



THE INVASION OF GERMANY

March 24, 1945

Several days prior, the 435th Troop Carrier group headed by Col. Frank J. MacNeas had been alerted on an Airborne Mission to carry in part of the 17th Airborne Division across the Rhine River near the town of Wessel, Germany. Before, the mission was postponed because of the taking of the Nimagan Bridge.

I'm in the 75th Troop Carrier Squadron headed by Col. Lewis A. Curtis. Col. Curtis notified Major Gordon who notified our glider commander who notified Lt. Connally, our squadron glider commander, that all glider and C-47 pilots were to meet in the briefing room on the Air Field about one mile from the chateau where were staying. In the briefing room, Col. MacNeas presided and gave us instructions on the LZ near Wessel. We were to be in one of several groups taking in a part of the 17th Airborne Division. John R. Jackson would be flying in the other glider beside me. Each glider was to take in five men and a jeep, part of a glider troop landing team fifteen miles behind German lines across the Rhine River. On this mission we had two gliders towed behind each C-47 plane. This was something new; never before tried in combat but used in training missions. This mission was to be pulled on the morning of March 24th.

Someone woke us up at 3 A.M. and told us to get ready and go to breakfast in a field kitchen in a French farmyard just off the air field. We had breakfast, and as I was about to go out to the flight line, I heard a shot fired, and someone ran to tell me my co-pilot just shot himself. I tried to find Lt. Connally and Maj. Gordon to tell them I didn't have a co-pilot, but as I was looking for them, my co-pilot walked up.

"I thought you were shot!" I told him.

"No," he answered, "that wasn't me. It was the fellow with me."

I breathed a sigh of relief, remembering the Holland mission when I had to fly without a co-pilot.

We were now on the flight line. We were about number 12 or 13. The first planes moved out and the lead glider on the right, having a shorter towrope than the left one, started pulling off. After our glider was in the air, we circled the field until the others were airborne.

This was one of the prize squadrons in the European Theatre of Operation. The 75th had done most of the training in ironing out all the bugs. It was the squadron that got the nickname "G stands for Guts."

We joined other groups until the skies were nearly full of aircraft. We were going to fly from just outside Paris to the German border just beyond the Rhine. While in the air, several gliders had to cut loose because their loads shifted. Montgomery, the British Commander in whose area we were to spearhead this mission, had put down a smokescreen where we were to land.

Approaching the Rhine, we began smelling the odor of burnt gunpowder. As Col. MacNeas' plane, which was always in the lead, crossed the Rhine, he began to pick up anti-aircraft fire. The lead plane in every formation is usually the target for enemy gunners, and in a bomber outfit, this is usually flown by a General. Several planes were already across. The plane towing us was midway through the squadron. We had just crossed the Rhine when two shells hit my towplane in the tail, and pieces flew out from underneath it.

I thought at first that the whole rudder and elevator had been knocked off. It reminded me of shooting quail back home and seeing the feathers fly out of the tail. He immediately started a dive, but then he got control, and I could see he was working what was left of his elevators and rudder. I didn't know it at the time, but the shell had cut his tow release cable which enabled him to release the towrope from the plane if I didn't or couldn't release it from the glider. This meant he couldn't release his end of the towrope. After working his controls, he climbed back into formation.

We began picking up anti-aircraft fire from every direction; they looked like candles burning from a giant birthday cake. Germans were in bunkers and trenches firing at us. It seems to me that, though several planes and gliders were shot down, if they had concentrated their fire on one plane or glider, they would have downed more.

As we approached the LZ, I saw the first gliders were cutting loose. Soon my time came to cut loose. As long as I was flying away from the sun, I could see the ground real well and could see a nice field to land in, but as I turned around, the haze against the sunlight blocked my view. Then a .88 mm anti-aircraft shell burst right in front of me. I immediately dived and cut in sharp to get out of the range pattern where I knew shells were cut to explode. The air was full of gliders. I saw a glider going in. He hit the ground, slid a short distance, and stood straight up on his nose. I saw another which was going in too fast. He hit the ground and went right into the trees. Other fields began filling up with gliders crashing into power lines, trees, and houses. The pilots that lost theirs were in the worst crashes. It reminded me of having to go into a hornets' nest, but I knew I had to grit my teeth and go on in.

I was circling at about 500 feet trying to find a place to land. I saw a high tension line and a field next to a canal which looked like a good place to land. (There were approximately 600 gliders to land in this small area, and about 3000 to 4000 Germans shooting at us while we were coming in. I still couldn't see the ground because of the haze. I was making my approach and would just have to take a chance on hitting the field beside the canal.

