



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

Men and equipment are dropped during a combat jump between Nice and Marseille in August, 1944. At right: Maj. Gen. James Gavin, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division in 1944

Jumping Into History

PARATROOPER

The Life of Gen. James M. Gavin

By T. Michael Booth and Duncan Spencer
Simon & Schuster. 494 pp. \$27.50

PARACHUTE INFANTRY

An American Paratrooper's Memoir Of D-Day and the Fall Of the Third Reich

By David Kenyon Webster
Louisiana State University. 262 pp. \$29.95

By Clay Blair

IN THE EARLY hours of D-day, June 6, 1944, about 18,000 airborne troopers descended on German-occupied Normandy in darkness. Their mission was to seize bridges and causeways and generate chaos behind two of the four invasion beaches, Utah and Sword. Notwithstanding

poor drops and landings in the American zone, the men of the American 82nd and 101st divisions and those of the British 6th division performed brilliantly. Allied airborne forces became the stuff of instant legend, and their exploits in Normandy and elsewhere continue to generate books and films.

For the 50th anniversary of D-Day, this spring's lists offer two very different and noteworthy entries: a detailed biography of the airborne pioneer and superb front-line fighter, the late Gen. James M. Gavin, and the rediscovered war memoir of an enlisted trooper.

Like his airborne peers, Matthew B. Ridgway and Maxwell D. Taylor, "Slim Jim" Gavin was a prolific author. His World War II memoir, *On to Berlin*, was a bestseller. Among other works, Ridgway and Taylor published autobiographies, but Gavin died in 1990 before he could finish his. This biography by the Washington-based writer Duncan Spencer and paratrooper turned historian, T. Michael Booth draws on Gavin's incomplete autobiography and personal papers and diaries, which were opened to them by Gavin's widow. Thus it fills a gap, sort of.

Born out of wedlock in New York City to an Irish immigrant and adopted by an unstable, uneducated coal-mining family in Mount Carmel, Pa., Gavin covered a lot of

ground in his 83 years. In 1924, age 17, he slipped away from Mount Carmel and enlisted in the army. A year later, he won an appointment to West Point and was graduated with the class of 1929, standing 185 among 299. A few months later he married a Washingtonian, Irma ("Peggy") Baulsir, a relationship that soon turned sour but produced a daughter. In 1947, the Gavins finally divorced and he married Jean Emert, a woman about 20 years his junior.

In the 1930s, Gavin's career in the army was undistinguished. He flunked out of flight school, then served routine tours at the Infantry School, Fort Benning, Ga., overseas with the Philippine Scouts, back to Washington State with the 3d Infantry Division and as an instructor in tactics at West Point. Frustrated in his attempts to locate his birth parents, miserable in his first marriage,

Military historian Clay Blair, author of "Ridgway's Paratroopers," has completed a new history of the U-boat war, which will be published in 1995.

Gavin obsessively sought the company of other women. Many, many women, the authors imply—but provide few details.

In the summer of 1941, Gavin volunteered for the Army's parachute school, then just beginning. It was a move that put him on the path to professional acclaim and public fame. Perfectly suited for this new form of infantry, he was soon a bird colonel, commanding a parachute regiment in the 82nd Airborne Division. At that time, Major Gen. Matthew Ridgway commanded the division and Brigadier Gen. Max Taylor commanded the division's artillery. In mid-training the 82nd divided to become the cadre of the 101st Airborne Division, but Ridgway, Taylor and Gavin remained with the 82nd, where they became archrivals.

The 82nd entered combat first in Sicily and then Italy. Taylor left to command the unbloodied 101st. Gavin, age 36, moved up to become Ridgway's number two and a chief planner in London for airborne operations in the Normandy invasion. When Ridgway rose to command the XVII Airborne Corps, Gavin replaced him as commander of the 82nd. The rivalry between Ridgway, Taylor and Gavin intensified as each rose to higher responsibilities, all three vying to be "Mr. Paratrooper" in the public mind, or so it seemed.

In the hot and cold wars of the 1950s, Ridgway, Taylor and Gavin became the leading lights of the U.S. Army. Each rebelled against the air-minded Eisenhower administration and its strategy of "massive retaliation," which left the Army little to do in the putative big war and ill-equipped for a brushfire war. All left public service in a huff, and all wrote similar dissenting books. Taylor and Gavin returned to public service in the Kennedy administration, Gavin as ambassador to France. The rivalry continued: Ridgway and Gavin opposed the war in Vietnam; Taylor urged an ever greater commitment.

