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Part III of a three part series

The Allied invasion of the Normandy beaches on June 6, 1944 may have been the beginning of the end for Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany, but it proved to be the beginning of a long and hazardous journey for the men of the 96th Troop Carrier Squadron.

Following their success at Drop Zone D, the squadron, part of the larger 440th Troop Carrier Group, continued with resupply missions to ground-based troops in the European theatre, and were detached for service in Italy in July and August 1944. Upon their return to England, the next big operation for the 440th TCG was Operation Comet. Set for early September, the mission was to drop paratroopers in Belgium ahead of General George Patton's Third Army. Then tragedy struck.

"My plane 'Toni', serial number 919, was first in line. We were placed wingtip to wingtip after being refueled and serviced," Staff Sgt. Irving Brezack of the 96th TCS wrote in a letter shortly after the Sept. 2, 1944 incident at RAF Fulbeck, England. "My crew chief, Raymond B. Clark, and myself were sitting in the cockpit reading a UFE magazine when a rocking motion struck our airplane, followed by a loud roar... We were told that the paratroopers had dropped a pack while loading the plane. The entire work detail was killed in the explosion. In that crater, which was a twist of fate, all we saw was someone's dogtag and an open pocket bible. Roll call had to be taken later on that day to see, who was on the detail that unfortunate day."

Annando Kramer, also of the 96th recalled the incident in a related letter.

"My friend, Roland P. E. Dahlberg, was the crew chief on that airplane, and he was standing right in the doorway of his airplane when that bundle of landmines went off," Kramer wrote. "Fortunately he had his back turned towards the explosion, or he would have been blinded. At the hospital they dug about 165 pieces of shrapnel out of his body. It was a miracle that he survived, but he had a strong will to live and much faith in Jesus Christ."

The incident occurred when a detail of paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division's 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment Company I, were unloading parapacks from a 6x6 truck and placing them under the left wing of the "Bama Belle," C-47 number 43-15067 belonging to the squadron. One of the parapack bundles toppled onto a bundle containing 28 landmines, which exploded simultaneously. Sgt. Shearer, Plc. Mitchell and Pvt. Spera were killed instantly and two other member of the 82nd Airborne were wounded. Sgt. Dahlberg was the only casualty in the 96th TCS.

Operation Comet was cancelled due to Patton's Third Army overrunning the drop zone at Tournai, Belgium.

Their next operation was Operation Market-Garden, a re-crafted version of Operation Comet. It was scheduled for Sept. 17, 1944 and billed as the largest daylight paratroop drop of World War II. Utilizing 1,544 troop carrier aircraft and 478 gliders into the rear areas of the German lines, the plan would outflank Germany's "Siegfried Line" and liberate Holland. The 96th TCS was to drop paratroopers and gliders from the 82nd Airborne into Nijmegen, Holland during the mission.

The airborne component featured the British 1st Airborne Division taking Arnhem in the north to capture the bridges over the Rhine, the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division was in the center at Nijmegen to secure the bridges over the Meuse and Waal rivers and hold the high ground towards Groesbeek, while the 101st Airborne Division took care of the bridges near Eindhoven, Holland in the south. The British 30th Division would then make its way north through Eindhoven and Nijmegen to link up with their colleagues in Arnhem.

"Colonel Krebs, the Group Commander, was the leader for this big push," wrote Charles Everett Bullard in his memoir, "Little One and His Guardian Angel." "At 1104 he opened up his throttles and went thundering down the runway. At regular intervals each following plane took off and immediately fell into formation. In twenty minutes the formerly crowded runway was completely empty. The Colonel took the formation in a wide circle and crossed over the field. We must have put on a spectacular show."

Flying "Miss Yank," a 96th TCS C-47 with tail number 42-100965, the colonel and his crew were shot down over Holland during the operation. Except for the navigator, who was captured by the Germans, the entire crew escaped detection for six weeks before making their way back to American lines.

Flight Officer William Hamrick, a navigator with the squadron, recalled the arrival of the colonel in January 1945.

