
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the first March session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker will be James Fenelon, author of *Four Hours of Fury*. He is joined by veterans of Operation VARSITY who will discuss the largest airborne operation of World War II.

Operation VARSITY in March 1945 is the largest single airborne operation in history, but it never received the same recognition as the other big name events like OVERLORD or ANVIL. Historians have paid more attention to military operations that never even took place, such as CORONET or OLYMPIC. There are many studies of the scale, scope, and possible outcomes of these planned campaigns. Perhaps one of the reasons for the relative obscurity of VARSITY is that it came late in the war after several unauthorized American crossings (First Army's 9th Armored Division on 8 March at Remagen, Third Army's 5th Infantry Division on 23 March) that led many historians to question its importance and its necessity.

Airborne operations ("vertical envelopment") came of age in the Second World War but the concept originated in the search for alternatives to trench warfare in the Great War. All the Great Powers desperately searched for ways to develop some successful innovation that would break the deadlock on the Western Front. The development of the tank, poison gas, flamethrowers, and unrestricted submarine warfare were all innovations designed for decisive advantage beyond the fruitless infantry tactics in the mud of Flanders. The 'new' tool of war, the airplane, inspired many on both sides to use aviation to change the ways the war would be fought. This led to the first strategic bombing campaign in history (against the United Kingdom), and the struggle for air supremacy over the skies of France by famous aces like Albert Ball and Manfred "The Red Baron" von Richthofen (who was shot down by a white Beagle on a flying red dog house.)

Toward the very end of the war, the idea of air dropping large numbers of troops was seriously considered for the very first time. In the fall of 1918 Colonel William P. "Billy" Mitchell

(General John Pershing's air service advisor in France), proposed the idea of gathering all the Allied bombers, loading them with men and machine guns, and dropping them by parachute behind enemy lines. Pershing approved the plan for the spring of 1919, but the war ended before it could be executed.

During the interwar years, the Soviet Union and Germany latched onto the airborne concept, which is parachuting infantry troops behind the lines to engage in surprise vertical envelopment of opposing forces. By 1935, the Soviet Union had battalion sized parachute troops engaging in mass jumps and had even perfected parachuting light tanks. During the 1930s the French, Italians, and Germans all opened military jump schools. The German paratroopers (*Fallschirmjäger*) quickly moved from regimental to division strength. In May 1940 the Germans used a combination of paratroopers and gliders in combat for the first time, in the attack on the Netherlands, seizing bridges and holding them until the infantry forces could catch up. Additionally, German forces seized and took the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael. A year later the Germans followed these victories up with the first exclusively airborne invasion in history when the *Wehrmacht* attacked Crete with only aircraft and paratroops.

The United States lagged far behind in experimenting with airborne operations in the 1920s and 30s. This changed with the appointment of General George C. Marshall as the Army Chief of Staff in April 1939. After reading reports about Germany's work on paratrooper and glider projects, Marshall requested a study on the feasibility of creating similar American units. The different sections of the Army fought over who would be in charge of these new forces. The engineers wanted them because the soldiers would have to be trained in explosives, the Air Corps because they would have to jump out of airplanes, and the infantry wanted them to be part of the ground forces. The infantry ultimately won out and formed the First Parachute Test Platoon in July 1940.

Starting late, the United States was catching up fast. Once it entered World War II, the United States raised five airborne divisions, the 11th, 13th, 17th, 82nd, and 101st. The 17th, 82nd, and the 101st all saw action in Europe. The 11th and 13th were held in reserve in the United States.

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

The 13th finally deployed to Europe but did not see combat, and while the 11th fought in the Pacific in the New Guinea, Leyte, and Luzon campaigns.

America's first use of airborne operations occurred during Operation TORCH in 1942 when the 509th Parachute Infantry Regiment dropped into Algeria. This first operation was generally successful but later airdrops had mixed results. During the Sicilian invasion, the 82nd Airborne were scattered from their drop zones and Allied anti-aircraft guns shot down twenty-three American C-47 transport aircraft in one of the worst friendly fire incidents of the war. Later on, during the Italian campaign, two regiments of the 82nd Airborne had two successful combat drops in support of the Allied landings at Salerno.

The most famous airborne assaults were part of Operation OVERLORD. The 82nd, 101st, and the British 6th Airborne divisions dropped into the Normandy countryside, most scattered far from their drop zones. They ended up taking part in some of the toughest fighting in the invasion. Smaller airborne and glider units were also used in Operation ANVIL in southern France.

During Operation MARKET GARDEN, the 82nd and 101st were dropped and seized their objectives in Holland, but Arnhem proved 'a bridge too far' despite the heroics of the British 1st Airborne. During the winter of 1944, all three US Airborne divisions were used as reserve infantry, which led to one of the most heroic battles in US history, when the 101st ("Screaming Eagles") held off the Germans at Bastogne in the Battle of the Bulge in December, a fight immortalized in the film *Band of Brothers*. The 82nd helped to hold the northern shoulder of the Bulge, and the 17th took part in the counter-offensive in support of Patton's Third Army.

As spring came in 1945, the 17th Airborne and the British 6th Airborne received the call for Operation VARSITY. Over 19,000 paratroopers dropped behind German lines in support of an infantry crossing of the Rhine River near Wesel. As envisioned, the mission was to be an overwhelming force shattering German resistance to allow deep penetration of the Nazi defenses. After the war, some historians and former generals claimed that VARSITY was unnecessary since infantry could have made the Rhine crossing with fewer casualties than were suffered by the paratroopers in the actual battle. However, the vertical envelopment by the airborne units knocked out critical German artillery positions that made the infantry crossings much less costly. The 17th Airborne division veterans have no patience for the "second-guessers" or "naysayers" that attempt to diminish the sacri-

fices of their brothers in this last, and least studied, airdrop of the war in Europe.

Further Readings:

James M. Fenelon, *Four Hours of Fury: The Untold Story of World War II's Largest Airborne Invasion and the Final Push into Nazi Germany* (New York: Scribner, 2019).

Clay Blair, *Ridgway's Paratroopers: The American Airborne in World War II* (Garden City, NY: The Dial Press, 1985).

Gerard Devlin, *Paratrooper! The Saga of the US Army and Marine Parachute and Glider Combat Troops During World War II* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

W. D. Knickerbocker, *Those Damn Glider Pilots* (College Park, GA: Static Line Books, 1993).

James Mrazek, *Fighting Gliders of World War II* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1977).

Charles Whiting, *Bounce the Rhine* (Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein and Day, Inc., 1986).

Stephen Wright, *The Last Drop: Operation Varsity, March 24-25, 1945* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008).

Announcements:

Vietnam War Roundtable - 16 Mar. 2020, *Fall of Saigon* - rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - 17 Mar. 2020 - *Dakota War Trials of 1862* - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 23 Mar. 2020 - *Law and the Civil War* - 715-386-1268 -

rossandhaines@comcast.net

Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - 25 Mar. 2020 - Showalter, *Instrument of War: German Army 1914-1918* - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com

Civil War Symposium - 4 Apr. 2020 - info@tccwrt.com

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 - <https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org

World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 - <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show - 20 June 2020 - 320-564-6644 - <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie - 18-19 July 2020 - 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org

Winston Churchill Book Club - lin.hopkins@hotmail.com

Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - www.afmisp.org -

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - crazyjer-ry45@hotmail.com

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2020

24 Mar. Bedel Smith

9 Apr. **THURSDAY** Tanks at Bataan

12 May Last Battle

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We would greatly appreciate your supporting the HCDWW2RT!