

THE DEVIL’S PLAYGROUND - THE AIRBORNE BATTLEFIELD IN WORLD WAR II

Lieutenant-Colonel Bernd Horn

Airborne forces, from their inception, have always generated an emotional debate in regard to their value. Many argued they were merely overly-specialized and therefore, too expensive, if not pampered infantry who brought little of substance to justify their drain of scarce resources, specifically aircraft and manpower. Not surprisingly, advocates underlined their strategic importance. Moreover, they highlighted the fact that airborne soldiers operated in a completely different environment that required only the best a nation could provide. There are “very special dangers that are a combat paratrooper’s particular lot,” recounted General Matthew B. Ridgway, wartime commander of the 82nd Airborne Division. “The quick leap out of the plane into the buffeting prop wash,” he explained, “the slow float down, hanging helpless in the harness, the drop into the darkness where armed enemies wait behind every bush and tree.”ⁱ Similarly, Major-General Richard Gale, Commander 1 British Airborne Corps insisted that the paratrooper “is aware, too that once on the ground his future lies in his own skill. The gun which he carried down in his drop and the small supply of ammunition on his person are his only weapons for support in either attack or defense. His water and food are what he can carry when he jumps. His sense of direction, his field-craft and in map reading and his physical strength must all be of a high order. He may be alone for hours, he may be injured, he may be dazed from his fall. But it is his battle and he knows it.”ⁱⁱ

Airborne detractors quickly countered that parachuting was just another way to the battlefield. But they were wrong. The circumstances and environment that paratroopers found themselves in were very distinct from their brethren in the infantry or other combat arms. It is for this reason that airborne soldiers were specially selected based on mental and physical stamina, as

well as resiliency. It was also why their training was just that much more grueling.ⁱⁱⁱ The airborne battlefield was distinct. It was demanding, unforgiving and unrelenting. Only intrepid, resilient and self-reliant individuals could survive in the devil's cauldron.

The special nature of the airborne battlefield was derived directly from the missions and roles that were assigned to airborne forces.^{iv} Not surprisingly, the Allies, relative latecomers to this new type of warfare, demonstrated an evolution in doctrine. As late as 1941, official thought on the subject was somewhat rudimentary and simplistic. Airborne operations were visualized in two forms: major operations that pertained to "the employment of airborne troops at one point for the capture of an objective of the first importance"; and minor operations that entailed the employment of small numbers of airborne troops "against headquarters, dumps, convoys etc., and for sabotage."^v The failure to realize the strategic value of airborne forces was evident in the early thinking. Their employment centered on small tactical objectives. This was reinforced by doctrinal publications. Drawing lessons from the employment of parachutists up to 1942, the *Canadian Army Training Memorandum* summarized the Allied thought to that point. The objectives for paratroops were given as: "the destruction of bridges; cutting and tapping of telephone wires; incendiarism and the destruction of public utility enterprises; firing on troops, supply columns and refugees to create confusion and panic; indication of bombing targets; spreading false news; seizing and holding certain main objectives, e.g. an aerodrome; and sabotage generally."^{vi}

A maturation of thought quickly developed with experience. The U.S. War Department's 1942 Strategy Book clearly expounded the new importance placed on airborne forces. "Nowadays," wrote the American strategists, "one cannot possibly hope to succeed in landing operations unless one can be assured of the cooperation of parachutists on a scale hitherto

undreamed of.” Paratroopers were regarded “as the pivot of success of the entire operation.”^{vii} By 1943, doctrine writers determined three major functions for airborne forces to fulfil. The first was in close cooperation with large forces in conjunction with an attack of all arms operating by land, sea or air or a combination of all three. In this capacity airborne troops were expected to attack the enemy rear and, thus, assist with the breakthrough of the main forces. In addition, they were also expected to delay enemy reserves by holding defiles between them and the battlefield or conversely to delay a retreating enemy until the main force arrived to ensure the complete destruction of the withdrawing hostile force. In addition, paratroops were also deemed capable of capturing enemy airfields to assist with the air superiority battle, creating diversions and capturing or destroying belligerent headquarters which would lead to the paralyzation of the enemy’s capability of providing a cohesive defense.

The second major function of airborne forces was working independently as units or formations. Strategists envisioned paratroopers capturing islands or areas not strongly defended or capable of being reinforced, as well as positions that could seriously embarrass the enemy and prevent his reserves from being used elsewhere. In addition, the seizure of vital installations, such as oil refineries, were also seen as viable targets for independent action as were centers of government - the loss of which would cause severe confusion. Planners also visualized the use of paratroops to assist guerilla forces by providing a nucleus of trained soldiers. Overall, within this function airborne forces were seen as fulfilling the role of an economy of effort force by pinning belligerent resources down or creating a situation by which the enemy would be required to invest a large amount of equipment and manpower to ensure the security of his rear areas.

The third and final function was that of a harassing role, operating in small numbers and often at a distance from the area of major operations. Paratroops employed in this role were

responsible for harassing communications and destroying aircraft, transport, signal stations, railway trains, locks, bridges and factories. In addition, they would also be tasked with the destruction of enemy fuel, supplies and equipment, as well causing panic among the civil population by the dissemination of false information.^{viii}

That was the theory. But as always, it is the front line soldier who most accurately describes his actual mission. “The paratroops,” asserted Lieutenant-Colonel G.F. Bradbrooke, Commanding Officer of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, “are the tip of the spear.” He explained that “they must expect to go in first, to penetrate behind enemy lines and to fight in isolated positions.”^{ix} Major-General Richard Gale explained to his officers their role in a similarly simple fashion. “In almost every case,” he extolled, “Airborne Forces will lead the way and be the spearhead of the attack.” He further elaborated, “The sort of tasks you may have to do are: capture a position in the rear of the enemy, cut his communications, and isolate him from his reinforcements; attack the enemy in the rear, while our main forces attack his front; capture airfields in enemy country; assist sea or river crossings by making a bridgehead; [and / or] raid special objectives.”^x

The aforementioned missions and tasks of airborne forces paint a formidable picture, namely one of shock troops that are first into battle and often alone to absorb the enemy’s retaliatory strikes. More ominously yet, there are major limitations that detract from the ability of airborne forces to achieve success which make their battleground that much more difficult. The first glaring weakness was the vulnerability of the aerial armada in flight. The lumbering transport planes, as well as the aircraft towing gliders behind them were slow and inviting targets to both anti-aircraft fire and enemy fighters. As a result, control of the entire “air corridor” was

crucial and demanded air supremacy or at a minimum, local air superiority along the entire route.

