

PICTURE
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GENERAL DEMPSEY CROSSES
THE RHINE

**HULTON'S
NATIONAL
WEEKLY**

THE LAST STEPS TO

VICTORY

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APRIL 14, 1945

Vol. 27. No. 2



2.00 HOURS ON THE WEST BANK OF THE RHINE: March 24, 1945

THE LAST STRIDE TO VICTORY

The record of the great day we've been living for, talking about, dreaming on for nearly six long years. Macdonald Hastings tells the story of the storming of Germany's last great defence line by the men of the British Army.

D MINUS ONE. Twenty-two hundred hours exactly; unless our watches had gone mad. Two thousand yards from the banks of the Rhine; unless we'd got the maps upside down. Zero hour for the big crack, the all-out all-in party. And here we were, the three of us—Bert the photographer, the jeep-driver and I—slap in the middle of it, without a soul in sight. It was uncanny; it was worse; it was ridiculous. The British Army, for the first time in history, was assaulting one of the greatest rivers in Europe. And, so far as we could see, we were the only living creatures taking part in it.

The long straight road, lined with long straight poplars, was empty. The flat fields, bathed in moonlight, were quite bare. Only the blazing signposts of the guns, pointing the way across the Rhine with tongued flash and red fingers of tracer, told us we were in the right place. We couldn't see the guns. All we could see was that the earth all round us was spouting flame, and, where we stood,



The Bombing That Prepared the Way

the pattern of tracer bullets wriggled like a red net over our heads. The air about us trembled and hissed with flying steel. Our nostrils were sharpened with the salty, exciting smell of cordite. But the whole thing was utterly impersonal.

Somewhere in the area surrounding us, there were hundreds of thousands of men. For days, we'd been watching them moving up into position. For days, the roads had been so choc-a-block with trucks, tanks, guns, bridging material, assault boats, buffaloes, alligators, weasels, ships on wheels that, sometimes, it took us hours to jeep a few miles. But now, at the very moment when, according to plan, the Commandos were assaulting the Rhine at Wesel only two thousand yards away from us, the whole of the British Second army, with their waggon trains and their gear, had vanished. I still don't know how—or where.

We knew the order of battle. Earlier in the day, at a conference in a German village, in a room in



ON THE MORNING OF D-DAY, AS THE FIRST WAVE OF THE AIRBORNE FORCES SWEEPS OVER THE RHINE.

The estimated time to build the first pontoon bridge for heavy traffic across the river is forty-eight hours. During the night, the engineers move the bridging material into position. At ten o'clock, the Commandos had to make the crossing. By 10.30, they had to be in position fifteen hundred yards outside Wesel. At 10.30 exactly, the R.A.F. were to plaster the place before the Commandos broke in. And, at 10.30 exactly, standing on the western bank of the river, we heard, over the noise of the guns, the droning music of the bombers coming in.

which every door was guarded and every window closed, a young staff officer from Second Army had given us the time-table of the operation. His manner was brusque and, in the way of his breed, he tried to be undramatic. But we could see that he

felt the sense of the occasion. And there was a ring in his voice as he recited off the proud names of the crack British divisions who were taking part. The beginning of the show was to be at 21.00 hours at Rees, with the 51st Highland Division leading the

assault. In our sector, at Xanten, the party was to begin at two in the morning with the 15th Scottish Assault and the 52nd Division and 20th Armoured Division following. But, before the assault at Xanten, the Commandos had the job of breasting open Wesel at ten o'clock. "A typical Commando operation," the staff officer called it. It was.

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Lines of tracer from our bank marked out the lanes where the Commandos were waiting. Anxiously, we watched to see whether the bombers would mark the target correctly. We needn't have worried. Suddenly there was a roar as one of the bombers dived. A row of coloured markers ringed the target. And the bombs started crumpling home. Where we were standing, the ground quaked. In a few minutes, what was left of Wesel was heaving and belching with flame and smoke. The air over the target filled with puffs of flak, like a shower of feathers. The enemy was hitting back. For a quarter of an hour, the raid went on. And then another flare dropped between the blazing town and the positions where the Commandos were waiting. It was the signal that the job was done. The noise of the bombers faded. Wesel, on the other bank, was a smoky red and purple glow. As we drove away in the jeep on the road running alongside the river, we could hear the chatter of Vickers guns. The Commandos were making the final assault.