Booth and Spencer have done a workmanlike job with the Gavin biography. They touch all the requisite bases in Gavin's personal and professional life. Importantly, they develop the fascinating (and ultimately bitter) Ridgway-Taylor-Gavin rivalry, which Taylor's son, John M. Taylor, unwisely chose to ignore in his recent biography of his father. Nonetheless, the Gavin biography, like

the Taylor biography, is incomplete; we'll have to wait for the definitive work.

A momentous turn in the lives of all three airborne generals occurred when Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall directed the first commander of the 82nd division, Omar N. Bradley, to rescue a National Guard division which had bogged down in training. In Booth-Spencer prose, this event is described in the following, inappropriately slangy language: "High command considered him one of the army's top commanders, so when the 28th Infantry Division began having organizational problems the army grabbed Bradley to straighten things out." Yikes!

There are other editorial problems. Precise dates of Gavin's posts and service are lacking. When introduced, not all the important people get full names and some are referred to later by nicknames. A fleeting implication that Robert Oppenheimer might have been a "Communist" demands substantiation, to say the least.

The failure to develop more fully Gavin's Don Juanism before his second marriage is unfortunate. For example, the authors briefly describe what they call an "unusual" lunch after the liberation of Paris. Lunching at the Ritz were: Ernest Hemingway; Hemingway's wife, war correspondent Martha Gellhorn; Hemingway's new mistress, Mary Welsh; Marlene Dietrich and Jim Gavin. While Mary Welsh sought Hemingway's eye, Martha Gellhorn and Marlene Dietrich sought Gavin, who had affairs with both women, the authors assert, while also sleeping with his English driver. "Unusual" lunch indeed, but where is the rest of the story?

A COUPLE of years ago, Stephen E. Ambrose, the indefatigable lecturer, military historian and biographer, published *Band of Brothers*, a combat chronicle from Normandy to VE-Day of E company, 506th Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. One of Ambrose's sources was an unpublished memoir and the letters of a wartime sergeant in E Company, David Kenyon Webster. Ambrose wrote an introduction to the Webster memoir, *Parachute Infantry*, and Louisiana State University Press has now published it.

A 21-year-old English literature major at Harvard University who aspired to be a

writer when he enlisted in the parachute infantry in 1943, Webster jumped into Normandy and Holland with the 101st. In both campaigns, he was wounded but recovered and returned to serve in E company until his discharge in 1946. In the postwar years, he was a reporter for the Los Angeles Daily News and the Wall Street Journal and wrote a book about sharks, *Myth and Maneater*. In 1961, while shark-fishing in his 11-foot sailing dinghy off the Santa Monica coast, he disappeared. *Saga* magazine and the Saturday Evening Post published brief excerpts of his war memoir, but 29 publishers turned it down.

Ambrose was right to urge publication of this almost-forgotten memoir. It is beautifully written and perfectly evokes life and battle in a parachute infantry company. Webster's account of the night jump into Normandy is absolutely superb. He recalls standing beside the plane that would take him to France: "I shiver and sweat at the same time. My head is shaved, my face darkened with charcoal, my jump suit impregnated for gas. I am carrying over a hundred pounds of equipment. I have two bandoliers and three hand grenades for ten thousand Germans . . ." This book ranks right up there with the 1951 classic, *Those Devils in Baggy Pants*, written by another enlisted man (of the 504th regiment of the 82nd division), Ross S. Carter, who died shortly after the war.

I was mystified by one aspect of the Webster memoir. The description of the Normandy campaign (on the ground) ends abruptly after merely a day or so with no further explanations. Only later in the text did I discover that Webster was wounded early in the Normandy fighting and evacuated to a hospital in England. An account of his first wound and evacuation should have been included at the end of the Normandy section. At the end of the war, Webster and a small group were the first Americans to arrive at Berchtesgaden, where they commandeered the contents of Hitler's wine cellar.

I join Ambrose in recommending this book to anyone of any age with an interest in the exploits of the airborne forces and ground combat in the European Theater of Operations, as told by a truly gifted narrator. ■