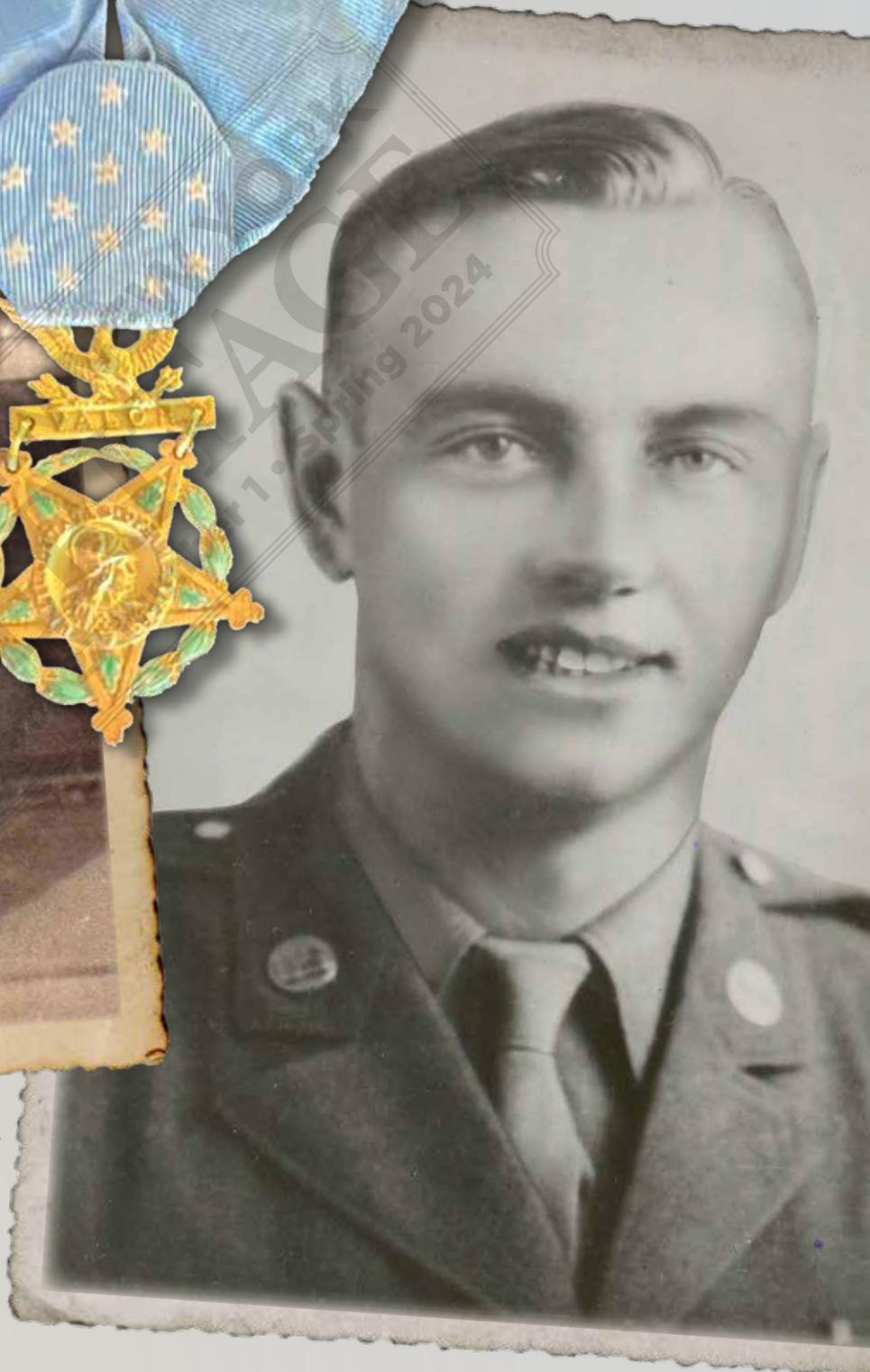


FROM GRAND ISLAND TO GLIDERS:



