

Uncommon courage: A bridge too far



Sgt. Bruce Cox, a paratrooper for the British Army in the Second World War, lives near Bewdley.

This is an excerpt from a speech Sgt. Cox has presented to local students.

Arnhem, 17 September, 1944
 Operation: Market-Garden as told by Sgt. Bruce Cox, 3rd Battalion, Parachute Regiment, 1st Airborne Division

35,000 men, 300 miles behind enemy lines. This was the largest airborne operation ever mounted. This was the 1st Airborne Army. They were veterans and well-trained — veterans of North Africa, the 1st and 8th Army, had seen action in Sicily, Italy, Normandy, and scattered amongst the volunteers who had served in Norway, North West Frontier, Spain, Finland and Poland.

This army knew combat and knew the orchestration of battle. You have to listen to the music if you are to stay alive. See the flashes, watch the ground strikes, and estimate where fire is coming from. Each weapon has its own sound, for example, the German Schmeisser, the British Sten, Submachine, and the heavier guns. German Spandau 42 and 34 firing. 1200 rounds a minute, the British Bren only 500 per minute. The Vickers 250 RPM. The

“thwack” of a round near you. All around you. The “plop” as a bomb leaves the barrel of a mortar, maybe a half mile away leaving about five to eight seconds to find cover. This is the music of combat.

It had never been attempted before and it was a devastating battle. At that time we were rolling up the German Army; the evil empire had to be destroyed — entirely. Regardless what the odds were, it was “Stand up! Hook up and go! For that was the general feeling.

We were to be carpet layers. The job of the 1st Airborne Army was to get the bridges over three rivers. The Mass, the Waal and the Heder Rijn by airborne assault. This would open the way for the British 21st Army group to swing through into the plains of northern Germany, to encircle the Ruhr, to open the ports of northwest Europe. This was essential because the whole invasion was still being supplied from the beaches. The “Red Ball Express” was coming all the way through from Normandy. Now the plan was for the 82nd U.S. Airborne Division. Landing at Grave and Nijmegen. The 101st U.S. Airborne Division at Eindhoven to Grave. The British 1st Airborne Divi-

sion with the Polish 1st Para Brigade southwest of Arnhem Bridge.

The Briefing: After 16 operations had been cancelled after D-Day, this one had to go but the RAF said



they could not land near the town or on the bridge — too soft for gliders. Too heavily defended. We had to use a “DZ” miles from the bridge. There

was no surprise. So once more into the Douglas Dakotas, our dear friend. We were on the northern lane, 2 AA Division on the south lane. I sat in the DC3 and looked out the window as far as the eye could — stack on stack of aircraft. Black and white stripes. On the way over I see two FW 190 dive through the air armada, followed by about 10 spitfires. Good. That told me we have great air cover. Battalion on battalion of paratroopers, gliders also with air-landing troop, engineers, armaments of all types. A division all heading for one location in Holland — Arnhem. We were to start dropping at 2 p.m. My aircraft was due to drop at 2:10 p.m.

The coast of Holland, OK running in, Stand up/Hook up comes so soon. Pat says to me, “Would you change places with me Bruce?” “Why?” I said. “I’m number 13” — We change, it’s OK. The landing was good; I identify our red smoke rendezvous marker. All equipment OK, formed up and we Sgt. Bruce Cox jumps from a Dakota (DC-3) aircraft, 1943



Sgt. Bruce Cox, third from left, participated in a commemorative Pathfinders jump at Arnhem in 1994.

were down the road. To Arnhem. Shots being fired already. Shortly we came upon a German staff car in the centre of the road.

A German general hanging out the door, his driver very still in her seat. We came under some light fire but pushed on until it became heavy. In a line we went into a wood to clear them out. This is where Pat took two in his ankles — Irish luck.

We cleared them out, plus we took two prisoners. My buddy and myself took them back to Coy HQ. At this point, we came under heavy

mortar fire, multi-barrel. I was flat, but my buddy was getting down very slow.

I knew he’d been hit. I grabbed him and we ran for cover. I got him to a ditch, out of the target area, he fell, I couldn’t find where he’d been hit.

I cut away his gear only to find the wound at the base of his neck. Through his jugular vein. Moments later he died in my arms.

The platoon sergeant came over. I told him the situation. Remove one tag and let’s move out.

EXITING FROM A DAKOTA (DC-3) AIRCRAFT 1943

TED AUSDEN