The Big Assault Begins

Just before 02.00 hours that night at Xanten, we stood in a slit trench on the flood dyke overlooking the Rhine. Beyond, a long flat stretch of land extended to the river bank. Behind us, we could see the church tower of Xanten, lit by a fire from a stray shell. Nothing moved, except a few cattle in the ruined villages at our backs. Over the dyke, we could see white streaks of tape marking the lines for the assault parties to approach the river. At intervals, a glimmer of light from a lantern



The Corps Commander Looks Round
General Ritchie, commanding 12th Corps, makes a tour of inspection of his troops during the battle.



The Stuff To Do The Job
Anchors in hundreds are needed to grapple the pontoons in the swift, deep-flowing river.



SAPPERS START THE JOB OF BRIDGING ONE OF EUROPE'S GREATEST RIVERS IN A RECORD RACE AGAINST TIME.

material into position. At early light, while the assaulting infantry are still clearing the enemy on the opposite bank, great tree trunks are flung into position and launched in the river. Ferries and amphibious vehicles are used to get men and material over the Rhine until the bridge is ready.

picked out a notice signposting the route. The enemy's side of the river was dotted with the glow of fires. The Rhine, in the moonlight, looked like a silver streak.

Although a division was massing behind our shoulder for the crossing, there was still no sign of it. All we could see were the shadowy forms of pickets. The battle was still being fought by the guns.

The torment of sound of the barrage was so tremendous that our eardrums seemed to be opening and shutting and our heads ached with the pain of it. It was scary just to lie there and see the tracer and feel the metal going over our heads, it felt so very close to our heads. What it was like for the enemy, one can only surmise. And the barrage wasn't just guns. "The funnies," as the soldiers call them, were there too. Batteries of rockets. When the rockets were fired, it seemed as if an express train was going overhead and we were lying on the permanent way. When they exploded on the opposite bank, I can only say that it looked like the devil playing the piano.

Zero Hour For The Infantry Attack

Zero hour—one expects so much of that phrase—zero hour itself was so quiet and uneventful in fact that we scarcely realised the party had started. In a leisurely way, as we stumbled about among the broken trees and ruined buildings of the village behind the dyke, we noticed that tracked vehicles dragging assault boats were assembling along the tape-marked roads. Then, somebody said "Come on, chaps" and the procession moved through a gap in the dyke, over the flat land to the river. The infantry trotted along behind holding on to the sides of the boats.

Not till we reached the river bank did the enemy open fire. And then a few scattered Spandaus started firing and we could see the tracer sweeping in our direction. I felt a tingling in my stomach and a queer sensation as if all my clothes had been stripped off my back and I was standing there, naked on the bank. I threw myself desperately on my face. But I was the only one who did so and, a few seconds later, I was standing, a little shamefacedly, on my feet again.

The men manning the assault boats stood by until the whole force was assembled, and then, quietly, they put away across the river. The enemy

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10.00 HOURS ON D-PLUS ONE: The Gap Over the Rhine Closes

Building the bridge in sections from both sides of the river at once, the sappers work ahead of schedule. Enemy attempts, during the night, to destroy the construction work have failed.



THREE HOURS LATER: The Last Section of the Bridge is Got Into Place

Already the bridge is open to foot traffic. The sappers, sweating in the hot spring sunshine, hammer away to complete the laying of the planking to let the waiting guns and armour get across.



