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Foreword

Even before the echoes of the last round died away and the ink dried on the Japanese surrender document signed on the deck of the USS Missouri, the process of celebrating and dissecting America's participation in World War II began. During the fifty years since Hitler's attack on Poland plunged Europe into war, the barrage of memoirs, novels, films (and now television miniseries), documentary collections, technical treatises, popularly written histories of battles and campaigns, and scholarly studies has rarely slackened. Far more is known about this conflict—the debates over grand strategy and alliance politics, the details of theater operations and small unit actions, the attitudes and outlooks of individuals as disparate as General George S. Patton, Eleanor Roosevelt, Private Slovak, and "Rosie the Riveter," and the characteristics and performance in combat of every item of equipment employed by the armed forces of the United States—than about any other era in America's history with the possible exception of the Civil War.

When a work such as Kurt Gabel's autobiographical account of his wartime experiences comes along, nearly five decades after these events, the shock of encountering something new, of obtaining fresh and important insights, is thus intensified. This is the story of a young man inducted into the U.S. Army in 1943 and what he experienced in the barracks, on the rifle range, on the parade ground, and in the mess hall. It is the story of how Gabel became first a soldier and then a paratrooper. It would thus seem familiar, another of the many fascinating personal chronicles of combat during World War II.

But Kurt Gabel's narrative differs in two respects from most autobiographies and "told-to tales." First is its focus on the cycle of training—the stages by which Gabel was transformed from raw if eager inductee to proficient combat infantryman/paratrooper and how the unit to which he ultimately won assignment (A Company, 1st Battalion, 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment) metamorphosed from an agglomeration of young recruits, unfamiliar with each other and with their own
capabilities, into a finely honed, confident, cohesive military organization. Surprisingly few of the flood of personal narratives of World War II military service give much attention to the phenomena of basic training, specialized training courses, and the efforts to prepare squads, Platoons, companies, battalions, and regiments to enter combat. Aside from observations—enshrined by postwar films as platitudes—about first encounters with other GIs with odd accents, the tough-but-kindhearted drill sergeant, the bad food, the obstacle course, and the first weekend pass, these accounts typically hurry to embarkation, the subject's baptism by fire, and the hurly-burly of battle. This is understandable because the authors were in almost all cases civilians for whom the one uniquely memorable aspect of military life was combat. What came before or after the experience of "seeing the elephant" was to them of little enduring importance.

Reinforcing the idea of combat as a singular experience and one essentially unrelated to individual or unit training was the typical U.S. battalion, regimental, or divisional history. Rushing through the organizational and training phases, these histories—mostly published in the years immediately after World War II—emphasized a detailed chronological narrative of the unit's participation in battle. Notably, among the first of the Green Books (the U.S. Army's official history of World War II) to appear were two compilations based on wartime studies: *The Organization of Ground Combat Troops* (1947), by Kent Roberts Greenfield and Robert R. Palmer, and *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops* (1948), by Robert R. Palmer, Bell I. Wiley, and William R. Keast. These works focused on the vital importance of recruitment, personnel selection, organization, and training, logistical support, troop deployment, and replacement and unit reconstitution policies, especially for a force built from the ground up as was the U.S. Army in World War II. But the lessons these works offered were not followed either by historians or by the army establishment, principally, it appears, because their implementation would have been costly and politically awkward. Only in the past decade have the direct links between individual and unit training, personnel turbulence (with consequent effects on morale and unit cohesion), and combat performance come to the fore with the publication of such works as Martin Van Creveld's *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945* (1982), William P. Leinbaugh and John D. Campbell's *The Men of Company K* (1985), and John Sloan Brown's *Draftee Division: A Study of the 88th Infantry Division, First All-Selective Service Division into Combat in World War II* (1985). In its special way Kurt Gabel's memoir
contributes to this reawakening of interest in how and why some Americans performed superbly during combat.

