

*We stand on the backs of their sacrifice. Their history is our tradition, as long as there are Americans to remember...*

My name is Marvin Hubert Allen. My friends call me Hubert, and I prefer to be called that. I grew up at Boyce but moved to Waxahachie after the 9<sup>th</sup> grade where I played football for the Indians.

After our country got into the war, I volunteered to be a paratrooper. We trained at Camp Toccoa, which was located in northern Georgia. Our days were filled with physical training, "PT" they call it.

At night we went on forced marches, and then there was the obstacle course that must have been laid out by some very sadistic officer. As our C.O. explained it to us, "My purpose here is to acquaint you with a well of energy which you have never tapped before in your life."

I was in the 507<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, and there was this mountain there called Currahee. It was the most prominent landmark on the base, and we ran it up and down, three miles up, three miles down. Our regiment trained so hard that the mountain run became relatively easy for us.

We went to jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia, learning the Army way to jump from a perfectly good airplane. I really enjoyed the jumping for the most part. There was much time spent on the 34-foot tower. It was fun in the daylight but a little intimidating up there at night.

I had to learn how to pack my own parachute and learn all the correct terminology. There were risers, static lines, suspension lines and other things. Using the wrong terms would get you ten pushups for every instructor within earshot. If you couldn't learn to talk the talk, your pushup muscle would build up real fast.

Later we moved to an Army air base at Alliance, Nebraska and became part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Brigade. We trained there for another six months, taking many flights over the countryside in those C-47 transport planes. Nice country here in western Nebraska, lots of ranches and farmland. Folks around here sure know how to bring in a good crop.

That summer our regiment made a practice jump and mock-attacked the Municipal Airport at Denver, with thousands of civilians looking on. That was an interesting experience, kind of fun actually.

In September of '43 we bivouacked on a lake at the Custer State Park in the Black Hills of South Dakota. It was really nice there, although a little cold. I could see myself coming back to this place some day, without a doubt. This was to be our last fling before we were going to be deployed overseas.

I sat there under the starry skies of South Dakota and thought about a lot of things. I have just been through months of intense training, and among other things I was now skilled in the ways of killing my fellow man. I wondered about what it would really be like to be in actual combat, man-to-man combat. Not sure how I would really feel about pulling the trigger on someone when the time came. Right now I sure feel a long way from home.

That November we boarded a train and headed for Camp Shanks near Orangeburg, New York. All the guys that came through this place called it "Last Stop U.S.A." After a few days at Shanks we marched four miles to Piermont Pier. Everyone was in good spirits; there was a lot of chatter in the ranks. I guess every group has its bigmouths, we sure did. We loaded onto a ferry headed for the port of New York. We were on our way now, and this whole business was getting very real.

We boarded a passenger liner at the port of New York and steamed out into the Atlantic past the Statue of Liberty. That was really quite a moment for us all. It was some sight, as I had had never seen such a thing before. It was December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1943.

On the North Atlantic crossing there was a lot of talk of the possibility of U-boats. Lots of the fellows kept busy by losing their money with card games, but I liked going topside and watching the sunsets. Several days later we arrived at Liverpool, and I for one was glad to be back on solid ground.

We took a train north to Greenock, Scotland. Beautiful country here, a little strange in a way, looks nothing at all like back home. Didn't get settled down good before we took another boat ride on the liberty ship 'SS Suzan B. Anthony' across to Belfast, Ireland. And from there another train ride to Portrush in central Ireland. I took in as much of the scenery as possible. If

not for being in the Army, this would really be a trip to really brag about back home.

In January of '44 our regiment was made part of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. For many weeks we continued our training with a lot of night field maneuvers and night compass courses. There was more weapons training, judo, wrestling and hand-to-hand fighting. The weather was just rotten here. I don't see how these people can make a good crop around these parts.

In April we moved back to England, this time to Nottingham. We spent a lot of time cleaning our guns and sharpening knives. You could tell that the invasion wasn't too far away. Things were getting awful serious around here now. They asked us all to make out a will and be sure to take out a life insurance policy for our folks, just in case. I had never thought much about dying up until that moment. I wasn't old enough to think of such a thing.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of May our regiment was moved by bus to airfields in central England. This was all done very secretly as they wanted nobody to notice. I suppose this thing is about to happen any day now. Everybody is getting pretty keyed up; some of the loudmouth fellows aren't talking so much now.

June the 4<sup>th</sup>, the order came down. Tonight, we go! Everyone spread out all their gear and carefully repacked. Some of the fellows were sporting a new Mohawk haircut. With all our face paint on, I must admit, we were a fierce looking bunch.

