurry of artillery shells whined overhead, and our newcomers madly dove for cover. We just sipped our coffee. Then one of us yelled: "That's outgoing men. They're ours!" As we started to leave one trooper said: "Do you think we should warn them about the poor Germans wandering by?" We did, and they thanked us, and we said goodbye and good luck. And that was the end of our war in Normandy.

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LEARN WITH THE NEWS

On May 29 in Washington, D.C., the nation said "thank you" to World War II veterans with the dedication of the National World War II Memorial. A newspaper can say "thank you" in many ways—from feature stories to editorials to photos to thank you ads. Study the different features in your daily newspaper. Then choose one and use it to create a thank you for World War II veterans. Show your thank yous to your family or friends and explain why you picked the approach you did to say "thank you."

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