

Horizon Unlimited

In the velvety darkness before dawn, fresh winds blew across dozens of airfields in France and England. By the thousands, sleepy-eyed, yawning warriors climbed into their big-pocketed jump suits and pulled on high combat boots. For the airborne troops it was another fateful morning of: "Well, here we go again!" This time they were going beyond the Rhine.

For breakfast there were fresh eggs. But many a tight-stomached trooper passed up this crashing luxury and wanted only scalding black coffee. Soon they were at the airstrips, piling aboard the transport planes and gliders, stacked nose to tail in neat, herringbone formation, with their towlines carefully coiled on the ground.

Once started, the take-offs had to be run with stop-watch accuracy. At ten-second intervals the tow planes moved in from the sides, gently tautened the line, then poured on power and roared down the runway and off into the sky. By then the day had dawned clear and bright, with a near-perfect ten-mile wind.

Big Parade. It was Saturday, March 24, 1945. The western Allies had launched the biggest push, the drive for Germany's throat. General "Ike" Eisenhower was moving more than a million men into action. To the broad picture of overall strategy, the First Allied Airborne Army was contributing its own ultramodern specialty: vertical envelopment of an enemy position.

Flying in double column, two great aerial task forces were converging on a target. Near Brussels the forces joined—the British 6th Airborne Division flying from England, the U.S. 17th Airborne from France. There were more than 3,000 transports, towing gliders and carrying men and equipment. They had 2,000 fighter planes and bombers running interference. If the planes had been strung out in single file they could have stretched in unbroken line from Paris to Berlin. The Allies' big parade was over its German objective for three hours.

Hit the Silk. On the roads below the roaring air fleet, guns, trucks and marching men were raising dust clouds. Farther ahead were smudges of black smoke where heavy bombers were still beating up the target area. Suddenly, out of the smoke, the now bridgeless Rhine appeared, flowing placidly. In the lead transports gum-chewing paratroops were tense. From the jumpmaster in each plane came a curt command: "Stand up!" Then, "Hook up! . . . Stand in the door! . . . Go!" They went tumbling out, 15 men in ten seconds.

To transport pilots and correspondents flying as observers it seemed that the operation was moving at the unreal pace of a speeded-up movie. Within 30 seconds the drop had begun, German flak opened up, colored equipment parachutes dotted the ground, a white parachute was hung up

in a tree, a big Hamilcar (British) glider lay on its back, broken and burning.

Fighter pilots saw concealed flak positions open up on the plump transports; one ship exploded in the air, others tumbled and burned. The fighters, in rocket-firing P-47 Thunderbolts, cursed and went in on the deck, taking desperate chances to silence the enemy ack-ack. One low-flying pilot had to weave his plane through a group of parachuting soldiers. He launched rockets against a flak emplacement, looked up and saw a paratrooper directly in front of him.

"I had to tip my left wing, and rolled past him with only inches to spare," the flyer said. "My tail almost got him, too, and the plane's slipstream must have shaken him up, but thank God I missed him—I don't know yet what my rockets did to that gun position."

Beyond the River. Down on the ground the Allied troops—airborne no longer, just expert infantrymen now—set about speedily to vanquish the first and most formidable foe: the inevitable confusion and disorganization of a large-scale drop. The fact that they were in the middle of enemy territory did not disconcert them. That is what the tough-trained, extra-paid airborne troops are trained for. Their corps spirit is as cocky as the marines'. The masters of many weapons, from the lovingly whetted knife to the .57-caliber antitank gun, they are prepared to fight without tanks or artillery support. They are well aware that their presence in the enemy's vulnerable rear zone is excruciatingly unpleasant to him. But men have to find their outfits; outfits have to get in line with each other for tactical operation; the whole organization has to establish communications and a functioning chain of command. The process takes time.

But once the first shock of landing was over, the men of the Rhine drop went into action smoothly, setting up their guns and mortars, unpacking ammunition, getting the command radios working, moving out to crush local opposition and drive for the main objective.