DEMPSEY CROSSES THE RHINE: The Commander of the British 2nd Army Sees How the Bridgework is Getting Along. At 11.30 hours on D-Day, General Dempsey crosses the Rhine in a small motor boat to see for himself how the bridge is coming along. He tells the sappers that the battle is going well, that, for quick victory, everything depends on getting the armour across the river as quickly as possible.



stunned and punch drunk with the artillery preparation, allowed us to cross his last great line of defence with scarcely an answering shot. And all that night, in thin streams of assault boats and amphibious craft, the "Jocks" trickled over the river. At first light on D-Day the river bank was still amazingly deserted and quiet. As we wandered along the sandy beach, it was still hard to believe that a great battle was going on on the opposite bank. There were long stretches of the Rhine with nobody in sight. And there were no fleets of boats or vehicles making the crossing. We watched a team of ferries (odd craft with a platform mounted on four pontoons and drawbridges at both ends) pushing tanks over the river. We saw cranes unloading naval craft, with sailors as uncomfortable as ducks out of water, waiting to get into their element again. And then, up the river, we came upon the preparations for the first bridge. Nobody seemed to be in a hurry. A hundred men, at most, were at work doing nothing more exciting than laying huge tree trunks on the shelf of the river bank. A convoy of trucks, carrying pontoons, was drawn up at the river's edge. The purpose of the tree trunks, as we discovered later, was to slide the pontoons into the water.

The Airborne Forces Go In

Up till 9.45 on D-Day, the artillery barrage, which had started at five o'clock the previous evening, thundered on. Then, with dramatic suddenness, everything was quiet. I'll swear I heard a bird singing; although none of us, by that time, could hear much except the buzzing in our ears. The moment had come for the airborne landing. And, at ten o'clock on the dot, the first wave of the air armada swept out of the morning mist over the Rhine so low that we could see that the jumping doors for the paratroops were open.

It was a tremendously exciting moment. Over our heads they came like fighting geese, wave after wave of them, hundreds of aircraft, roaring over to



A Mine Goes Up on the Eastern Bank The Germans have laid mines. One of them is pulled by the sappers working on the bridge.



14.30 HOURS ON D-PLUS ONE: The First Pontoon Bridge Across the Rhine is Opened for Heavy Traffic. The job has been completed nearly half a day ahead of schedule. The first vehicles to go across, after the chief engineer has made his final check, are mobile guns for the anti-aircraft defences of the bridge on the eastern bank of the river.

finish the job the "Jocks" had started on the eastern bank. The mist was too heavy to see the paratroops tumble out over the dropping nose and the gliders sailing in. But we could see they were having a hot time. The enemy flak was opening up. And planes, flaming and smoking, tumbled out of the sky. One crashed just near us. Others reeled out of sight. But, as each wave of aircraft passed over, another took its place. After an hour or so, the flak faltered as the airborne troops on the ground douped what was left of the flak defences after our artillery barrage, to let the later waves in. The sky was all ours. And, ever since, the roar of allied aircraft, bombers and fighters, has never ceased.

At eleven o'clock on that morning, while the airborne forces were still roaring over our heads, just at the moment when the first British pontoon slipped into the river, there was a flutter of salutes at the bridgehead. A spare figure in a battledress, in a peaked hat with the red band and gold badge of a general, walked down to the Rhine bank. A little motor-boat was waiting for him. He climbed in and, unnoticed even by most of the men working on the bridge, General Dempsey, the commander of the 2nd Army, crossed the Rhine. On the other side, he talked to the engineers clearing mines. And then, with a wave of his hand, he made the return journey.

General Dempsey Under Fire

It was strange that, at that moment, the enemy started to mortar the bridgehead. And it's worthy of record that he missed the commander of the Second Army by a bare hundred yards. When he reached the western bank again, General Dempsey and his aides walked slowly to a shell hole pitted in the bank. While the rest of us rubbed our noses in the sand, the general sat in the shell-hole and smoked a cigarette, as calmly as a general ought to, until the barrage stopped.

As he went away, he went up to the sappers working on the bridge and said "Make this a

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Meanwhile, the Airborne Forces Wait for the Ground Troops to Relieve Them The 6th Airborne have taken all their objectives. Contact with the ground forces is made on the afternoon of D-Day. Now, "the red devils" hold on till the ground troops come up to take over.



