LOOK OUT BELOW!

By REV. (Lt. Col.) FRANCIS L. SAMPSON

To bring you up to date—Father Sampson, chaplain of the 101st Division U.S. Army paratroop corps, has completed his training for combat duty in World War II. This week's chapter describes the drop into Normandy on D-Day, 1944.

D-Day, Normandy

CHAPTER SEVEN

There could be no mistaking the meaning of the elaborate preparations this time.

This wasn't a dry run. They don't pass out "live" grenades and ammunition for a dry run.

About ten days before the invasion two battalions of the regiment were sent to Merryfield Airport, the third battalion to the airfield just outside of Reading, almost a hundred miles away. The men were not allowed to leave the tent area within the field, except to march in companies to the war rooms where everyone was briefed on the mission.

The closest possible guard and secrecy were observed; there was a double check of all passes. The band, which, of course, was not going with us, outdid itself with its music to keep the morale up.

There was no KP, nor were there any other onerous duties either; a service unit took care of that.

The men were in high spirits as they sat in the sun outside their tents sharpening their knives, writting letters home, or just swapping stories. The tenseness of the past several months was gone, and the men seemed actually glad that they were finally going to be a part of the big show.

They were confident. They were the best!

Colonel Johnson had told them they were for more than a year now; they had come to believe it.

As General Eisenhower passed among the men with his friendly grin and informal chats, it is difficult to say whether he gave them more confidence than they gave him as they grinned back through their charcoal-and-linseed makeup. He was the soldiers' "right guy," and he refused to show in his face the terrific burden of the decision for which he accepted full responsibility; nor did he betray a certain apprehension he must have felt.

One of his high staff officers, it was rumored, had stated that to land airborne troops behind the Atlantic Wall, in view of the uncertain weather predictions that might postpone the beach landing, was "pure murder." Nevertheless a single day's delay now might destroy every advantage of surprise.

General Eisenhower calculated the risks and was ready to gamble. But he was gambling with the lives of these fine young men; he knew it, and they knew it, but it was O.K. with them. They were ready and willing to vindicate his judgment.

Arrangements were made for Chaplain Engel and myself to fly back and forth between the airports so that we could see all of our men before D-Day and H-Hour.

I had each man write his name and put it in a box beside my tent when he went to confession so that I might be able to check up later to make sure all the Catholic men received the sacraments. Though the confessions took more than three full days, it was a great satisfaction to know that all the Catholics of the regiment had fortified themselves in the sacrament of Penance.

It took almost an hour to distribute Communion at the two Masses on the eve of departure. I could later write with certainty to the parents of men who did not return from Normandy that their sons had been well prepared for death.

After General Taylor had given an inspirational talk, Colonel Johnson also addressed the men. It was a talk the Colonel had looked forward to since the war began, a talk that I am sure he had rehearsed for months. He used his time-honored tactics, and they were effective.

He was the fighter, nothing else, and he pretended to be nothing else. The men responded; they knew their CO had guts, a quality they admire in an officer above tactical ability.

At the emotional peak of his talk Jumpy reached for his knife strapped to his boot. He pulled and pulled at it, but he couldn't get it out of its sheath. Getting very red in the face, he finally reached for his trusty bowie knife that was strapped to his waist.

He raised the bowie high above his head and screamed, "I swear to you that before the dawn of another day this knife will be stuck in the foulest Nazi belt in France! ARE YOU WITH ME?"

"WE'RE WITH YOU!"

"THEN LET'S GO GET 'EM! GOOD HUNTING!"

Colonel Johnson jumped down from the stand, and we went to put on our equipment and to make any last minute adjustments of parachute harnesses.

We were much over-equipped, the fault, we suspected, of some logistics expert in the Pentagon who tested his theories by jumping off a footstool fully equipped.

Let me give you an idea of how loaded we were.

Every man, besides his weapon and extra ammunition belt, carried two parachutes (one weighing thirty-eight pounds, the other twenty-eight), an extra complete set of gas-impregnated uniform and boots, several first-aid equipment pouches, canteen, four K-ration boxes, grenades, blood plasma or mortar rounds or machine-gun ammo, a Mae West life preserver, and personal toilet articles. Also, most men carried that crowning insult to the enemy—comic books and murder mysteries.

I carried no weapon or ammunition, but I did have a couple of extra sets of blood plasma, a doctor's field kit, and a complete Mass kit.

Most of us with all our equipment weighed well over three hundred pounds, and air corps people had to help the men get into the planes. I recalled that I had blown a couple of panels from my chute in jump school with only my own hundred and eighty pounds exerting the pressure.

Eisenhower was standing alongside the road waving to each group as it passed. As we marched to the planes, I waited as the men went by, shaking as many hands as I could, and gave each a sincere "God bless you!"