When I was finally able to see the ground, I saw I'd made my turn too quick. There was only one other place to land--a lane leading to a barnyard lot. I was going to have to either get in the lane or the lot. The Germans were really pouring it to us; they must have lined up and down each side of the lane. I just knew I couldn't land in either place, so I told the troops, "Get ready to crash. We're going to the woods!" But one boy in the back kept saying, "You're gonna make it! You're gonna make it!"

I thought, "Well, if he thinks I can get in this lot, maybe I'll try it." The barbed wire fence was coming up fast now. The barnyard lot was about two or three hundred feet across. The barn was coming up fast; I was going too fast! I had to slow it down a little. I got it slowed to about 60 mph, and that was about as much as I could slow it carrying 5 men and a jeep. The boy in the back was still hollaring, "You're gonna make it."

I tried to dive over the barbed wire fence and almost made it except that my back wheel caught the top strand. This slowed us considerably. I had to throw it on the nose to try to stop the glider before it got to the canal and patch of woods at the end of the lot.

Finally it did stop about 10 feet from the canal. There was just enough room to unload the jeep and make the turn away from the canal.



I yelled back, "Everybody get out and get under cover."

We were getting alot of small arm fire and machine gun fire coming from behind us from a farm house. We were just inside the lot where the cattle were kept and the barn was to our right.

We all got out of the glider, and everyone headed for the small canal in front of the glider. It was more of a wide ditch than a canal. It had just a small trickle of water running through it. It was early spring, and when I jumped in beside where two bullfrogs were mating, I thought, "Frogs, you'll have to move over and let me in with you."

More gliders were still coming in. One was going way too fast. He came right over us just above the treetops and went all the way across the other lane where there was a large patch of trees. The last I saw of him was when he pulled up and headed for the lower lane. I heard a loud crash, and I know he must have torn the glider all to pieces.

The biggest danger on one of these raids is from gliders crashing into each other, both in the air and on the ground. There was a short pause, and then another group of gliders began coming in. There was about a one or two minute delay between each group. The biggest part of the 17th Airborne Division was supposed to get on the ground in less than 30 minutes.

We decided that while this next group of gliders were coming in would be the best time to unload the jeep since the Germans would be busy trying to shoot at the gliders in the air rather than concentrating on those already on the ground.

So, we went out to unload the jeep. We got the "2 by 4's" on the sides of the glider and took them around to the tail. We raised up the tail and used the "2by 4's" to prop it up in the air. By doing this, the nose dipped down to the ground. Then we raised the nose compartment and drove out the jeep. We really had to do it in a hurry because we knew that as soon as the C-47's had turned and started back, the Germans would begin firing at us again.

The whole nose compartment where the pilot and co-pilot sits is connected by a latch and a hinge, so that it could be raised to drive out a jeep. The jeep had a cable hooked to a winch in the back of the glider which raised the nose as the jeep was driven forward.

We got the jeep out and got everybody's equipment loaded on it. We decided to try to make a run for it to get away. We could see that by going around through the farm lot, we could get on the farmer's drive and from there go on out to the highway. The highway was just a small two lane paved road that went back toward the canal.

We made it allright through the lot, but when we got on the main road, we began picking up alot of machine gun sniper fire, though none of it was very close. The biggest concentration of Germans seemed to be in the lane we had approached with the glider. The bridge over the canal was arched and as we crossed it, I could see several gliders in the field beside the canal (the field we had planned to land in). One had a big hole in its nose, apparently made by a shell that hit it after it was on the ground. A lot of the gliders came in right at this trench, some of them bumping across. This place was really honey-combed with trenches and foxholes. The Germans must have had this area set up for a long time. We were about 15 miles from the Rhine River, and I guess this was their second front from the Rhine. We didn't actually see many Germans; they were all either in foxholes or up in trees as snipers. From the road we couldn't see any, though from the air we could see them everywhere.

We headed for our rendezvous point, a patch of trees about $\frac{1}{2}$ -mile from our landing site. We ran into a group of glider troops who directed us as to where this patch of trees was. It was a large grove of hardwood trees just beyond a farmhouse. The jeep belonged to the 17th Airborne troops, and when we got to our rendezvous, we had to get out and let them have it.

There was a glider there that stood up when it landed and it was still standing. The tail was sticking straight up out of the trees. The field there was covered with gliders, but I was surprised that none were piled up on top of each other like those I saw in Normandy and Holland. However, there were several gliders and C-47's burning.