Courtesy family of Charles N. DeGlopper

Charles N. DeGlopper

by Douglas W. DeCroix

AS DAWN APPROACHED ON JUNE 9, 1944, a small group of American soldiers, members of C Company of the 82nd Airborne Division's 325th Glider Infantry Regiment, took cover in a shallow ditch southwest of the Normandy hamlet of Cauquigny. Their battalion had crossed the flooded Merderet River in the darkness the night before in an effort to flank German forces holding the strategic causeway leading to a bridge over the river at a place called La Fière. But now, as the Germans launched a fierce counterattack, the men found themselves cut off from the rest of the unit and in danger of being annihilated. It was at that moment that a tall farm boy from Grand Island, Private First Class Charles DeGlopper, shouted to his comrades to make their way through the hedgerows to rejoin their unit while he engaged the nearby Germans to provide a diversion. His diversion cost him his life.

JUST 19 MONTHS BEFORE, IN NOVEMBER 1942, Charles DeGlopper—"Charlie" to his family—was working on the family farm on Grand Island, a pastoral farming community located in the Niagara River that separates Canada and the United States. The DeGlopper farm, located on Fix Road between Baseline and Alt Blvd., was originally established by Pieter (Peter) DeGlopper, the son of Dutch immigrants who was also a wagon and carriage maker, furniture maker and, later, town supervisor. The farm was large and, in 1904, Peter deeded 60 acres of it to his son Charles Leonard, "Len," and his wife Mary Neilans DeGlopper (herself the daughter of Scottish immigrants)—possibly as a wedding gift—where Len built a house for his new family. Len and Mary worked the land with horses, raised Hereford cattle and chickens as well as children. They would have three children—John, Robert and Lillias—over a four-year period. Charlie was a later-in-life child, arriving 12 years after his sister.



Hereford cattle graze near the barn on the DeGlopper family farm on Fix Road, Grand Island. Courtesy family of Charles N. DeGlopper

Charlie grew up on the island as part of a large extended family, with an abundance of cousins with whom to play and discover life. He would also grow in height, taking after his mother's family—topping out at six feet, seven inches tall, weighing about 240 pounds with a size 15 shoe. According to one of his nephews, "Our dad [John] told us his cousins called Uncle Charlie 'the Gentle Giant' because he would tower over people even back when he was at Tonawanda High School.... He had to duck to get into rooms, and when they would wrestle as kids, Uncle Charlie would take on three at a time!" Not all of Charlie's cousins were tall, several—including Bernice Bailey, who would write to him during the war—were on the diminutive side. Charlie, a giant to them, treated them gently and with care, hence the name "Gentle Giant."

Like his siblings, Charlie went to school on the island through 8th grade, but he would continue his education at Tonawanda High School, as there was no high school

