

Airborne General Selects 50th Squadron

(and few knew about it)

by Robert E. Callahan

Introduction

There are times when a person is so caught up in a climatic event in which he is involved that he misses some of the most important matters circulating around him. How did the General of an Airborne Division arrive into battle behind enemy lines in World War II? He arrived in the same manner as any other trooper in his Division, by parachuting from the open door of a C-47. He risked the same problems in landing as any other trooper; coming down in a tree, breaking a leg, or experiencing other difficulties that sometimes occurred.

Thousands of stories have been written about the Normandy Invasion of France, launched June 5, 1944. By no means could anyone read all of those accounts. I have read many and wrote some myself. Never have I read a story involving my own troop carrier squadron that so intrigued me as one that came to my attention recently. In this account it is not my intention to rehash the problems encountered in flight as paratroopers were being delivered into battle. Those matters are covered in thousands of publications in libraries across the world.

On November 8, 2010, I received a letter from Joel Baret, a dedicated French historian. He said he was 68 years of age and a member of an organization named Association "US-Normandie memoire et gratitude" that was trying to determine exactly where Brig. Gen. James M. Gavin, Commanding Officer, Task Force "A," 82nd Airborne Division, had landed in France in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944. He said his organization was attempting to identify exactly where Gavin landed that night in Normandy because it wanted to place a memorial marker on that very spot in his honor, if that location could be identified. He asked in his letter,

"Did one of your squadron airplanes deliver Brigadier General James M. Gavin into Normandy by parachute during the early hours of June 6, 1944? Was it a 50th Troop Carrier Squadron (TCS) plane that flew him into battle?"

"Absolutely not," I quickly replied. "No, no, no! That did not occur. If that had occurred, I would have heard it at some point over the last 66 years. A few of our men would have known it. I have never heard so much as a hint to the effect that Gen. Gavin boarded one of our planes to parachute into Normandy that night."

Wrong!

Surprised and Shocked

On November 22, 14 days later, Baret sent me a second letter listing all 19 paratroopers aboard the lead aircraft in Serial 21 that night. Brig. Gen. James M. Gavin headed the list. He also identified the aircraft in which they flew into battle as aircraft No. 43-30651. When I read the listing of troopers aboard that aircraft, I was stunned almost beyond belief. That aircraft was the 50th Squadron lead plane for the flight into Normandy that night. After all these years, am I learning that my squadron flew Gen. Gavin into battle that night? That appeared to be the case. How could I have missed it? I had to know, if for no one else, for my own satisfaction.

For purposes of this account, and to answer Baret's question, I wish to focus upon only one matter. How did Brig. Gen. James M. Gavin arrive into the battle zone in Normandy June 6, 1944? Seeking the answer to my question, I am not in any manner minimizing the effectiveness of the 101st Airborne Division. That Division led the assault on Fortress Europe with its airborne forces landing in Normandy ahead of the arrival of the 82nd Airborne Division that night. My interest in writing this account focuses upon the 82nd Airborne Division, the commanding officer of Task Force "A" and his involvement with my squadron, the 50th TCS of the 314th Troop Carrier Group (TCG), that night. It takes nothing away from the 101st Airborne Division.

The 82nd Airborne Division

The 82nd Airborne Division was divided into three Task Forces. Task Force “A” consisted of troops arriving into the battle area by parachute. Task Force “B” consisted mainly of forces arriving aboard gliders. Task Force “C” consisted of other support personnel and equipment, including tanks, arriving aboard sea-going landing craft. Major Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway was the CO of the 82nd Airborne Division, but he was also the hands-on commander of Task Force “B.” Like Gen. Gavin, he also arrived into the battle area by parachute. His arrival and how he accomplished it, is not the subject of this account.

Troopers of the 82nd were sequestered at six airfields in and around Grantham, England, awaiting departure into battle. To deliver Task Force “A” into battle required 10 serials of Troop Carrier planes in serials numbered from 17 through 26. A serial was comprised of 24 to 48 aircraft. The number of planes making up the 10 serials totaled 369, not counting the six aircraft required to fly in the Pathfinders. In flight, serials were separated by about 15 miles. After forming up in the air, the ‘skytrain,’ as it may be termed, was hundreds of miles long. Serials trailed one another in the following order: The 316th TCG led with Serials 17 and 18, flying from Cottesmore. The 315th TCG followed in Serial 19 from Spanhoe. The 314th TCG came next in Serials 20 and 21, departing from Saltby. The 313th TCG departed in Serials 22 and 23 from Folkingham. The 61st TCG departed in Serials 24 and 25 from Barkston Heath. The 442nd TCG departed in Serial 26 from Fulbek. The assigned flying speed was 140 miles per hour. Each serial was required to pass a designated check point in flight at an exact specified time. This was necessary in order for each serial to arrive at its assigned drop zone on schedule. To begin the operation, Pathfinders departed for their assignments from North Witham airfield at 10:00 p. m.