But this was only the first requirement. The next challenge lay in the accuracy of the drop itself. Even if the laden aircraft reached their destination the ability to drop their troops on target was another hurdle that was never easily surmounted. There were just too many factors against an accurate release. Inexperienced and poorly trained aircrews often resulted in the inability to maintain aircraft formation, the release of paratroopers at too high an altitude or at too great a speed. During the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, the Allied paratroopers were to be dropped from 600 feet with the C-47 Dakota aircraft slowing down to almost stalling speed - 100 miles per hour. But this is where theory and practice diverged. Instead, the troopers were flung out at 1,500 feet with the aircraft racing along at nearly their top speed of 200 miles per hour. This, added to navigational problems and heavy winds resulted in 3,405 American paratroopers being scattered over a width of 60 miles in southeast Sicily.^{xi} For the first few hours of the landing, Colonel James Gavin, a Regimental Commander in the 82nd Airborne Division, found himself in enemy territory with a force of only 19 of his soldiers.^{xii} He later estimated that only 12 percent, or about 425 of the 3,405 men, actually landed somewhere in front of the beachhead as planned.^{xiii} Similarly, of 144 aircraft that left Africa carrying the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment - 23 never returned, 37 had major damage and half the planes required major repairs before they could fly again. Twenty-four hours after the drop Colonel Reuben Tucker, the Regimental Commander, could account for only a quarter of the 2000 men who had left Africa.^{xiv} In addition, during the same operation, only 27 of an intended force of 200 British paratroopers (or 14 percent) landed within proximity to reach their objective and fight for the Ponte Grande.^{xv} Almost a year later in Normandy, of the 6,600 men of the American 101st Airborne Division that dropped in the early hours of D-Day, 3,500 were still missing by the end of the day.^{xvi} Moreover, on 15 August 1944,

5,000 Allied paratroopers of the 1st Airborne Task Force dropped in the area of Le Muy, in Southern France, as part of Operation Dragoon. Once again, accuracy of insertion was lacking. Approximately 60 percent of the American and 40 percent of the British paratroopers landed too far from their drop zones (DZ) to be considered by Army analysts as constituting a successful drop.^{xvii}

Inexperienced or poorly trained aircrews were not the only challenge. Flak and enemy air activity often caused pilots to take evasive action that created enormous difficulties for airborne soldiers and inherently resulted in missed drop zones. “As we approached the DZ the aircraft took violent evasive moves,” recalled nineteen year old paratroop Bill Lovatt, “as I approached the door I was flung back violently to the opposite side of the aircraft in a tangle of arms and legs.”^{xviii} Simple navigation errors compounded problems as did high winds or poor weather. When any of these factors, or worse yet, any combination of factors were present the likelihood of a successful parachute assault was severely taxed. On the evening of 24 September 1943, during the Russian Dnieper River offensive, Soviet pilots panicked when they reached the front lines and began to receive heavy anti-aircraft fire. As a result, the drops were widely dispersed and off target. Of the 4,575 paratroopers and 666 cargo containers dropped, a total of 2,017 men (or 44 percent) and 590 cargo containers (89 percent) failed to reach their intended DZ. German reports accounted for downing only three aircraft and one glider from a total of 296 sorties flown. This low kill rate strongly indicates that Soviet pilots over reacted and failed to push onto their objectives.^{xix} But it was not only Soviet pilots who reacted in such a manner. American Captain Richard Todd conceded that on D-Day “we lost a number of people over the sea from evasive action who fell out.”^{xx} Sergeant John Feduck was slightly more fortunate. “Before the light changed the plane suddenly lurched,” he remembered, “I couldn’t hang on because there was nothing to hang on to so

out I went - there was no getting back in.”^{xxi} Luckily, he was over the coast of France when the pilot’s actions caused his early descent. Similarly, the disastrous drop of 1,200 German paratroopers under the command of Baron von der Heydte in December 1944 also occurred because of inexperienced pilots and aircrew, who were unable to maintain course or formation due to enemy fire. They released their Fallschirmjaeger over such a large area that only a tiny fraction of the force was able to regroup. The resultant team was too small to effect its mission of cutting off American reinforcements that were sent south from Belgium to relieve the pressure created by the surprise German offensive in the Ardennes.^{xxii}

Despite the daunting challenges of flight, there are further impediments to the efficacy of airborne soldiers once on the ground. Initially, paratroops are extremely vulnerable on landing. Individual soldiers, weapon systems, radios and other mission essential equipment must all be brought together at a Rendezvous Point (RV) so that the proper concentration of force and command and control can be exercised. This takes time - how much time depends on the success, specifically the accuracy, of the drop itself.^{xxiii} The greater the dispersion, the greater the time to regroup to assemble combat power. Obviously, there is a direct correlation between time needed to assemble and the degree of surprise and shock action achieved. “The hardest part of the job wasn’t the fighting, although that was hard enough at times,” conceded Lieutenant-Colonel Bradbrooke, “but getting ourselves organized after we hit the DZ.”^{xxiv} The location of the drop in relation to the enemy’s position also has a dramatic effect. A British Royal Artillery Officer serving at Heraklion in Crete in May 1941 observed:

