

The Airborne Invasion of Holland

From Maurice Higginbotham
Elkhart, Texas, February 2008

356th Fighter Group - September 17th 1944

Merrion Higginbotham participated in the Airborne Invasion of Holland, also known as the "Air Drop at Arnhem." He talked of this operation several times over the years and seemed to be very impressed with its enormity. There were 1,500 planes on this Sunday, September 17th mission and 478 gliders carrying 34,000 men.

Following are quotes that he made about his participation in this operation, in his letters to home.

"I guess you know all about the Airborne Invasion of Holland by now. Well, I helped a little on that show and got to see it all for the first few days from zero hour. It was quite a sight. We were shooting up flak positions and gun positions and anything else that needed it, before the troops came in."

In another letter, he said:

"Well the news looks pretty good lately, since the invasion of Holland. I was in on that show and believe me, it was really a show. There were more planes over there that day than I thought could be in all of England." (Editor's note) English news must have been putting out propaganda about the invasion of Holland, because it turned out to be an Allied disaster. This was only Merrion's fourth combat mission.

Below is an official copy of the Squadron's Mission summary of Sept. 17, 1944:

Mission Summary – September 17, 1944

Squadron Line up. (Pilots) Major Cooper, Lt. Lindsay, Lt. Hurley, Lt. Hall, Lt Swift, Lt. Tobiassen, Lt. Gillette, Lt. Bomberger, Capt. McDowell, Lt. Runyan, Lt. Roberts, Lt. Higginbotham, Lt. Wiggins, Lt. Whitson, Lt. Nystrom, Lt. Beck, Capt. Scheible

Today's operation will undoubtedly go down in the annals of history as one of the most formidable military accomplishments of all time. In the largest airborne invasion yet known, an army was dropped into Holland behind the German lines. Hour after hour, mile after mile, the C-47's, Stirlings, Halifaxes and many other types came over. Some of them carried paratroops, but most of them had in tow huge gliders --- Horsas, Wacos and Hamilcars. Some containing troops, others carrying field guns and all the necessary impediments of a modern attacking army.

As the forward elements of this giant armada approached Martlesham, they gave the effect of a huge cloud of locusts. There were some exclamations of astonishment from the observers surrounding us. But, for the most part, we were standing in mute wonder. All of us had heard of the military use of gliders and paratroops, particularly as utilized by the Germans in the capture of Crete, but what we saw on this day, was quite beyond our comprehension. We were overcome with a feeling of bewilderment and infinite smallness. On two occasions, one of the gliders cast away from its air "tug" (probably because of some structural failure of the latter) and with all the grace of a gull, swept silently down to a perfect landing. The first of the "abortives" bore a group of burly Scots who later obliged some of us with a skirling of bagpipes.

Our pilots can be rightfully proud of the part they played in this enormous invasion. It was our 258th operational flight and according to veteran pilots, our most hazardous. Field Order 576 directed sixteen of our pilots and planes to precede the airborne troops.

At an 0945 briefing, the flyers were told by Col. Tukey that, contrary to all previous missions, they were to attract the fire of the enemy A.A. Guns in the dropping zone. Having drawn their fire, our men were to mark the spot (Assuming of course that the gunners were inaccurate.) and immediately go down and destroy the flak battery with their guns. Eight of our ships carried sixteen 250 pound frag. Bombs. In the event suitable large emplacements were sighted.

To insure that our men did not attack friendly emplacements, they were instructed to fire only when fired upon. Enemy aircraft were not to be considered; only the flak positions, which unless knocked out would certainly play havoc with the slow un-maneuverable gliders and transports, were to receive the attention of our pilots. They were further briefed to expect any and all types of allied aircraft in the assigned area, coming to their drop zone.

Major Cooper led the squadron in a strafing attack on the block houses from which came a moderate amount of light accurate flak. These positions defended a bridge near GRAVE at 4QE 6254, two were situated on the Southern approach and one on the northern side. All three were silenced. A few minutes later, north of GRAVE at 4QE 7746, another pillbox was attacked and silenced. The bombs had previously been dropped unarmed.

