

Personal Account of a WWII Combat Glider Mission

Operation Market Garden – September 18th, 1944

by Flight Officer John Hughes Nickerson

53rd Troop Carrier Squadron, Glider Pilot

A-40 (*Serial in Flight Formation*) - T.O. (*Take-Off – from Barkston Heath airfield, Lincolnshire, England*) 11:30 hrs - N. Route - Landfall Schoen Light (*Schowen Lighthouse on Schowen Island, Netherlands*) - LZ-T - N.E. Groesbeek, Holland

Sept. 18, 1944 - D+1 (*second day of Operation Market Garden*): After final briefing and two postponements and two changes in route, we finally took off. I flew No. 3 position in second esch. (*echelon*) of four. Carried Jeep, ammo and three men. I was surprisingly calm and cool, didn't seem at all as if it were me sitting there. My co-pilot – one of the airborne (*Battery A, 319th Glider Field Artillery Battalion, U.S. 82nd Airborne Division*) – was OK, but had never been in a glider before. D.E. King and Timmens (*53rd TCS C-47 pilot and co-pilot*) towed me.

Inter-com checked good after T.O. Good T.O. Air slightly rough in spots. High overcast – good flying weather. The 2 men in the Jeep went to sleep. King or Tim (*Timmins*) called back frequently to see how I was doing. Headed out over the Channel (*English Channel*) and hit a sprinkling of rain which didn't last long. Checked time we would hit coast as visibility was bad.

As Schoen (*Schowen*) Light came into view, I had my C.P. (*co-pilot*) help me into my flak suit, then he put his own on. 20mm and machine gun fire at coast, then quiet until we crossed onto mainland when we got heavy flak. Saw about five fighter planes before, but they had disappeared, and I was wondering where in Hell all the air cover they had promised us was.

Big black bursts of flak were all around us and every once in a while a piece would whiz through the glider. I just gripped my wheel a little tighter and sweated – wondering just when and where it would hit next. I thought of a line of a poem, “Thinking of death as just another place to go – another road to walk- another land to know!”

Presently, it stopped and in about five minutes some 20mms opened up on us. I could feel and hear them as they whistled past the ship. At the I.P. (*Initial Point - A point close to the landing area where serials (troop carrier air formations) make final alterations in course to pass over individual drop or landing zones.*), Jerry (*Germans*) threw a lot of stuff at us but we plowed

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along un-hit. Old King would call back and ask if everything was O.K. My little C.P. (*co-pilot*) still followed through on the controls trying to get the feel in case I should get hit.

Four minutes out, the 1st esch. cut and dove. I watched for Coffee (*53rd TCS glider pilot*) and Twil to cut and followed a second later. Flak – 20mm - machine guns and small arms stuff was zooming all around, but I was pretty busy dodging other gliders and looking for a good spot to land. Sat her down perfect tail first (14:38 hrs) in a plowed field. The two boys aft jumped out to size up things. I thought I was in the middle of an ammo dump exploding there was so much firing. The Jerrys were counter attacking as we landed and we (*the gliders*) broke it up. Saw friendly troops in a line of trees about 200 ft. in front. Jerry was in a hedge row all along to our right about 200 yds away. We unloaded and just then mortar shells began bursting around the glider so we took off towards the C.P (Command Post). One paratroop Lt. (*Lieutenant*) said to me “I always hated the sight of those damn gliders, but I was never in my life so glad to see you boys landing today.” Nick Miller (*53rd TCS glider pilot*) led our gang in (*first glider to land*). We were first ones in on D+1 (*first squadron in the flight formation on the second day of Operation Market Garden – 82nd Airborne*).

I walked most of the way (about 3 mi.) to the C.P. When I got there our guns were all set up and in action. Our sqdn. (*Squadron*) got every piece of equip in O.K. Ray (*53rd TCS glider pilot*) nosed over and broke an arm and a leg. Jones (*53rd TCS glider pilot*) hit by shrapnel on landing and one man in his ship was killed by flak. Otherwise, everyone O.K.

Dug in for night. Had a K ration for supper. Later a Jerry (*Luftwaffe pilot*) flew over. Looked like a prairie dog village the way we dove head first into our holes. Planes (*flew*) over several times during night observing our fire. No strafing. Snipers firing at us all night, but no one hit. Slept in foxhole.

D+2 (*third day of Operation Market Garden*): Washed up at Catholic Seminary. People friendly and seemingly very thankful we had chased Jerry out. Nick Miller, Jones and I set out for our gliders to see what we could salvage. Met paratroop patrol at cross road where we turned for LZ-T. They were looking for some Jerrys who were reported to be in the area. We tagged along with them until we reached LZ where we landed. There we found that they weren't going back and that the enemy line was still just the other side of our ships. We had to walk back to the main road alone with snipers all through the woods. We were three scared boys I'm here to say.

At the main road met some Dutch people who gave us some coins and cognac. Walked back to C.P. had lunch and went to sleep by my foxhole. Someone woke me and said some enemy tanks had broken through our infantry and were expected to attack our position any minute. Just then the Canadian tank column rolled up. What a relief! Jerry didn't attack then, but did next day after

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G.Ps. (*glider pilots*) had left. About 14:00 hrs our G.Ps. (*glider pilots*) reported to Division C.P. other side of Groesbeek. Then to G.P Area west of Mook (*town of Mook en Middelaar*). Miller and I took off for castle and prisoner stockade where we picked up some souvenirs. On way back met Cox (*1st Lt. Donald W. Cox, 53rd TCS C-47 pilot*) and Hanford (*2nd Lt. Maximillian A. Hanford, Cox's co-pilot*) & crew chief & radio man who had been shot down back of Jerry lines after glider drop. Just then we heard planes which swung around and strafed Hell out of us and the G.P. area and the supply dump near the R.R. bridge. I dove behind the biggest tree I could find, and could just feel every bullet going through me. The funniest feeling I've ever had. Washed up and hit the sack.

D+3 (*fourth day of Operation Market Garden*): 88s (*German field piece: artillery, anti-aircraft (flak), anti-tank*) shelled the R.R. bridge and supply dump and the bridge at Mook all night. Tanks and supplies rumbled up the road in one endless stream. Rained a little towards morning. Some of boys went to guard prisoners at stockade. Several Jerrys were rounded up near camp.

About 0800 hrs Perrins, Pogy and I walked over to wrecked train. Few dead Germans around. Took picture of one. Got a couple of souvenirs off train. About that time a bunch of ME's (*German Luftwaffe Messerschmitt Bf 109 'Me 109' fighter aircraft*) came over and strafed us with 20mms. About twenty Dutch people were there getting junk off the train. I tried to tell them to get in the ditch with us, but they were so frightened that they just ran around in circles. A wonder none were hit. Again I had that feeling that every bullet was going right through me. Jerry left after several passes and we beat it for camp. We'd just climbed the bank over the main R.R. tracks when a lone Faulk Wolff (*German Luftwaffe Focke-Wulf Fw 190 fighter aircraft*) flew down the R.R. at about 75 feet. We dove for the woods again which was no protection at all. When I got back I dug my hole so deep I thought I'd be arrested for going A.W.O.L. in China.

About noon the enemy attacked from S.W. and N.E. to cut column with tanks and inf. (*infantry*).