Those [Fallschirmjaeger] dropped on the central sector fell right on top of my gun position, with the result that my small party of 25 men had to deal with vastly superior numbers of parachutists. However, they did more than deal with them; they almost completely destroyed them. If an

immediate attack can be made on parachute troops the second they leave the plane and touch the ground, they are almost powerless to resist.^{xxv}

Up until the end of the war, Army planners accepted that one-third of the force that set out would fail to intervene effectively in operations.^{xxvi}

The vulnerability of airborne soldiers on landing was further exacerbated by their lack of mobility. Once on the ground, paratroopers were limited to how far and how fast they could move with what they had. This restricted the objectives and missions that could be assigned and failure to recognize this had dire consequences. A degree of the failure to quickly capture the bridge at Arnhem in September 1944 was due to the fact that drops were made too far from the actual objective. This criticism was substantiated by the German defenders who acknowledged that they had time to mobilize their defence and respond to the threat.^{xxvii}

Yet another major limitation faced by paratroopers was their lack of firepower. Since they normally dropped behind enemy lines they were often beyond the range of friendly fire support assets such as artillery or naval gunfire. Therefore, all they could depend only on that what they themselves could successfully bring to the “party.” As a result, sheer logistics negated many heavy weapons. Loss and damage due to bad drops increased the problem. “With the planes not slowing up below 125 or 135 miles an hour,” complained one veteran of the Tagaytay Ridge mission in the Phillippines in February 1945, “most of us experienced the hardest physical opening shock in our lives. The result of the shock was that most of us lost helmets, packs broke free from web belts, suspenders broke, and in the wind which was 20 to 30 miles an hour . . . many had hard landings.”^{xxviii} But, bruises and scrapes aside, it was the loss of equipment that was most sorely felt. Not surprisingly, paratroopers lamented that “in the difficult weeks that followed D Day [6 June 1944], when attacks by enemy infantry and sometimes tanks and self-propelled guns had to

be met with an inferior weight of fire power.”^{xxix} A little more than three months later at Arnhem, the 82nd Airborne Division was unable to communicate with their superior headquarters 15 miles away because both of their large radio sets were damaged in the drop.^{xxx}

The last major limitation to airborne operations was that of sustain ability. All airborne operations depended on eventual linkup with ground forces and was generally recognized that this had to occur within 48-72 hours.^{xxxi} Normally, air drops were used if linkup between airborne and ground forces could not be achieved. However, resupply drops suffered from the same limitations already noted and an inherent requirement for accuracy. Nonetheless, airborne elements have been able to hold out for great lengths of time even when surrounded by superior forces. Large Soviet airborne formations operated behind German lines for periods of four to six months during the winter of 1940-1941 as part of the battle of Moscow. Furthermore, the Allies held out for a period of eight days in Holland during Operation Market-Garden in September 1944 - four times longer than expected. Both cases involved vicious close quarter combat, including battle against armoured units. Equally, at the end of both engagements, the respective parachute units were severely mauled and virtually ceased to exist.^{xxxii}

The myriad of limitations, however, are offset by the array of capabilities that are inherent in airborne forces. These strengths eclipse the weaknesses and make the use of paratroopers inescapable. They also provide the airborne soldiers with an edge in their fight for survival in their distinctive battlefield. The greatest advantage paratroops bestow is their strategic mobility. Army planners described them as “highly mobile shock troops which can be projected at short notice into an enemy area which might otherwise consider itself immune from attack.” Quite simply, a large number of paratroopers and equipment can be deployed quickly over large distances, over difficult terrain and obstacles. Moreover, they are the only ones who are capable

of, on short notice, engaging in combat operations without the prerequisite of secure airfields, ports, beaches or other points of entry. Strategically employed, they can seize ground and fortifications critical to manoeuvre, hitherto thought impregnable. On 10 May 1940, a paltry 55 German parachute engineers rendered the key Belgian fortress of Eben Emael guarding the strategic Albert Canal with its 1200 man garrison ineffective.^{xxxiii} Additionally, a group of 129 Fallschirmjaeger landed near Vroenhoven to capture that key bridge. Within minutes the Belgian garrison was overwhelmed and the bridge disarmed of explosives. Thirty minutes later, the bridge was open to German panzers.^{xxxiv} Approximately a year later, Fallschirmjaeger seized the Corinth Canal in Greece, thus capturing approximately 10,000 Allied soldiers at a cost of 63 killed and 174 wounded.^{xxxv}

The strategic mobility inherent in airborne operations in turn creates yet another set of capabilities that create tangible combat multipliers, namely surprise and psychological dislocation. Surprise creates confusion, fear and panic in both the military and public at large. Moreover, the mere threat of attack by airborne forces necessitates costly counter measures. More importantly still, it nurtures fear in the minds of the besieged - a comprehension that even rear areas are no longer safe. Examples abound. The German landings in Holland in 1940, caused a wave of panic throughout Europe, as well as in England. "One thing is certain," wrote Captain F.O. Miksche, "there was a parachute obsession everywhere. Everybody saw them being dropped, Everybody was suspect, and even Allied officers and men, sometimes bearing important orders, were arrested by the French military authorities."^{xxxvi} In Britain, troop dispositions were tailored to counter a perceived airborne invasion and vast amounts of scarce material were invested to this end. The government adopted a policy in 1940 to safeguard the country by ordering all open spaces (meaning virtually every park and playing field) throughout Britain to be seeded with long

spiked poles, concrete blocks and other obstacles that would impede paratroopers.^{xxxvii}

The threat of an airborne invasion later reversed itself and the Axis forces felt the resultant insecurity. The attack on the Tragino aqueduct in Italy on 10 February 1942, by a small group of parachutists caused minimal physical damage or dislocation. Nonetheless, it had far reaching implications. The Italians had been so unnerved by this operation that they diverted valuable manpower and resources in its aftermath for the protection of every vital point in the country.^{xxxviii}