Not long after these attacks the airborne armada arrived, and the pilots reported they seemed to meet little opposition in the initial landings in the northern area. On the way our Major Cooper sighted a C-47 which had crash-landed in the sea N.E. of Walcheren Island. Not far from the abandoned plane was a dinghy with four of the crew. Major Cooper circled the spot until a Walrus came to the rescue.

Meanwhile, as the survivors were being picked up, Lt. Swift made a pass at and diverted the fire of four 20 MM. Gun emplacements which had been concentrating on the Walrus, thereby assuring the rescue's success. Had Lt. Swift not had this presence of mind, the rescuers might have become in need of rescue themselves. Most of the flak received on this mission was light, meager and inaccurate, except in the woods south of Nijmegen, where it was heavy, intense and accurate. Shortly after making landfall a heavy spiraling, nearly vertical contrail was observed near HAGUE. This may possibly have been one of the rocket bombs, a few of which, rumor has it, have landed on England recently.

Landfall in, was made over WALCHEREN ISLAND at 1205 hours AT 5,000 feet and landfall out was made at FLUSHING at 1355 hours on the deck. Time up 1122 hours. Time down 1510 hours.

Mission Summary of September 18, 1944

Squadron Line up: Maj. Cooper, Lt. Tomlinson, Capt. Scheible, Lt. Swift, Lt. Lindsay, Lt. Hurley, Lt. Drake, Capt. McDowell, Lt. Runyan, Lt. Wiggins, Lt. Hall

After yesterday's epic feat, we were quite dumbfounded to learn that an invasion of similar proportions was to be launched again today. It seemed impossible that there could be any more gliders on the Island! Now, of course, we realize that for the last three years, these troops have been training and equipment has been amassed on an enormous scale at a steady and unvarying pace. The Germans may rightfully be due the credit for introducing this

type of warfare, but the Allies and especially America's phenomenal production have exploited the use of airborne troops to its fullest extent.

Again, we were afforded that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity as the invading force swept over Martlesham in columns that seemed never to end. Briefing was held at 1045 hours and F.O. 578 prevailed. Twelve of our pilots, Major Cooper again leading, were directed to attack flak positions in yesterday's area, the vicinity of NIJMEGEN. From 1320 until 1355 hours, our flyers searched the area, drawing the enemies fire, and then going down on the enemy emplacements with guns blazing. Near KRANENBURG at 4QE 8356 seven very active light flak positions were completely silenced. At the same location a few heavy gun positions were observed, but these were silent so the pilots did not attack them.

A couple of miles north of this target three more light flak positions revealed their whereabouts by their muzzle flashes and were strafed and destroyed. Contiguous to the last gun battery were several long barracks and hedgerows from which our men received small arms fire, which was quieted by cal. 50 "Hosing" The squadron then turned north and between 4QE 9056 and 4QE 8957, Capt. McDowell led his flight against a 20 MM. Flak position. Lt. Runyan and Lt. Wiggins did not see after this, though on two occasions a few minutes later he was heard to say that he was ok, then that he had either been hit or his motor cutting out. We were obliged therefore to insert regretfully an "N.Y.R." (Not yet returned) beside his name.

Since then, however, we have every reason to expect that he will be back with us very soon. On the preceding day, Lt. Broxton (359th Squadron) miraculously survived a crash in the same area when his plane exploded. He has returned to tell us that he observed Capt. McDowell's plane had belly-landed in a field about a half-mile from that in which he (Broxton) had crashed. McDowell was seen to run away from his plane, and Broxton believes that he is with friendly troops.

Most of the enemy A.A. fire was heavy, meager and accurate, particularly around TIEL, NIJMENGEN, and AND REICHWALD FORREST. Landfall in was made at 1252 hours over OVERFLAKKEE ISLAND at 4,000 feet. Landfall out was made at 1442 hours at the same place and altitude. Time up 1206. Time down 1518.
(Note) Capt. McDowell did make it back to his base several days later.)