The second crucial difference between the great majority of World War II memoirs and Gabel's account is his perspective. This comes in part from his having written his recollections some thirty years after the events he describes. But he also wrote about his World War II experiences for an unusual reason: with the deliberate aim, as William C. Mitchell notes, of "discovering and explaining what makes a soldier and, perhaps more important, what produces a first-rate combat unit such as he knew during World War II." Gabel wanted to know why his unit turned out as well as it did. Although never referring directly to S. L. A. Marshall's classic study of the American soldier's behavior during combat in World War II, *Men against Fire* (1947), Gabel clearly was familiar with its principal argument: that the American combat infantryman who "actually fired at enemy positions or at personnel with rifles, carbines, grenades, BARS, or machine guns during the course of an entire engagement" was a rare bird indeed. Marshall's assertion—now being subjected to serious challenge on methodological grounds—that only a minority (variously estimated at between 15 and 25 percent) of the troops in any unit actually did the fighting reflected basic assumptions about the training and employment of American combat troops that had guided U.S. personnel selection, training, and replacement policies during and after World War II. As had many other combat veterans, Gabel refused to accept these judgments about the lack of initiative and self-confidence, poor fighting qualities, and low unit morale supposedly characteristic of American troops. His own experience taught him otherwise, and it is testimony deserving of careful attention. The Kurt Gabel who admitted in an interview for John Toland's *Battle: The Story of the Bulge* (1959) that during his first exposure to combat in the Ardennes he had no desire to fire his rifle was convinced by his own subsequent experience that Americans, properly trained, highly motivated, and skillfully led, would fight and fight superbly.

The soldiers whose fighting qualities Kurt Gabel extolled represented, of course, elite troops. From their inception the paratroops obtained a disproportionate share of the physically and intellectually best-qualified recruits available to the Army Ground Forces. Precisely how significant the composition of such units was to their success is a matter for debate. But because of the special skills and training requirements associated with the paratroops, units such as the 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment did not undergo the constant personnel changes that beset
most U.S. infantry units organized during the middle of the war. Gabel and his buddies experienced stability and continuity; therefore it is not surprising that he finds leadership and unit esprit to be the primary ingredients of outstanding performance in battle. That seems to be a matter upon which Gabel and the U.S. Army today agree.

Theodore A. Wilson
Acknowledgments

Those who live in the past not only miss out on an exciting present but also run the risk of boring if not annoying others, especially those who cannot possibly relate to that bygone time. Many friends, colleagues, and others have surely had their patience taxed as I took off time from my normal academic pursuits to work on this book. Their understanding will, I believe, be amply rewarded by reading this wonderful military memoir, a memoir not only of its author, Kurt Gabel, but of all who served with him in the 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment.

In preparing Kurt Gabel's manuscript for publication, I had the good fortune of renewing old military friendships as well as acquiring new friends. Each one has been helpful, often at personal cost. I want to express my appreciation to some of them without at the same time discounting what others have contributed to my work, morale, and memories of distant places and unbelievable events.

Among those who knew Kurt Gabel and shared their memories, I especially wish to thank Joe Carter (1st sergeant, Headquarters, 1st Battalion). His knowledge of the 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment is without equal, as has been his generosity in providing information, photographs, personal impressions, and so on. Col. John Spears, Kurt's first company commander, has been a fountainhead of 513th history and lore. Spears, who went on to a long and distinguished career in the airborne and the Green Berets and fought in three wars, to this day believes that the height of his career was achieved as CO of Company A. That such a man who has served his nation so admirably should offer me constant encouragement is one of my fondest treasures. Other members of Company A and 1st Battalion Headquarters who served with Kurt have also aided and encouraged my efforts to celebrate their comrade. Robert L. MacDonald (A Company) of Texas shared his remembrances as well as supplying important information. J. R. Cooley (Headquarters, 1st Battalion) also knew Kurt well enough to appear in these pages. Not only did he offer memories and photographs, he also became a friend. Jake Dalton (sergeant, Headquarters, 1st Battalion),
lent important materials for my use. And Ben Scherer (A Company) gave his materials and enthusiasm to the project. Although Maj. Samuel Calhoun, Ret. (platoon leader in F Company), who led the bayonet attack depicted in this book was asked to comment on the episode, he volunteered, as he has so often in other matters for the 17th Airborne Association, his rich recollections of service with both the 513th Regiment and the 101st Airborne Division. I am most indebted to Sam and now count him as a friend. Lt. Col. Kenneth L. Booth of California, former CO of the 466th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, has also been most helpful. Although not a member of the 1st Battalion, my fellow Eugenean and esteemed friend Ernie Rosen (E Company) and his wife, Phyllis, have been staunch supporters of my work. I owe much to them, not the least of which is their proximity.