I may have looked tough, but inside my stomach was all tied in knots. That afternoon they called us all together. I figured this was going to be a pep talk, but no, we were to stand down. The drop was cancelled due to bad weather over the channel. Man, what a letdown! I've never felt wound up as tight as this.

It was a long night. I didn't get much sleep, as I was going over everything again and again in my mind. I wish we had gone ahead with this invasion already.

The next morning there was a fine breakfast laid out for us and we were given a letter from General Eisenhower. He wished us luck and said, "The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you..."

We were on for tonight; I am fairly certain of that. Slowly and silently we all got geared up and tried to get our minds right. We were in Chalk #53, assigned to Headquarters Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 507<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment. I was going to be jumper number 9.

Later that afternoon we headed over to the airfield, marching along in single file with all our heavy gear, face paint and all. The mood was somber and quiet, no talking much at all.

Up ahead there were some anti-aircraft gun emplacements off to one side. The British soldiers manning those guns were just standing up and watching in silence as the troopers walked by. Just as I got up to them, one of the Brits put out his hand to me. We shook hands. He looked me square in the eye and after a pause he said, "Good Luck Yank!"

*(To be continued)*

## **Part Two**

*We stand on the backs of their sacrifice. Their history is our tradition, as long as there are Americans to remember...*

As we approached our green C-47 Dakota transport planes you could smell the unmistakable odor of fresh paint. There were new black and white invasion stripes painted on the wings. Word is that these new stripes would keep our own ships from shooting at us over the channel. Very reassuring.

The sun was going down as our Lieutenant gathered us around and gave a last-minute speech on what all he expected of us and what we meant to him. He had never talked to us in that way before. Then there were handshakes all around our group and we started climbing aboard our planes.

We were so heavy, what with all our gear, that each man was helped up the ladder by those behind him. I reckon that I must have weighed almost 300 pounds with my weapon and all my other gear.

Our stick was also taking an 81mm mortar and over 1200 pounds of ammo for it. Those bundles would go out on six parachutes, colored blue.

It seemed like an extra long time that it took our plane to taxi into position at the end of the runway, there were so many planes. Once in position our pilot revved up both engines to max power with the brakes applied. It was really loud and the plane shook terribly until he released the brakes and then we were off and rolling.

Once we finally got airborne, I looked out the window and was amazed at what I saw. I didn't realize we had so many planes. This is what we have trained for these many months and now we're finally going! This was really going to be a day to remember.

Our mission was to jump into Normandy behind the German lines and capture the bridges and crossroads along the Merderet River. Our job was to keep the German armor from getting to our fellows on the beach. Without much of a stretch, you could say that everything was pretty much riding on us.

The flight across the English Channel was fairly quiet. Some of the fellows were nervous and fidgety, some prayed, one guy was sound asleep. Some asked for gum, while others looked for rosary beads. I was doing a lot of thinking and remembering, that's all, just remembering.

You could look down through the darkness and just make out that there were hundreds of ships below us, headed in the same direction. Man, oh man, what a sight!

After what seemed like forever, the co-pilot called back and said we were passing over the coastline. Very shortly you could see flashes of light up ahead inside the cloudbank, and right away we started to hear them. It was German anti-aircraft fire, and we were headed right into it!

As we got near to our drop-zones, the fire got more and more intense. The pilot gunned the engines and tried to maneuver through all the clouds and white bursts of flak all around us. When the red light came on, our Lieutenant called out, "Stand Up! - Hook Up! - Equipment Check!"

There was a lot of flak exploding all around us, and loud! I hadn't expected it to be this bad. We could see some of our planes getting hit, some were on fire, and others were going down. You could hear bullets hitting the wings. There was a lot of excitement and yelling. We just wanted out of that plane!

The green light came on, and very quickly, we were out the door! When the chute popped open, many of us lost equipment and weapons. The machine gunfire and tracers were streaming up at us from the ground below.

I watched as several of our planes smashed into a fireball on the ground while I hung above them in the air. It really looked like a sea of tracers headed straight up at the bottom of my feet! What have I gotten myself into? It looks as if every German in France is shooting at me!

Finally, I hit the ground and rolled over hard, face down in the wet grass. It was cold, damp and 0232 in the morning. I was all alone in the dark. There was swamp water all around me. You could hear voices shouting in German off in the distance.