The Bruneval Raid on the coast of France a little more than two weeks later, also conducted by British paratroopers, was more significant. This raiding force secured elements of the German Wurzburg Radar that proved significant for British radar development and electronic counter measures.^{xxxix} But on a larger tactical level, the threat and actual execution of large-scale airborne assaults created great problems for the German high command. During the invasion of Sicily in 1943, the German 6th Army Headquarters received panicky reports that paratroopers were dropping all over the southern part of the island. This paralysed their ability to respond in a coherent and decisive manner. The scale of confusion was evident by the Radio Rome broadcast that reported that 60,000 to 120,000 paratroopers had jumped into Sicily - instead of the approximate 7,300 Allied parachutists and glidermen that assaulted over a two-day period.^{xl} And finally, less than a year later, in the spring of 1944, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel specifically adapted his plan for the defence of the Normandy Coast to allow for the defence against airborne soldiers. As a result, valuable troops were siphoned away from front line duty and positioned in the Contentin Peninsula primarily to provide protection against airborne assault.^{xli}

Remarkably, the ability of airborne operations to inflict surprise and psychological disruption was so great that even small scale drops or those by a nearly vanquished enemy still caused consternation and panic. In December of 1944, the ill-executed German parachute

operation during the Ardennes offensive set off a parachutist scare that was felt all the way in Paris. The Supreme Allied Commander, General Ike Eisenhower became a virtual prisoner in his own headquarters.^{xlii} It is the fear engendered by the sudden appearance of enemy troops in one's rear area and the inability to fully define their objectives that creates a decisive advantage for the invading force. Often, as already shown, inaccurate reports delivered by alarmed commanders, particularly when describing widely dispersed drops creates an impression of massive, wide-scale airborne operations threatening large areas of territory. This in turn paralyses enemy response because of an inherent attempt by the enemy leadership to determine where the major threat lies before committing forces. In September 1944, during Operation Market Garden, Colonel-General Kurt Student acknowledged that "I could not tell what was happening or where these airborne units were going."^{xliii} The paratroopers must quickly regroup prior to carrying on with their mission, but the defender must try and determine what has happened, how many have landed, where, what is their objective and who is available to counter the alleged attack. "It is a unique characteristic of airborne operations," insisted German commanders, "that the moment of greatest weakness of the attacker and of the defender occur simultaneously. The issue is decided by three factors, who has better nerves, who takes the initiative first, and who acts with the greatest determination."^{xliv}

In sum, despite severe limitations, it is the promise of overwhelming success due to the enormous capabilities of the third dimension of war that make paratroopers such a valuable asset to any fighting force. However, their use, although promising high value pay off, is also high risk. And so, within this context the individual airborne soldier must go to battle. His challenges are great. For him, parachuting is more than just another means of getting to the battlefield. His struggle starts long before he closes with the enemy. Paratroopers normally arrive tired and

exhausted. They endured the process of dressing and waiting fully kitted for long periods of time. It was not uncommon for individuals to be weighted down with 100 pounds of equipment not including their parachute assembly. Aircrewman Martin Wolfe recalled pushing paratroopers with up to 125 pounds of gear into his aircraft. "With our gear," asserted Colonel Ivan Hershner, "the average man weighed about 300 pounds that night [6 June 1944]."^{xlvi} The exhausting weight was in itself not the only hurdle to overcome. Its effect on the actual jump was enormous. "I got a good opening, tore a few sections in my chute, which was not unusual when you were loaded up with equipment," recalled Edward J. Cole of his drop onto Tagaytay Ridge in February 1945. "[I] reached up to grab my risers and hit the ground," he explained, "I didn't have a chance to release my jump rope...we had jumped at about 450 feet with full equipment."^{xlvi} With the enormous weight and low jump altitude, the descent was rather quick. This was common.

However, once dressed the salvation of shedding the uncomfortable parachute harness and heavy equipment on the drop zone was but a glimmer in the distant future. First, the ordeal of flight to the destination had to be overcome. Bucking, lurching aircraft that were tossed about in the wash of previous air planes, as well as the attempts to avoid flak, created additional stress for the paratrooper. Research has shown that airsickness due to turbulent flying conditions in itself creates fatigue. Compounded by anxiety and tension, as well as the heavy loads carried by each airborne soldier, the state of enervation on landing was substantial.^{xlvi}

But the exhaustion, as well as the numerous abrasions and bruises, if not more serious injuries such as sprains or fractures had to be quickly put aside. The battle on the ground now began and ordinarily, the paratrooper was the first to fight. His mission behind enemy lines placed him in direct contact with the enemy before he was often fully prepared. The airborne insertion of

the Poles at Arnhem in September 1944, resulted in them being placed directly into a raging battle. As a result, they were fired on by both sides.^{xlvi} To exacerbate the airborne soldiers' plight, once the drone of the aircraft engines disappeared the paratroopers were normally on their own. They had no rear, no sanctuary to return to, and no pipeline connected to ships or friendly lines. "A parachutist fights a lonely battle," argued British Lieutenant-General Sir Michael Gray. "He has no real front or rear," he explained, "He often feels he is fighting the battle on his own."²⁹ Brigadier James Hill, Commander of the British 3rd Parachute Brigade during the Normandy invasion understood the potential confusion that his paratroopers would face. "Gentlemen, in spite of your excellent training and orders," he proclaimed, "do not be daunted if chaos reigns. It undoubtably will."³⁰ His words were prophetic. Drops were widely dispersed and scattered and units were faced with the task of completing their missions under strength and lacking important equipment.