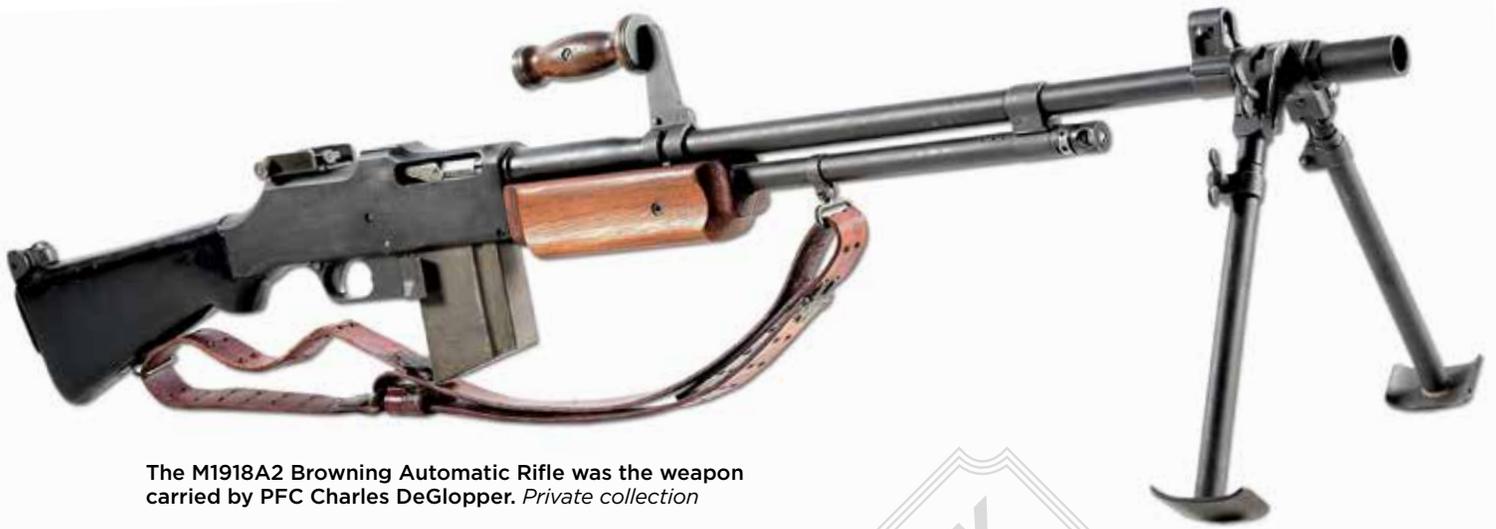
on the island at that time. There were also no bridges to Grand Island prior to 1935, so travel to the mainland was done by ferry, which Charlie would do, along with his classmates to attend Tonawanda High School. This would make extra-curricular activities such as football, which Charlie loved to play, impractical. He ended up graduating in June 1941, needing more time to complete his education as tragedy struck the family twice, sending him off course for a time. In 1933, when Charlie was 11, his older brother Robert died of tuberculosis. Then, just 18 days shy of his 16th birthday, Charlie's mother died of a heart attack. His brother John married Margaret Dinsmore in spring of the next year, and they moved in with father Len and Charlie. Margaret, a trained teacher, would tutor Charlie and helped him with his studies.

In November 1942, nearly a year after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Charlie was drafted into the U.S. Army and reported to the induction center at Fort Niagara. But the Army Quartermaster Corps was



Two images of young Charlie DeGlopper. The photo at right was taken at the wedding of his older brother, John (on right) to Margaret Dinsmore (seated), when Charlie would have been 16 years old. Courtesy family of Charles N. DeGlopper





The M1918A2 Browning Automatic Rifle was the weapon carried by PFC Charles DeGlopper. *Private collection*

not ready for someone of his stature. Thus, he was sent home for a brief period while the supply channels processed his unique uniform and equipment requirements. Eventually, Charlie was sent to Camp Croft, an Infantry Replacement Training Center in South Carolina, for basic training. There, recruits, mostly draftees, were sorted into training assignments and went through a 17-week training program. Upon graduation, the soldiers had little say as to the

unit to which they might be assigned, being regarded as replacement forces. Charlie ended up being assigned to the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment, part of the 82nd Airborne Division. The weapon with which he would wage war was one appropriate for his stature—the M1918A2 Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR).

Initially developed during the First World War and, after 1938, issued to infantry squads to act as a light machine gun, the BAR fired the

same ammunition as the standard M1 Garand rifle used by the majority of U.S. soldiers in World War II. But whereas the Garand was a semi-automatic weapon (ie. one had to pull the trigger each time to make the weapon fire), the BAR was fully automatic and could fire up to 650 rounds per minute. With each magazine holding only 20 rounds, however, a soldier was capable of only a couple of seconds of automatic fire before having to reload. Weighing in at nearly 20 pounds, it was not a weapon



Photos of Charlie and some of his comrades during training (left) and following his assignment to the 325th GIR (right). *Courtesy family of Charles N. DeGlopper*

for the frail, but Charlie could heft the BAR with ease.

