

BEN ROUS' STORY

MILITARY ACCOUNT OF HUGH "BEN" ROUS' HISTORY IN W. W. II. His experiences with the 101st. AIRBORNE DIVISION, 506 P.I.R. He was amongst those men who stood alone against 8 German divisions at BASTOGNE, BELGIUM, Dec. 1944. This is his story.

Years have dimmed my memory and my use of the English language and spelling as well as punctuation. Please bear with me and don't look for the errors because you surely will find some. I have never been great at accepting ALL my mistakes, I am selective, some yes, some no. I will not embellish this account. It is presented as best I can recollect:

The Adams county draft board ordered me to go to Milwaukee for examination on Dec. 3, 1942. I went along with a bus-load and since I was still breathing, passed the "physical" exam and was put on class 1-A. I was told to go back home and get my things in order and report for induction on Dec. 14, 1942. Boy! What a Christmas present that made! (little did I KNOW JUST HOW FATE would yet intervene in my life in another December in just two years!) It was therefore not the last unpleasant Xmas present I was to receive! Well, on Dec. 14th we went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois where we were inducted. Shortly a Sgt. came into the barracks and asked for six "volunteers" to drive truck. I shirked my duty, but he got a number of "volunteers" and in a few minutes I looked out the window and saw those "truck drivers" moving off with snow shovels over their shoulders. Lesson #1 about volunteering in the army! (Ed. note: he was yet to find out what REAL, BIG TIME VOLUNTEERING COULD LEAD TO!)

After a day or two we were loaded on trains and traveled east to wherever it was we were going. In typical army style we weren't told anything. The only question I could recall that they asked me at Fort Sheridan was, "Would you like to go to the "Ground Crew" in the Airforce?" Well, we traveled for two or three days. Every time the train stopped they made us get off and for "P.T.". At any rate, we finally got to Fort Bragg, North Carolina and there we got off the train for the last time. In typical army style, the dozen or so of us from Adams county kept being split up and separated until I guess each of us had been sent to a different company. Many went to even different regiments, but I think we all wound up in the 82nd AIRBORNE DIVISION! For me it was the 326th Glider Infantry Regiment. We took our basic training there. I don't recall how long it was, except of course--too damn long! Ed. Note: AIRBORNE BASIC was the toughest basic in the army at the time. Men who transferred into the AIRBORNE from other outfits and had had basic with them were very fortunate! (ed.) Basic was over and they took the 326th Glider out of the 82nd Div. which was then headed overseas on its way to North Africa.

The 326th was loaded on trains about March 1st and was headed west. We all figured we were destined for the Pacific theater. Well, as it turned out, we trained for about nine or ten months at the Army Air Base in Alliance, Nebraska. Most of us kept wondering just what we were doing and we used to say that we were "training officers!" We were in the "AIRBORNE COMMAND" and therefore there was a parachute regiment there as well. Obviously there was an Air Force unit too. It was a small group compared to most camps. Sometimes it became terribly monotonous, but I kept working on my weaknesses and thinking I had to do my best if I

wanted to survive the eventual combat I knew would come. I was in an 81 mm. Mortar Platoon, where I had been assigned right after basic. We took the gunners tests and observers tests time after time! We also took many, many glider rides and occasionally we would get a ride in a C-47. There were the same planes that towed the Gliders and also the ones that dropped the Paratroopers. Finally, the day came when we loaded up on the trains again and went to--You guessed it!--Back to Fort Bragg! Shortly after our arrival there, we were marched on foot to Camp Mackall, North Carolina and somewhere along in these days we were put into the 13th AIRBORNE DIVISION. (Ed. note: that is about 40 miles).

In April 1944, we had about half of the outfit taken out and we were sent overseas as replacements, supposedly for the 82nd and the 101st Divisions. We all talked over amongst ourselves and became convinced that we really were no longer in the AIRBORNE. I insisted in my opinion that we would be: "cannon-fodder" and be sent to anywhere a warm body was needed. It always struck me as such a terrible waste to have had all that special Glider training and let it go to waste. We had done a lot of experimenting with "double Glider tows", etc. and I always felt we probably had more glider training than any other outfit in the U.S. Army! (of course that was just my opinion). Well, we finally got put on a ship and headed overseas. When we finally got off the boat in England, there were several paratroopers there to meet us and they kept asking if anyone would like to join the Parachute troops. There were at this point about a dozen of us from the 326 still together. We all wanted to join these Paratroopers. This was the first opening that we ever had to join this elite group. Up to this time we had not "volunteered" for the various "hazardous" duties we had been "dumped" in! Up till this time the call was out for "volunteers" for the "Paratroops" and for "Aerial gunners". It seemed that they were using these people up very fast! Anyone in the Services could "up" for these jobs. None of the Glider Troops were allowed to transfer out to either of the above. Today the reasons appear quite obvious but at the time we felt unfairly abused.