In this case the objective was a limited one: to help in the establishment of a Rhine bridgehead for the British Second Army by seizing and holding an oblong patch of high ground northwest of Wesel. The drop itself, made in great strength, went on from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. By late afternoon both the British and U.S. divisions had made contact with British troops working overland from the river; by 6 p.m. the skytroopers had taken all their assigned objectives, including several intact bridges over the Yssel River, regarded as the Nazis' next main line of resistance after the Rhine. Before midnight the airborne men had captured 4,000 German troops behind their own front lines.

Nazi resistance was spotty—weak at some places, iron hard at others. British

paratroopers at the north end of the area ran head-on into the German 7th Parachute Division, dropped back before one counter-attack, then drove forward again.

Through the night there were short, bitter patrol clashes all around the perimeter, especially where German detachments came to grips with bands of paratroopers who had dropped farther out and were making their way back to the main body.

But by the second day it was clear that the airborne attack had come off beautifully, and that it could stand almost as a textbook model of sound airborne doctrine: jump for the open spots and clip the enemy from the side; jump in real strength, not in penny packets for the enemy to chew up one by one; jump close enough to the main attacking ground force so that contact can be made before the airborne group is worn down.

For the quality of the performance, major credit was due to two U.S. generals who went in with their men: Major General William M. ("Bud") Miley, commander of the 17th Airborne, taking his outfit into combat for the first time, and Major General Matthew Bunker Ridgway, veteran airborne fighter and commander of the Airborne Army's XVIII Corps. They had led their troops across the enemy barrier on bridges of silk.

The Bosses. Overall commander of the First Allied Airborne Army is a colorful, hell-for-leather urman, Annapolis-trained Lieut. General Lewis H. ("Louie") Brereton. In Brereton's command setup, the role of deputy is filled by tall, bluff, ruddy Major General Richard N. Gale, who also doubles as active head of the



BRADLEY & RIDGWAY
Now they know all the ropes.



U.S. Army Signal Corps-Associated Press

PARATROOPS DROPPING NEAR WESEL
For the enemy: excruciating unpleasantness.

First British Airborne Command. But the Airborne Army's heavyweight punch, the potent XVIII Corps with three known U.S. divisions, is wielded by husky, aggressive, driving General Ridgway, rated by U.S. Army chiefs as the world's No. 1 active airborne commander.

Six years ago Ridgway was not even involved in U.S. airborne training. Neither was anyone else. U.S. airborne activities began in 1940, in a shy and tentative way, with an experimental platoon of 48 men and a couple of lieutenants. There was no ready-made body of doctrine or data; in the beginning some of the best information came from the Department of Agriculture's forestry experts, who knew something about parachuting men & materials to fight forest fires.

Like a sensitive plant growing in a bull pit, the U.S. paratroop platoon modestly expanded to a battalion, then to a provisional group.

Nazi airborne coups in Crete and the Low Countries opened many military eyes, and some of the U.S. Army's best brains, including Air Forces General Henry H. ("Hap") Arnold and the late, great Ground Forces chief, Lieut. General Lesley J. ("Whitey") McNair, lent support and advice to the U.S. paratroop and glider program. That program really got rolling in 1942, with the setting up of two full airborne divisions.

As commander of the newly activated 101st Airborne, the Army chose Major General William Carey Lee, unquestioned father of U.S. airborne doctrine. In the training program from the start, Lee had been the first general to jump with his troops, the first chief of the Airborne Command. General Lee trained the 101st, took it to England, whetted it to a razor edge for the Normandy invasion. Then, to the heartbreak of his officers and men, he was compelled to give up the command because of illness, and return to the U.S.

For its other airborne outfit, the Army decided to take a hot infantry division and convert it. The choice fell on the 82nd—once commanded by Lieut. General Omar N. Bradley, then by his friend

and deputy, Matt Ridgway. As Ridgway recalls it, his introduction to the airborne merry-go-round was brisk and informal. The War Department simply called him up and said: "Would you like to become airborne?" Said Ridgway, no hater of change or challenge: "Yes."