"Colonel Krebs and Major Ottoman had been lost at Bastogne," he said. "I remember them walking in with their straw hats on. We had a big rally for them."

Hamrick also recalled a joke he played on Major Ottoman shortly afterwards.

"I said to Major Ottoman, 'Could you tell me why in the world they sent a bombardier to this unit?' Ottoman was livid and reported me to Lieutenant Colonel Johnson, our squadron commander. Colonel Johnson and I flew together on a zig-zag pater and he said to me, 'Could you direct us back?' By golly, I got us back and Johnson and I have been friends ever since," he laughed.

While the ground component of Market-Garden was considered a failure due to the inability of the British 30th Division to reach Arnhem, the airborne component was considered a success due to the 96 percent accuracy in their paratrooper, glider and resupply missions.

As soon as the Airborne forces returned from Holland, after spending 72 days in combat, they were tasked again.

The German's began a surprise offensive against the Allied lines on Dec. 16, 1944 in the Ardennes, a forest that stretches from the Sambre river in Belgium to the Rhine river in Germany, in an attempt to capture Antwerp, Belgium and drive a wedge between the British and American lines.

Due to the element of surprise, the 101st Airborne Division was driven by truck from Camp Mourmelon in Le Grand, France the 107 miles to Bastogne, Belgium where they were to hold a key junction that would halt the German advance.

The 101st Airborne held their ground for the next two weeks, while running low on critical supplies and despite mounting casualties. Their resistance created a bulge in the German lines, which gave the name of the battle as the "Battle of the Bulge."

Following Market-Garden, the 440th TCG moved its base of operations from England to Orleans, France, in order to save time and fuel in supporting the Army's advance across Europe. Inclement weather kept the troop carriers from executing a resupply mission in the early stages of the battle, but when the weather improved, the 96th TCS was tasked with leading the effort.

Bullard writes, "On the morning of December 26th the 440th had its first chance to get in on the act. The job of delivering the first glider into Bastogne was given to the 96th squadron, and at 1025 a C-47 piloted by Captain Raymond H. Ottoman took off with a glider piloted by Lt. Charlton Corwin, Jr., with F/O Benjamin Constantino as co-pilot. The glider was loaded with the surgical team and medical supplies so urgently needed at Bastogne, and at 1400, the run was started."

The next day, the 96th was again called upon to fly gliders into Bastogne.

In his memoirs titled, "Battered Bastards of Bastogne," Cpl. George Koskimaki of the 101st Airborne Division writes, "On the morning of December 27th, the 440th was given another glider mission, and at 10:39 eight C-47s and eight gliders of 95th Squadron and five planes and five gliders of the 96th Squadron took off from the air strip at Chateaudun...The 440th gliders were loaded to capacity with high explosives."

He added, "Before cutting off their gliders the two planes held steady courses and were unable to make any attempt at evasive action. Sgt. Robert J. Slaughter, radio operator of a 96th Squadron ship, was in the astrodome when the right engine of his ship was hit. At the same time, he saw three different planes hit, catch fire and start to fall. A few moments later there was a tremendous explosion in the tail and fire broke out. The bail-out signal was given but only the crew chief was able to get through the cargo door before fire blocked it."

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"Of the five 96th planes, three were shot down with seven crew members killed and two taken prisoner. Both of the 96th planes that managed to get back to Orleans were also heavily damaged. The pilots of both of these ships attributed their safe return to their split-second decision to turn right out of the landing zone instead of to the left as briefed," Cpl. Koskimaki concluded.

Aircraft numbers 42-100916 and 42-100977 belonging to the 96th TCS are listed as having been shot down with missing aircrew reports on file for Dec. 27, 1944.

The end of the Battle of the Bulge still meant no rest for the fliers of the 96th Troop Carrier Squadron and their colleagues in the 440th Troop Carrier Group as the American and British ground forces smashed through the German defenses and were prepared to cross the Rhine in the heartland of Germany.