Within this devil's cauldron it is not surprising that airborne soldiers suffered a higher ratio of casualties than other combat troops. "Jumping out of airplanes was romantic as hell," critiqued one detractor, "but also dangerous and wasteful of lives; what it did was put a very high premium on bravery of a certain kind."^{xl} The requirement for courage was no understatement. Casualty statistics tell a tale all of their own. Of 2000 German airborne troops (22nd Infantry Division - airlanding) assigned to the capture of the Hague in the Netherlands on 10 May 1940, 40 percent of the officers and 28 percent of the men were killed.¹ Similarly, that same day, the Fallschirmjaeger that attacked the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael suffered 30 percent casualties.^{li} Almost a year later, German paratroopers suffered 58 percent casualties during their invasion of Crete, a full 25 percent of the participants being killed.^{lii} "We paid dearly for our victory," Adolf Strauch concluded, "Every third man killed, every second man wounded. Our victory was no victory."^{liii}

And the bloody trend continued. The British parachute commando action at Tragino, Italy, cost them the loss of a 100 percent of the raiding force.^{liv} The Soviet paratroopers suffered 71 percent casualties during their desperate battles around Vyazma / Moscow during the winter of January to March 1942. The German Waffen SS Paratroop Battalion suffered 62 percent casualties in its raid on Tito's headquarters in Yugoslavia in May 1944^{lv} and approximately 80 percent of the British 1st Airborne Division was lost during Operation Market Garden in September that same year.^{lvi} Finally, the 82nd Airborne Division incurred 27 percent casualties in Sicily and 46 percent in Normandy.^{lvii} In November 1944, then Major-General Ridgway, Commander XVIII Corps (Airborne), conceded in a letter to General George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army, that "At the moment of entry into action, an airborne division has already suffered losses far in excess of those of an infantry division at a similar time, through misplaced drops and crash injuries, both of which are in addition to normal battle casualties."^{lviii} In the overall American experience of World War II, over 30 percent of all airborne personnel became casualties. This compares to only 10 percent among regular infantry formations.^{lix}

It becomes easy to understand why the airborne battlefield exacts a higher price. It is a unique battleground, one where the situation is never clear, where a paratrooper has no distinct starting position and often, if not normally, finds himself, at least initially, totally alone, deep in enemy territory. It is an environment where one is never fully sure who or how many will actually arrive on the objective in time to assist in the battle. To survive in these ambiguous, hostile surroundings requires a special character - an exceptional type of combat soldier. Neither rank, nor position, hold privilege as all must share the hardships and dangers of flight and a parachute descent onto an unknown DZ. During the assault on Sicily, many gliders crashed into the Mediterranean Sea. One survivor clinging to the wreckage of his stricken aircraft was British

Major-General Hoppy Hopkinson, Commander of the 1st Airborne Division.^{lx} During the invasion of Normandy, the first battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment was not only badly scattered, but it also had its commanding officer killed, the battalion second in command captured and all four company commanders missing.^{lxi} “The scattering had an operating influence on the whole battle,” disclosed paratroop veteran Dan Hartigan. “We lost more than 50% of our officers on D-Day,” he revealed, “15 of 27 I believe.”^{lxii} The potential loss of leadership necessitated that all airborne soldiers be prepared to carry on the mission themselves. “When its [airborne division] people hit the ground,” declared General Matthew Ridgway, “they are individuals, and a two-star general and a Pfc. [private] are on exactly the same basis.” He further explained that “you have no communications whatsoever for some little time, particularly when you have jumped at night. You don’t know where you are. You don’t know who’s around you, friend or foe.”^{lxiii}

Without question the airborne battlefield was an arena that required an aggressive individual with courage, initiative and tenacity, as well as mental alertness and exemplary combat skills. Paratroopers had to be capable of adapting to unforeseen situations and above all else they had to be self-reliant. It is for this reason that special selection processes and tough rigorous training were implemented. In the end, the formidable entrance requirement and gruelling training designed to weed out all but the fittest and most aggressive, combined with their unrivalled battlefield performance, created a distinct airborne mentality and philosophy - no mission too daunting, no challenge too great.

The public image of the paratrooper also added to the mystique. The complex and dangerous nature of the operations required what was described as an “elite” type of soldier. Most people, both civilian and military, believed that airborne soldiers had nerves of steel and that they were in superb physical condition so that they could withstand the shock of the jump and the

hard landings.^{lxiv} “In the first place, they [parachutists] are perfect specimens,” wrote Larry Gough from the American *Liberty* magazine. “They have to be,” he explained, “because their work is rough tough and full of excellent opportunities to get hurt. Mentally they’re quick on the trigger, again because their job demands it, because split seconds can make the difference between instant death or a successfully completed job.”^{lxv} A Canadian account was equally dramatic. “Picture men with muscles of iron dropping in parachutes, hanging precariously from slender ropes, braced for any kind of action, bullets whistling about them from below and above,” portrayed one journalist. He elaborated further:

They congregate or scatter. Some are shot. But the others go on with the job. Perhaps they’re to dynamite an objective. Perhaps they’re to infiltrate through enemy lines and bring about the disorder necessary to break up the foe’s defence, where-upon their comrades out in front can break through. Or perhaps they’re to do reconnoitering and get back the best way they can. But whatever they’re sent out to do, they’ll do it, these toughest men who ever wore khaki.^{lxvi}

Quite frankly, the public, as well as military commanders, believed that airborne soldiers were the cutting edge of operations - tough, intelligent and self-reliant shock troops dropping from the sky to paralyse and demoralize the enemy. “It builds our morale, it stiffens the spine and braces the backbone of the public,” insisted Lieutenant-General E.M. Flanagan, “to hear talk about the independent type airborne operation.” He elaborated that this was born from the image of an airborne army storming-in “to deal a lethal blow to the enemy, deep in his backyard.”^{lxvii} Brigadier James Hill simply described parachute troops as the best fighting material in the world. He felt that “the parachutists have shown themselves magnificent infantry, pre-eminent in physique and steadiness of nerve, born guerilla fighters, mobile and tireless, tremendous marchers, and of an undefeated spirit.”^{lxviii} Brigadier-General Ridgley Gaither from the Army War College, after a tour of the European theatre of operation, reported “That there are no better fighting troops in the theater is evidenced by the wholesome respect accorded these unit by all other combat troops.