After we were lifted and pushed into the planes by the airmen, we struggled to our seats and tried in vain to fasten the seat belts. Most of us pulled off the extra equipment. When we were settled, I led our plane load of twenty-two men in prayer.

We took off right on time and once the formations had formed, we went at top speed. Once over the Channel the lead man kicked all the discarded equipment (including twenty two gas-impregnated uniforms) out of the plane. Somehow the loss to the taxpayer didn't even bother us.

I walked to the open door and looked down at the Channel; it was choppy and uninviting; the sky was overcast. That was good; we wouldn't be such easy targets when we hit the French coast in another ten minutes. Our protective fighter planes shot past us now and then.

The men were generally quiet; some tried to sleep, others smoked steadily, and a few tried to be nonchalant by humming some modern songs.

It was hard to believe that we were now only seconds away from the enemy and that within an hour some of us would be dead.

We got across without mishap, but as soon as we were over land, the ack-ack was terrific. The plane was hit many times, and Butkovich had a fragment go through his leg, but he didn't tell anyone until after we had jumped. As we stood up and hooked up on orders from the officer jumpmaster, the plane was rocking badly in a strong wind.

The green light came on, and the jump master pushed our equipment bundles out. We went out as fast as we could, my assistant right behind me. Our jump was a surprise all right — for us.

The Germans were waiting for us, and they sent such a barrage of bullets at us that it will always remain a mystery to me how any of us lived. The tracer bullets alone made it look like the Fourth of July.

I collapsed part of my chute to come down faster. From there on I placed myself in the hands of my guardian angel.

I lit in the middle of a stream over my head and grabbed my knife to cut my bags from me (my Mass kit, doctor's kit, etc.), but I could scarcely move to free myself. The canopy of my chute stayed open, and the strong wind blew me down stream about a hundred yards into shallow water.

I lay there a few minutes exhausted and as securely pinned down by equipment as if I had been in a strait jacket. None of our men was near. It took about ten minutes to get out of my chute. (It seemed an hour, for, judging from the fire, I thought that we had landed in the middle of a target range).

I crawled back to the edge of the stream near the spot where I landed, and started diving for my Mass equipment. By pure luck I recovered it after the fifth or sixth dive.

The whole area was swamp with deep little streams running through it. As I started to get my bearings, I looked for the lights to assemble on. I learned later that we were several miles from where we were supposed to jump, and that the ack-ack of the Germans had forced the planes to disperse and dump us where they could.

Later, I learned too that this had been most fortunate; for the path finders with the assembly lights had landed on the proper DZ, and many had been killed almost as soon as they landed. Luckily I spotted my assistant not very far away, still struggling to get out of his chute. We got together and made for the nearest hedgerow that would offer cover.

We no sooner got there than a plane on fire came straight at us. It crashed about a hundred yards in front of us and threw flaming pieces over our heads. We prayed for the men who were in the plane and then watched and prayed for the men in two other planes that were crashing about a mile away.

My assistant had lost his weapon in the stream, so we welcomed two of our men who came crawling along the hedgerow.

Photo shows a paratrooper about to jump into the bullet torn air over Normandy on D-Day, 1944.

Our little group discussed what we ought to do and then started toward the place where we judged our troops might assemble. We moved slowly under concealment of hedgerows and were glad to see a half-dozen paratroopers running down along the ditch by the road. They were not of our regiment but told us where we might find the 501st or a part of it.

We went in the direction they pointed until we came under heavy enemy rifle fire. We ducked into a nearby farmhouse where we found about twenty-five troopers, all wounded or injured from their jump.

It was just a three-room house, and the French farmer, his wife, and little girl were being of what help they could to the wounded. Chaplain McGee, a splendid Protestant chaplain from the 506th Parachute Regiment, was giving first aid as best he could. He had run out of sulfa drugs and compresses, and since my assistant and I had quite a bit of medical supplies, he was very happy to see us.

We worked with the men for the better part of the day. Chaplain McGee was a former aid man in the enlisted ranks during peacetime before he went away to study for the ministry, so he directed our first aid work with the wounded.

About four in the afternoon a wounded soldier came in and told us that he and his buddy had been shot a hundred yards or so from the house. His buddy still lay where he fell. Chaplain McGee and I went to find him. He was already dead.

We dragged him back, rolled him in a blanket, and put him in the shed.

Then a mortar shell hit the back door of the house just as the French woman and her little girl were bringing in water from the well. Both were killed. As I knelt to anoint them, the farmer threw himself on their bodies and broke into agonizing sobs.

When I put my hand on his shoulder, he jumped up, his hands and face smeared with the blood of his loved ones, and went yelling down the road shaking his fists in the direction of the Nazis.