All the glider pilots from the 435th Troop Carrier Group were supposed to meet at this rendezvous and form an infantry team of our own. As I got out of the jeep, I saw a German halftrack sitting at the side of the road, but it was not manned. As I walked out through a field, I saw two dead Americans lying in the middle. These were the first I'd seen here since landing. We were lucky we weren't all killed the way we were shot coming in.

My co-pilot, who was also a power pilot, walked out a little ahead of me on the road. I told him he'd better not since this was where we were supposed to stop. Then I spotted a good friend of mine, Lloyd P. Bennett, from Manchester, N.Y. sitting on the side of the road. I always ran into him at some of the most awful places; one time in London, one time in Paris, Louisville, and Lone Oak, Arkansas. He'd really been a good friend of mine but we'd been in different outfits ever since we left glider school.

We were then at the rendezvous point. Another group of gliders were coming in and they were cutting loose right over our heads. There were already about 25 or 30 captured Germans at the rendezvous point, and I found out that they were going to use the field beside this patch of woods as a PW assembly area.

My co-pilot just ran in and he was as white as a sheet. He said he had been walking down the road when he turned and saw a German tank coming right for him. He was almost hit by the machine gun fire. The tank rode on down the road, and as it went past a building, a soldier with a bazooka set the tank on fire. Only one of the three Germans got out of the tank, but he was on fire, and he ran only a short distance before he fell where he burned completely up. My co-pilot said he was going to stay with me from then on.

More gliders kept coming in. I heard of one glider which, while landing, was hit in the nose with a shell, killing the pilot and several others in the glider. I also heard of a pilot from the 75th who had just landed and just got out of the glider when a bullet hit him right between the eyes.

I could see a whole formation of B-24 bombers coming in to drop supplies. But when they made their pass overhead, they were too low to give the parachutes time to open. One fellow was caught with a load and was pulled out of the plane. I don't know if he had a parachute one, but one didn't open and he was killed when he hit.

More German prisoners were being brought in. These prisoners were about as scared as we were trying to dodge the gliders as they came in. That was one of the great dangers with the use of gliders---those on the ground had to make sure they didn't get hit by other gliders coming in. At least this was a daylight landing, and the pilots had some idea where they were going.

Major Gordon gathered in his group of glider pilots and gave us instructions as to what our mission was. We were to assemble and move



out to take an area about $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ miles from where we were in the direction of Wessels. We had been sitting around in German foxholes for a long time. All glider pilots assembled into an infantry team of our own. We soon moved out. Major Gordon, who used to be our squadron commander, was now our group commander. He had always been a real good friend of mine; we used to fly alot together when we were test pilots for these gliders.

We had just moved into an area where there were alot of houses. We were going in the direction where the tank that had been knocked out by the bazooka was. It was still burning. We hadn't had any opposition yet, but there were alot of people in these houses, and since we didn't know if they were civilians or soldiers in them, we had to go house by house cleaning them out. Several of us went into a house where the people were about as friendly as could be expected. I asked one if they had any soldiers in the house, and he motioned no. Still I had to search the house anyway. I started to go down into the basement, but he stopped me. He yelled something into the basement, and a boy about 17 or 18 came out from hiding. I motioned for him to come upstairs. The german tried to tell me that this was his son, but the boy had on some type of uniform. I could tell he was scared to death, and since the boy didn't have a rifle, I saw no need to take him in. They wanted me to eat with them, but I had to refuse under the circumstances. I told them to stay inside, and if they did not give us any opposition, we would not bother them. I went back out and saw two or three German soldiers on the next street. When I yelled at them they started running in the opposite direction. I threw up my gun and was ready to shoot when they stopped, turned around, and threw up their hands. I motioned for them to come back over, and I turned them over to the glider troopers that were there.

Several other houses were searched, but no more soldiers were found. We were told to dig in. The house we used as our command post was an ordinary German farmhouse at the edge of Wessels. It seemed that everyone had dug in at the back of the house. There were alot of German foxholes already dug, but it looked like I was going to have to dig one. Then I spied a sugar beet pit; it was a little big for a foxhole, but it had plenty of room to sleep in.

Everyone was pretty well dug in and had their place set up for the night even though it was only 4 P.M. There was a building down the street full of bicycles, so a few of us decided to go down and get one. I got a bicycle, but it didn't have coaster brakes. Then someone came along who had two bikes and could use only one. The other was a woman's bike, but had coaster brakes so I took it. I'm glad now I did. The woman's bike was easier to get on with a loaded pack.