Our willingness was immediately siezed upon and off we went to Jump School! All of the group from the 326th that went made it through the jump school successfully and as I recall we had one of the 326 guys who made his "qualifying jump" with an already broken ankle. He didn't want to tell anyone because he didn't want to lose his place with his "class" or take the chance of being "washed out". He made the jump and got his Parachute Wings. Along with being one of the most prestigious badges in the services, he started collecting the famous "Jump-Pay" of an extra \$50.00 a month for hazardous duty. It was in many ways no more hazardous than the Glider rides, certainly at combat time if all equaled up!..but about this time the Army wised up and realized the dangers and elected to give the Glider troops the same pay as the parachutists. Now it seemed that we hadn't gained all that we thought, but we had gotten out of the "flying coffins" and we were after all, still in the "AIRBORNE" fraternity and happy to be in that special group. We wore our new "Wings" very proudly. They are prouder still today considering the traditions the AIRBORNE has set for all time to come.

Well, when they then assigned us to our new company's, each of the old 326ers were separated at last. I was sent first to "E" Co., 506 Rgt. 101st AIRBORNE DIV., Parachute Infantry. After a few days the E-Co. Commander, Captain Winters, called me into his office. He had been studying the records and saw that I was a "Qualified Expert" on the 81 mm. Mortars. He asked

me if I preferred being in a mortar platoon. My thinly restrained reply was, "Sir, if you had trained constantly for 18 months in 81's where do you think you would prefer to be?" His reply was, "I'll talk to the Hq. co. Commander, and if he needs a mortarman, I'll transfer you". So with that I had found a "home" in the Hq. Co. 2nd Bn., doing the things I had spent all my time up to now training for. The only difference was that now I was a "Paratrooper" in the 506 P.I.R.!(101st Div.)

The training now was the same---only very different! My new buddies found out that I had a wife, that I was a little older than most of the guys and that I had a son at home, born while I was off in training and whom I had never seen! I soon became known to them as "POP". I began to realize that I had had some very excellent training in the 326th. I had no problems being a Paratrooper and a 506er.

One day they held a Company Formation to award the Presidential Unit Citations that had been promised to the men who fought in the invasion in Normandy on D-Day and for many days beyond that. The Captain was going down the formation, pinning the decoration on each soldier. When he stopped in front of me I asked for "Permission to speak", which he granted. I then asked the Captain to present my pin to someone who had actually been in Normandy. He replied, "Trooper, you are just as much a part of this outfit as anyone here. You were here taking jump training and serving as "back-up reserve" for the men over there to count on...and I am going to pin this little thing on YOU and I want to see it there everytime you are in "Dress" uniform"! So much for requests to ones C.O.! I didn't yet realize it, but that little pin was soon to have lots of company! I soon learned that the fellows in my squad were quick to see that I was well trained on the mortars. I also learned some combat tricks from these seasoned troopers..the few survivors from Normandy's battles!

While we continued to train we actually got sent to Airfield Marshaling areas and scheduled for missions 3 different times. Each time the mission got canceled just before we took off. One time we were totally loaded in the planes, with motors revving up just as the call came down that Patton had already taken the area we were scheduled to jump on and the mission was canceled! What a let down and big relief in a way all at the same time.

Well, Sept. 17, 1944 finally rolled around and we went off to Operation "Market Garden". About 1:00 p.m. on a beautiful, clear, blue, sunny fall day we jumped at "Zon" Holland (now known more commonly as "Son". As my plane got over the drop zone (D.Z.), we were greeted by plenty of "flak". A burst hit the end of the wing just as I got to the door of the plane. It tipped the plane to the opposite side from the door and I really had to "jump for it", just to get to jump out! As I got out from the plane, I suddenly found myself right on the middle of a big orange equipment chute. I was sinking into it and I had to run for my life to get off it before it collapsed my own chute! Obviously I made it! We had made a very low level jump and I had very little time to rescue myself and get set to hit the ground. Combat loaded paratroopers are a walking jump shop to say the least. Their total equipment load can weigh almost as much as they do! It is the AIBORNE'S way of getting as much supply into the DZ as possible. When I hit the ground loaded as I was, and with the goofed up delay and faster fall off the equipment chute, my "M-1" rifle socked me in the chin. I could hear the 88's firing on the other side of the

