

Pvt. William Arthur O'Brien
11th Bn., 4th Brigade
Int. October 6th, 1967

Kelly

O'Brien's memory is pretty bad. He is unable to remember what company he served with.

He figured the Arnhem operation would be "a piece of cake, a walkover, a Sunday School treat." He knew it was "a long way in to the bridge" but he was more concerned about foot-slogging than what it could mean to him from a strictly military point of view.

He recalls all through the summer the people around Liecester, where they were stationed, always seemed to have an idea when a mission was scheduled. They would gather about the soldiers at the pubs and say goodbye.

"When we actually did go, though, no one was there to see us off."

O'Brien played his mouth organ on the way over. Songs like "Nellie Deane," "Bless 'em All" and "Tipperary." He remembers shifting uncomfortably on his seat when the first flak started coming up.

When he jumped, about eighth or ninth in the stick, he went out of the door wrong and did a complete somersault in the air. As a result, his left leg caught in the rigging lines. He figures they were somewhere near 400-feet when they jumped.

"The chute didn't develop properly. It was not more than two-thirds open and I was going down at a fairly fast clip. I was all doubled up, trying to get my leg free, but I couldn't get it out of the lines.

"I looked down and the ground was coming up fast. I decided if I tried to land on ~~one~~ one leg I would break it, so the best thing I could think to do

was put my other leg up and land on my back. I pulled it up and began tugging on the rigging, trying to straighten out the chute and slow myself down. I hit with a tremendous thud and felt the wind go out of me like popping a paper bag. I had a sharp jab of pain in the back and that it was it. I laid on the ground for a couple of minutes and got up. I had nothing broken that I knew of."

They rallied and moved to the RV where O'Brien saw "a lot of people running around, with nobody looking like they knew what to do." They began marching into Arnhem. O'Brien had no idea what was happening; no suspicions anything had gone wrong. He could hear the crunching of shells further ahead, but they seemed a long way off and he wasn't worried.

The further he walked, however, the noisier it got. He began to wonder. He wondered especially if the Germans might be there in more strength than they had originally been led to believe. "I didn't know, but it seemed to me from the sound of things that there was more than just German Volkstrum and beat-up guns up ahead."

Sep 20

By Wednesday, his suspicions were confirmed. They were on the outskirts of Arnhem, where they had been for two days. They couldn't go forward and even if they could there were no officers around to tell O'Brien what to do. It seemed as though they had been on their own for 48 hours. "It was chaotic. Nobody knew what to do. There was a lot of running around, ducking in one house and out another. A lot of stuff was coming in. The Germans had brought up those nebelwerfer things and they were screaming all around us. I was scared out of my mind at the sound of them. I remember running into one house with some others and we tipped over a huge grand piano and put it up against the door and got down behind it. Out in the garden were two or three six-pounders, all of them knocked

☆ out. One of them had its muzzle split open. It looked just like a flower."

They began falling back. O'Brien doesn't remember receiving any orders to go back. It was just a natural thing for him and the others to do. As he pulled back, he remembers seeing all kinds of animals - cows, sheep and horses - lying dead in the fields. They were all blown up, their bellies horribly distended.

"I began to think of my own skin now. It seemed to me they had gotten us into something they had no business getting us in. Once in, it seemed to me they just forgot about us. I can't remember seeing an officer for the first two or three days.

"We got back around the church in Oosterbeek and there were hundreds of men who seemed to be just wandering around. A whole bunch of lost units. I saw my first officers around there. They were trying to rally the men into order. While I was there, I remember we had a supply drop. A few containers reached us and I remember opening one and finding berets. One might have had some food, but most of the time we relied on eating food we found in the cellars of houses, especially bottled fruit. The Dutch seemed to have a lot of that. I remember gnawing on an uncooked piece of porridge once. It was a hard little block, but it tasted damned good."

O'Brien had started out with something like 200 rounds of ammo. He ran out of that soon and he threw all his gammon bombs away on the outskirts of Arnhem at a house where they suspected German snipers.

"Every night an officer would come around and tell us to hang on, the 2nd Army would be there the next day. There was a helluva lot of apathy. Everyone was asking what the hell they were there for and where the hell was the goddam army."

O'Brien's back had begun to bother him. While in Arnhem, a house in which he was in had had the roof blown in. It landed right on top of him and it took him 15 minutes to barrow out.

"We used the church to rest in. Nobody told us not to go in and nobody told us when to go out. When we felt we needed a rest, we walked in and stretched out on one of the pews. It seemed safe. It had big thick walls. But the roof was gone, or at least most of it. You could see daylight and loss of it.

"The pews were all broken up and there were prayer books scattered all over. All the windows were long since gone, and the place in general looked like someone had dropped a couple of hundred pound bombs right on top of it. We figured it was the safest place to be, though, so we went in as often as we could.

"I remember being stretched out there one day when a middle aged Dutch lady crept in. There were wounded and dead lying all over the place. We'd had it. She walked around among the wounded and kept saying, 'Have courage. God is with you.' I don't want to sound callus, but I wondered then if He really was. It was still rather inspiring, though, to have her walking around like that, talking to us. It made me embarrassed to be stretched out there while a woman walked around showing so much courage. I got up and went back outside."

Sept 26

O'Brien says he never heard about the evacuation. "Not a whisper. I woke up on the Tuesday morning. I was with quite a few others in a cellar. It was quiet as hell outside, but I didn't stop to think what it meant. That was the furthest thing from my mind.

"Anyway, I told some of the others I was going out and look for some grub.

I went down into a cellar and got a bottle of prunes, I think, and went back to our cellar. It was still very quiet, but it still didn't dawn on me that everyone had left.

"One of my mates said he was dry when I got back so I went back upstairs and out into the garden to a pump there. The next thing I knew, I felt a revolver in my back. Jesus! I jumped a foot off the ground and the bucket fell back into the well. I turned around and there was a bloody great German grinning at me. I had left my rifle in the cellar, but it wouldn't have made any difference anyway. I didn't have a single round left.

"Anyway, I was prodded out toward the road and down it came a tank. There was a German officer, I think, standing in the turret and in perfect English he said to me, 'For you the war is over.' I couldn't think of anything to say so I said, 'That's alright, I've been captured already'. I didn't know they had left until the officer said they had gone the night before. I couldn't believe it at first, but when I finally realized it was true, I was mad as hell. I was mad because they had gotten us into this mess and then abandoned us. Worse than that, they had left without telling us."

They were taken in cattle trucks to Limburg (Stalag 12A) and from there to Muhlburg (?). He and another fellow, a Scotsman named MacDonald, escaped in March and were eventually picked up by the Americans.