With a high esprit de corps and morale second to none they firmly believe they are unbeatable.”^{lxi} It is for this reason that Colonel James Gavin, wartime commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, later wrote that “the term American parachutist has become synonymous with courage of the highest order.”^{lxx} Even George C. Marshall, the American Army Chief of Staff declared that “the courage and dash of airborne troops has become a by-word and is a great inspiration to all others.”^{lxxi} Finally, Field Marshall Bernard Law Montgomery adjudged that “when the maroon beret is seen on the battlefield it at once inspires confidence, as it is well known that its wearers are good men and true and have the highest standards in all things.”^{lxxii}

But these accolades were well earned. Paratroopers proved themselves as aggressive, resilient and tenacious fighters capable of overcoming adversity. “When tracer bullets began ripping through his canopy, Private Edwin C. Raub became so enraged that he deliberately side-slipped his chute so as to land next to the anti-aircraft gun. Without removing his harness, and dragging his parachute behind him, Raub rushed the Germans with his Tommy gun. He killed one, captured the others and then, with plastic explosives destroyed the flak-gun barrels.”^{lxxiii} In another example of tenacity over adversity, Sergeant Bullock, from the British 9th Parachute Battalion and a handful of others were dropped almost thirty miles inland. They reported to their units four days later with evidence to show that they had killed numerous enemy, including twenty senior German generals of Brigadier rank or higher. Another paratrooper swam twenty miles down the Orne River to reach Pegasus Bridge.³¹ Yet, another example of the airborne spirit that has since entered into legend is the infamous incident of Captain Eric Mackay relaying his CO’s refusal at Arnhem to surrender despite the fact they were cut off, completely surrounded and had suffered horrendous casualties. “Get the hell out of here,” he yelled at the German Waffen SS soldier who had come forward to offer terms, “We’re not taking any prisoners.”^{lxxiv}

In the final summation, the prowess of airborne forces lay in the requirement and their ability to transcend the brutality and unforgiving nature of the airborne battlefield. “The mainspring of these forces,” insisted the renown American soldier and military historian S.L.A. Marshall, “lay in the spirit of the men. They moved and hit like light infantry and what they achieved in surprise more than compensated for what they lacked in fire power.”^{lxxv} Brigadier-General Gathier observed that “the individual parachute soldier in combat is completely self-reliant and able to operate on his own. He is a killer and imbued with a desire to close with the enemy and destroy him.”^{lxxvi} Military historian Clay Blair agreed. He wrote that the 82nd Airborne Division emerged from Normandy with the reputation of being “a pack of jackals; the toughest, most resourceful and bloodthirsty infantry in the ETO.”^{lxxvii} This was not a peculiar American outlook. British Major-General Richard Gale came to the same conclusion. “In the end,” he extolled, “it all boils down to the individual and it is he that counts. Be alert, be vigilant and be resourceful. What you get by stealth and by guts you must hold with skill and determination.”^{lxxviii}

But it was their ability to overcome their daunting environment that set them apart. “Their duty lies in the van of the battle; they are proud of this honour and have never failed in any task,” wrote Field Marshall Montgomery. “They have the highest standards in all things . . . [and] they have shown themselves to be as tenacious and determined in defence as they are courageous in attack.” They are, he concluded, “men apart - every man an Emperor.”^{lxxix}

And so, the claim that parachuting was just another means of getting to the battlefield betrayed an ignorance to the disconcerting and exacting airborne battlefield. It failed to account for an environment that is ambiguous, chaotic and seldom predictable. Only those hardened to adversity, resilient to the stress of the unknown and capable of adapting to ever changing

circumstances could survive in the devil's cauldron that was the airborne battlefield.

ENDNOTES

- i. General Matthew B. Ridgway, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 1.
- ii. Lieutenant-General Richard Gale, *With the 6th Airborne Division in Normandy* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & CO., 1948), 2-3.
- iii. The Director of Military Training stated "That due to the fact that this type of work requires unusual stamina and mental attitude by personnel, parachute battalions must be considered as elite units. Therefore, in the early formative period of such a corps, volunteers should be selected who by reason of physical and mental standards and previous Military training are most likely to be able to succeed in this unnatural and difficult work." Memorandum, DMT to DCGS (B), 30 October 1942, "1 Cdn Parachute Battalion," LAC, Microfilm C-8379, File: HQS 8846-7, No. 1, 2. The development of a distinct attitude and culture was noted early on in regards to the development of the American airborne forces. Major-General Lesley McNair, Commander of U.S. Army Ground Forces, remarked at a press conference in Washington, D.C. in 1942, "They [paratroopers] are our problem children. They make lots of money, and they know they're good. This makes them a little temperamental, but they're great soldiers." William Breuer, *Geronimo*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 9.
- iv. Airborne troops include all those carried by air to battle whether parachute troops or air landing troops. Parachute troops are trained and equipped to land by parachute and air landing troops are those that land by either aircraft or glider. CIGS, *Airborne Operations, Pamphlet No. 1, General - 1943* (London: War Office, 1943), 1.
- v. CIGS, *Airborne Troops - Military Training Pamphlet No. 50 - 1941* (London: War Office, 1941), 1.
- vi. "Notes on German Airborne Troops," *Canadian Army Training Memorandum (CATM)*, No. 11, February 1942, 14.
- vii. U.S. War Department Operations Division, General Staff, Strategy Book, November 1942, 212-213 & 219. National Archives, Washington D.C., RG 165, entry 422, Box 2, Item 10A, Exec 1, File OPD Strategy Book, November 1942. Sourced from the Joint Military Intelligence College Washington, D.C.
- viii. CIGS, *Airborne Operations, Pamphlet No. 1, General - 1943* (London: War Office, 1943), 6-9.
- ix. Ronald A. Keith, "Sky Troops," *Maclean's*, 1 August 1943, 19.
- x. "Ad unum omnes," hand-out given to British and Canadian officers serving under Major-General Richard Gale during World War II. Canadian Airborne Forces Museum (CAFM), File AB 21 - CAFM Staffs' Airborne Research Notes.
- xi. William Breuer, *Drop Zone Sicily. Allied Airborne Strike, July 1943* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1983), 71 and 89.

