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FAITES UN DON – UTILISEZ LE BOUTON PAYPAL - MERCI



H-HOUR MINUS FOUR AND A HALF

By Captain Luther Davis
AIR FORCE - Overseas Staff

The Ninth Air Force's IX Troop Carrier Command has made history; carried out the largest Troop Carrier operation ever - and done it with maximum efficiency and minimum loss.

Troop Carrier has done it. That's the news the morning after D-Day. All the great promises of Troop Carrier, all the hopes which its champions have had for it, have been richly, triumphantly fulfilled. If this sounds like intemperate praise, look at the record: in the cold darkness before H-Hour IX Troop Carrier Command dropped behind the enemy's forward defenses two Airborne Infantry Divisions - dropped them in the area they were supposed to have been dropped - and did it with a total aircraft loss of less than two and a half per cent. In four hours two very aggressive Divisions with some essential heavy equipment were where the enemy wanted them least - compare with this the fact that the Navy usually requires fourteen hours to land a complete Infantry division on a beach; compare our aerial loss with the Germans' at Crete when over twenty per cent of participating planes and gliders were destroyed. Troop Carrier, gentlemen, is here to stay, thanks to the near perfection with which IX Troop Carrier Command did its job.

THE PLAN

To understand how well the operation was carried out you should know the plan. To quote the field order, the over-all design was: "to secure a bridge-head at the base of the Cotentin (Cherbourg) Peninsula, and secure a lodgement for future operations". As an essential auxiliary to this the airborne part of the show was "to begin about four hours and thirty minutes prior to Civil Twilight (the pre-dawn) to assist in the initial assault." ~~and also to capture the town of Caen.~~ That was the objective of one of the American airborne

divisions while the other was "to land to the immediate West of its companion Airborne Division to prevent movement of enemy reserves to East and West".

Timed with our vertical landings were British operations involving about one Airborne Division. Using C-47s (the British call them Dakotas), Sterlings, and Horsa gliders, the British 38th Group established protection for the left flank of the British beach by dropping its airborne load just where it was supposed to, at the set time, and with aircraft losses actually slightly less than ours. So for both nations Troop Carrier made its mark.

THE OPERATION

On 5 June 1944 at 2154 hours Lt. Col. Joel L. Crouch, Commanding Officer of the IX Troop Carrier Command's 1st Pathfinder Unit, reported his C-47 airborne. For the historically minded that's the time the first plane was up - the tactical beginning of the liberation of Europe. Crouch and the two planes he led crossed the enemy coast, on the West ^{Shore} of the Cherbourg Peninsula, at 0006 hours 6 June - D-Day. At 0016 hours Crouch dropped his stick of ~~ten~~ paratroops. Incidentally, he's rather unhappy because (a) he dropped four minutes early and (b) he thinks he was four or five hundred yards off the dead center of his target. Needless to say he is known as a perfectionist.

As there were six drop zones there were six Pathfinder formations to mark them, each consisting of three aircraft. The specially trained crews of airborne infantry carried by these planes established certain radio navigational aids on the drop zones and, until the enemy got too tough, showed marker lights for the guidance of the pilots of the main column.

Beginning with Colonel Crouch the operation proceeded through twenty-six separate formations (called "serials" in Troop Carrier parlance) of paratroop-carrying planes, totalling eight-hundred-and-twenty-one aircraft. After them came serials twenty-seven and twenty-eight totalling one-hundred-and-three ~~more~~ planes each of which towed one CG-4A glider.

The paratroop-carrying planes transported payloads of five-thousand-eight-hundred-and-fifty pounds including containers, supplies, equipment and troops. They flew over water at five hundred feet getting radio checks from the last point of land over which they passed and also getting visual position checks from a special light beacon there. Then they had another check on a marker vessel near the enemy coast where they turned, doused their navigation and recognition lights, and dimmed their formation lights to the lowest practicable intensity. Drops were made from seven hundred feet - and, until troops were actually out - it was verboten to take any evasive action whatsoever. After that, however, pilots were briefed to descend to one hundred feet and evade all they wanted. Once over the sea they climbed to three thousand feet and conscientiously gave the Navy every recognition signal they could think of. Despite the fact that our Navies were all over the channel there was no repetition of the Sicilian error in which our Navy shot down Troop Carrier planes.

Our formation was column of nine ships in V of V's except the glider boys who were flying pairs of pairs echeloned to right. The paratroop serials were spaced six minutes from head to head with a ten minute interval between lifts - gliders slightly more.

As special equipment our C-47s had flame dampeners on exhaust outlets, the best navigational equipment that could be devised, flak suits for the crew. There was no other armor or armament, and not a ship of the nine-hundred-and-twenty-four had a self-sealing gasoline tank.

Aircrews were up for between three-and-a-half and four hours during which time they, without exception, flew magnificent formation, navigated so well that there was not a single case of seriously mistaken drop - such as in Sicily when some paratroops were put down over fifty miles from DZ (Drop Zone) - and maintained radio silence like mad. There were no lights in any of the planes,

aircrews were dark-adapted, and the only noise, aside from that of the engines, came from the paratroops most of whom sang all the way out. There were no abortions or turnbacks short of target, although one pilot made two passes and still couldn't find a DZ, so brought his cargo home. Not more than a dozen other paratroops were brought back to base - all of them men who had received flak or small arms fire * (and purple hearts).

