



# LIFE IN THE 101ST AIRBORNE, FROM THE EYES OF THE XO

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Photos: Scott Stoddard

As I write this article, I just finished reading the war memoirs of Major Dick Winters, 506th PIR (Easy Company) 101st Airborne Division.

Reading about his actual D-Day experiences spired me to share my own memories as a commander in the 101st Airborne at Oklahoma D-Day 2006. Of course, a paintball game could never be as profound (nor, fortunately, as life threatening) as what happened on Normandy Beach in 1941, but I think my story should be shared.

D-Day 2006 marked my second trip to Oklahoma for the "largest paintball event in the world." After playing the prior year, I was hooked and just had to come back, not only for the game but to be with the friends I made in 2005.

In 2005 I arrived as a sergeant in the 101st Airborne Able Company, only to find myself promoted to Colonel, and XO of the 101st Airborne division. We spent our week doing leadership training and preparing for what would turn out to be an easy Allied win. D-Day 2006 was going to be a very different event.

Even before we left for Oklahoma, we knew the German side had gotten their act together after their humiliating loss of 2005. Websites spouted German propaganda like it was 1939 for months before the game. Players signed up with little or no prodding.

Having sent my gear ahead with Delta Paintball Team, I hopped a plane and flew to Tulsa, rented a car and drove to the field as I had the year before. That's where the similarity to 2005 ended.

## AN EMPTY TENT & OTHER SURPRISES

This year, I did not find a young Lt. in the 101st marching Airborne troopers around in the hot

sun with a saber in his hand. I found the 101st Airborne personnel tent up, but empty. No players searching frantically for their units, no old friends greeting each other after a year apart. The tent was like a ghost town; the only sound was crickets.

On the German side, things were different. They were meeting their people at the registration booth and directing them to their camping areas and company leaders. The Germans were having meetings. I knew it would not be a cakewalk this year.

Our Leader Jim "Hangrenade" Helton and the rest of the Allied leadership seemed at ease, and after our German rout in 2005 everyone expected an easy victory. Those of us in the 101st did not get much information about where or when we would be dropped until we were pushing off to our drop zone. (Sounds just like the real D-day). My XO and his team were doing the SPPL week-long event, so getting info to them was almost impossible. All we could hope for was to meet them on game day morning and share the info at that time.

The parade that is always a big hit on Friday got off to a rocky start. No one knew where we should form up our units. After trying three or four different "jump-off" points, we began right from the spot we had first picked. Our men were hot and tired before the parade even began.

Even so, the parade went well and we showed everyone what Alpha company, 101st Airborne Division was made of. I placed second in the costume contest, once again, to Maj. Gen. Sir Raymond H. Adams III, aka "Harley Hunk." I will be the first to admit he puts together a great costume and persona. However, he carries a

STEN MK4 that I made for him and that is a big plus. He also stacks the deck by bringing the whole 1st Expeditionary Force of the Commonwealth along to cheer him on. But not this year, my friend. I will be decking myself out in the 101st finest gear.

## "GOOD MORNING NORMANDY"

On Saturday, Alpha Company awoke to the traditional "Good Morning Vietnam," and we got our gear together for what we considered to be another easy victory. We all were ready for our 0800 jump-off. We hopped on our truck with "Blood on the Risers" coming from the stereo and sang along loudly, all of us in good spirits. We headed for the real military 6x6 trucks that would serve as our Dakota jump aircraft. We thought we still had time to get all of the 101st together and formed up.

Much to our surprise, D-Day promoter Dewayne Convirs was putting troopers on the buses in the order they arrived, without their leaders or others from their group. Troopers arrived at the jump off point without their leaders first, adding more D-Day realism to the game. It also added confusion we were not prepared for. I did not find my XO, nor did I locate the rest of Alpha Company, until we were at our jump-off point.

I arrived at the 101st Drop Zone and was informed by my commanding officer that my company was to be loaned to the 82nd airborne under General Psycho's command. Not sure about my orders, I was given an assignment to take my company to the 82nd commander. We were to spearhead for the 82nd; our objective would be Caen.

This was a new area of the D-Day field for me. I had never been to Caen during my weekly field walks, but we were "Airborne" and would adapt to our new orders. We all sat down and waited



for the game to start. There were rumors of German snipers and spies in the bushes. They were not supposed to be in our area before game on. Tension in the units was reaching the boiling point. It had become almost impossible to hold the troopers back. They were straining at their restraints like wild animals and this was not good. We needed to use our heads and go forward slowly, probing the German defense. But I could see this was not going to happen.

#### GAME ON.....

The referees assigned to us announced the game had begun. All of the sound discipline that we practiced vanished in an instant and most of the troopers in the 82nd went running into the bush and up the roads as fast as they could. This did not bode well for playing all day long, since it was way too hot to run and we had no idea what was ahead of the division.

I put out our point unit to be the "trip wire" in case they ran into a German ambush. Within the first 10 minutes we had progressed up the hill through the bush towards our objective, losing all contact with the 82nd. I later learned that they had stayed near the roads. As a company, we had a rule to never follow roads or trails, in order to avoid ambushes and traps left by the Ger-

mans. As it turned out the 82nd ran into a very well-laid-out ambush. It was a hot and uphill climb. Those of us not in shape were starting to fall behind.

At the top of the hill, we found a crossroads guarded by two pill boxes and two or three tanks. We had made it all that way only to be stopped by well-placed German armor. We had one AT weapon with us. After making three attempts to get the AT to the tanks we were all killed and made our way to the dead zone.