In August 1942, the 82nd Infantry Division had become the first airborne division in the history of the Army and would hence be known as the 82nd Airborne Division. The soldiers of the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment would enter battle in lightweight gliders towed behind cargo aircraft. Prior to its being sent overseas, the regiment would be joined by two parachute infantry regiments—the 504th and 505th—the soldiers of which, as their names implied, would jump out of said cargo aircraft and descend by parachute.

TO WAR

In the spring of 1943, the 82nd was finally ordered to war. Troop trains delivered the airborne soldiers to ports on Staten Island and Hoboken and, on April 29, 1943, the division shipped out on SS *Santa Rosa*. Disembarking at Casablanca May 10, the 82nd rode the train to Oujda, Morocco, and then traveled by truck to Kairouan, Tunisia. The conditions they encountered were less-than-idyllic to say the least, and the neat rows of two-man pup tents belied the reality of life in the desert, which was made almost unbearable by a potent combination of extreme heat, wind, sand and flies. Even the water,

which was trucked in, “was so heavily chlorinated it burned the troopers’ throats.”

The parachute infantry regiments of the new 82nd Airborne Division had their first taste of combat when they dropped onto the island of Sicily as part of Operation Husky in July 1943. But Charlie DeGlopper and the 325th GIR remained in North Africa. They wouldn’t face the enemy until September of that year—and then they arrived, not by air as they had trained to do, but rather by sea. Boarding beach landing craft, the regiment was sent to Salerno, Italy, to reinforce American units already there.



Members of the 325th GIR assemble next to a British-made Horsa glider prior to the D-Day landings. U.S. Army Center for Military History

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THE INVASION OF NORMANDY

Following service in Italy, the 82nd Airborne Division, minus the 504th PIR, arrived in the European Theater of Operations in early December 1943 and disembarked at Belfast, Northern Ireland. By February, it had moved to the Nottingham-Leicester-Market Harborough area in the English Midlands. With one of its regiments—the 504th—still fighting in Italy, the decision was made to attach two new parachute infantry regiments—the 507th and 508th—to the division upon its arrival in the ETO. Charlie DeGlopper and the other glider infantry conducted extended glider exercises, now with both American-made Waco and British-made Horsa gliders, with some flights lasting as long as two hours.

On May 26, 1944, as the date for the invasion of France approached, Charlie penned a letter to his cousin Bernice:

Still having one hell of a time for myself. Don't know how long it is going to last but while it does look out! Don't you worry about giving me the news. You just carry on as you have been doing. You had better go back to that spiritualist and find out when this is going to be over. Kinda like to know whether I'll be coming home in the spring, summer, fall, winter. Know what to expect. Am enclosing a photo of myself and hope you like it. So long for now. More later. As always, Charlie.

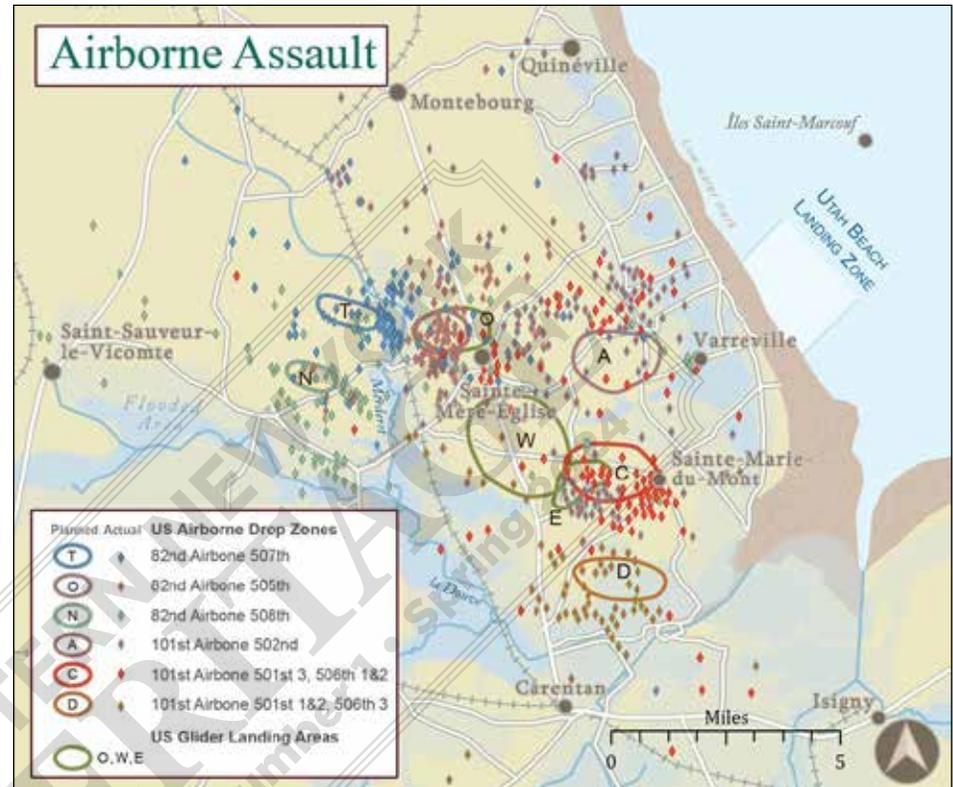
It would be Charlie's last letter home.