In my quest to learn about Kurt's civilian career during the 1970s, I had the good fortune of meeting Caroline Anderson and Robert Simmon, Kurt's coworker and supervisor, respectively, of the Planning Department of Monterey County, California. Because both worked closely with Kurt for several years and knew him well, they were able and disposed to answer my inquiries. Kurt was blessed indeed to have labored with such thoughtful, competent, and friendly associates.

Although I have been enriched by all who have aided me, I am especially indebted to two people, one of whom figures prominently in these pages; I refer to Col. Allen C. Miller II and his wife, Jean. Because I served as an enlisted man in the 1st Battalion and "Ace" was commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, I did not get to know him; I only saw him from a distance and knew of him. In fact, I did not meet the Millers until September 1987. Since that time, however, we have become fast friends. The colonel and Jean represent all that is best in our military tradition. That a nation should produce, let alone deserve, such able and dedicated servants is among the more remarkable fortunes bestowed upon us. I was honored to be in the same regiment with Ace during the war—today I am confounded that this splendid gentleman and former fighting man and his wife are my friends.

Thanks must go to Larry Malley of Duke University Press for putting me in contact with the University Press of Kansas. The press staff's editorial requirements were matched only by their dedication in producing a book worthy of Kurt's memory. I also want to express my appreciation to Professor Theodore A. Wilson for his highly perceptive foreword to this book.

This book was originally typed by Kurt Gabel, who, although, not a professional typist, did an excellent job. The final copy was produced on a word processor by Cheryl Looney. Cheryl's patience, good humor,
and kindness are every bit equal to her considerable professional skills. When asked whether she was having problems with the manuscript, Cheryl unwittingly paid Kurt his highest compliment: She said the typing was going slowly neither because the manuscript was difficult to follow nor because it contained so many unfamiliar German names, quotation marks, and so on but because it was one of the few manuscripts she had typed that she actually read as she went along. What more can I say?

William C. Mitchell
Introduction

Kurt Gabel died May 5, 1978, leaving an unfinished manuscript detailing his three years (1943–1945) as an enlisted man in the paratroops. This memoir pertains to Kurt’s service both in A Company, First Battalion, and in Battalion Headquarters Company, 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), of the 17th Airborne Division. The 17th was one of five airborne divisions (the others include the 11th, 13th, 82d, and 101st) organized during the war; all but one (the 13th) saw intensive and often prolonged combat. The battle record established by these divisions is unparalleled and provides some of the truly legendary chapters in American military history.

More than twenty-five years after his World War II airborne experiences and after a distinguished military career, Major Gabel retired in 1969 and became a civil servant employed by Monterey County in California. As an investigator for the Planning Department, he was authorized to examine alleged violations of zoning ordinances and prepare files and cases for adjudication. Gabel’s associates and supervisor were all highly impressed by his diligent and meticulous investigations and sensible, fair-minded resolution of differences among interested parties. Kurt was as dedicated and able a civil servant as he was a military man.

