

## Call on "Poopville"



EXCEPT THAT it is one of World War II's more perfect illustrations of how unevenly fate distributes her favors to men in combat, the little fight at Pouppeville which won the southernmost exit from Utah Beach could be handled as a footnote.

This is not to say that it was ill-conducted. To the contrary, it was managed to the hilt, for never before or after did so many brilliant military brains collaborate in the staging of one small skirmish. And in the end, as the old song goes, "there was glory enough in that for boys with a little red drum."

But uniquely among the forces in the night drop, the band of sky soldiers who took Pouppeville operated virtually as if they had happened into a vacuum and were privileged to stage a little show of their own, with minimum interference from the enemy while in isolation from their friends. There is no explaining it; the gods, whose seeing mind is not as ours, simply ordained them a beautiful solitude.

By the hour of their adventure against fire, the Germans were fully alerted. The doubts which assailed them in the critical hours when the first-arriving parachutes bloomed overhead — doubts intensified by the faulty work of the carrier pilots who misdropped their passengers — are indelibly reflected in the war diary of the German Seventh Army High Command.

The earliest entry — 0130 on 6 June — notes that "parachutes have dropped since 0105 hours in the area east and northwest of

Caen, St. Marcove and Montebourg, both sides of the Vire and on the east coast of Cotentin." At 0200, there is this entry: "Heavy fighting reported at Le Ham." Several of these points were far outside the limits of the airhead. The command was misled by the desperate action of little groups of paratroopers cast too deep into enemy country. So it marked time on the pivot for several hours, waiting to get a more accurate reading of the danger.

By 0240, the debate was still going. The acting Commanding General of Group West contended, "We are not confronted by a major action." His Chief of Staff replied, "It can be nothing less than that in view of the depth of the penetration of the 84th Army Corps area." Then at 0400, the commander of LXXXIV Corps called the Chief of Staff, Seventh Army, to report his conclusion: "The general plan seems to be to tie off the Cotentin peninsula at its narrowest point." At last they were on the beam; but still another hour passed before the Germans knew that they were also about to be hit from the sea. It was then too late to shift a force which could block off the southernmost exit; and the flat land directly adjoining it was ungarrisoned.

Since melodrama does not become General Maxwell D. Taylor, the personification of the ever controlled, tightly disciplined life, his entry into Normandy was appropriate. He dropped routinely into a pasture a little way from Ste. Marie-du-Mont, with only cows for witnesses. His accommodating stick descended out of sight in an adjoining field, giving him VIP privacy for all of 20 minutes — the time it took him to shake free of his harness and deploy rapidly toward human company. So moving, he tramped an area pitted with fresh-dug rifle trenches and gun emplacements. But not one gun or enemy soldier gave it respectable martial dignity. The commander of 14,000 men couldn't have had it softer on a dry-run exercise. But when at the corner of a hedgerow, after his lonesome maneuvering, he saw his first trooper — a bareheaded rifleman of the 501st — they warmly hugged each other, than which the night provides no more surprising entry.

But if you "gotta have heart," you also need luck. Coming into this same area, the serial carrying Lieutenant Colonel Julian J.

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*now on staff -* Ewell's battalion of 501st did not encounter truly thick flak. Still, three of its planes were shot out of the skies, and 36 troopers died.

Ewell, a handful of his own men (the battalion was tabbed for the division reserve) and about 60 men from Division Headquarters came down squarely, smoothly, uneventfully, on Drop Zone C. Out beyond the boundary hedgerows, they could hear fire. But it was like July 4; all noise, no pressure. Their assembly was conducted by rote — with blue lights and a police whistle.

Not far away, Major Larry Legere, of the G-3 section, and Captain Thomas White, General Taylor's aide, ran into an enemy group who mistook them for Frenchmen. Asked to account for himself, Legere answered in perfect French, "I come from visiting my cousin," then flipped a grenade among them and cleared away. Private Ambrose Allie had a closer call. He landed on a roof top in Ste. Marie-du-Mont and was grabbed by a party of Germans when he made the street. They lined him up against a wall and formed as a firing squad. While Allie sweated and prayed, two other Americans whipped round the corner and gunned the Germans down. But these were the only shreds of combat for the men assembling out of Drop Zone C.

Until dawn, Ewell's truncated battalion stayed just south of Ste. Marie-du-Mont, under no compulsion to get mobile and fight because it was the general reserve. But here is the baffling note: Not one man was able to identify any feature of the landscape, and though they were in exactly the right location, they didn't know it until dawn.

Not far away, Max Taylor was having the same trouble. He could not get oriented. Unable to guess his direction, he got on the path to Ewell through some sixth sense. En route, he picked up a few more of his soldiers, then in the dark, physically collided with his artillery chief, General Tony McAuliffe. Tony didn't know where he was going, either.

One-quarter mile farther on, they ran into Ewell's sit-down position. The field was already outposted. Patrols were sent out to check on road signs or interview countrymen. Driven back by fire, they returned no wiser than before.

Colonel Gerald J. Higgins, division chief of staff, thought he knew the ground for two miles around Drop Zone C like the palm of his hand. In the weeks preceding the invasion, studying the air photos, he had assiduously "counted the trees of every orchard within that area and memorized the exact pattern of each." Then when he jumped he landed just 100 yards off the terrain etched in his mind and was as completely lost as the Babe in the Woods. The more he walked, the less he knew. Having only a .45 Colt, he coveted strongly armed company. When at last he heard a cricket, his deliverer proved to be only a medical corpsman carrying a curette. This pair simply wandered into Ewell's position.