The airborne component of the Allied invasion of Normandy began on the night of June 5–6, prior to the "D-Day" naval landings on June 6. The 82nd Airborne Division was given three objectives prior to taking to their C-47 aircraft and Waco and Horsa gliders to begin the assault on Hitler's Fortress Europe. They were to capture the strategic town of Sainte-Mère-Église several miles

behind Utah Beach (the westernmost of the five invasion beaches), as well as to secure two bridges over the Merderet River. One of these was located southwest of Sainte-Mère-Église at Chef-du-Pont while the other spanned the river near a hamlet

them back into the English Channel.

Charlie DeGlopper and his 1st Battalion of the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment left Ramsbury Airfield in England early on D+1, June 7, bound for Landing Zone W, south of Sainte-Mère-Église. They were accompanied



This map illustrates the drop zones for U.S. airborne troops in Normandy, relative to towns and other geographic features. The inland areas shaded in blue indicate flooded ground. National WWII Museum

called La Fièvre nearly due west.

A visitor to either of these small, seemingly insignificant bridges today might find it difficult to conceive of their importance in June 1944. In fact, the bridge at La Fièvre was later described by one veteran as "a smallish stone affair and little more than a large culvert." But because the Germans had flooded much of the area behind Utah Beach, there were only limited roads—causeways—by which the invaders could move inland off the beaches. By the same token, German troops responding to repel the invaders would need to utilize these same paths. Thus, to control these river crossings was to ensure the soldiers of the 4th Infantry Division could move off Utah Beach, while hopefully minimizing the German ability to respond and drive

by portions of A Company of the 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion. While some were delivered off course and others crashed, the majority of the gliders reached their destination.

The 325th was initially kept in reserve, but by June 8, the fight for the bridge at La Fièvre had become critical. The American airborne had succeeded in capturing the bridge and defending it against several German counterattacks. But German forces held the narrow causeway to the west of the bridge, as well as the small hamlet of Cauquigny, about 500 yards beyond it. To make matters worse, there were two small groups of 507th paratroopers that had become surrounded and pinned down on the German side of the river and were in danger of being wiped out.



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Thus, the fresh 325th Glider Infantry Regiment was called into action to help break the stalemate. It was decided to send the regiment's 1st Battalion, which included Charlie DeGlopper's C Company, on a flanking maneuver

to the north to link up with the isolated pockets of the 507th PIR and to attempt to drive the German defenders from their positions from the rear.