Despite having lived in this country since 1939 and served in its armed forces for twenty-five years, Kurt’s Old World background exerted itself in his civilian work and home life. As some of his former colleagues observed, Kurt projected an aura of European civility, quiet deference, and privacy. He was, apparently, the only member of his office to wear a coat and tie every day. He was unfailing in his attention to the courtesies of daily life, something hard to imagine given the informalities of a California existence. He was also a highly private man for whom family meant a great deal. And, although not wealthy, he managed to live well in the affluent residential area of Pebble Beach.

In 1975, a few years after he began his civilian employment, Gabel became a “weekend writer,” intent upon discovering and explaining what makes a soldier and, perhaps more important, what produces a
first-rate combat unit such as he knew during World War II. He gave expres-
sion to his concern in a letter to a potential publisher:

If I may, I'd like to explain why I am attempting this book. Subse-
quent to the events described I remained in the Army. During the
Korean conflict I became an officer and was assigned to the 187th
Airborne Regimental Combat Team as a rifle platoon leader and
later as the S-2 of its 1st Battalion. As Battalion S-2 I noticed cer-
tain misconceptions about troop motivation on the part of many
officers who had not served as enlisted infantrymen which some-
times resulted in avoidable morale problems.

In post-combat assignments, particularly at HQ Seventh Army
in Germany, this deficiency in assessment of the individual enlisted
man continued to bother me.

By the mid sixties, when the quality of the Army was allowed to
deteriorate, I thought it might be a good idea for someone to write
an illustrative account about the motivation of the individual rifle-
man and of the requisite ingredients for a superior line unit like the
513th Parachute Infantry Regiment described in my narrative.
(Since its deactivation in 1945, I have not seen another organiza-
tion remotely like it, including Special Forces in which I served on
my terminal assignment.)

Kurt approached his tasks not as a military sociologist, philosopher,
or military historian but as an experienced soldier who had fought in
two wars, including his experiences as an airborne officer in the Korean
War. Although he drew upon his extensive background as both an en-
listed man and an officer, his World War II regiment served as his
model.

Kurt answered his questions with a narrative or memoir recounting
the history of the regiment from his perspective. It is a unique docu-
ment because Kurt was as highly conscious of his intellectual mission as
of his vivid personal experiences. Despite having written this memoir
long after the actual events, Kurt displayed an extraordinarily accurate
memory for striking, crucial, and even seemingly unimportant detail;
indeed, one might easily claim that he had a photographic memory.
That memory had room for both technical detail and social interaction
whether in training or combat. Despite this rare talent, Kurt honored
the historian's discipline by a minute and painstaking checking of
names, places, dates, and so on. And we who shared his experiences can
readily testify to the overall authenticity of the records he composed.

But this memoir is more than an accurate depiction of long-ago war-
time events; it constitutes a moving testament to the valor of the airborne regiments, to their gut-wrenching courage in facing the extreme demands of service—ever-present fear, exhaustion, injury, and all-too-frequent death. Kurt understood fully and valued these paratroopers’ sense of community, esprit de corps and élan because he had been a highly impressionistic, idealistic youth whose only aspiration was to be one of them. He fully appreciated the means employed by the Jump School and the Regiments to mold such eagerness into a dedicated and well-honed unit.

That Kurt idealized the military comes as no surprise to those who knew him. As a German-Jewish émigré in 1939, he was always keenly aware of the sharp contrasts between the country of his birth and that of his citizenship. Given his background (detailed in Chapter 1), it is understandable that he was close to his mother, his regiment, and the profession of arms. Like all idealists, Kurt was most disturbed by the failures of those he most admired. Although he enjoyed a notable and satisfying military career, it seems that its pinnacle was reached at its beginning, a summit never again to be achieved, not even with the famed 187th paratroops during the Korean War nor with the Green Berets later.