Preparing for the Invasion

Originally, the invasion was to have been launched on the night of June 4. Bad weather caused a delay of 24 hours. Gen. Gavin was undoubtedly aboard the plane on the Saltby base that would take him into battle when the delay occurred. Sometime later that night or early the next morning, with his aide, Lt. Olson, he must have returned to Cottesmore for a few hours. He departed Cottesmore with Lt. Olson to return to Saltby sometime in the afternoon of the 5th. His departure from Cottesmore is as intriguing as one of Sherlock Holmes/Dr. Watson stories by Arthur Conan Doyle. Why would he have departed for Saltby by boarding an airplane to travel 15 miles when he could have made the trip in a military vehicle as quickly and maybe easier? We will never know, of course. But it may be he wanted to visit the other airfields where his troops were sequestered before arriving at Saltby to board the plane once again that would fly him into battle. In his book, “On To Berlin,” (p. 103) he says, “My flight took off from Cottesmore, England and left exactly on schedule.” We do not know what his schedule may have been. He could not have meant he took off from Cottesmore to fly into battle. His statement must mean that his plans for Task Force “A” were now ready to be put into action.

In his letter to me, Baret asked why Gen. Gavin would have been airlifted into battle by a 314th TCG aircraft at Saltby rather than a 316th TCG aircraft at Cottesmore, his base headquarters where aircraft of the 316th were more readily available. I am persuaded the decision the General made was for security reasons. He meant to confuse enemy intelligence. The enemy would likely assume the General would be departing from Cottesmore in an aircraft that would take him into battle. To glean any and all particles of information that might be helpful to them, enemy intelligence constantly monitored the airwaves. With his departure from Cottesmore, Gavin launched a carefully crafted ‘cat and mouse’ game to defeat enemy intelligence. If any personnel from any of those troop carrier and airborne units based at Cottesmore were captured, their interrogation might have been brutal. The enemy would have wanted to find the unit that flew the General into their perimeter. To surround and take prisoner a General in battle would have been a monumental coup. They feared Gavin because they had faced him in Sicily and Italy months earlier and had fared badly in battle. Gavin crafted a plan to match his wit against enemy intelligence in order to conceal his whereabouts and prevent them from tracking his movements. Referring to his departure to fly into battle, Gavin further says on page 101, “I flew in the lead plane of the 508th Parachute Infantry.” His Regimental Headquarters Company (Hq. and Hq. Company), 508th PIR, boarded planes in Serial 21 for the flight into Normandy. Some writers have interpreted his statement to mean he was in the lead plane to depart the Saltby Air Base that night. I do not believe that to be what he meant.

From the moment he departed with his aide from Cottesmore sometime in the afternoon of June 5 until early evening, his whereabouts is unknown. It's possible he wanted a quick visit to each of the other four bases where his troops were sequestered before arriving at Saltby. That might account for his departure by air rather than traveling to Saltby by military vehicle. Whatever his activities, he arrived at Saltby by early evening. His 'cat and mouse' game to deceive the enemy was now in full operation.

Serial 20

Serial 20 consisted of 36 airplanes of the 62nd and 61st Squadrons. Those planes were parked at the end of the 6,000-foot long runway, in place for take off. They were parked in elements of three. That is, a lead aircraft of a three-ship element was parked in the center of the runway with a plane on the right and one on the left. All three would begin their take off run and lift off the runway at the same time. Although it posed some danger, if the width of the runway would accommodate such a take off it saved a considerable amount of time and fuel to form up the flight once the planes were in the air. Col. Clayton Stiles, CO of the 314th TCG, in aircraft No. 43-15326, led Serial 20. Orders reveal that Serial 20 aircraft contained the 2nd Battalion, 508th PIR. Official records indicate no Regimental Headquarters Company personnel was aboard any of those 36 planes in Serial 20.