He started methodically, reading all there was to read on his new subject—which did not take long. Then he applied himself to the fundamentals of parachuting and gliding. His first jump came off without incident; his first glider ride characteristically ended in a rousing wreck, from which he jumped clear, ending up bruised in body and dignity, but professionally impressed with the way the ungainly box kite could put down a whole squad, jeep or gun in one place.

By the luck of the draw and the schedules, the 82nd was the first airborne division to go overseas and into action. Ridgway and his outfit became the test case for the whole airborne program. Elements of the division went first to North Africa, and the entire division was first committed in Sicily, July 1943.

That show, for the airborne people, was something like giving a command performance with a symphony orchestra of well-trained musicians, none of whom had been introduced to each other or had ever played in public before. Liaison between air, ground and sea forces was faulty. In one of the war's most tragic errors, U.S. antiaircraft guns blasted down a covey of troop-laden planes like fat ducks. Because of this, the scheduled glider runs were hastily called off. Other transport pilots missed landmarks and sowed their hapless paratroops up & down the coast, miles from their objectives. In consequence, the parachutists came down in so many places that the alarmed Germans thought they were being hit with a fantastically large skyborne force, and milled around in such indecision that the surface invasion was greatly facilitated.

For a time after Sicily the Army was about ready to scrap the airborne divisions; even some of its most progressive

commanders feared that a division was too unwieldy a unit to jump and glide. Ridgway and the other airborne men had to summon all their powers of tact and persuasion. In the end they prevailed, and the divisions survived to undergo the test of D-day in Normandy. On that historic morning three airborne divisions—the 82nd, 101st and British 6th—spearheaded the great invasion, took their objectives, helped secure the all-important beachhead. That ended the arguments. Eisenhower went ahead and organized the First Allied Airborne Army, naming Ridgway to head the XVIII Corps.

Airborne's next show was the Arnhem drop, a bold effort to turn the German defenses on the lower Rhine. That gamble failed gallantly when the British 1st Airborne, key division of the offensive, was badly cut up and finally forced to retire. Whatever the true explanation, nothing will ever persuade airborne men that the failure was not caused primarily by overcautious use of Field Marshal Montgomery's armor, which never broke through to relieve the beleaguered British division.

After Arnhem the U.S. airborne outfits retired to rest areas in France. While "resting," they contributed notably to the blunting of the desperate German winter offensive in the Ardennes. There the 101st staged its epic defense of Bastogne, while the 82nd held like a rock on the northern side of the bulge. After setting up his corps headquarters for that battle, Ridgway made a mild contribution to military literature. Over a field telephone, to a bewildered general in another sector, he remarked conversationally: "There hasn't been a breakthrough here and there isn't going to be. We are going to attack."

Army Brat. At 50, Matt Ridgway looks like a Roman senator and lives like a Spartan hoplite. He is ruggedly built (5 ft. 10½; 175 lbs.), has straight dark brown hair sprinkled with grey, dark brown eyes, expressive eyebrows. His face (variously described as "distinguished," "handsome" or "austere") is deeply tanned

and crinkled with the lines natural to an outdoorsman. He has never known any life except that of the Army. An "army brat," he was born at Fort Monroe, Va., son of Colonel Thomas Ridgway. In due time he went to West Point, was graduated in 1917, and like many another unhappy officer (Eisenhower, for one) fretted out World War I in a training job in the U.S. Afterward he served in China, Nicaragua, the Philippines.

In peacetime he played a fast game of tennis, liked hunting, riding and flying (he is not a pilot). In war, for an airborne general, exercise is not a problem; his chief recreations, fitted in at odd moments, are reading and cribbage. Kipling is his sure-fire reading, but a correspondent who visited his command post on a recent evening found him deep in Lord Moran's *Anatomy of Courage*. Like any G.I., he is avid for mail from his blond wife, who lives in Washington, and their daughter, wife of a lieutenant colonel now on duty in Europe.

After Europe, What? The war in Europe is still a bitter war, and there can be more airborne drops before it is over. But the time is at least dimly in sight when the men of the Airborne Army will be temporarily out of places to go when they feel like passing the word: "Here we go again!" When that time comes, there is no reason to doubt that Brereton, Ridgway and the rest of the gang will pack up and head for the other war. The 11th Division, fourth announced U.S. airborne outfit, went direct to General MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Theater, and fought well on Luzon, making a notable drop on Corregidor. In the big push against Japan, airborne men will have plenty to do.