I had an immediate sinking feeling that we had been dropped in the wrong place. I looked around and surveyed the situation. This did not appear to be our intended drop zone. There were enemy all around me and sounds of gunfire in every direction.

Using my metal cricket, eventually I located some Americans, not all from my unit, but they were Americans, that's all that mattered. We were all separated and spread out.

It was apparent that we had missed our drop zone badly, but we were determined to improvise, adapt and overcome. We got out a map, a compass and a flashlight. Underneath a poncho, we tried to figure out where we were.

At first light, we could see that many of our guys landed in flooded marshes, some had drowned in five or six feet of water, loaded down by all their heavy gear. What a mess, this has all gone wrong so far!

In the early morning light, we saw the steeple of an old church in the distance and we instinctively moved toward it. By 10 in the morning about twenty-five of us had gathered with Captain Leroy Brummitt on the edge the small town, Graignes (GREN-yay). By noon, Major Charles Johnston and more soldiers of the 507<sup>th</sup> arrived.

There was a conference of the officers and it was decided that we were so far away from our objective that we would stay in place and defend this town.

Graignes was the confluence of the few roads that ran through these swamps and it was a main route for the Germans to get into Carentan, France and on to the invasion beaches.

We set up outposts guarding each road, machine-gun positions and mortar pits were dug. Forward observers were placed in the church tower. Over the rest of the day, small groups of soldiers emerged from the swamps and joined us, some of them from 101st. By nightfall on June 6, there were 182 soldiers including 12 officers defending the perimeter of the town. Graignes had become an Alamo-like position.

Early on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup>, our C.O. met with the mayor and two priests and asked for the support of the village in retrieving supply bundles from the swamps. He also asked permission, although a bit tardy, to use the church and boys school as his headquarters and medical aid station.

Mayor Alphonse Voydie agreed, but said that the townspeople must vote on it because of the potential recapture of the town by the Germans. Virtually the entire population quickly assembled into the church. The mayor described the situation and there was a show of hands. It was unanimously agreed to, although they all knew the consequences for helping us invaders from America.

For the next three days we improved our defensive positions. The women and girls cooked food and brought it to us. The men and boys deployed throughout the area collecting our bundles in the swamps. They brought in medical supplies, food, ammo, commo wire, telephones and weapons. But no radios. We had hope for relief from the 101<sup>st</sup> in Carentan, but we had no contact with anyone outside of town.

On Saturday June 10, things changed. At midmorning our observer in the church steeple saw a German mechanized patrol approaching. Our outpost let them get close and then opened up on them, killing several. Papers were found on the bodies that showed they were a recon element of the 17<sup>th</sup> SS Panzergrenadier Division.

At 2300 hours, the Germans began probing attacks from several different directions. This is getting really serious now. It was dark and we were fighting for our lives against untold numbers.

During a lull on Sunday morning, the townspeople and many Catholic U.S. soldiers entered the church for Sunday Mass. Midway through the service, the Germans attacked. Mortar and artillery fire began landing in the town. Bullets were ricocheting off the stone buildings and the slate roofs.

We spotted a battery of 88mm antitank guns setting up in a distant field. At the same time, the enemy infantry attacked several points around the village. The fighting raged on all afternoon and the villagers helped to move our wounded into the church. The two village priests assisted our medics and our battalion surgeon.

The narrow roads and limited dry ground forced the Germans to attack on restricted terrain. The combat was savage, and we used every tool, weapon and advantage that we could muster. Dozens of German bodies littered the roads on the approaches into town. We were determined to exact a heavy price from them, even though our supply of ammo was now getting low.

As night fell, we could hear the unmistakable sound of armored vehicles approaching. German artillery began laying down a heavy barrage. The church steeple was hit several times killing our observer and Major Johnston.

The final assault came in regimental force. One by one, each roadblock disintegrated under heavy fire and the overwhelming numbers of enemy. The fighting became fluid as we displaced and fell back.

It was a Sunday, June 11, 1944, and I was 21 years old.

Remember us. We were soldiers once, and young.

*\* As the town fell to the enemy, Capt. Brummitt ordered the remaining American defenders to pair off and to try to make it to Carentan. The German SS took the American wounded, the American medics, the American doctor and the two priests to the edge of the swamps and executed them. Forty-four townspeople were interrogated and executed, and the town was then burned. Because of the American's resistance at Graignes, the German armor did not reach Carentan, France before it was secured by the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. The Battle of Graignes is now referred to as the Alamo of Normandy. Corporal Marvin Hubert Allen now rests in honor at the Hillcrest Burial Park just west of Waxahachie.*



