

Heroes of the Greatest Generation: Stitt Robinson

by

Marsha Henry Goff

Stitt Robinson had a unique experience in World War II. He was involved in two glider invasions: the first in Operation Dragoon, the August 14-15 invasion of Southern France with the 13th Airborne Division; and the second, Operation Varsity, across the Rhine River in Germany on March 24, 1945 with the 82nd Airborne Division.

After he was drafted in November 1941, Stitt was sent to Officer's Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. "I had two years of ROTC as an undergraduate at Davidson College my first two years in college, but not in my junior or senior years." He graduated from OCS as a Second Lieutenant and was first stationed at Fort McClellan, Alabama, where he met his wife Connie. The couple married on March 18, 1944, when he had a ten day leave, giving them time for a honeymoon in New Orleans before he shipped out for Europe.

He served as communications officer in an independent unit, the 550th Infantry Battalion, later called the 550th Glider (or Airborne) Infantry Battalion which was known as "A Bolt from the Blue." Stationed in Panama for 6 months, he sailed on a Liberty Ship to Naples, with a detour to Africa when the ship was attacked by a German submarine in the Strait of Gibraltar.

Operation Dragoon utilized 407 gliders transporting 4,000 airborne troops, 221 jeeps and 213 artillery pieces. "The British gliders were larger than ours and could transport a jeep or cannon, but ours transported personnel and could hold a squad — 10 to 12 men — but they were very fragile. The DC-3s towed two gliders and the glider pilot determined when to release [usually at 1,500 to 2,000 feet]. The gliders would practically be a wreck by the time they got in." Indeed, fewer than 50 of the 407 gliders were

deemed salvageable.

Operation Varsity across the Rhine saw even more destruction of gliders. Only 172 of 1,302 gliders were salvageable. Worse, the cost in lives, estimated at 1,111 Allied soldiers, caused some to question whether it was worth it — "We weren't quite sure why it was necessary," said Stitt — although the operation did open the northern route into the industrial heart of Germany.

Stitt's unit fought in waist deep snow in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge. "The German tanks were supposed to be retreating, moving elsewhere, but instead they made a counterattack; we actually relieved an armored division and that armored division should have been there to counter those tanks. We didn't have anything but bazookas and to knock a tank out, you have to hit it in the right place and that was pretty difficult."

Stitt had attained the rank of Captain and was in Headquarters Company when his battalion lost about a third of the unit. "I talked to one of them over the phone, Lieutenant Mertles, and he said, 'Give us some more help!' But there was no more help to be provided and so they ended up either surrendering or being killed. I never found out what happened to that group, whether they were captured or killed."

After the war, Stitt completed his PhD at the University of Virginia. He was immediately hired by The University of Kansas and spent almost 40 years teaching there, where he chaired the department for several years. He and Connie live in Lawrence.



This article was published in Amazing Aging, Spring, 2014