As Higgins arrived, so did Lieutenant Colonel Pappas, division engineer. Then all the brains got together in a ditch. That way, the banks screened their flashlights. Then they went over and over the air obliques of the Drop Zone C neighborhood, checking for recognition points. It was as futile as had been the leg work by the patrols. Nothing looked familiar; they knew they were in Normandy, and that was about all.

So they gave it up and waited for first light. Then Taylor, looking north, saw a glint on the church spire of Ste. Marie-du-Mont and said, "I know the shape of that one; we're right where we belong." Of the episode comes one shining value. It redeems the pride of every buck soldier who kicks himself because he was lost for a few hours among the hedgerows.

Talking things over, Taylor and Higgins agreed that the division had been badly dropped — this because no one present had yet seen anyone from the 506th Regiment. Taylor said, "It remains for us to help the 4th Infantry Division in every way possible." Amid uncertainty, the one logical move was to start east looking for a causeway.

Taylor ordered all of the people present to fall in with Ewell and go for Pouppeville, wryly remarking, "Never in the history of military operations have so few been commanded by so many." The force had one radio, belonging to the *division artillery*, but every attempt to get in touch with friends met failure. Some few

of Ewell's people were told off, along with a few headquarters hands, to install the division command post at Hiesville.

The remainder — including the generals — hit the trail at 0600, marching cross-country until they came to the main road into Pouppeville. It was practically an uncovered march. No flank patrols were used but only a few flankers. The column picked up a few more men as it slogged along. Right at the start, it drew blood without losing any. A foolish German sentry cried, "Haltel!" From an isolated bunker behind him seven other Germans came running. Two of Ewell's scouts shot six of them, and the others ran away. Thereafter the advance on Pouppeville was an uninterrupted breeze. They reached its limits at approximately 0900.

Immediately their presence was honored by a scattering rifle fire. But the village was poorly organized for defense. South of it was a complete field position, observation tower in the center and a rim of foxholes, machine-gun emplacements and bunkers. The Germans fled this prepared ground and got in among the houses of the village, where there were neither barricades nor slotted walls. So there was no place to stand. As promptly as Ewell's men drew to the high side of a wall and moved through or around it, the Germans jumped to the next house beyond. They fired back as they ran. Ewell's worst affliction was his own lack of numbers. He counted only 40 men from his line companies, and the headquarters specialists were a drag in house-to-house fighting. The Germans pushed small patrols around his flanks, and he did not have enough strength to outcircle them. Most of his losses came of the oblique pressure.

present  
staff

— Major Legere was downed by a dum-dum bullet, which tore away most of the flesh from one thigh. In that way, Higgins lost his only staff officer.

Sergeant Meryl W. Tinklenberg knocked off one German machine-gun crew; Corporal Virgil Danforth did as well with another but got his skull creased with a bullet. Private James F. Hubbard started through a garden gate and was shot down by a sniper. Private Jesse C. Garcia heard a group of Frenchmen

laughing and shouting inside another garden and stepped inside to investigate. A German waiting beyond the fence put eight bullets into Garcia.

So it continued, slowing the advance without stopping it. A few minutes later the Germans lost heart for the contest. By 11:00, Ewell was at the German CP in the center of the village. That was enough for the enemy commander. He surrendered with 38 men of the 1058th Grenadier Regiment, having lost 25 dead and wounded. The two-hour fight cost Ewell 6 killed and 12 wounded.

Lieutenant Luther Knowlton and a sergeant walked on to the far side of Pouppeville. They saw a medium tank churn toward them around a bend in the causeway.

"German?" asked the sergeant.

"Damned if I know," said Knowlton.

"To hell with it, I'm firing," said the sergeant. And he did.

Then an orange panel fluttered on the side of the tank.

Knowlton replied by tossing an orange tank grenade on the road.

The tank came on, and with this meeting between its riders and two infantrymen, the link-up at Pouppeville was complete. Ewell already knew, from questioning the villagers, that the bridges along the causeway had been mined for demolition. A few of the Germans had escaped in that direction. But Ewell could hear the forces of 4th Division coming toward him only a few hundred yards away, and he knew the runaway Germans would come bouncing back on him before they could blow up any bridges. So he set up his machine guns and waited.

Taylor and Higgins stayed with Ewell's force until the seaborne troops nosed west out of Pouppeville. They had kept hands off, leaving Ewell free to run the fire fight. When the first tanks and line companies came past, they talked to the junior officers who were loaded with information about how smoothly the landing had gone.

Though Taylor had still heard nothing about how his own division was faring anywhere save at Pouppeville, he turned to Higgins and said, "The invasion is succeeding. We don't have to

worry about the causeways. Now we can think about the next move."

It was a snap estimate, based on fragmentary intelligence. But it was right as rain.

In the hour of the fight few if any of the participants were known to the country. Numerous of them have become military VIPs, if not world figures, in the years since. For example, in General Taylor's labors at the White House, Ewell and Legere work at his elbows. Captain Simmons of this book is now General Simmons, and so on. These postgraduate achievements are not spelled out. There was honor enough in what happened on these fields of their great common endeavor.

My work began under the apple bower at the Carentan farm and was concluded near the trees of Sherwood Forest, the two airborne divisions having repaired to England to reoutfit for the next jump into Europe. And that was fitting enough, for stauncher men than these never walked the streets of Nottingham, even in legend.

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