

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Operation Varsity

A small contingent of Air Force officers played a unique role in the final defeat of Nazi Germany.



ON THE morning of March 24, 1945, an enormous air armada crossed the Rhein River near Wesel in western Germany. The column, two-and-a-half hours long, consisted of more than 1,500 IX Troop Carrier Command airplanes and gliders. To their left were about 1,200 RAF airplanes and gliders. The entire assemblage was supported by 880 US and RAF fighters. This was Operation Varsity, the airborne support for the US Ninth and British Second Armies' crossing of the Rhein.

Varsity was unique not only in magnitude. Three weeks before D-Day, Maj. Gen. William M. Miley, commander of the Army's 17th Airborne Division, briefed the glider operations officers of the 53d Troop Carrier Wing's five groups on the impending operation. His 194th Glider Infantry Regiment needed one more infantry company to carry out its assignment. He asked for one of the troop carrier groups to provide that company, to be made up of glider pilots after they had landed in their designated zones. It would be an all-officer company, maybe the first in the history of modern warfare. Capt. Charles O. Gordon, glider operations officer of the 435th Troop Carrier Group, accepted this unusual assignment. He was to become commander of the provisional company. Personnel of the 194th Regiment trained his glider pilots for two weeks in infantry tactics and weapons.

The vast majority of the glider pilots were second lieutenants or flight officers. None had ever expected to serve as infantry, but they accepted that duty enthusiastically. These men were organized into four platoons, one for each of the group's squadrons. Most squad leaders were second lieutenants. They were to assist the 17th Airborne Division in securing a designated area northeast of Wesel, establish roadblocks,

and make contact with British forces northeast of the town. For the first time, each of the 435th's C-47s would be towing two gliders; and, for the first time, their landing zones would not have been secured by paratroopers.

When the 435th's 144 gliders, loaded with airborne infantry and equipment, cut loose over the landing area, they came under heavy ground fire with substantial casualties among the infantry and glider crews. Once on the ground, they continued to be hit by sniper and mortar fire that had to be subdued before they could move to their assigned area of two crossroads—one that would earn the name "Burp Gun Corner." There they cleared several houses, taking a large number of prisoners before digging in for the night.

Several times, small groups of German soldiers attempted to infiltrate their defensive positions but were driven off in a series of fire-fights. The defenders knew that German troops, retreating ahead of British forces, would attempt to overrun their position, probably supported by armor and mobile guns. The ground held by the glider pilots was at the top of a ridge, the country sloping away toward Wesel, the direction from which an enemy attack would come. The reverse slope would allow enemy forces to advance almost to the 435th's area before coming under fire.

About midnight, the first attack by a German tank, supported by a large number of infantry, hit the crossroad defended by the 75th Platoon. They came under heavy fire and retreated. Thirty minutes later, a German tank and approximately 200 German infantry, supported by two 20-mm flak guns, attacked the position defended by the 77th Platoon. As soon as the enemy troops were in close range,

the glider pilots of that platoon, where the attack was concentrated, opened fire. Small-arms fire took a heavy toll on enemy infantry during the hour-long battle.

Flight Officers Chester Deshurley and Albert Hurley held their positions, firing their machine guns until the tank came within fifteen yards of them, as did Flight Officer Robert Campbell, armed with a tommy gun. At that point, Flight Officer Elbert Jella severely damaged the tank with his bazooka. The retreating tank ran over one of its flak guns; the other was captured by the glider pilots.

At daybreak, the glider pilots defeated several smaller attacks and joined up with British forces coming out of Wesel. Their job was done with the professionalism of veteran infantry troops. They soon were relieved from further duty as ground soldiers. Overall, they suffered thirty-one casualties in the operation, killed a large number of enemy troops, and captured several hundred prisoners.

"The Battle of Burp Gun Corner," a unique event in Air Force history, was covered by *Stars and Stripes* but then slipped into obscurity. In March 1995, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman learned from retired Maj. Charles Gordon of the heroic actions of these glider pilots turned infantry and directed that appropriate awards be made to those who took part in the fighting. At the 435th Troop Carrier Reunion in October 1995, Flight Officers Jella, Deshurley, Campbell, and Hurley each were awarded the Silver Star. All others who fought in the battle were awarded the Bronze Star, but many of those more than 280 men had died before their heroism was recognized. ■

Thanks to Maj. Charles Gordon, USAF (Ret.), author of "Crossing the Rhine With the 17th Airborne," a detailed report on this 435th Troop Carrier Group operation, and to retired Col. Phillip Rawlins, who, as a major, had commanded the 77th Troop Carrier Squadron.