At the dead zone, we took a break to drink more water, cool ourselves down and locate our General, who was sitting in the shade cooling off. I was alone in this DZ because the rest of Alpha Company was in another dead zone. They were going to push on Caen while I took a mixed company with General Psycho. Leadership had fallen apart in this DZ and the players needed direction.

We made several pushes out of the dead zone, but found ourselves faced with Germans encroaching on the dead zone and shooting us the minute we were live players. We asked for the referee to stop the Germans from "camping" the DZ, but the referee ignored our request. After some time, a

long argument and some crazy Colonel in the 101st tossing grenades from inside the DZ, we finally convinced the game coordinator to get a referee to take us to a safe area before letting us go.

General Psycho led the way; we were headed to the airport for an all-out assault. We made a great patrol to the Airport, the only thing we ran into were little signs put in place by the Germans to alert us to non-existent minefields. This proved very effective for the Germans because our troopers were always looking down for mines even though none existed. The General called "Attack!" and we charged the airfield. I was in the front leading my group of men, but got hit crossing the road.

Walking back to the dead zone, tired, hot and angry because our assault had failed yet again, I came up with a plan. In the dead zone, I got the men to drink water and prepare for the General's next maneuver. I then asked General Psycho if I could implement my plan. I would take two men and go head hunting. Seeing that I needed something else to do other than get killed, the General approved my mission.

I picked two men and we inserted. I instructed

them to sling their guns barrel down and to look dejected and beaten. They needed to look like they were finished and walking back to the Airport DZ. We fell into the stream of dead and tired players, keeping our distance from live Germans. We needed to pull off a convincing charade; if the Germans studied us too closely, they'd see we did not have barrel covers on our guns.

As we reached a position parallel to the Airport, I asked the guys if they were "hungry." We started to move towards the German perimeter, and I noticed that the German guarding the entrance looked bored. He was sitting on the drainage pipe and not paying attention to his duties because he had not had anyone to shoot at all day long.

Giving orders for the men to pick some targets, I picked out the guys standing on the storage containers as my own inspecting prey. The moment I gave the order to fire, all hell broke loose.

The poor sentry was the first one to get it. I wish I could have seen his face but I was too busy shooting my targets on the ground and working my way up to the containers. I began pounding the area around openings in the containers hoping to score an officer hit inside the HQ. Everything was happening as if in slow motion, people were yelling, our guns were firing, we were in our element and it was working better than I had ever hoped.

Then the bubble was burst and we were all being shot in the back. Yelling "hit!", my men and I put our barrel covers on. With wide smiles showing right through our masks we walked back to our dead zone. The best part of the whole attack was hearing a confused voice from inside the German HQ ask: "What the !@#S just happened?"

### A PAINFULL ALLIED LOSS

Noticing that it was late, I was out of air, paint and just plain overheated and tired, I walked back to camp. The game was almost over, the Germans had most of the objectives and we were going to lose even if we stayed on the field and got heat stroke. I headed back to the vendor area and my booth.

My guys stripped me of my gear and pushed me towards the misting tent to cool off. I was spent. Even with drinking water and Gatorade, eating snack bars and lunch, I had nothing left. I just sat in a chair watching the world go by. I had not sat

down since I got up at 0500. I was happy it was over, but not happy we had lost. I wanted to know why our attacks had been so futile. The answer came the following day from a much unexpected source.

Sunday morning Alpha Company was packed up, my vendor booth was taken down and we were ready to head home. Hangrenade and I went into the D-Day Café to get one last drink together.

To my surprise sitting at a table was the German High Command pouring over a map of the field. They were discussing what had gone right and what had failed for them. I could not believe the dedication that this group of officers had. It was not even 12 hours after the game ended and they were already planning for 2007.

I realized, then, why we had been beaten. These men had been planning for a year. They had



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rallied troops to their banner after losing in 2005 and were willing to do anything to win in 2006. They had brought their "A" game and we only were on a "B" game plan. Their win was well-earned and much deserved. I felt a little better being beaten by them. They had done everything right this year, and we had done it all wrong.

### D-DAY 2007

As you read this article, the 2007 game is here. It is the 10th anniversary of Oklahoma D-Day and it should prove to be the best ever. The promoters have been working on the game and the field. There are new showers, better bathrooms, and a new paint supplier, DraXxus, with their brand-new scenario-grade paintballs. There will be more vendors, including my store, more players and more excitement than ever before.

I have been promoted to Major General and given command of the 101st Airborne. Never in a million years would I have thought that in 2005 when I first arrived in Oklahoma as a sergeant, I would be leading an entire division in 2007. I am at once humbled and honored to have the position of responsibility.

I will do my best to lead the 101st Airborne Division to victory in 2007. I have always felt it is a leader's job to make sure everyone under his command has a good time and that everyone plays fair and safe.

To this end, I have been planning since that fateful Sunday in 2006. We will prepare all week; we will hang out together and experience the D-Day friendships, new and old, that we've been yearning for all year. I can guarantee that we will have our "A" game on this year. The Allied command has been planning just as long and hard and the game will be very different.

Oh and one more thing. I will beat that wonderful Limey, Maj. Gen. Sir Raymond "Harley Hunk" Adams III in the costume contest this year if it kills me. My division is larger and I know they will not allow me to lose to him three years in a row. I know I can count on them every step of the way, all day long, all week long, for they are some of the best players in the country.

Good luck to all. Play honest, play fair, and hydrate, but also remember this is a game and we are all here to have fun.



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