DZ, so I rolled into a convenient ditch. After a minute I decided I best get going but first I cut out a panel of my green/camouflaged chute, tied it around my neck and wore it for additional clothing for some 56 days before mailing it home to my wife, Agnes, and my little boy. We assembled on the DZ periphery and moved off to quickly secure the canal bridge that was our first assigned mission. Then we moved on. On the next day we liberated the major city of Eindhoven. It was the capital city of Holland and was the first city liberated. As we marched and fought our way into the town we dodged the heavier fire and took a side street. A young mother with a child about the age of my son, appeared from a nearby doorway as I was passing. She rushed up to me and stuck a tiny Dutch flag (about one by one and a half inches on a 3 inch pin) in my field jacket. I still have that precious little flag in my "Mementos".

On our second day on the ground we started up "Hells Highway"! Every time the enemy would break through our thinly held lines holding the highway, we would be called to come up and chase them out again. Then we would be sent to the next "breakthrough". We were like a Fire Brigade...everytime the fire broke out we would have to go deal with it. So it went for the next several days. We knew the 82nd boys were having it tough up at Nijmegen, another many miles up the road and they were still cut off. We had to hold the damn road open till the British got enough force up there to keep the break through going. Our supplies were getting down to none. Several hungry days began to take their toll. As we traveled back and forth on our "Hole-Plugging" combat role, we often passed apple orchards where we could help ourselves to the long rows of harvested fruit piled in pyramids all along the way. Also, quite often, a Dutchman would stand beside the road passing out drinks of milk as we came by. We all figured to turn into milky-apples before long. We were so hungry that they were good and very welcome and appreciated. We figured the guys at Nijmegen and Arnhem up the road were still cut off and hungrier than we, if that was possible! One of those days along Hells Highway turned out to be "My Day". We were just outside the little town of Veghel, taking a severe beating by 88's artillery fire. My M-1 rifle had gotten dirty, so I stripped it to clean it just as a shell was coming in. I quickly left the rifle on the dirt parapet above my hole and jumped in. I was convinced the shell was coming right into my foxhole, right after me personally! After that volley lifted, I crawled out and looked around. there was NO Rifle! The incoming shell had completely demolished it! I immediately proceeded to get another from a buddy who was not going to need it or anything else, anymore! It soon proved to be unworkable too so I picked up another which worked just fine (to the discomfort of several of the enemy)!

Shortly after that we were called to plug another breakthrough in the route, and as we ran along I held that new rifle in front of me, ready for action. Suddenly something struck it from my grasp. I had another ruined rifle. It had probably saved my life but I had to discard it for another, my fourth rifle of the day! I hated to part with the one that had saved my life but this was no time for sentiment and souvenirs! I guess it just wasn't "my kind" of day, although it sure was one to remember! (Ed. Note: his luck was sure running on empty by now!)

One day the British tanks finally broke through to us. We were very glad to see them and get some food and ammunition. We had to think that the boys up the road at Nijmegen and Arnhem were still a heck of a long way from us and still without any tanks or supplies. (Ed. Note: we sure were- damn hungry!) One of the tanks that were in our "support" was joined by 2 more and

They stopped for “tea” as is the British habit. The crews were parked just below a knoll, “hull-down” and relatively safe. They were out of their tanks and brewing their tea. As we came up to them we found a German “TIGER” tank parked at the foot of the bottom of the other side of the hill! It was accompanied by a small group of German infantry. This is a rather deadly combination and best dealt with at some distance. So the British tankers tried to “sneak” up to the brow of the hill, one at a time, to take a potshot at the tank. Well! You can well imagine how “sneaky” a huge tank might actually in fact be! Not very! So as each one tried it, the German “TIGER” knocked it out! Our tank support was gone and we were facing the “TIGER” and the infantrymen. It was a very unhealthy situation. Finally, with the typical elan of the AIRBORNE, several of our guys worked their way around the area in spite of the German infantry and knocked the “TIGER” out with one round from their bazooka! Then they charged the infantry and rounded them up as prisoners! (Ed note: Typical AIRBORNE)

As time went on we saw less of the enemy infantry and our main problem became one of the intense and continuous heavy artillery fire. They seemed to have no shortage of ammunition. We did! We finally got dug in on one side of a canal. They were equally dug in on the other! We were in this position for a long time. We continually harassed each other for many days. It was a very unhealthy place in which to reside.

This all was during the days when the enemy had started, in desperation, launching “Buzz Bombs”. These had a very singular sound as they flew over. They also had started to fire off the larger rockets such as the V-2’s, etc. You could hear them coming and going as they passed our positions on their way to terrorize London. They were actually not much of a threat to us except the “Buzz Bombs” were rather erratic and tended to fly an unreliable path and could be expected to fall “short”. I don’t believe many of the latter made it to the target. (Ed note: I know personally of several that hit the airport at Brussels, Belgium at a most convenient time for myself actually!)

As the days dragged interminably on and fall became cold and rainy, our foxholes filled up with water and the fields became a slippery, muddy mess. Every time we moved as a unit, the 88’s would find us and harass us and complicate our moving quite seriously. They seemed to know where we were even when we weren’t on the move. Needless to say, their firing betrayed their locations to our artillery as well and we entertained them appreciably and probably with more effect than they did us. Slowly but surely the balance began to tip in our favor. We fervently hoped that their foxholes were filled deeper with water than ours, when our shells found them exposed and they had to dive in!

We spent 73 totally miserable days on the front lines before we were finally relieved by a Scottish outfit. We came off the line and were sent to an old French army camp at Mourmalon, LaGrand, France. It was there that we got to recover our duffel bags and personal items from the old camp we left in England. My squad leader, Cpl. Chester McAdams had gotten two new pairs of jump boots, specially made for his size 14 feet, just before we left on this invasion. He was understandably upset, when upon trying them on, he found that he only 2 boots left in his duffel! That was small grief compared to his dismay upon finding that the apparent thief had

mistakenly left him 2 boots for the left foot only! I still wonder what the thief thought when he discovered his error!

We were relaxing and feeding up and enjoying ourselves mightily when, having been out of combat for several weeks of peace and relative ease, the word came down that the Germans had launched an all out, massive thrust toward Antwerp, Belgium. It was Hitler's ordered "super plan" to cut the allies in half and seize the highly valued deep water port there. He had sent Von Runsted with all the force he could muster at the center of the lines in the Ardennes. It was an overwhelming force and was thrown against a brand new, untried, infantry division fresh into the lines from the States. It had wiped it out and was rolling toward Antwerp at breakneck speed. It was already threatening the huge Allied supply center at Liege, Belgium. If it did indeed manage to isolate this center and cut the forces of Patton in the south and Monty in the North (AND US!) off, he might well have turned his burgeoning defeat into a victorious "rout" and changed the course of the war. It was obvious at SHAEF HQ. that they needed the AIRBORNE and they needed it now! On the 16th of December 1944, we were told to "truck up" and move to the threatened area on the double! We were going back into the "meat grinder" again! We left in open trucks on Dec. 17th. We were crowded in so tight we could not sit down. None of our equipment had been repaired and we were without winter issue clothing. We also had not yet gotten replacement troops fill out our badly thinned ranks after the Holland fight. Thus started a very bleak, demoralizing picture! Had we truly realized what we were going to get into and what we would ultimately be called upon to do, I wonder what we would have thought then? It was terrifying enough to have to go back to what we had so recently experienced and considered we all had used up our "luck" getting through that one!

In the 20 days we spent at Mourmalon we had superficially put the horrors of that battle behind us. Now we were going back "up there"! There were some grim faces in those trucks! We rode forever it seemed in those trucks. Every mile we passed brought us all closer to death and the Hell we already knew too well!! Eventually we arrived at an area out side of a little town unknown till now to any of us, and certainly never heard of outside Belgium! The world would soon hear of it and it was about to become enshrined in the annals of wars, equal in fame and ferocity to Gettysburg, the Pass at Thermopaly and, yes, even Normandy! Fate was about to christen the 101st in a way no one would ever wish to emulate! Little did we know! All we knew was we were in the dark, we were cold, freezing and had been up without sleep for hours on end in open trucks. Hardly the kind and condition of troops you would ask to stand in front of, and stop, Hitler's Super Juggernaut! The picture was totally bleak already and we hadn't quite arrived yet! The bright spot, the ONLY bright spot, was that as we went along sometime during the trip, we passed an abandoned jeep with a load of rifle and machine-gun ammunition. We finally got some of the precious ammo we needed. I don't recall that we had any ammo for our Mortars, nor did we have as many Mortars as we should normally have. Of course, we didn't have near as many men as we should have had either. As we went along, the picture got continually more bleak and the weather got colder, if indeed it could get any colder! At least now we had some rifle ammunition!

The first few days were very cloudy and stormy. The only airplanes we saw were a few of ours, but unmarked! They were flown by Germans! Not very comforting! The picture began to

degenerate toward much worse, fast! Our main occupation became trying to dodge all the incoming German artillery, and trying to keep out of sight of those U.S. Planes the Germans were using! They were not physically very effective, but the fact that they had them etc., was demoralizing. We saw few if any American or Allied aircraft.

Finally, at last, on December 22nd or 23rd the sun broke through and Glory-be, the damn sky was FULL of Allied/American supply aircraft! What a relief! Oh! It was a gorgeous and thrilling thing to stand there in the cold and snow up to your "you-know" and see the equipment bundles full of food, ammunition and at last some winter clothing etc., tumbling out of the planes, the chutes billowing out and their loads whomping down in to the snow. The planes were very low. Great targets for enemy gunners, and we had to sweat and hold our breath as each plane threaded its way amongst the fire. We felt great pride and admiration for the men up there, cooley standing in plain sight in the doors of the lumbering C-47's and kicking the last of the bundles out into the freezing wind. We--the isolated and battered ones on the ground, felt for a moment "at one" with those other brave men! We knew we were truly not alone that day! What a relief! What a Christmas blessing! As we retrieved the bundles, we first cut rags to wrap our freezing feet! We then took the supplies back to their proper areas. What a great feeling to have warmer feet! Of course with the clear weather came the P-47's and the P-51's and P-38's. Now we knew the Germans were so massed against us and forced somewhat more in to the visible open that these fighter planes would have a real "turkey shoot" and that would cut down the threats to us materially. Things were truly looking up! We immediately felt more secure, and surely we could now endure most anything as long as we had ammunition and supplies. History books tell us we survived all that eight German Divisions could throw at us. On Dec. 24th, the Germans didn't throw so much artillery at us, so we decided to put up a Christmas tree. We picked up any bright colored bits we could find, most of it the "chaff" aluminum strips the planes dumped to foil the enemy's radar. Then we put some full and empty ration boxes to represent our presents under the tree. We even used a couple of live mortar shells! For a brief few moments on Christmas each of us was at home with loved ones! At least in our minds! The enemy gave us a nice fight that day. They didn't bother us at all for a while with their artillery. They were saving it for the next day to give us a real Xmas present! Which they did!

Anyway, we really almost enjoyed Xmas day (on Dec. 24th!). It was sunny and much warmer and a fellow from Regimental Hq., I believe, came along with a photographer and took a couple of photos of our little group and our tree. These pictures showed how we had wrapped our feet with the bag material. I don't remember what day, but shortly after this we received some real winter foot gear, and some warmer clothing. We really felt lucky. What a blessing and relief! How lucky could you get?

Finally on the morning of Jan. 3rd, we moved out and advanced toward Foy and Noville. There we had started to dig a mortar emplacement and some foxholes. Suddenly I dove into my foxhole going in headfirst. I don't recall ever going in head first before, but it was lucky I did because I caught a fragment from a "screaming meemie" right through my calf of my leg. Later it was described as a two and one half inch by six and one half inch wound! I recall thinking that it was a good thing I had gone in head first...what if my neck had been sticking up there? I do

remember the Sergeant cranking up our field phone and asking for an "Evac" vehicle. We hadn't seen a vehicle for days it seemed. Suddenly there it was! Ready to evacuate me to Bastogne proper which was only two miles way. Later on I was moved to an Evac. hospital near Paris. Finally, I had my pass to Paris and dang it, here I was with only one good leg! Oh, the cruelty of war! On January 21st I was shipped back to England and finally I arrived in the good old U.S.A.! That was on May 13th, 1945.

Upon docking at the wharf a large group of us watched from the ship's railing (it was a hospital ship and we were supposedly "litter" patients. As the gangplank was set in place the whole bunch of us hustled off the wharf to kiss the good old U.S.A. Then the officer in charge berated us and we had to get back on the ship so we could be carried a shore on litters! What a show!

I was finally medically and Honorably discharged on Sept. 27, 1945, from Percy Jones Hospital Center at Fort Custer, Michigan.

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