xii. Ibid., 57.

xiii. Clay Blair, *Ridgway's Paratroopers. The American Airborne in World War II* (New York: The Dial Press, 1985), 88.

xiv. Lieutenant-General E.M. Flanagan, *The Angels. A History of the 11th Airborne Division* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1989), 47.

xv. William Breuer, *Drop Zone Sicily. Allied Airborne Strike, July 1943* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1983), 45.

xvi. Napier Crookenden, *Drop Zone Normandy* (London: Ian Allan Ltd., 1976), 110.

xvii. Blair, 314.

xviii. David Owen, "A Portrait of a Parachutist," unpublished manuscript, 1 Cdn Para Bn Assn Archives.

xix. Richard Armstrong, "The Bukrin Drop: Limits to Creativity," *Military Affairs*, July 1986, 130. See also David Glantz, *The Soviet Airborne Experience* (Fort Leavenworth: U.S Army Command and General Staff College, 1984), 124 and *The History of Soviet Airborne Forces* (Portland: Frank Cas & Company, 1994), as well as, Steven Zaloga, *Inside the Blue Berets* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1995), 99-116.

xx. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge* (London: Touchstone Books, 1985), 109.

xxi. Interview Sergeant John Feduck with Michel Wyczynski, 19 December 2001.

xxii. Centre of Military History, *Airborne Operations - A German Appraisal* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Govt Printing Office, 1989), 21; John Toland, *Battle - The Story of the Bulge* (New York: Random House, 1959), 40-44; Michael Reynolds, *The Devil's Adjutant* (New York: Sarpedon, 1995), 67-68. Air Chief Marshal Sir John C. Slessor made reference to the drop in a most uncomplimentary manner describing it as "the fiasco of Heydt's single ill-fated battalion's [drop] during the Ardennes offensive." Taken from an article "Some Reflection of Airborne Forces," *Army Quarterly 1948*. Canadian Department of National Defence (DND) Department of History and Heritage (DHH) files.

xxiii. Centre of Military History, *Airborne Operations - A German Appraisal*, 28.

xxiv. Ralph Allen, "Canadian Paratroops Create Proud History," *Globe and Mail*, No. 29,495, 26 June 1944, 1 and 3, National Library of Canada (NL) Microfilm N-20057.

xxv. "How to Deal with Parachute Troops," *CATM* No. 17, August 1942, para 96.

xxvi. WD/HF/180/1/A Div Comd's Directive 26.1.42 contained in "The Airborne Forces 1940-1943," UK, Public Record Office (PRO), CAB 101 /220, 25.

xxvii. Much of the blame has been levelled at Major-General Roy Urquhart who was appointed Division Commander with no prior airborne experience. He made the fateful decision to go with DZ locations between 5-8 miles from the objective, distances contrary to airborne doctrine. He preferred good DZs at a distance compared to bad DZs close to the objective. He later admitted this was an unnecessary and fatal error. It cost the division the advantage of surprise and forced it to divide its forces to maintain DZ security for follow on operations. John Warren, *Airborne Operations in WWII, European Theatre* (Kansas: USAF Historical Division, Air University, 1956), 149.

xxviii. Flanagan, 247.

xxix. DND Historical Section, *The 1st Can Para Bn In France, 6 June-6 September 1944, Report 26*, 23 August 1949, 7. DHH and CAFM files.

xxx. Cornelius Ryan, *A Bridge Too Far* (London: Touchstone Books, 1995), 244.

xxxi. This time frame became the doctrinal framework that was used during the establishment of the British Airborne Division in 1941. Extracts from “Memorandum on the Organization and Employment of the Airborne Division. by Major-General F.A.M. Browning, D.S.O., Commander, The Airborne Division.” DHH and CAFM files.

xxxii. Ryan, 599.

xxxiii. James Lucas, *Storming Eagles. German Airborne Forces in World War II* (London: Cassell, 2001), 42-47; and Volkmar Kuhn, *German Paratroops in World War II* (London: Ian Allan Ltd, 1978), 33-40.

xxxiv. James E. Mrazek, *The Fall of Eben Emael* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1970), 138.

xxxv. Lucas, 75 and Kuhn, 52-55.

xxxvi. Captain F.O. Miksche, *Paratroops* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1942), 38-39.

xxxvii. G.G. Norton, *The Red Devils* (Hampshire: Leo Cooper, 1971), 254; and Philip Warner, *The Special Forces of World War II* (London: Granada, 1985), 8..

xxxviii. Eric Morris, *Churchill's Private Armies* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 163..

xxxix. David Eshel, *Daring to Win* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1992), 33-34.

xl. Breuer, *Drop Zone Sicily*, 113.

xli. F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol 3, Part II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 797. The units which were brought in specially from Germany were: 101 Werfer Regt, 206 Panzer Bn, 70 Army Assault Bn, 17 MG Bn, 100 Panzer Training Bn.

xlii. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe: A Personal Account of World War II* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1948), 358.

xliii. Ryan, 217.

xliv. Centre of Military History, *Airborne Operations - A German Appraisal*, 28.

xlv. Martin Wolfe, “This Is It,” *Air Power History*, Vol 41, No. 2, Summer 1994, 32; and Heike Hasenauer, “Airborne’s 50th Anniversary,” *Soldiers*, Vol 45, No. 9, September 1990, 49.

xlvi. Flanagan, 256.

xlvi. J.A. Easterbrook, *Fatigue in Mobile Striking Force Parachutists, JSORT Memorandum No. 55/8* (Ottawa: DND Joint Services Operational Research Team, 1955), 1-8.

xlviii. Ryan, 423.

xlix. John Talbot, "The Myth and Reality of the Paratrooper in the Algerian War," *Armed Forces and Society*, November 1976, 73.