Serial 21

Serial 21 consisted of 24 airplanes of the 50th and 32nd Squadrons. They were parked at the end of another of the three runways.. They, too, were parked three wide. The plan was for Serial 21 planes to begin their take off some 10 minutes after Serial 20 planes had cleared the runway. Lt. Col. Glen A. Myer, Executive Officer, 314th TCG, led Serial 21 in aircraft No. 43-30651. That list, provided me and now in my possession, showed the name, Brig. Gen. James M. Gavin, heading the list of 19 paratroopers who boarded our 50th TCS aircraft with that number. Aboard were men of Hq. & Hq. Company (the Regimental Headquarters Company), 508th PIR, and B Company, 307th AEB (an engineering battalion)

Checking with 50th TCS Veterans

Of the 82 pilots and crewmen aboard our 50th Squadron's 18 planes, only four pilots, one navigator, three crew chiefs and two radio operators are still alive in late 2010. Seventy-two have passed away. Calling one of the surviving pilots, Lawrence J. Haas, I asked if he knew anything about Gen. Gavin being there and giving a pep talk. Haas said, "Yes, I do remember General Gavin being there and calling a group around him for a pep talk. I believe it occurred in the early evening near the front of where our planes were parked, and while it was still light. I have no memory as to whether or not he boarded one of our planes, but he was there." Another surviving pilot, Jack Schulze, said, "Yes, I remember that some officer, a General, was there and gave us a pep talk but I must admit that I do not remember his name. Nor do I remember little of what he said. I was so involved in getting our paratroopers on board that I had little time to listen to someone I did not know give us a pep talk. I thought I had more important things on my mind." In England in June, darkness comes about 9:00 p.m. I can assume Gavin must have had his talk with those gathered around sometime between 8:00 p. m. and 9:00 p. m. (Additionally, 508th PIR rigger Carl Porter says Gavin spoke to his unit that afternoon, stating his remarks were "short and sweet with mainly a reminder that this was what we had trained for and that we would prevail.")

Next, I called Howard Sass and Robert Rosholm, the other two surviving pilots, and James M. Thorn, the lone surviving navigator. I asked if they knew anything about a pep talk by a General that night. All three said they had no memory of anyone giving a pep talk. I then called Robert G. Bramble, a crew chief on one of our planes that night. Probably no man in the squadron is more informed about squadron history than Bob Bramble. For years he edited the Squadron Newsletter. Nothing escaped his attention. He, too, informed me he had no knowledge of any pep talk. Upon calling Andrew J. Kyle and Gail Voigt, the two other surviving crew chiefs, they told me they had no knowledge of a pep talk. Finally, I called Dennis Murdock who, like me, was a radio operator. He knew nothing about a pep talk. After talking with Haas and Schulze, I became convinced that Gen. Gavin was, indeed, there by early evening and boarded the lead aircraft in Serial 21, as the document before me indicated.

Lew Johnston

Lew Johnston, Recording Historian of the 61st TCS and a wartime pilot in that squadron, was one of the most devoted persons ever to compile the history of the 314th TCG. He produced two CDs and published a book setting out what he had learned in some 14 years of intensive research. He is now deceased. In his writings, Johnston referred to Gavin being in the “. . . lead aircraft piloted by Col. Clayton Stiles . . .” departing for battle that night. I believe Johnston took his cue from Gavin’s statement that he took off in the lead aircraft. To him, that meant the one piloted by Col. Stiles, when, in fact, Gavin was in the ‘lead aircraft’ of Serial 21 piloted by Lt. Col. Myer. If he were still alive, I think Lew Johnston would have been as stunned as I was to learn of this late development in 314th TCG history. I exchanged information with Johnston many times while he was conducting his researches. He was a careful student of all the facts.

The Landing in Normandy

Fiftieth Squadron crewmen with Col. Myer in C-47 No. 43-30651 that night consisted of 1st Lt. Gene E. Hill, co-pilot, 1st Lt. Herbert Plummer, Jr. and 1st Lt. Gaston E. Heffington, both navigators, S/Sgt. C. Goodwin the crew chief, and Sgt. A. W. Hastings the radio operator. None are still alive at this late date.

Listed with Brig. Gen. Gavin in the lead aircraft, No. 43-30651 of Serial 21, was the following men::

1st Lt. Hugo V. Olson	S/Sgt. David D. Dalton
1st Lt. Earl W. Witcher	Pvt. Walker E. Wood
1st Lt. Karl R. Price	2nd Lt. James H. Devine
Cpl. William Walton	Pvt. John J. Creel
Pvt. Kenneth J. Auge	Pvt. Paul Moderalli
Pvt. Monton S. Wolk	2nd Lt. Carl O. Miller
T3 Szajko Frydman	Pfc. Kendall A. Walker
Pvt. George J. Brozovich	1st Lt. Thomas W. Graham
Capt. Willard E. Harrison	Lt. Col. Gerhard I. Bolland.

Upon landing in Normandy, Gavin refers to Lt. Olson, Lt. Price, Lt. Devine, Cpl. William Walton, Lt. Graham and Capt. Harrison as persons he relied upon quickly for help in gathering his men together. This is irrefutable evidence that the entire stick of paratroopers listed above flew in the same aircraft with Gavin and landed together as a unit. Had the General been in the lead aircraft in Serial 20, he could easily have been separated from the men of his unit by miles. This is proof he flew into battle with his men in the lead aircraft of Serial 21.