We should not dwell too much on the speculative because Kurt was not a philosopher. He was, however, a thoughtful man and above all a masterly writer. Even though—or perhaps because—English was not his native language, he acquired a thorough mastery of both written and spoken English. His ability to recapture the exact, colorful lingo of the airborne is just superb. His exposition is always direct, lucid, and compelling and never forced, didactic, or even grammatically incorrect—a major achievement for one whose first language was German! Kurt’s death has deprived us of a first-rate writer, one who might well have gone on to achieve major status on matters both military and otherwise.

After a generation or more of cynical war novels, memoirs, and movies replete with gore and sex and antiheroes, Gabel’s views may seem simple and naive. His sole intent was to become a first-rate soldier and, more particularly, a paratrooper. His was an odyssey of wonderment, a renewal of faith in what young men can accomplish if only they have the heart. Gabel set out to discover the wellsprings of airborne commitment and achievement on the battlefield. And, although his innocence could have produced clichés and moralizing, he never succumbed to the temptation. Given the direct narrative style, his literary achievement is all the more remarkable. His answers emerge without the self-conscious preaching or pretentious yet banal philosophizing of most who seek meaning in war. Gabel never intrudes on the narrative; there is no ego-
tism, no "look at me." Nor is there an endless repertoire of war stories by a garrulous old vet. Instead we have the superb story of a proud regiment preparing for war and then its immersion in the unrelenting demands of combat. One need not have been a member of the 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment or of the paratroops in general to understand and prize the trials and tribulations of which Kurt writes; they are universal experiences for all who fought in World War II or any other war. And yet they will be fascinating to those too young to have personally known the tragedies and triumphs of such endeavors.

Gabel did not live long enough to complete his book. He intended to write a chapter on the last battle fought by the 17th Airborne, a battle and jump in which Kurt participated but as a member of Division Headquarters rather than with his beloved 513th. He had been transferred to the counterintelligence unit of Division Headquarters after the Battle of the Bulge, no doubt because of his linguistic skills as well as superior knowledge of the Germans. In any event, I have assumed responsibility for "completing" the book by providing an account of Operation Varsity entitled "One Last Great Jump," a heading I firmly believe would have won Kurt's approval.

Rather than mimic Kurt's style—something I neither wish nor could in any way do—I have written an impersonal account of the operation, explaining why it came about, how it was conducted, and, most important, its consequences in terms of costs and gains. I do not provide intimate, detailed accounts of small units and individual paratroopers because they would be based not on Kurt's experiences and memory but on mine. Nevertheless, I hope I have provided important knowledge about a major airborne operation of which Kurt was justifiably proud and about which he would have sung our praises.

Readers should also be informed of my role as editor. I have resisted the constant temptation to insert editor's comments and limited myself to correcting errors—factual and grammatical—that Kurt would have, sooner or later, caught as he prepared the manuscript for publication. I have also assumed responsibility for eliminating the opening chapter in the original manuscript. It recalled a somewhat painful event in Captain Gabel's service as a briefing officer in the Civil Affairs Section of the American Military Government (7th Army) serving in occupied Germany during the mid-1950s. After World War II and before his return to the airborne during the Korean War, Gabel served in Germany in the Criminal Investigation Division of the army. During these two tours of duty in Germany, Gabel began to worry about the quality of the U.S. military, a concern that focused on the role of the officer corps and its misunderstanding of the enlisted men who do the fighting. He felt that
by writing his memoir of the 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment he could somehow teach the next generation of officers what it means to become a soldier. Although Gabel's goal was laudable and the chapter did have an integrity of its own, it added little to the subsequent narrative and could easily be eliminated. It is entirely possible that Kurt would have agreed.

I have also taken the liberty of attaching two appendixes containing useful information about the 17th Airborne and the 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment; various maps that should supply a more graphic setting for my chapter; and a number of photographs, including three of Kurt Gabel during World War II.

I close by noting that I am deeply honored that I was once a member of Kurt's battalion and regiment. My fondest wish is that I could have known him—we were so close in space and, above all, in spirit.

William C. Mitchell