

Panco, John

Local Soldiers Land In France Three Hours Before Invasion

John Panco and Nicholas Moscow With Paratroops Taking Ste. Mere Eglise

Two Bethlehem soldiers were among the first Americans to touch the soil of France on D-Day, it was revealed today in an Army announcement that a parachute infantry regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division captured the town of Ste. Mere Eglise in Normandy, three hours before the Allied landing forces touched the beaches.

The two, Sgt. John Panco Jr., 1701 Calypso Avenue and Pvt. Nicholas Moscow, 1509 East Third Street, are members of the parachute unit for which the mayor of the captured town has asked the decoration of the Fourragere Francaise.

The full story of the 82nd Airborne Division's exploits on D-Day are as yet unknown. The regiment to which the Bethlehem men are assigned, however, played an outstanding part in carrying out the mission of airborne troops, which was to prevent the Germans from throwing powerful forces from the West and South against the beach-head.

OPENS ROAD FOR TROOPS

The men of the regiment had particular reason to be proud when they took the town of Ste. Mere Eglise. It was the important junction town through which the Germans were expected to move up reinforcements. It was they who also took St. Sauveur le Vicumte, opening the way for Allied mobile units to drive on to the sea and thus cut off the peninsula and Cherbourg.

Men of the regiment landed mostly around Ste. Mere Eglise, today's announcement said. Many met machine gun fire when they hit the ground. There was mortar fire, as well as snipers to contend with in the earliest fighting on French soil. Almost every man was forced to fight the enemy immediately in close country where the enemy had the cover of hedgerows ages old.

MAYOR URGES HONORS

Much of the story is told in the request of the mayor of Ste. Mere Eglise, that the Americans be given the French decoration for valorous achievement. He said:

"For 48 hours these men, their strength reduced already by losses during the night, always alert for combat, separated from the sea by eight kilometers of hostile country, having on their right flank in the village of Fauville, towards Carentan, strong detachments of infantry and anti-aircraft units, on their left flank at Neuville au Plain two battalions of the German Division 1050 Hermann Infantry, composed largely of guns and tanks, and finally on their west facing the sea, two companies of fanatical Georgians who would fight to the last man—these American soldiers resisted alone with their sub-machine guns, two machine guns and two small cannon taken from gliders.

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"These men I observed in battle. They did not show false bravado. They spoke little, one might say they only maneuvered. They went along, cigarette between their lips or chewing their gum, hugging the walls, yet going along upright and quietly, under the careless shelling from the batteries of Azeville and Saint Martin . . ."

The mayor concludes: "Forty-eight hours after their arrival, the magnificent work was accomplished, by them alone. Two battalions had been cut to pieces. In the north, two battalions; in the south, one battalion and anti-aircraft unit; in the west two companies of Georgians whose remnants barricaded themselves in a chateau at Beuzeville au Plain. They had destroyed eight tanks, some cannon and had taken 364 prisoners. Their losses were heavy."

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