I. Callum MacDonald, *The Lost Battle, Crete 1941* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 37.

li. Mrazek, 164.

lii. Eric Morris, *Guerillas in Uniform* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 45-46; Brigadier M.A.J. Tugwell, "Day of the Paratroops," *Military Review*, Vol 57, No.3, March 1977, 48; and Centre of Military History, *Airborne Operations - A German Appraisal* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1989), 21-23. Another account reported German casualties at 44% and aircraft losses at 170 out of 530 operation (32%). Blair, 29.

liii. Lucas, 94.

liv. Hilary St. George Saunders, *The Green Beret. The Story of the Commandos 1940-1945* (London: Michael Joseph, 1949), 193; and Lieutenant-Colonel Robert D. Burhans, *The First Special Service Force. A History of The North Americans 1942-1944* (Toronto: Methuen, 1975), 162.

Iv. Kunzmann-Milius, *Fallschirmjäger der Waffen - SS im Bild* (Osnabrück: Munin Verlag GMBH, 1986), 7.

Ivi. F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol 3, Part II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 382-389.

Ivii. Ridgway, 102 & 295; Blair 102 & 295.

Iviii. Personal letter Major-General M.B. Ridgway to General G.C. Marshall, 1 November 1944. *Marshall Papers*, 31:086, University Publications of America, Bethesda, Maryland.

lix. Kurt Gabel, *The Making of a Paratrooper* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 268.

Ix. Breuer, *Drop Zone Sicily*, 43.

Ixi. Crookenden, 101.

Ixii. Dan Hartigan, interview with Bernd Horn, 30 October 2000.

Ixiii. Ridgway, 7.

Ixiv. Blair, 27. See also Saunders, 317. General-Leutnant Bruno Brauer, who commanded a German parachute regiment during the invasion of the Low Countries in 1940, captured the essence of the 'airborne' allure. Parachuting, he said, "compresses into the space of seconds feelings of concentrated energy, tenseness and abandon; it alone demands a continual and unconditional readiness to risk one's life. Therefore the parachutist experiences the

most exalted feelings of which human beings are capable, namely that of victory over one's self." Brauer concluded, "for us parachutists, the words of the poet, who said that unless you stake your life you will never win it, is no empty phrase." Maurice Newnham, "Parachute Soldiers," *RUSI*, Vol 65, No. 580, November 1950, 592.

Ixv. Larry Gough, "Parachutists Want it Tough," *Liberty*, 4 December 1943. CAFM files.

Ixvi. "Assembling Paratroopers At Calgary," *Globe and Mail*, Vol XCIX, No. 28916, 18 August 1942, 13, NL, Microfilm N-20035.

Ixvii. Lieutenant-Colonel E.M. Flanagan, "Give Airborne Spurs," *Infantry School Quarterly*, Vol 39, No. 2, October 1951, 33.

Ixviii. "3rd Parachute Brigade - Training Instruction No. 3," 23 July 1943, 2 & 6. Canadian Forces Director of History and Heritage 145.4036 (D1). American Major-General A.S. Newman believed that parachuting proves the "will to dare." He further elaborated that "Parachute jumping tests and hardens a soldier under stress in a way nothing short of battle can do. You never know about others. But paratroopers will fight. You can bet on that. They repeatedly face danger while jumping and develop self-discipline that conquers fear. Subconsciously every trooper knows this. That's why he has that extra cocky confidence." (Major-General A.S. Newman, *What Are Generals Made Of?* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1987), 197. Similarly, another American, Major-General Willard Pearson declared, "If you want to select a group of people who are willing to fight, well, one of the best criteria I know is whether or not they will jump out of an airplane. Now that is not to say that some of the others won't fight, but sure as hell the airborne will." Ward Just, *Military Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 130.

Ixix. Brigadier Ridgley Gaither, Headquarters Army Ground Forces, Army War College, "Observer's Report, Airborne Operations, European Theater of Operations," 19 April 1945. CAFM, Airborne Font, Vol 2, File 36.

Ixx. Breuer, *Drop Zone Sicily*, 35.

Ixxi. Letter, Marshall to Ridgway, 18 December 1944, *Marshall Papers*, 31:0876.

Ixxii. "Ad unum omnes," hand-out given to British and Canadian officers serving under Major-General Richard Gale during World War II. CAFM, File AB 21.

Ixxiii. Ryan, 237.

Ixxiv. *Ibid.*, 415.

Ixxv. S.L.A. Marshall, *The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of a Nation* (Quantico: The Marine Corps Association, 1950), 16.

Ixxvi. Brigadier Ridgley Gaither, Headquarters Army Ground Forces, Army War College, "Observer's Report, Airborne Operations, European Theater of Operations," 19 April 1945. CAFM, Airborne Font, Vol 2, File 36.

Ixxvii. Blair, 295.

Ixxviii. Lieutenant-General Michael Gray, "The Birth of A Regiment," *Illustrated London News - Red Berets '44*, 19.

lxxix. Hilary St. George Saunders, *The Red Beret* (London: Michael Joseph, 1950), hand-written foreword by Field-Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein.