Robert Houben.
War Correspondent, Parachuting with 101st Airborne Division into Normandy, representing the Combined Allied Press, June 6, 1944.

In order to prepare for the assignment, I was sent through Paratrooper Replacement School in Hungerford, England. I completed the course, made my five jumps, and was given my wings.

I was assigned to parachute from the same plane as General Maxwell Taylor, at that time Commanding General of the 101st Airborne, and presently Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army. (I am attaching a personal letter received from Taylor after this recent appointment.) Normally, one thinks that it's reasonably safe sticking by the General, and naturally we gagged about that a good deal. It turned out that General Taylor jumped from plane number one in the invasion, the first plane of the regular airborne flotilla, and I tumbled out of the same plane right behind him. Not only was I the first correspondent to land in France, I was in the first handful of soldiers. General Taylor jumped number two, and I jumped number six.

To begin at the beginning, I got a call at my flat one night in London, telling me to be ready in full field pack at 3 a.m. the next morning and a truck would pick me up. I was taken to the Newbury area and sealed in for the invasion, a matter of days away. We were ready to go one night, June 4, but as you know, the invasion was postponed. The next night we gathered by our planes after smearing our faces with charcoal from a stove. We had missed chow because our cook had prepared pork chops and Taylor felt it unwise to take a chance on a pork dinner and airsickness. General Eisenhower came to our plane (followed by several of my buddy correspondents who were covering him -- including Red Mueller of NEC) and bid us Good-Speed. As I recall we took off some time before midnight with our plane circling the sky in the lead over England as the hundreds of others formed up behind us. We were all given a handful of anti-airsick pills.

Not knowing I was to take only one or two, I popped them all into my mouth. As a result I slept fitfully almost from the time we left the grounds until we bailed out over France. It was very dark in the plane with little conversation because of engine noise. It all seemed very unreal and we all seemed numb.

Naturally, it was a big gamble, a gamble in which each of us was putting his life on the wheel, bailing out into a complete unknown in the pitch of night behind the German lines in occupied France. Our assignment generally was to neutralize certain specified objectives (such as gun replacements, key coastal towns, etc.) and thus ease the job of the seaboard troops to begin the invasion some hours later. I was loaded with equipment, heavy underclothes and socks, jump boots, G.I. wool uniform, then a gas-impregnated jump suit, cans of k-rations, a folding-stock carbine strapped to my thigh, binoculars filched from the army, a trench knife strapped to one leg, and trench shovel strapped
to the other. (I have picture of me in this outfit shortly after landing).

At one point during the crossing, someone shook me and shouted "We're leaving England!" Shortly later, another shaking and another shout: "We've crossed the French coastline!" I was still numb with the sleeping pills, and numb from anticipation almost past the point of fear to resignation, but I stirred awake and tried to see around and out the open door. Soon thru the door we could see bursting balls of anti-aircraft fire -- sporadic and not heavy. Then the RED LIGHT on the wall! Get ready! We stood up and hooked up our cables and tried to check each other's equipment, but all was confusion with the weaving plane booming along close to the ground. I felt resigned -- if we weren't ready then, no sense trying to prepare this late. Suddenly! GREEN LIGHT! Major Legere, jump master, screamed "Follow me!" and leaped out the gaping hole. General Taylor followed. I stumbled up the weaving floor. Suddenly the open door gaped at me. I gasped, took a big breath and pushed out into nothing.

It was a moonlit night (a tremendous help actually, although a mental block because you feel obvious -- feel that the enemy can spot you easily) with a gentle breeze, perfect parachuting weather. I saw tracer bullets arc thru the sky as my chute snapped open and flipped me taut. The tracers terrified me as I had an immediate fear that if one hit my nylon chute, it would inflate up. As I sped toward the ground, I saw I was heading for a crossroad, with an open field on one side and an orchard on the other. I had enough maneuverability to pick one or the other. Through these split seconds of confusion, a couple of thoughts registered -- one, that taking the open field would prevent my hanging up in a tree, but, two, taking the orchard would give me cover when I hit the ground. I took the orchard, and started "slipping" my chute over towards it.

I had a nightmarish conviction that the Germans who had fired those tracers were following us down, were leaping across hedgerows to be there in the fields with bayonets as we landed (actually, I now presume they were as frightened as we, and probably intent on hiding or defending themselves instead of hunting us down). My schooling stood me in good stead, and automatically, I reversed myself into a forward position and landed neatly on the ground between trees. At that moment I had my most terrifying minutes. I was so loaded with equipment and strapped so tightly, I couldn't get out of my harness. I took out my carbine, laid it beside me, struggled with the harness and did some fancy praying -- I actually prayed intently, repeating over and over, "Please, just let me get on my feet, give me a fighting chance, let me on my feet before they get here, just a fighting chance..."

I pulled out my trench knife and sawed off some of the harness. Just before I got loose, I prayed for some Americans to drop near me, but I was all alone. A lone C-47 circled overhead but he apparently had unloaded his human cargo and was on his way home.

I scouted into a hedgerow for cover and unfolded my map, laid my compass on it and got out my flashlight. But then I was stunned. In the hundreds of aerial photos I had studied of my drop zone before we left, there wasn't one orchard. We had missed our DZ! My map and com-
pass were useless -- without a point of reference, all I could do was
stare at a map of France and wonder where hell in the entire country
presuming it was France -- I could be. A burst of gunfire startled me
and I leaped thru the bushes. I hid in another bush and again stupidly
looked at the map.

Suddenly I heard the snap of a toy cricket. We had been issued
these in England. One snap of the cricket was a friendly challenge,
two snaps the answer. I had punched a hole in the back of mine and tied
it to my belt. I grabbed for it. The back was still there, but the
metal noise-maker was gone. I turned slowly in the moonlight and saw
a crouching figure pointing his gun at me a few feet away. In the dark,
every figure looked like a German soldier, every helmet like a German
helmet.

"Flash", I said, repeating one of our verbal challenges. He didn't
react. "Thunder," I said another. No answer. "I'm moving out into
the moonlight," I said. "Don't fire."

I had a large W.C. (War Correspondent) painted on my helmet. All
paratroopers have white identification insignia on their helmets. I
moved out slowly and he stared. "Hell, the correspondent." He was the
side of General Tony McAuliffe (later to become famous for saying "nuts"
to the Germans at Bastogne), and he was looking for the General.

We decided that I would return to the crossroad and gather anyone
I could find there; he would scout the fields. I headed for the cross-
roads. As I walked down the road, I heard footsteps, and jumped into
the ditch. I almost fell over General McAuliffe. He gave me a big smile
and asked where I was going.

"No place, General," and I settled down beside him. I still
thought the safest place to be was with the brass. The general had his
cricket and we challenged footsteps and soon had collected a motley
crew. As we gathered, we got organized and I felt greatly relieved
although I all night I hated to turn my back to the open spaces. Whenever
possible I kept it to a tree.

The radio started working and we discovered that the paratroopers
scheduled to take the key town of Pouperville overlooking the beaches on
which the Fourth Division would land had missed their DZ and were too
far away to reach their target in time. General Taylor ordered a forced
march and decided that our group would attack the city. We were supposed
to be a command headquarters. We had radio-men, and cooks, and aid men --
and a correspondent -- two generals, a full colonel, a lieutenant colonel,
and about 70 or 80 soldiers. This was perhaps the oddest group ever to
launch a petrol action and tactical attack. And never did so few men
have so much brass to command them on a small maneuver.

As we dog-trotted along one stretch, I noticed a soldier with a
couple of cartons tied around his neck. They contained carrier pigeons.
I talked him out of a pigeon, scribbled my first story and fastened it
to the bird. We scooted him into the air. The story got through, the
first story written from liberated France, and was published throughout
the world under the slug "By carrier pigeon".
To condense the next few hours, we hit Pouperville in two columns. We took the town with only two casualties to my knowledge, one man killed, Larry Legere badly wounded.

It was still early in the morning, our command was set up, and I decided to head for the beaches where a radio transmitter was scheduled to arrive for the correspondents. I could see the barrage balloons in the sky, but I presumed the German forces were between us. I lit off, avoiding the main road and dodging through the back country. My equipment weighed terribly heavy, and I was exhausted. I started discarding everything unnecessary, and discovered to my disgust I even had a towel with me. I tore it in two and threw away half as I went, along with other items. Finally I tossed it all away, tossed away even my toothbrush. I hit the sand at the beach but I had missed the area of the beach where our troops were landing. I tried to tread softly, staring at the sand, fearful lest it be mines. Suddenly I stumbled on a lone G.I. He had a shattered leg and was crying for help. I spilled my sulfa powder on his leg, offered him a capsule of morphine and promised to send help. He begged me to stay with him, but as we were off the beaten path, it was better that I continue and try to send him a couple of aid men.

Trudging thru the sand was so exhausting I stumbled to the ground several times. Eventually I reached the beach. Soldiers were floundering in the water. Jeeps and trucks were under water. Some were making it ashore. An ammunition dump was burning. I started for a Red Cross sign when there was a terrific explosion behind me (probably artillery). I was blown on my face and skidded thru the sand. I had terrible pain in my ears and both my hands were bleeding (I have only partial hearing today, probably resulting from this injury). I crawled to the aid foxhole, and the boys wiped off and bandaged my hands. All they could give me for my ears was sympathy. When the body is numb with fatigue, it can rest thru anything. I crawled under a truck and slept for a short time. When I awoke the truck was gone.

In the confusion I located the beachmaster and asked for the radio. He thought I was nuts and told me to get out of the way of the tanks. Obviously, no radio. I waded out in the water. An LCP was unloading the soldiers. I waded up to it. "Can you take me to the flagship?"

As it returned to its ship, it dropped me at the flagship of General Lavon Collins, Commander of the 7th Corps which was leading the invasion, and later to become Chief of Staff (three of the generals I was with those first couple days later became Chiefs of Staff -- Collins, Ridgeway and Taylor).

I stood dripping on the deck when a major passed me. He glanced at my shoulder patch -- the Screaming Eagle of the 101st -- and then spun around to me.

"Are you from the 101st?" he asked almost incredulously.

"Yes".

"The General wants to see you!"

To my amazement, I learned that none of our operational messages
gotten to the flagship. As far as this headquarters knew, our airborne flotilla had disappeared into space and not been heard from. Returning to file my story, I HAD UNWITTINGLY LINKED THE AIRBORNE AND SEABORNE OPERATIONS. I later was recommended to 12th Army Group for a decoration for this unplanned accomplishment. A couple of years later, General Taylor sent me a copy of a letter he had written to General Parks recommending again that I be decorated. Bill Walton of Time Magazine, who parachuted with the 82nd Airborne, told me during a later campaign that I had not been cleared for the field decoration because 12th Army Group was uncertain about my status, as I was technically a civilian.

General Collins called an army secretary to his office and asked me to tell him everything I could about what had happened to the airborne. The secretary took it all down.

"How is Max Taylor? Did he make it okay...." He left the question unspoken, but I answered it for him.

"He's alive and busy organizing further operations," I said. "He personally led an attack which secured Pouperville just in time for the seaborne boys to land."

"How was the drop?"

"Irregular." I replied.

"Irregular?" Collins was worried. "Get that down!" he told the secretary.

When I had passed on information as to the type of soldier we had met initially (I felt he was inferior and not first-line), and all other information I could think of, Collins asked if I had eaten. When I said no, he turned to his aid.

"Get him some ham and eggs and put him to bed in my room."

I wrote my first story first and sent it off. Then I sacked out in the General's bed for about three or four hours.

I later bummed a ride back ashore and went looking for the 101st. I found a white horse and made me a bridle out of parachute harness. The first day I rode him back to the beaches to file another story, giving Clark Lee and Bill Stoneman a big laugh when I met them. I slept the following nights in my parachute. I continued on throughout the campaign, but I think this is the essence of the first day in Normandy.

I had the dubious distinction of being the first correspondent to land in France and the first to file a story, but I'm much prouder of the fact that a lone newspaperman looking for a radio transmitter unwittingly linked the airborne and seaborne phases of the invasion of Normandy.