Some of our patients were getting worse, and Chaplain McGee said that they had to have a doctor. I decided to try to find our regimental aid station. My assistant stayed to offer what help he could to Chaplain McGee.

After going about a half mile, I found a patrol of men. They told me where they thought the aid station might be.

Since the area was under fire, I avoided the road and went by way of the swamp. The deep swamp was filthy and cold but afforded good cover. Addeville was the village the soldiers had told me to go to; with dusk closing in, I arrived there to find Major Allen in charge of about two hundred men scattered throughout the village.

They were have a real fight with a German unit a few hundred yards up the road. I went first to the aid station to tell Doc Carrel about Chaplain McGee's predicament.

"Kingston," he said to the assistant surgeon, "you take Cleary and follow the Father's directions to that group of wounded."

I then went to speak to Major Allen. He was on the 300 radio talking to Colonel Johnson. Allen motioned for me to stand by. Johnson was, as usual, talking loud enough even over the radio to be heard by everyone around.

"We're going on down to the locks," he said. "You'll have to withdraw from your position and come with us."

"I can't," said Allen. "We'd be overrun. And how long will you last at the locks if we don't hold off here?"

"ALLEN," he yelled, "DON'T TALK TO ME LIKE THAT! DO AS I SAY!" Allen looked at me and winked, laughing noiselessly.

"Think it over, sir," he replied. Johnson's reply was one long string of oaths. Allen laughed quietly again and said, "Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

Allen then turned to me. "Father, we're pulling out in about an hour. Tell Doc Carrel that the walking wounded and the aid men and you and he will go with us. When we move, we've got to go quickly, 'cause the krauts will close in on this place fast. I'd like to stay and hold, for it's a good high position; but we don't have enough men to do it."

What he was trying to say was that the non-walking wounded would have to be left behind.

It was one of those decisions officers hate to make, but for the safety of the whole unit are sometimes forced to make.

Allen was back on the radio calling in heavy support fire from the light cruiser eight miles away at sea. "Give me six more rounds on the same coordinates as the last."

Doc Carrel looked at me when I told him what Allen had said. "This is a bad time to leave them," he said. "Neither side is taking many prisoners now, and the Germans will consider them a liability."

"I don't think they will do anything to them. Their record as far as the wounded is concerned is pretty good," I said. "At any rate, I'm staying with them."

"Well . . ." Doc Carrell, a real friend, started to say something, then just shrugged his shoulders. He looked around the big room and pointed out the most serious cases to me. "That man in the corner won't live—hand grenade went off in his pocket; his leg is gone, and he's ground up inside. Fenton on the bed should pull through if you can get a full unit of plasma in him.

"He has a big hole in the back, but no vital organs touched. There are two broken legs among this group — they have splints on. The man with the head wound . . . I don't know how serious it is, but for the time being he can't see. Just change the dressing now and then.

"Do what you can for the others; they should pull through. There are fourteen non-walking wounded in these two rooms and the shed. Incidentally, there's a psycho in the shed. Better keep him away from the others."

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NEXT WEEK—Nazis arrive.

Thief Picks Wrong Church

New Orleans — (NC) — A would-be poor box robber picked the wrong church. The pastor is chaplain of the police and fire departments.

The thief dragged the poor box into the rectory but apparently abandoned it when patrolmen and the pastor, Father Joseph Laux, began searching the building. He was found hiding on the church grounds.

First Arabic Novena Held

Baghdad — (NC) — For the first time in history Iraqi Catholics have been able to take part in a Novena of Grace in Arabic.

Increase In Lay Teachers Predicted

Chicago — (RNS) — More lay teachers will join Roman Catholic school faculties if they are made to feel like integral members and not temporary substitutes for religious, Archbishop Albert G. Meyer of Chicago said here.

"With the problem of sheer numbers of students," he told a group of Catholic high school principals, "that factor alone should give our religious a deeper understanding of the contribution the lay teachers can and will make, and therefore the necessity of integrating them fully into our school system."

THE PRELATE is chairman of the education department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference. He said that increasing school enrollments have made the lay teacher a permanent factor in Catholic school operation regardless of whatever increase takes place in the membership of religious orders. These historically have provided the bulk of Catholic school teaching staffs.

Archbishop Meyer spoke to the principals during a teachers' institute sponsored by the archdiocesan school board. "We note with a good deal of chagrin," he said, "that the number of religious teachers is not keeping pace with the enrollment in Catholic schools.

"This is said by no means as a reflection on other sections of our school system, but religious by reason of their lives consecrated to God have a profound influence on their pupils which cannot be generally met by those other teachers, valuable, esteemed, and important as they are in our school system."