Whatever tasks they do, the manner of their doing will bear a strong stamp of Matt Ridgway. All four announced commanders of U.S. airborne divisions served under him in the 82nd at one time or another. In the words of a colleague: "Each of them is a hunk of Ridgway."* For them and for all their men, Matt Ridgway once set down the definitive rule for airborne operations: "The horizon is unlimited."

* The four "hunks": Major General Maxwell D. Taylor (101st); Major General James M. Gavin (82nd); Major General William M. Miley (17th); Major General Joseph M. Swing (11th).

THIS INVASION WAS DIFFERENT

Robert Capa, war-going LIFE photographer, parachuted into Germany last week with the U.S. 17th Airborne Division. Two nights later he turned up in Paris, bone-weary, unshaven, still clad in a dirty paratroop uniform. At the apartment of TIME's chief military correspondent, Charles Christian Wertenbaker, Mr. Capa consented to eat some ham and eggs and beefsteak and bread and butter and cheese and cake, and to drink some coffee and burgundy and champagne and cognac. Between swallows he explained what it was like.

"This was the first invasion of my life where nobody was puking. I waited for it but nobody did it. We left from somewhere in France. Everybody left from all over. It was very funny, the ride with this terrific armada over France and Belgium. Fifteen minutes before I had to jump I started thinking over my life. I went over everything I ever ate and did and I finished up in twelve minutes. I had three minutes left so I started to read a book by Eric Linklater.

"We dropped at 1025, four miles north of the Rhine. Our plane was a hell of a lot hit before we got out of it. Those troop-carrier command boys deserve a hell of a lot of credit. They have to drop their men at 600 feet and that is too low for them to get out themselves and so they have to turn around and nurse that plane back and sometimes they do and sometimes they don't, but they always drop their sticks of men. The Germans had small arms and small antiaircraft fire but compared to the Normandy defenses the defenses of the Rhine were definitely nonexistent. If the Germans could have put in 20 tanks they could have murdered the gliders. They knew we were coming but they had no defenses.

"I jumped with three cameras and a canteen of Scotch and I pointed out to myself that the canteen was very important. The other guys jumped out yelling 'Umbriago!' which is what you yell now, but I was yelling 'one thousand' because if your parachute does not open you are to yell 'one thousand, two thousand, three thousand' before you pull the string. The moment between your jump and land is 24 hours in any man's life. I had time to figure out six or seven things before I hit—one thing was that there is no future in this paratroop business.

"The most amazing thing I ever saw is the way everybody just lays on the ground when they get down. It seemed like two minutes and everybody was just laying there. The first thing is a certain relief. You are down, you are not hurt. You are reluctant to start the next phase. There were some paratroopers hanging in the trees and they were murdered by the Germans. They were shot twenty times. It is fine in practice if you land in a tree but if there is a guy with a gun shooting at you you are a dead duck. I started getting out of my harness. Then somebody started shooting at me and I started a beautiful long Hungarian swear. The guy next to me said: 'Don't start those Jewish prayers now. They won't do you any more good.'

"It was 20 minutes before I had a chance to smoke and it was 1210 before I had a swig of whiskey. After that we were busy all day. At 1830 I finished and went to look for the CP. I found General Ridgway and Miley, the divisional commander, playing Big Indians. They were cleaning out the woods and crawling around on their hands and knees like they were lieutenants and having a hell of a lot of fun. I went to bed in my parachute and dreamt that LIFE said this was a fine story and I could go back skiing.

"It seems to me that the last days of the war were in the battle of Bastogne. Those kind of slow-moving businesses afterwards when we moved up the Rhine finished the German Army. And much as I hate to make primitive statements, the Germans are the meanest bastards. They are the meanest during an operation and afterwards they all have a cousin in Philadelphia. That is what I like about the French. They do not have cousins in Philadelphia."