

Look Out Below!

(Continued from Page 1)

The day I arrived at Fort Benning to begin jump training, I received a wire from my brother in The Dalles, Oregon, stating that my mother was very ill.

On my way west I called up from Chicago, only to learn that she had died that day. Her body was brought back to Luverne, Minnesota, the place of her birth and childhood; the place she always called "home," the place she loved above all others. My mother had always worked hard, very hard. Al had been the manager of a small-town hotel, mother took care of the food end of the business and for years did the cooking. Her life was filled with many worries and heartaches, but she always kept her keen sense of humor and Irish wit.

The help and guests of the hotel loved her for her kind and affable nature made the place a home rather than a lodging house. With scarcely a wrinkle in her face or a grey hair in her head, she looked like a young girl, as she lay in her coffin.

She had often dwelt on the thought that I would one day say her funeral Mass, and she had spoken of it in a manner of real anticipation and delight. I suppose only the mother of a priest can understand that.

After the funeral, I prepared to return to the Fort Benning jump school, and I discovered that the prospect of jumping from a plane did not seem nearly as hazardous as it had before my mother's death.

I realized then that the great mental hazard in parachute jumping was more than subconscious concern for one's family and dependents than for one's own safety; not, of course, that the latter was ever absent. This fact has been demonstrated over and over again, and I think it could be authenticated by almost every parachutist. I am sure the wives and mothers of paratroopers suffered the fearful anticipation of the next jump more keenly than did the jumpers.

As a matter of fact, after several successful jumps the paratrooper gains a certain degree of confidence that is not shared by those who must wait at the phone for the familiar voice, "Made it O.K., darling. The landing was perfect," or for the dreaded professional voice, "This is the Fort Benning Station Hospital. Your husband..."

I vowed when I was going through the agony of jump school that I would never say anything good about it. It was even tougher than it was reputed to be.

In all fairness, however, it must be admitted that the desired results were actually obtained, and the qualities of physical fitness, determination, and aggressiveness nursed at Benning bore fruit in Normandy, in Holland, then at Bastogne, and much later, in another war, in Korea.

I shall try to be as objective about the airborne jump school as the memory of my sweating body, bruised skin and bones, aching muscles, abused dignity, and deflated ego will permit. If a note of acidity is detectable in my description of the jump school, I would ask the reader kindly to remember that it is entirely premeditated and intentional.

When I reported in at the school, the adjutant told me that the two previous chaplains to enroll were now in the hospital, one with a broken leg, the other with an injured back. My expression must have been both comic and tragic, for he looked

at me and laughed, then said encouragingly, "But three or four chaplains have already gone through the school successfully."

I made a noise in my throat that was meant to be a chuckle and said with an assurance I was far from feeling, "I guess if they can make it, I can."

The school was divided into four weeks of intensive training called Stages A, B, C, and D. With seventy-seven other officers I reported May first to the chief instructor of A Stage. The training was conducted by sergeants who gloried in the fulfillment of an enlisted man's dream — to be in a position of authority over commissioned officers.

Most of the sergeants were former professional athletes or acrobats. The words and order of a training sergeant was as absolute as any order of a commanding officer to his subordinates. One lieutenant colonel who spoke sharply to a training sergeant and refused to obey the sergeant's orders was made to apologize in the presence of the entire class assembled on the day of their dismissal from the school.

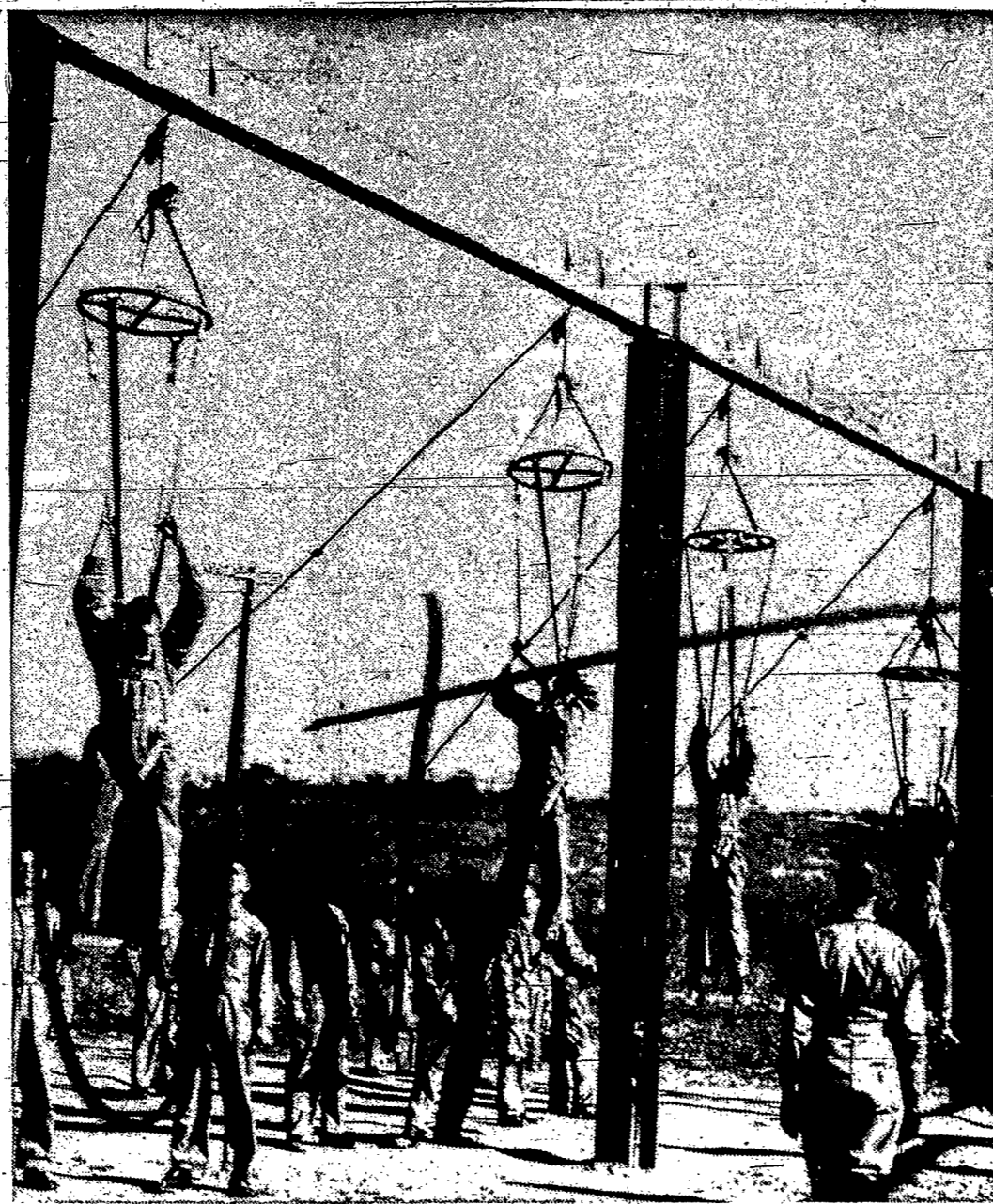
They meant business here; they played no favorites, and any man who failed to fulfill the rugged requirements was washed out. Colonels were dropped as readily as second lieutenants. The boot as ruthless as a fine officer. Those who failed the latter spoke of the school in terms of bitterness and hatred; even those who eventually made the grade would always recall the four demented weeks with more repugnance and revulsion than pride.

Calisthenics and long runs constituted A Stage. I thought that I was in fairly good physical condition when I arrived at Benning, but the first morning of calisthenics — more than three hours of it — convinced me that I was as flabby and soft as any sergeant-major in the Quartermaster Corps.

We finished the morning with a forty-minute run under a broiling Georgia sun, leaving almost a quart of sweat stretched out at intervals along the road. Some had quit in anger; others ran until physically incapable of going farther; some were out cold. The "meat wagon" (ambulances, to the civilian) picked them up.

Those who finished the run arrived at the barracks at the stroke of twelve and, drenched, tired, and worn out even beyond the ability to curse the school, flopped on their bunks, unable to make the effort to go across the road for dinner. Food wasn't interesting. A shower required energy to take off fatigues. We only wanted rest, rest, rest.

Most of us dozed in our sweaty and smelly fatigues until they blew that infernal whistle again at one p.m.



Paratroopers of the original test platoon training device at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1940.

We had the same schedule in the afternoon as in the morning, except that there was a little jump thrown in, plus several tries at the obstacle course.

We always finished up with the inevitable run. I did rather badly with the calisthenics. I never could seem to get the hang of climbing the rope, and the Indian-club exercises left my arms limp and listless long before the sergeant said, "Enough."

"I finally learned to do fifty push-ups, but I was almost the last man in the class to do it. I had recommended to the Trappist monks the duck-waddle and squat jumps as a penance more agonizing than any hair-shirt. The only thing that kept me from being washed out of A Stage was the fact that I never dropped out of a run."

Only the toughest of the students would sacrifice precious hours of sleep for a movie at night. In the evening after supper, saying the Breviary in the quiet of the chapel was restful; but I do hope there is some truth to the old legend about the angels finishing the rosary for those who fall asleep from fatigue while saying it.

Mass at six a.m. would begin another day just like the last. The crowded barracks of seventy-eight officers had slipped to a comfortable thirty-eight by the end of the first week. Many of them had quit the first couple of days, but not before telling the sergeants

and everyone connected with the school what they thought of it — and in terms not permitted in these pages.

B Stage, the second week of training, was much more interesting. During this week we employed the many ingenious gadgets designed to simulate parachute jumping.