Parachutes Drape the Trees
The whole area of the airborne drop is littered with supplies, parachutes, and broken gliders.

record." At the time, I remember thinking that the way the bridge was going forward didn't look like record-breaking to me. Little I knew. When we crossed the Rhine ourselves to join the infantry on the other bank, there was no sign of a bridge at all. That same night, the first bridge was half-way across the river.

At early light, on D-Day, the first German prisoners were crossing the Rhine in our direction. By the time I crossed, the "Jocks" of the 15th Scottish Division were already in control of the village on the opposite bank. German civilians were standing about at the doors of their ruined houses watching us going through. Some of them were already engaged in nailing up the proclamations of the Military Government, notices ordering a curfew, rations warning the population against the possession of firearms and shielding enemy soldiers, and a proclamation, under the signature of General Eisenhower, that the Allies come as "conquerors but not oppressors."

As we went through, we heard that some civilians had been wounded, or killed in our bombardment. But the majority were safe enough in their cellars. And now that we had crossed the river, they clearly expected no counter-attacks by their own people. For them the war was over. And, in the middle of the battle, they were industriously getting on with the job of tidying up the mess. Only one woman

THE BRITISH AIRBORNE FORCES GO INTO ACTION

I met was anything but servile. And she, as we went by, shouted out, in English, "Get back again!" The job of the 15th Scottish Division was to clear the Western bank in our sector and make contact, at the earliest possible moment, with the Airborne Troops who dropped about five miles from the river. The first contact with the airborne troops was made at about a o'clock on D-Day by a Bren carrier on reconnaissance. An excited infantry subaltern told

fellow on the edge of a wood. And, in the next twenty-four hours, the junction was completed. The first red beret I saw was worn by a paratrooper trotting through a fir wood on the back of a cart-horse. He gave us a wave and then, pointing to his horse, said with a grin. The best of these things is that they don't need any petrol." We asked the paratrooper if the area in front of us was cleared of the enemy. "If it isn't," he replied, "my mount has had it." And, on that doubtful evidence, we pushed on.

An airborne battle is quite different from an ordinary battle. In an ordinary battle the enemy is in front of you. And, by picking your way forward through division, brigade and battalion, you know more or less where you are in relation to the enemy. Not in an airborne battle. In an airborne operation, the units fight in a circle with the divisional headquarters as nearly as possible in the centre. And, in the nature of things, the enemy is everywhere. If you're wise, you move about with caution.

The whole airborne area that we journeyed through looked like a seaside beach after a bank holiday. Trees were draped with parachutes. The

fields were littered with containers, ammunition boxes, shells and stores. And, everywhere, there were carcasses of gliders: gliders lying on one wing, gliders standing on their noses, gliders on top of each other, gliders opened at the nose for the emptying of their cargoes.

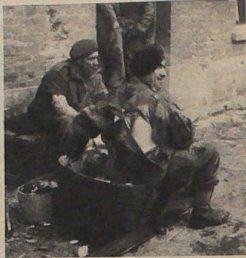
The airborne men, always wearing the red beret, never a tin hat, were everywhere. And German prisoners were everywhere, too. We saw

one man, squatting like an imp on the ground with a Sten gun at the ready and a couple of hundred German prisoners lined up in front of him. We saw another driving a jeep with a couple of German prisoners sitting on the bonnet. We saw Germans helping our fellows to move the wounded. We saw villages where the airborne men had rounded up the entire population and cordoned them in the church or the school buildings. We saw chaplains tearing round the countryside on captured German vehicles, in horse and cart, on bicycles, on everything that could possibly be used to increase mobility.

You felt this was a private sort of war in which every man was

fighting his own battle. And, in a way, it was, because the essential character of an airborne battle is that every individual makes a contribution as an individual. But, the disciplined teamwork is always there.

Personally, I've never felt safer than I did in this airborne operation. "The red devil" exude confidence into you as they do into each other. And, when they tell you it's all right to go into a copse, if you keep your head down and run fast, you find yourself laughing with them. You feel quite simply that the enemy hasn't a chance.



The Red Devils in Battle

He's got a mortar wound in his back. Fighting is going on all round him. But he doesn't stop grinning.