Known as Operation Varsity, the plan was to drop paratroopers and gliders from the American 17th Airborne Division and the British 6th Airborne on Mar. 24, 1945 to assist the ground forces and open up the industrial section of the Ruhr river valley and facilitate an end to the war. The 440th TCG was to drop paratroopers and gliders from the 17th Airborne into the Emmerich-Wesel sector.

The squadron flew a total of 22 aircraft during Operation Varsity.

Bullard writes, "The lead ship of the 96th squadron caught a 20-mm shell smack in the nose. He made it back across the Rhine while the crew chief fought fires in the cockpit area, and they managed to make an emergency landing in a field at Eindhoven, Holland. Another of the 96th planes was forced to drop out of formation after two gasoline tanks had been hit. Trailing gas, he had to put in at another emergency airdrome."

Flight Officer Hamrick recalled both of those incidents.

"Colonel Johnson's plane was hit in the nose while we were dropping over the Rhine. Capt. James Robertson was the co-pilot and he was trying to use the firefighting equipment to get the flame out," he said. "Capt. Aldo Tombari got so excited that Johnson had to tell him to sit down because he had to make an emergency landing."

"2nd Lieutenant Aymon Prudhomme was the pilot of the right wingman plane and 1st Lieutenant Joseph Turecky was the co-pilot. They had a hole in their gas tank and had to set it down. Nobody mentioned anything about that episode until our 1996 reunion in St. Louis. I told Turecky 'Do you know who told you to land at Wesel?' He shook his head and said, 'No.' I smiled and said, 'Well you're looking at him!'" he chuckled.

Operation Varsity was a success, despite having high casualties, and the end of the war was in site.

Without having anymore paratroopers or gliders to drop, the mission of the troop carriers changed. Since Patton's Third Army raced through the heart of Germany at such a rapid pace, supplies were delivered by aircraft from the 440th TCG's new base in Metz, France.

On one particular day, Flight Officer Hamrick flew as a navigator with 1st Lt. David Brown, 1st Lt. James Murphy and Sgt. Thomas Pinto on a mission to deliver five-gallon jerricans of fuel to the Third Army. The flight was a routine flight and they made their way back to Metz. He didn't fly with them the next day but remembers clearly what happened.

"Murphy and Brown slid in a little too close on takeoff and they started to roll out to the left. I could tell the pilot was trying to pull up but the weight of the cargo shifted to the left and they couldn't pull it up. They came down but didn't make it out. The plane hit and went off like a bomb had exploded. They were hauling gas," he said.

"When I got there, their bodies were already taken off. Murphy was a guy who always liked to fly with jump boots on. I saw his leg with a boot by the tail of the aircraft. Pinto, the crew chief, was a Brooklynese kind of a fellow. I saw his coveralls there. He was the only one still with his body in good condition, the rest were consumed by the flames," he sobbed out of remembrance.

"We lost other guys but seeing that was hard. I still feel deeply hurt. I did get a weeks pass on the Riviera to get over the shock of it, but it never really went away. I flew with the crew the day before it happened. They were all nice young men," Hamrick concluded. According to DZ Europe, the official history of the 440th Troop Carrier Group, more than two million air miles had been flown by aircraft and crews of the 440th Troop Carrier Group during the month of April 1945, including more than 13.5 million pounds of freight; 10,000 evacuees, liberated prisoners of war and wounded troops; and 1,230,000 gallons of gasoline. The gasoline alone amounted to 20 percent of the gasoline delivered by the entire IX Troop Carrier Command for all of 1945.

From Operation Neptune on June 6, 1944 until their deactivation on Oct. 18, 1945, the group averaged 650 air miles per sortie. On one particular day 60 aircraft flew 167 sorties, a record for the Group. In one month, 3,182 sorties were flown, 2,508 of which were combat sorties, for a total of 13,330 flying hours.

The 440th Troop Carrier Group was well decorated for their accomplishments. Despite losing 67 men who were killed in action, over 900 Air Medals, 36 Purple Hearts, 32 Bronze Stars, 21 Distinguished Flying Crosses and 8 French Croix de Guerre medals were presented to individual members. The 96th Troop Carrier Squadron earned their fair share of these.

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