The first prop was the fuselage of a plane from which the wings had been removed. They seated twenty-two of us in it at a time, and we were shown how to stand up properly in a plane, how to hook up the strap that pulls the top off the parachute pack, how to check the equipment of the man in front of us, how to respond to the orders of the jump master, and how to make a proper exit from the plane. We began to get cocky; jumping was going to be simple.

Then they took us to the landing trainer. This is a fiendish device by which the student is hooked up in a jumper's harness attached to a roller that slides down a long incline.

At any moment he chooses, and always when you least expect it, the sergeant pulls a lever that drops you to the ground while you are traveling about twenty miles an hour. The idea is to hang on to your risers, duck your head between your knees as soon as you touch the ground, and go rolling along like a ball.

Failure to duck quickly enough means that you go sliding along the cinders on your

The mock-up tower was a thirty-foot platform with a long cable extending on it inclined to a big soft pile of sawdust. After the hookup to the cable, the sergeant would give the signal to jump. The exit, the drop, and the jerk from the cable closely simulated an actual jump.

The ride to the sawdust pile was fun at first, but each succeeding jump from this tower seemed much farther from the ground. We had never quit the school during this phase that we did later on during the actual jump from an airplane in flight.

The sergeant failed to hook up one man properly for his jump from the tower, and the man fell all the way to the ground. Fortunately he only sustained a fractured foot, but our confidence in the sergeant in charge was considerably shaken.

The "trainium" was another of the elaborate props — a forty-foot-high maze of bars, catwalks, ladders, and so forth. There was only one other in the world like it, and that was at the parachute school in Germany. We hoped the Germans had as many accidents on theirs as we had on ours.

The afternoon of B Stage were spent in the packing sheds where we learned to pack our own chutes. This was supposed to give us confidence in the chutes, but most of us would have preferred to leave the job to a professional packer. Our first jumps would be made with chutes packed ourselves.

This really worried me, for I had no confidence in the bulging, lopsided, twisted thing that had taken me an hour and a half to pack. The sergeant told us, however, that you could jump a chute thrown in a barracks bag and it would open. The occasional "streamers" in the preceding classes didn't seem to warrant such confidence.

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NEXT WEEK—The real jump!

Canada Bishops

Seek State Aid

Vancouver (NC)—The Catholic Bishops of British Columbia have called for state aid to Catholic schools.

The bishops cited the "heavy financial burden" borne by Catholic schools in a brief submitted to a commission appointed by the British Columbia provincial government to study education in the province.

BOOK SHELF

Fact And Fancy

By Sister Margaret Teresa, Nazareth College

New Horizons in Latin America, by John J. Conslide, M.S. Dodel, Mead '58, \$72 pp., illustrated, \$5.99.

Three Who Ventured, by Myra Conolly. Lippincott '58, 248 pp.

Father Conslide is a very special kind of John Gunther reporting from "Inside Latin America."

For a lifetime, from the days of his Across a World, he has been following the fortunes of that Catholic world to the south of us, in which just one single country (Brazil) is bigger than Europe, bigger than the U.S.A., in which a total of 29 countries have a Catholic population numbering 100 million every one of them—important persons.

Only 1 per cent of the world's priests are there, however. There are some 35,000 priests in Europe for 300,000,000 persons, and there are only 90,000 Sisters. The U.S.A. has proportionally ten times as many.

There are more than 6 million Protestants now, but as very long ago there were 600,000. Latin America receives only 1 per cent of our Foreign Aid.

It is this Catholic world, poor in religious personnel, low in funds, that Father Conslide explores, country by country — discovering a high degree and quality of Catholic activity.

And oh, the stories! He has entered everywhere, visits the rich poor-spirit and the poor rich in love-and-hope; the priests; the Protestant ministers too; the Mayan Catholic pagans who have kept the Faith without any help and have kept their ancient Indian beliefs right along with it (Gods venerated as saints), and the millions of descendants of enslaved Africans who have done the same thing.

He visits Sisters in anti-clerical Mexico who work in lay dress and are beloved by the deep Catholic Indians.

The stories are endless, starting beautiful. Father Conslide takes you to modern cities and jungle hideouts, to business offices and Eucharistic Congresses and the bedside of the dying poor. He reports from inside Latin America, from inside its real heart.

Myles Conolly has lived and written out his insights in the Hollywood world, lessening the number of harmful scenarios by producing good ones, spinning out Mr. Blue in several forms. (The

Red Rituals Ape Church Services

Berlin (NC)—East Germany's Red authorities have published an order calling for the start of communist birth, marriage and funeral ceremonies.

The new functions, instead of church baptism and marriage ceremonies, are to be based on "socialistic humanism which is atheistic and acknowledges no supernatural being but mankind struggling for peace, democracy and socialism."

The ceremonies include the obligation for parents and couples to sign promises to be good socialists and give their children a socialistic education.

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