The last paratroop serial (serial number twenty-six) dropped at 0244 hours while the first paratroops of the main column (as distinguished from pathfinder crews) dropped at 0050 hours. The split-second timing in between was based on an airspeed of a hundred-and-fifty miles per hour except at drop when one-hundred-and-ten was ordered to be the maximum. Naturally glider tows made their approach considerably slower, although they carried no interior loads. Their CG-4As had payloads of three-thousand-seven-hundred-and-fifty pounds, composed of troops, vehicles and other equipment. There were no mid-air collisions although two groups came back with more planes than they started.

Weather varied throughout the operation, but was in the main favorable. Early planes reported ceiling down to about a thousand feet despite the fact that forecast had been for a three-thousand foot ceiling. Later crews found ceiling going down as low as five-hundred feet - necessitating blind drops - while others found it up to three or four thousand with moonlight breaking through. Wind was fresh but not strong; visibility good.

Earlier that evening the entire area had been prepared by as heavy an aerial bombardment as could be dared without giving the whole show away. Tactical surprise was counted on - and achieved. All planes reported flak and two or three were seen to go down in flames, but the lethal concentration which the enemy could have mustered, had he known what was coming, was definitely not there.

Fighter cover - not escort, but high cover - was maintained over the entire

area and a small force of Mosquitoes ranged overhead, bombing, dive-bombing and shooting at flak and searchlights. They rambled all over the Coast causing a few C-47 pilots to report enemy night fighters, and they kept a lot of German heads down. There were no confirmed reports of interception by enemy planes.

As for enemy ground interference, there was some worry about things called Air Landing Obstructions which Jerry had placed all over the Cherbourg Peninsula. These are posts about ten or twelve feet high planted in likely Landing Zones. Some are pointed at the top and frequently have barbed wire stretched between them. However, as this is written we know of no case in which our airborne loads were dumped on these, although aerial photographs X taken the following day show that one glider landed in the fringe of some. Its starboard wing was crumpled, but the fuselage appeared intact.

To help confuse the enemy we dropped some dummy parachutists at spots we wouldn't think of dropping men on. With them we included a British-conceived gadget which makes a noise like rifle fire as soon as it hits the ground. There were several "sharp engagements" between these lifeless apparati and enemy patrols.

The glider serials worried Command most because they came last of all - when presumably the enemy would be alerted - and because they had to fly so very slowly. However, only one tow plane was lost and only four gliders were prematurely or improperly released. Their job was finished at 0408 hours, and Troop Carrier was through for the time being.

Began then what will always be remembered by many of us as the great sweating-out. There was no way to know what was happening to the men we'd dropped as radio silence was maintained for quite a while. The only signal received from the airborne troops was a panel marker placed at the appointed

to objective, figures

place and the appointed time indicating where they wanted resupply and reinforcement.

This operation, which had been laid on as part of the original plan, began before dusk on D-Day. Two hundred and eight C-47s towing one-hundred-seventy-two Horsa gliders of British manufacture (carrying six-thousand-nine-hundred pounds) and thirty-six American CG-4As released between 2110 hours and 2310 hours. The gliders carried additional elements of the airborne divisions dropped as well as items of resupply - ammunition, food - and some heavy equipment to our waiting troops. The following morning, D-plus-1, ³⁰⁴eight Horsa and ^{one-hundred-thirty}CG-4As were released over the same spot; ^{249 other C-47s dropped supplies} Thus the air phase of the airborne operations to assist in the initial assault, ~~and~~ prevent enemy troop movements from East to West* ended at 0900 hours on D-plus-1. The entire operation had involved ^{1,371} sorties by IX Troop Carrier planes, ^{plus 301} gliders. ~~_____~~
~~_____~~
~~_____~~

BACKGROUND OF THE OPERATION

Basically the operation succeeded so brilliantly because IX Troop Command received what every Troop Carrier outfit has been shrieking for since the beginning. Here, for once, a troop carrying organization was permitted to devote itself to training for its combat assignment instead of indulging in freight-hauling right up to the moment of action. It had its own equipment and was not forced - as in the early Mediterranean operations - to use mixed, tired and foreign aircraft. Moreover, the high command planning for the operation took into account the various special requirements - adequate time in which to prepare for the particular operation as well as for operations as a team under varying conditions, a straightforward and well-marked route to objective, fighter protection, bombardment diversion. Also basic in the

success of the operation was the existence and magnificent performance of the 1st Pathfinder Unit which marked the DZs accurately, its crews having been specially and exhaustively trained for the task.

(An article on 1st Pathfinder follows this, MA.)

As an example of the kind of training that IX Troop Carrier Command gave its men there is something called "Operation Eagle". This exercise took place on 12th May - about two weeks before D-Day - and simulated the actual operation as far as was then possible. DZs resembling the real ones were selected, courses approximating in length and number of turns the ones that would be flown on D-Day were laid out, and, as far as possible, actual combat loads were carried.

Co-ordination of the pre-invasion training and of the actual D-Day operations was achieved through the Allied Expeditionary Air Force Headquarters which controlled both IX Troop Carrier Command and its RAF equivalent, the 38th Group (which is a Command and not a Group at all). Of course, IX TC remained under Ninth Air Force for administration and discipline, but this channel was by-passed for ops. - orders went straight from ABAF to IX TC.

It would seem that Troop Carrier, after years of being mistaken for the Air Transport Command (which properly has no part of carrying through and into combat - Troop Carrier's job), and after suffering a great many lean days, has made the grade - with plenty of room to spare. In fact, they exceeded even their own expectations!

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~~TOP SECRET~~