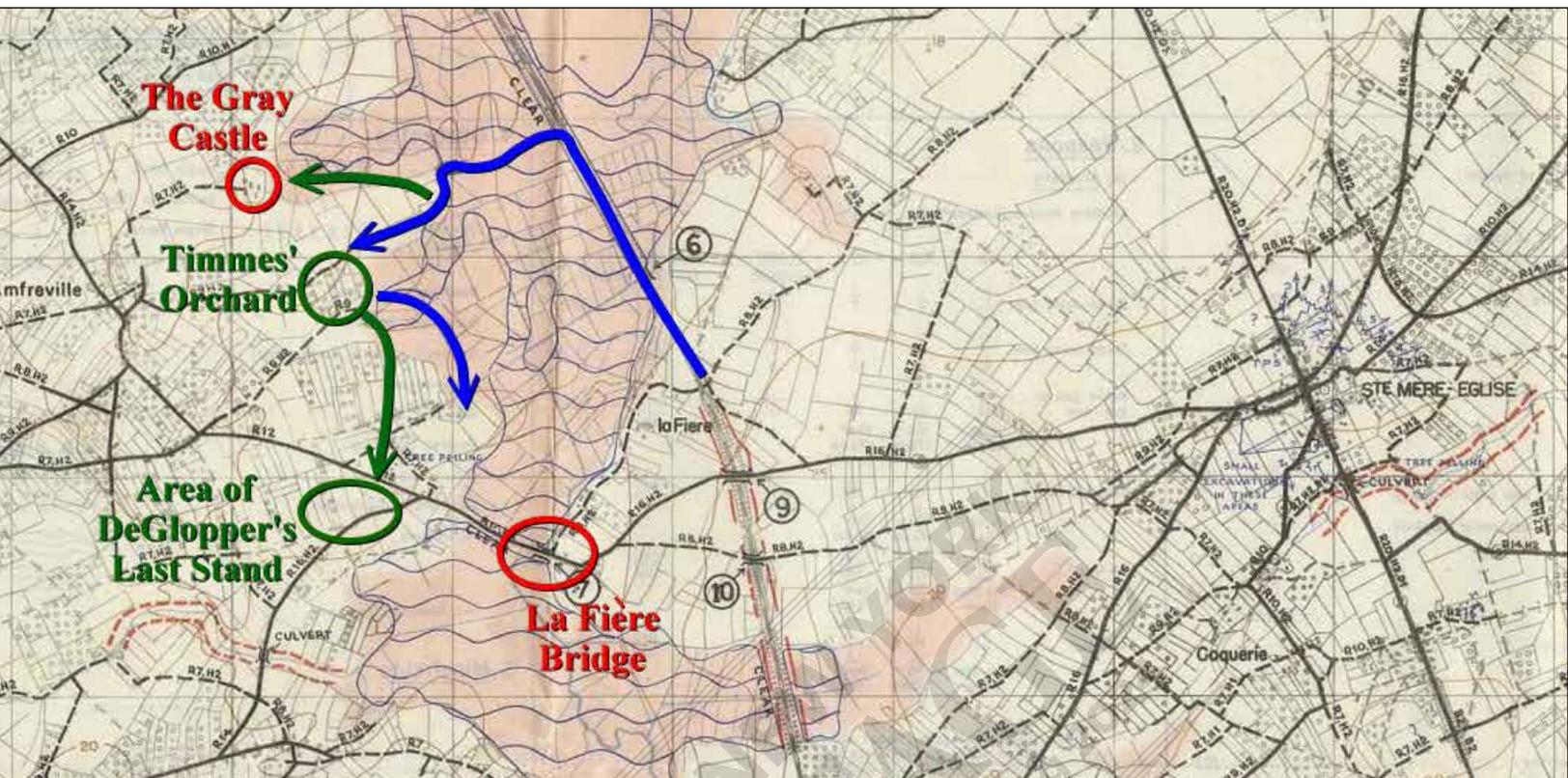
It was about 11:30 p.m. on June 8 when DeGlopper's C Company led the

rest of the 1st Battalion north and across the flooded ground, following markers laid out by the division's engineers. As they emerged from the marshy ground and began to make their way toward the orchard where Lt. Colonel Charles Timmes and some of his soldiers from the 507th PIR had been pinned down by enemy activity, they came under fire from a chateau to their right, referred to as the "Gray Castle."