Major Gordon wanted me to help with the forward command post that night, so I packed my gear and went. There was a field beyond the command post which was full of gliders and honeycombed with foxholes and had several swatooth trenches running through it. If there had been any Germans in the foxholes, its no wonder they couldn't shoot straight; they were constantly having to dodge gliders. The field was like the one I landed in in Holland--half turned and half solid. The gliders that landed in the plowed field, though, didn't smash up like they did in Holland since here the soil wasn't as sandy.

By this time the area was pretty well cleaned out. There was a house full of prisoners nearby, and one boy who had a hand grenade in his poscket fooled around and let the pin slip out. It went off and nearly blew him in half. The last I heard was that he was still

living, but he couldn't live for long--half his intestines were blown out. That's one of the things that happen around the front lines.

The 75th was dug in to our right in front of the command post, the 77th was directly in front of the command post, and the 76th and 78th were dug in far to the right of the 77th.

We were still getting alot of prisoners which were sent back to the PW assembly area. 1500 prisoners were already captured. The 17th Airborne Division controlled this two mile square area. We would go in, take a few square miles, set up defenses all around, and try to hold it until help came from across the Rhine River. I understood that the British had already crossed the Rhine and were headed this direction, though we didn't know when we'd get a breakthrough. One thing about these missions though was that there was always alot of excitement going on--we never got bored.

When 7:00 came, we still hadn't got any major counter-attacks and it looked like we were going to have a pretty quiet night. Some more prisoners were being brought in. Our interrogator was a real son-of-a-gun. I had to take a prisoner away from him when he said he wanted to take the prisoner for a walk (to shoot him). I told him he wasn't going to shoot any prisoners while I was around.

It was about 8:30 and we could hear bed-check Charlie overhead. (This was the name for the German planes which dominated the sky during the night.) They sounded like a tractor racing its motor.

One drunk prisoner was brought in. He had been captured on the road, and like every other drunk, he was wanting to love everybody; he wasn't wanting to fight. When he talked to the interrogator, he said he'd been in Wessels but wouldn't tell what outfit he was in, and the interrogator wanted to take him for a walk. He only shook him up a little though. Then the drunk came over to me and wanted to love me. I went along with him for a little while. He was taken in another room and finally quieted down.

At about 9:00 everything still seemed to be going pretty smooth. The moon had a pretty big halo around it, but except for that it was not too cloudy. We were right close to a high tension line. Several of the lines were broken into where the gliders had hit them as they came in. One time bed-check Charlie made a low swoop and hit the power line again. He headed for the ground and I heard a hell of a crash, though only a cloud of dust could be seen. I told Major Gordon I thought I'd go out and check to see what had happened. He said OK. A 17th Airborne major said he'd go along with me. I just took my rifle and one phosphorous grenade--I didn't think I'd need my rifle belt.

It was about 200 yards to where the plane landed. I had almost gotten to the plane (the major was lagging behind me) when I heard the major fire some shots. I turned and saw that he was firing at an American paratrooper who was coming across the field. Then the paratrooper began to fire on us with a sub-machine gun. I kept yelling for him to cease fire; he was really spraying us with bullets. He finally stopped.

The plane had hit a glider and had gone under it. I still could not make out what the plane was. I asked if they were British. He answered, "No, I'm a German pilot. Come get my gun; the war's finished for me." I started over toward him. I heard someone yelling on the other side of the plane and I asked the German pilot what was wrong. He said one of his buddies was thrown out. I saw two over there; one looked like he was broken up, but the other wasn't saying anything; I believe he was dead.

I believe they must have stolen this plane and made a false landing here to give up. I tried to get him out of the plane, but he kept holding out his hands saying, "Take my gun." I tried to reach his gun but with a two seating cockpit, I couldn't quite reach it. I told him to go on and get out and then I would get his gun, but he kept saying "Take my gun." I finally got him to stand up enough in the cockpit for me to get his gun. I guess he thought I was going to shoot him.

Several others had walked up in the meantime. I didn't know who they were, but I didn't think any were glider pilots--mostly paratroopers. I finally got the German captain out and told one of the others to go back to the forward Command post to send for an ambulance or jeep to take him back. I motioned for the other fellow in the cockpit to get out, but he kept pointing down at his leg. So, I went around to the other side, got a flashlight, and could see that part of a broken propeller had wedged his leg under the seat. I had just about freed his leg when it looked like all hell broke loose. A couple of artillery shells came overhead and exploded. I looked back and all I could see was machine gun tracer bullets and artillery pieces going off. It looked like we were really in a battle now. I told one of the airborne troops to look after the prisoners while I went back to the forward command post to get my ammunition. I could see shells going into the command post and tracer bullets bouncing off the brick walls surrounding it. It looked like a roman candle. It appeared that the Germans were right on top of where the 77th was dug in--so close it looked as though they would be having hand to hand combat. The Germans had two 20mm self-propelled guns and had 88mm's on their tanks. There must have been several hundred Germans compared to about 30 in each squadron of ours.

