

Minneapolis-St. Paul Air Reserve Station

HOME NEWS PHOTOS LIBRARY UNITS QUESTIONS



JOIN THE AF RESERVE

News > D-Day--The 96th connection

D-Day--The 96th connection

Posted 6/6/2009 Updated 10/3/2009

[Email story](#) [Print story](#)

SHARE

by Tech. Sgt. Jeffrey Williams
934th Airlift Wing Public Affairs

6/6/2009 - **Minneapolis, St. Paul** -- **Editor's note: This is the second in a series of three articles detailing the 934th's connection to WWII historical events.**

On a dreary, overcast June afternoon in Exeter, England, Cpl. William Wildes attached nozzles to the wings of the green and white C-47 Skytrain aircraft formerly known as the "Pride of Minnesota." Pouring approximately 100 gallons of fuel into each wing, he did it exactly like he had done several times before in the previous months for the training missions to prepare for the Normandy invasion. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, except the white invasion stripes and the large "6Z" that was painted onto the fuselage earlier in the day.

"The planes were fueled in the afternoon of June 5th. We didn't know where they were going. We just fueled them like normal," said Cpl. Wildes, a special vehicle operator for the 96th Troop Carrier Squadron. "One pilot had 'Pride of Minnesota' inside an arrowhead painted on the nose, but they made him take it off when they put the invasion stripes on for D-Day."

By evening, each of the 45 aircraft belonging to the 440th Troop Carrier Group was laden down with paratroopers from the 3rd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division for the flight across the English Channel.

Among the notables flown by the 96th TCS was the famed "Filthy 13," a demolitions platoon from the 3rd Battalion Company Headquarters. Each member wore a Mohawk-style haircut and face paint and collectively they were quite tenacious fighters.

They also dropped Cpl. Bobbie Rommel, a relative of General Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, who was leading the German resistance in Normandy. But not everything went without a hitch.

"I heard that somebody ran into the deicer boot and tore it up. They replaced this one plane and put another plane in its place. The crew chief was a guy named Bluestone. I remember him well and I fueled his plane," the corporal recalled.

"It was all an unknown for us," said Maj. George Johnson, who was an operations officer with the 98th Troop Carrier Squadron during the invasion. "We dropped at night and daytime for the preparations. When we went into Normandy, it was agreed that Col. Krebs, the group commander, would lead."

Maj. Johnson was promoted to lieutenant colonel a short time later as the 96th Troop Carrier Squadron commander. After a stellar career, he retired in 1975 at the rank of major general.

At 11:53 p.m., Col. Frank X. Krebs, 440th TCG commander, took off from Exeter in aircraft number 292717, call sign 'Ada,' followed by 44 other aircraft from the 95th, 96th, 98th and 98th troop carrier squadrons that comprised the group. Capt. William R. Cooper led the 96th TCS in chalk 19, aircraft number 100965.

Once airborne, the only navigational aids used were blue lights on the tops of the wingtips and fuselage, as the aircraft rendezvoused with other Skytrains from the IX Troop Carrier Command and Royal Air Force. With only the moonlight to navigate them in complete radio silence, the American and British forces joined together to make the big jump across the English Channel as the lighthouses of England slowly slipped away beneath them.

Once they reached the coast of Normandy, a cloud cover enveloped the planes, followed by the blue hue of searchlights and flak from German anti-aircraft batteries.

Col. Krebs honed into the radio signal from the Pathfinders who jumped in an hour before to mark the drop zone. At 1:36 a.m., the paratroopers received the command, "stand up and hook up." Four minutes later, the green light came on giving the okay to jump. In a matter of seconds, the sky was filled with the billowing white parachutes of the 101st Airborne Division heading for Drop Zone D, near Ste. Mere Eglise, France, 400 feet below.

In his memoirs titled, "The Filthy Thirteen," Sergeant Jake McNeice wrote the following regarding his flight into Normandy, "Those Germans were firing ammunition up at us that went all through the plane, our chutes and things like that. Those stinking automatic weapons had tracers about every fifth round. It just looked like a string of fire coming up at us. I did not know that there was any other color of tracer than orange but it looked like the greatest display of fireworks that I ever saw in my life. It was beautiful. They would have a blue one then a couple of red then a couple green. There was every color in the rainbow rising up to meet us. We lost several plane loads of paratroopers but the greater part came through it."

Tech. Sgt. Charles Everett Bullard, a crew chief assigned to the 98th TCS, recorded a piece of 96th TCS history in his memoir, "Little One and His Guardian Angel."

"Later, we found that two of the 96th squadron planes had crash-landed shortly after dropping their troopers," he wrote. "One plane of the 96th squadron came in on only one engine with the radio operator wounded by a bullet in the neck. He was the group's first Purple Heart winner; Staff Sergeant Earnest S. Iannuccilli."

Cpl. Wildes remembers the scene when the aircraft returned.

"I was on guard duty when they left and was still up when they returned," he said. "Some of the guys they brought back were shot up quite a bit. One of them got shot in the privates from flak that penetrated underneath the aircraft. It was a real mess. Tech. Sgt. Edward Bluestone, the crew chief whose plane I fueled earlier that day, well we lost him on that day at D-Day."

While other troop carrier groups were scattered due to the cloud covering at the coast, misplaced their drops by flying in too fast, or were shot down by the Germans, only the 3rd Battalion of the 506th P.I.R. landed in close proximity to their designated drop zone.

At 6:30 a.m., the main landing force of the 1st, 4th and 29th U.S. Infantry Divisions, 2nd Ranger Battalion, 3rd and 50th British Infantry Divisions and Canada's 3rd Infantry Division landed at Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword beaches making a 60-mile long front.

But the battle was not over for the 96th TCS.

At dawn on the morning of June 7, Maj. Johnson flew the lead aircraft in the resupply mission.

"All of our operations officers were to fly on the resupply mission," he said. "We carried ammunition, food, medical supplies and water."

"We went in about 15 to 20 miles behind enemy lines, descended to 500 feet for the drop and came back across Omaha beach. We

Photos



The 'Pride of Minnesota' displays the 6Z markings for the D-Day invasion. (Courtesy Photo)

[Download HiRes](#)

Inside Minn-St. Paul

Search

search 934AW

[Find it](#)

[Advanced Search](#)

[View All RSS](#)

had a beautiful view of the landing craft," the general said.

"There was lots of flak and small arms fire and aircraft damage. We were fortunate that we didn't lose any aircraft. We were so low that all the people on the ground could shoot at us with small arms fire. I led them down to treetop level and then got out of there and back up to the proper altitude," he remembered.

"It was quite an event in our lives. We got out of there quickly after we did our jobs. We were very fortunate," he concluded.

Little did anybody know, on the evening of June 5, that there would be heroes in the making who jumped out of the aircraft early the next morning. Of the 231 soldiers of the 506th P.I.R. who lost their lives at Normandy, 103 were from the 3rd Battalion, including those who died in three of the 440th TCG aircraft that perished in the operation.

The 96th Troop Carrier Squadron was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation, the precursor to the Presidential Unit Citation, for their efforts 65 years ago.

 Comments

No comments yet.

[Add a comment](#)

The Official Web Site of Minneapolis-St. Paul Air Reserve Station

[Site Map](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Questions](#)

[Security and Privacy notice](#)

[E-publishing](#)