

# Paratrooper recalls life during war 'It was either kill, or be killed'

By the time Canadian troops were hitting Juno Beach amid volleys of machine gun fire, a Georgetown veteran had already been in France since the wee hours of that morning.

Tom Clapham, a member of the First Canadian Parachute Battalion, was the first of his group of 17 paratroopers to dive out of a plane into the darkness at 1 a.m. that morning, as tracer bullets streaked up from the ground below. When he hit the ground, he found himself in a swamp.

"I had no idea where I was," he said in an interview from his home in The Sands, "I heard something coming, and when it got closer, I saw it was a cow. I figured a cow eats grass, so it'd know the way out, so I followed it to a road."

Clapham found a half dozen of his colleagues on the edge of the road, near the village of Varaville in France, not far from Caen. Their job was to set up a barrier, preventing the enemy from advancing on troops landing at Juno Beach.

"We were to keep the enemy at bay, so when I heard gun shots up the road, another fellow and I decided to move up to see if we could help out.

My rifle was somewhere underwater in the swamp, but he had one."

Before they made it to the fighting, the other fellow was killed by a sniper, so Clapham picked up his rifle and continued. Eventually he encountered the enemy, and before he got out, had killed a number of them, and doubled back to hide by a hedge until the firing subsided.

"I no more than got there, when the field right next to us was bombed by our own planes. I huddled down and never got hit, but it was close."

Running into another colleague who had no gun, they decided to find their outfit, but had to cross an open road after climbing a wooden gate.

"I sent him first since he had no gun, but when I got half way over the gate I saw a German tank coming up the road," said Clapham, "I shouted for him to run for cover, and I dropped down on the middle of the road, to return fire. The tank couldn't hit me since I was lower than its gun, but the soldiers with it sure could."

Clapham lost his helmet but miraculously, was never hit. He told how the bullets were

hitting the road all around him, and the farmhouse behind, but not one found its mark.

"I returned fire and hit a few of them (the enemy) then one huge guy started to climb a steep incline to try to get behind me," he continued, "I had to kill him, because he would have had me for sure."

Clapham said during war, killing wasn't something he wanted to do, but it was the only way to survive.

"It came down to either kill, or be killed," said Clapham. "It was simply a matter of staying alive in the middle of a war."

A daylight jump a week later found Clapham and his colleagues landing on the far side of a bridge in enemy territory, so the Allies could approach it from their side in France.

"We crossed a ploughed field, and I suddenly ran into a machine gun," said Clapham, "I crawled down the finished furrow in the ploughed field, but the bullets were hitting the dirt above me."

He and two others saw two brand new German tanks advancing, so they tried to find a mortar.

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Pte. Tom Clapham (right) was pictured with Ptes F. J. Mollin (left) and H. L. Churchill, as they boarded a jeep in Ladbergen Germany, April 6, 1945. (Canadian Army Photo, from "Out of the Clouds," 50th anniversary commemorative edition of the First Canadian Parachute Battalion.)

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