The men of C Company turned to subdue the Germans in the Gray Castle while the rest of the battalion continued on toward Timmes' orchard and Cauquigny. Accounts differ in their details, but the 1st Battalion advanced through the hedgerows toward Cauquigny with some success, though as daylight increased, the Germans were able to mount a more coordinated counterattack with superior numbers, which halted the glider troops' advance.



The bridge and causeway at La Fièvre as they appear today. *Western New York Heritage* photograph, 2019



This map shows the June 8/9 flanking movement of the 1st Battalion, 325th GIR in blue, with the subsequent movements of DeGlopper's C Company indicated in green. The pinkish areas of the map indicated ground flooded by the German forces. Sainte-Mere-Eglise is visible at the far right of the map. Base map National Archives

As the 1st Battalion of the 325th GIR began to withdraw as a result of the German attack, a small group from C Company, which had found itself somewhat forward of their comrades, became cut off from the rest of the company. Faced with enemy rifle fire from the vicinity of Cauquigny and from a machine gun positioned among farm buildings several hundred yards in front of them, their situation was dire indeed. To attempt to cross the hedgerows and the open ground beyond to rejoin their company would almost certainly bring a hail of German fire down upon them. But to remain where they were would mean capture or destruction.

It was at that moment that the tall farm boy from Grand Island took charge. Charlie DeGlopper informed his comrades that, using the fire of his BAR, he would occupy the Germans long enough for the rest of the band to make good their withdrawal. "Scorning the concentration of enemy automatic weapons and rifle fire," according to the official citation, "he walked from the ditch

onto the road in full view of the Germans, and sprayed the hostile positions with assault fire." His six-foot, seven-inch presence in such an exposed position naturally drew German fire and it wasn't long before he was hit. Notwithstanding these wounds, he continued to fire until further bullet wounds dropped DeGlopper to one knee. Pausing to place a new 20-round magazine in his BAR, Charlie continued to engage his enemy as the remainder of his party made good their withdrawal. Continued fire from the Germans finally subdued the intrepid private.

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Despite DeGlopper's gallant stand, the assault by the 1st Battalion of the 325th GIR failed in its objective. But later that day, a frontal assault by the remain-

der of his regiment, along with elements of several units of paratroopers, would finally clear the causeway at La Fière, completing the last of the 82nd Airborne's initial objectives. When comrades returned to the scene of Charlie's fatal action, they reported that the ground was "strewn" with the bodies of dead Germans.

THE ROAD HOME

Following the opening days of the invasion, Charlie was buried in a nearby cemetery reserved for fallen American soldiers. On February 28, 1945, he was recommended for the Medal of Honor. On March 10, 1946, that medal—the highest honor to be bestowed upon an American soldier—was presented to his father Len at a ceremony at Trinity Evangelical United Brethren Church on Grand Island. On July 7, 1948, Charlie's body was returned to the United States and brought to Buffalo by train. A horse-drawn caisson transported the body from the Central Terminal to the Connecticut Street Armory. There, DeGlopper's body lay in state for two days with two other returned

servicemen. A family funeral was held at the DeGlopper home and at Trinity church. Final internment was at the Maple Grove Cemetery on Stony Point Road.

Since his death, the heroic actions of Charles N. DeGlopper have been remembered in the many places and items dedicated to his memory. In December 1947, the Army transport ship *Englin Victory* was renamed the *Pvt. Charles N. DeGlopper*. The following April, a road in Fort Bragg, NC, (now Fort Liberty) was named for him and, in 2015, that installation's air assault school was renamed in his honor, prior to the school's closure in 2019. The U.S. Army Reserve Training Center on Colvin Blvd. in Tonawanda was dedicated as the Charles DeGlopper Center in December 1958.



(Left) A horse-drawn caisson bearing Charles DeGlopper's body arrives at the family home on Fix Road. (Right) The honor guard lines up at Charles DeGlopper's burial at Grand Island's Maple Grove Cemetery. Courtesy family of Charles N. DeGlopper

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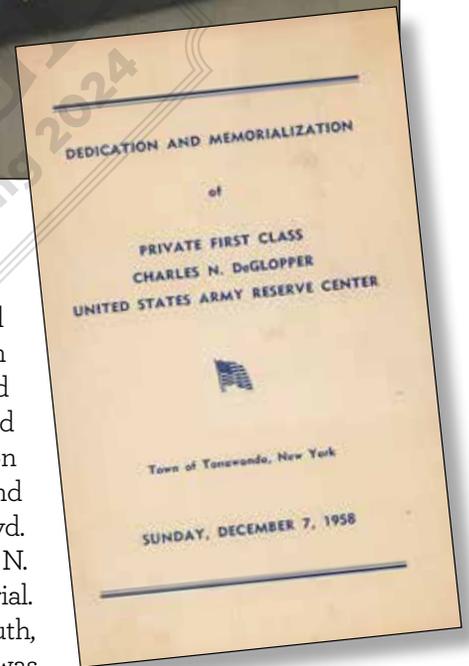
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PHOTOS: Matthew Degan



Len DeGlopper stands at front right during the ceremony renaming the Army transport ship *Englin Victory* the *Pvt. Charles N. DeGlopper*, December 1947. [Inset] Program from the December 1958 dedication of the U.S. Army Reserve Training Center on Colvin Blvd in Tonawanda. *Courtesy family of Charles N. DeGlopper*



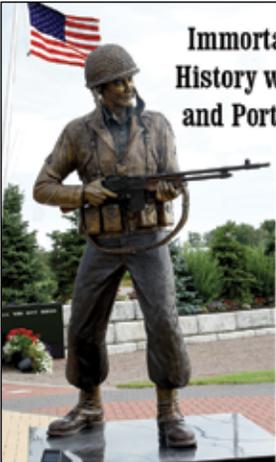
Sculptor Susan Geissler stands in front of her work with Charlie, George and Ray DeGlopper (Charles N. DeGlopper's nephews) at the dedication of the DeGlopper Memorial Expansion, June 5, 2021. *Courtesy family of Charles N. DeGlopper*

On Grand Island in 1962, American Legion 1346 acquired a small point of land at the intersection of Baseline Road and Grand Island Blvd. to establish Charles N. DeGlopper Memorial. Not far to the south, VFW Post 9249 was named in his honor in

November 1965. An ongoing drive to improve the memorial has continued over the years. On June 5, 2021, the DeGlopper Memorial Expansion was dedicated and a statue of Medal of Honor recipient and World War II hero, Pfc. Charles N. DeGlopper, was unveiled, along with an updated monument honoring the 17 Grand Islanders who were killed in action. The evocative bronze likeness was sculpted by renowned artist Susan Geissler of Youngstown.

The events in France of that time are not forgotten. The Normandy area and its current inhabitants have never forgotten the sacrifices of the Allies and numerous memorial sites, statues and monuments dot the current landscape. Since 1997, the bridge at La Fièvre is watched over by "Iron Mike," a bronze statue of an 82nd Airborne paratrooper. Only a few feet away is a flat bronze memorial plaque to Charles DeGlopper. The area is a major destination for

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tourists and history-minded travelers, as both organized tours and individuals visit to recall the fierce events of that summer. A few thousand feet away—down the former causeway and around a bend to the left—stands a second, larger memorial to Charlie, not far from the place where

he made his fatal stand. The year 2024 marks the 80th anniversary of these events and of the liberation of France.

The history of Charles N. DeGlopper is the story of America. Individuals, both male and female, are plucked from their everyday lives to serve a greater good. They know that evil must be vanquished even at the expense of their own existence. To die on distant shores, surrounded only by your comrades in arms, may be the ultimate sacrifice. **H**



Today, this memorial to PFC Charles N. DeGlopper stands not far from where he made his final stand in Normandy. *Western New York Heritage photograph, 2019*

We would like to gratefully acknowledge the contributions and support of Robert Lamb, Kristine DeGlopper-Banks and the other members of the Charles N. DeGlopper American Hero Project of VFW Post 9249 to the creation of this article. It would not have been possible without them.