Security Concerns

Gavin’s flight from Cottesmore set in motion one of the most cleverly designed ‘cat and mouse’ games of deception that could be devised. His intent was to deceive the enemy as to his movements. The plan was so cleverly planned and executed that he not only fooled German intelligence, he fooled most, if not all, American historians who wrote about his activities of that day after the war. In his book he did not disclose his security plan in any detail. He may have thought describing the ‘cat and mouse’ game he was playing on the enemy did not merit explanation, or he may have chosen not to delve into the details for any number of other reasons. Gavin was hiding his whereabouts in order to prohibit enemy intelligence from knowing which aircraft, in which unit of Troop Carrier, he had selected to fly him into battle. If the enemy should somehow learn that he was departing from Saltby for Normandy, they would assume he was in the first aircraft to take off. That may have been a factor in him choosing to fly in the lead plane of Serial 21 rather than the lead plane in Serial 20.

Additional Confirmation Needed

To back up and strengthen my opinion of how these events played out, I sought for a more reliable source for what I was reading. Contacting the 82nd Airborne Division War Memorial Museum in Fort Bragg, NC, I asked if it could verify my listing of paratroopers aboard the lead aircraft in Serial 21 that night. On December 6, 2010, I received a reply. It confirmed that Gavin’s headquarters unit, Hq. and Hq. Company, boarded Serial 21 planes, with aircraft No. 43-30651 as the lead plane. With that report in hand, I possessed the backup

documentation I needed to proceed with the writing of this account. However, meantime I had obtained copies of “On To Berlin” by James M. Gavin, and “Paratrooper” by T. Michael Booth for my research..

You might ask how I detected the error in Lew Johnston’s writings, as well as the writings of others who have covered the story. I may not have caught the inconsistencies in these documents had I not been so familiar with Johnston’s writings. His opinion, so firmly set out in his writings and which I remembered so clearly, did not match what I had discovered. That’s when I got busy searching other materials. I visited my public library and looked carefully at a dozen or more books discussing the D-Day Normandy invasion of France.

Air Movement Table – Task Force “A”:

Serial	Unit	Troop Carrier Group	#AC	Base	DZ	Time DZ
4	82d Pathfinders	1st P/F	3	N. Witham	O	0121
5	82d Pathfinders	1st P/F	3	N. Witham	N	0138
6	82d Pathfinders	1st P/F	3	N. Witham	T	0202
17	2/505th	316th TCG	36	Cottesmore	O	0151
18	3/505th 2sect. 456th PFA	316th TCG	36	Cottesmore	O	0157
19	1/505th Hq & Hq Co 505th Plat. 307th Engr Det. Hq 82nd Div	315th TCG	48	Spanhoe	O	0203
20	2/508th	314th TCG	36	Saltby	N	0208
21	Regt. Hq 508th Co B(-) 307th Engr Force 'A' Hq	314th TCG	24	Saltby	N	0214
22	1/508th	313th TCG	36	Folkingham	N	0220
23	3/508th	313th TCG	36	Folkingham	N	0226
24	2/507th	61st TCG	36	Barkston Heath	T	0232
25	3/507th	61st TCG	36	Barkston Heath	T	0238
26	1/507th Regt. Hq 507th	442nd TCG	45	Fulbeck	T	0244

6420 men in 378 C-47s

In Conclusion

There may be other writers who have come to the same conclusion as I have regarding how Gavin was flown into battle but I have not found one as of this date. As a result, I have chosen to try to clear the air, as it were, with our 50th Squadron veterans. I wanted them to know that our very own squadron flew the General into battle that night—and almost none of us knew it. Prior to boarding, pilots, crewmen and paratroopers were milling around the planes, chatting and talking with each other while seeking to relieve some of the tension. As these exchanges were going on, Gen. Gavin must have been circulating among us but most of us didn’t notice. His presence was not expected. I find that very interesting. It led me to spend hours and hours to determine exactly what went on that night. I did it for all 314th TCG pilots and crewmen who were involved in transporting Task Force “A,” 82nd Airborne Division, into battle. I believed it was a matter needing clarification. I only wish Lew Johnston were still with us to join me in setting out these facts.

For more information, go to the web site listed below and click on the aircraft flight pattern of any Serial 17 – 26 for any Troop Carrier Group involved in the mission that night, with the first pilot of each aircraft named:

<http://www.6juin1944.com/assaut/aeropus/formation.php>