


Back to the 'Dak'

Filming 'A Bridge Too Far'



DAKOTA AIRCRAFT, gathered together from four different countries but now painted a uniform dust colour and with the familiar American white star on the side, stood in a row on the tarmac at the Royal Netherlands Air Force base of Deelen in central Holland. As their engines reverberated, queues of paratroopers waited to board them — men of 1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, were about to re-enact the heroic exploits of their Red Devil forebears in 1944.

The parachuting was one of the final and most importance filming sequences of the multi-million pound war epic 'A Bridge Too Far' (for an account of earlier filming see SOLDIER September 1976). And the film's director, Sir Richard Attenborough, had enlisted the help of the modern paratroopers to make the scenes as realistic as possible.

For Lieutenant-Colonel Geoffrey Brierley's men it was just a normal parachuting exercise, except that both the uniforms and the aircraft were different. Just back from a



Above: Getting their kit ready for their first training drop from an ex-Air Djibouti Dakota.

Below: Happy landing. Just tiny drops from an old Dakota at Browning Barracks in Aldershot.

Below: British officer in a jeep. Captain Mike Summers is the man who collared a 'star role.'



busy two-year tour in Berlin, the all-volunteer 'film stars' began by familiarising themselves with jumping out of a Dakota — outside The Parachute Regiment depot at Browning Barracks in Aldershot. Wearing wartime battledress trousers and smocks, they used the Dakota which has been a familiar Aldershot landmark since it first took its place outside the depot in the mid-sixties.

Then it was off to Holland for the actual filming. On the first day, soldiers looked apprehensively at the Dakotas standing around the airfield. Colonel Brierley explained their fears: "It is completely alien for us to be jumping from so many different aircraft gathered from so many different nations and with so many different air crew. One of our main things is the confidence which we always have in the Royal Air Force."

The Dakotas came from the Danish and Finnish air forces as well as from Portugal and Air Djibouti (French Somaliland). The ten pilots included Danes, Finns and four Dutch civilians. Their time together to practise formation flying was short — yet by the time of the first drop (not officially being filmed) the formations were impeccable.

Said Major 'Birdie' Martin: "Participa-

tion was agreed only after all the rules for flight safety were met and kit was modified up to current standards."

During the war, for instance, the Arnhem invaders had no reserve parachutes. But the men who were reproducing their drop had. The only concessions made to authenticity in this respect were that when ground sequences were shot the para clothing and kit were all genuine wartime vintage.

The next day was occupied with emplaning shots, with the Dakotas remaining firmly on the ground. The British paras filed on and off the waiting aircraft, first in British uniform and then posing as American paratroopers. It was all rather routine and long-winded — too much for some. Groaned one soldier: "Just imagine how long it must take to make one of those Biblical epics!"

Just to give them the authentic memory lane flavour, the paras' 'tea and wads' were dispensed from a wartime Naafi refreshment van which had already been used earlier in the film. Its price list included such long-forgotten gems as rock cakes, jam tarts and buns at 2d each, tea 1d, coffee 1d and cheese 3d. And its customers were told: 'No Woodbines. Only Park Drive — five per person.'

One former paratrooper who now makes his living out of the events at Arnhem is ex-Sergeant Henry McAnelly, who lost an arm and was captured in the Market Garden operation.

Sergeant McAnelly's battalion was reduced from 650 men to 40 and after the war he returned to the area on holiday each year to try to find out what had happened to the rest of his comrades. In 1954 he moved to the area permanently and he has a Dutch wife.

He took a keen interest in the battlefields and became such an authority that visitors were constantly asking him to show them round. "So I thought I might as well do it for a living."

Using his own safari Land-Rover painted in Parachute Regiment colours, Sergeant McAnelly now takes several hundred visitors around each year. He speaks four languages — English, Dutch, Flemish and Afrikaans.

One oddity he has noticed is that in one particular area his vehicle radio does not function. He recalls: "This is the same area in which our radio failed in 1944 and we still cannot explain why it happens."

Captain Mike Summers seized his chance of screen immortality when the film-makers asked for 'a British officer.' But his hopes of stardom vanished when his contribution turned out to be sitting in a jeep as it roared away from the cameras down the airstrip.

Jumping and taking air-to-air film at the same time was the well-known parachuting cameraman, Dave Waterman. Dave, an ex-paratrooper, recalled jumping without a reserve parachute at the time of Suez.

Another man who had seen it all before was parachute jumping instructor Flight-Lieutenant Bill Coad. He first went to the Parachute School in 1942 and had spent more than 30 years instructing. He told SOLDIER: "I should have left the Air Force in July when I was 55 but I said I would stay on to do 'A Bridge Too Far.' I just liked the thought of seeing the old Dakotas and flying with them again. This is the last task of my service career."

Stringent security precautions were in

force at the dropping zone to prevent any intrusion. A main road was cleared and 150 policemen guarded the area for miles around. Meanwhile film cameras were situated around the area in hides which Colonel Brierley ungrudgingly admitted were as good as the Army's camouflage.

After it was all over the British paratroopers took the opportunity for several days of navigational type exercise around the local heathlands as well as holding their own memorial service for the Arnhem fallen at the war cemetery at Oosterbeek.

Next summer the results will be screened to an awaiting world public. But in the meantime men of 1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, have no time to sit back on their laurels. Within two weeks of their return to Aldershot they were off on their travels again, on a six-month unaccompanied UNFICYP tour in Cyprus — where there will be no parachuting.

Other soldiers who have been taking part in the filming of 'A Bridge Too Far' have been 'Tankies' from various units. All of them took leave to go to Holland and drive wartime Shermans as well as, in some cases, take other parts as extras. Major John Larmine, the film tank adviser, told SOLDIER: "I don't know what we would have done without them. We had troops and officers from The Queen's Own Hussars, Queen's Royal Irish Hussars, 3rd Royal Tank Regiment, The Blues and Royals and Driving and Maintenance, Royal Armoured Corps Centre, Bovington."

Below: Some of the men underwent instant changes of nationality. Here an 'American' paratrooper gets a hand with a quick change.



Above: Queuing for the vintage Naafi wagon.



Right: Waiting for take-off on their first jump from a Dakota. Lieut-Col Brierley (at front left).

Below: Battlefield guide Henry McAnelly (centre) discusses old times with two other veterans, Colonel John Waddy and General John Frost.