The only way I saw I could get back across the open field between me and the forward command post was by getting down in the furrow a farmer had plowed. I crawled the furrow until I ran into a trench which ran in the direction of the post. When I arrived there, no one was around. I couldn't find my ammunition belt, but got someone else's that would fit my rifle. Since I saw that the command post wasn't manned, I decided to stay close by to call the troops back by phone if I had seen the Germans were going to overrun them. I saw several Americans in a trench a few yards from the post, so I asked them what was going on. They said that this was a German counter-attack. He thought that alot of the troops in the 77th had been killed. They were glad to know that I had a phosphorous grenade launcher on my rifle since all they had against the tanks were machine guns. These few had fallen back. The other machine gun crew had been knocked out.

Behind us was a house with German civilians in it. A shell had started a small fire in one of the upper rooms and just a bucketful of water could have put it out. But it kept getting bigger and bigger. They were yelling but wouldn't come out. I guess they thought we were the ones that had set it and were going to shoot them. Later they stopped. I guess someone must have given permission for them to come out.

I could hear the tanks moving around in the background. The troops with me told me to get in position for a counter-attack, but not to shoot the tank until it got right on us. "Wait until you can see its tracks and then shoot for the tracks." I heard someone around the forward command post so I thought I'd go investigate. I sure had hoped nothing had happened to Major Gordon and the others who had been there. However, the airborne troops I was with wanted me to stay around to make sure they had a grenade launcher to knock out any tank that came.

(The Germans never did come back for another counter-attack. We got word later that none were killed in the 77th and there were only two casualties among the glider pilots. One had gotten wounded in the eye,

and a 17th Airborne Glider trooper had set up a machine gun in a road without protection and had gotten hit but not too seriously.

I went back to the forward command post and Major Gordon and the others were already there. Major Gordon said that after the forward command post started being shot up, he went back to the main command post to get reinforcements. He said he didn't see how anybody could have lived through that battle and he congratulated me for staying with the forward command post while he was gone.

Daylight finally came and we could see the battle area in front. Some had just come back and they said there were soldiers everywhere lying on the ground. One German medic had stayed with the wounded all night through the thick of the battle and someone said he should get German equivalent to the Congressional Medal of Honor. I asked Major Gordon to give me some prisoners to go up and start burying the dead. There was only one at first, but I latched onto every new one that came along and pretty soon we had a pretty good burial detail. I went up to a farmer who had some slit poles and drew in the ground that I wanted him to make me some crosses. He made some real nice rustic crosses and on each one I hung the dog tags of the dead soldier.

The German people were really cooperative. I guess they were as glad to be liberated as the people in other countries. I think the German civilians had it worse off than the people in the other conquered countries. One German farmer came to me to ask for a permit to kill a hog. I said, "If you want to kill your hog, go ahead and kill it. You don't need a permit." That seemed to tickle him to death. I guess before, he'd had to have a permit to do about anything on the farm.

I got about two or three hours of sleep during the day until Major Gordon woke me and told me we'd have to move out. We started moving out late in the afternoon. We loaded our gear on bicycles and we were more of a bicycle brigade than a marching brigade.

This was the second battle that the Air Force won on the ground. I later had that confirmed. The first was in Holland and the same ones that participated in this battle took part in the other one too.

They brought the prisoners by in a line as far as you could see from one end to the other. Thousands of prisoners marched out that way. Well, we were going down the road on bicycles and I saw two men standing on the side of the road ahead (I didn't know who they were). We were stopped, told to march, and look the best we could. It turned out that it was Eisenhower and Churchill who had come to the front lines to congratulate us for winning the battle.

When we got to the Rhine River, we crossed it on a temporary pontoon bridge, and got in a German town on the opposite side of the River that was torn all to pieces. Just as we had gotten across the river, a German plane started circling overhead, and I know there must have been 200 searchlights put on him and every gun in the area firing at him.

We spent the night there and went to a British bivwak area where we were fed real well.

I got on a plane the next day and was one of the first ones to get back to our base in Paris.