Parachutes Are Used to Line the Foxholes at Divisional H.Q.

The airborne troops use the parachutes on which they floated into enemy territory to line the trenches, make camouflage canopies over their heads. And they cut off pieces of the silk to make searchlights.



10.00 HOURS ON D-DAY: The Beginning of the Airborne Battle on the East Bank of the Rhine

The paratroops and gliders touch down in dropping zones foggy with the smoke of our artillery barrages. Many of the gliders crash. But wave after wave comes in. In a few minutes, bearded prisoners are being rounded up. The airborne troops fulfil their role.

And, yet, we saw evidence enough how bitter the fighting was. To my dying day, I shall remember in every detail, the mansion which the 6th Airborne used as a dressing station for the wounded. It was an elaborately over-furnished place, as German mansions usually are. Wall paintings, heavy hangings, rich carpets, over-ornamented furniture, and too much gold paint and red plush. But, when we went there, the floors were lined with wounded. There were boys, hanging to life by a thread, having blood transfusions. Men, with fractured legs, who'd been waiting since the airborne drop for treatment. Men with mortar wounds in the back, head injuries, worse. And all of them, sticking it without a sigh or a groan. Strange, but it was the German wounded who were screaming.

As we came out of the battle, the airborne boys shouted out to us along the route for news of the crossing. For most of them, we were the first ground troops they'd seen. The reason they wanted to know, they said, was because they were hungry. We gave them our rations.

But they hadn't got to hold out long. Already the "Jocks" were swarming forward. Already the armour was coming over the Rhine in quantity. When we got back to the river at 4.30 on D-Plus One, the bridge we'd watched the sappers begin to build the previous morning, was open to traffic.



A German Country House Becomes the Main Airborne Dressing Station
This was the richly-furnished home of a Nazi official. Now the house shelters over a hundred wounded during the battle which ends dreams of German dominance for ever.



The German Soldier Who Carried Out His Fuehrer's Orders to Die Fighting on the Banks of the Rhine
His name was Ernst Josef Juhl. His age was 47. In civilian life, he was a clerk. He was called up to die for Hitler's Germany at the end of 1943. He was killed on the east bank of the Rhine on D-Day. He lies there with the letters of his wife scattered about him.



The British Soldiers Who Fell So That the Rest Of Us Might Enjoy Victory and Peace Again
Our casualties, in the assault on the Rhine, were astonishingly light. But, for the men who fell, the price was all. The soldiers in this Bren carrier made the crossing of the river only to be blown up on a mine as they ran up the eastern bank.



The German Civilians Who Realize at Last What War Means
The airborne battle is going on in the village. Our troops have rounded up the civilians and



They proclaim the Germany of To-morrow
The proclamations of the Military Government are

Jokingly, I asked one of the sappers if there was a prize for it. To my surprise he said "Yes." And then, after a pregnant pause, added: "The prize is build another bloody bridge."

The Last Battle Story in the West?

And that's the story of the crossing of the Rhine, as one observer saw it. It isn't the whole story, because nobody could see it all. But it's probably the last great battle story of the war. Mine, anyhow. It'll be memorable for all time as a military operation. But, speaking personally, it'll be memorable for me chiefly for the men I saw fight it: the British soldiers. And one soldier in particular, because I feel that he typified them all. I met him, a little bandy-legged Cockney with a beret too big for him, trotting along. Sten gun in hand, behind a single German prisoner. The German was typical, too: a so-tightly-uniformed officer with a head like a stump of a leg with two eyes in it. As they passed, I asked the soldier what he was doing. He said he had orders to escort the officer back to somewhere or another. And, then, with eyes blazing with hatred, he swung on his prisoner, and said to him: "Thanks to you, I've missed 'bloody tea, you twerp!' I've never loved my own breed so much."

MACDONALD HASTINGS.



THE END: A Surge of Water for the Defeated Enemy
At the Airborne Dressing Station, one of the medical orderlies offers a drink to an exhausted German prisoner. Says the prisoner: "The war will be over in twenty-four hours."