



# Larry Cheek

## 'We Have To Go On'

Brian Irving is a captain in the Air Force. He does not fly airplanes. Rather, he has the difficult job of talking to news people when one goes down.

Everybody knows about Wednesday's C-130 LAPES (in which a plane puts a tank on the ground) crash by now. But maybe some of you don't know the Air Force tried it again on Thursday morning, this time in front of 4,000 ROTC cadets.

Something went wrong this time, too. A parachute that is supposed to pull the tank from the open rear cargo door of the C-130 was cut loose after it failed to open.

Nothing happened to the airplane. It roared safely past the bleachers, pulled up, and flew away into the sky.

Somebody who must not understand what the military is all about asked Capt. Irving why the maneuver was included in Thursday's demonstration when just the day before four airmen and one soldier had died trying to perform the same tank drop.

"Our business does not allow us to stand still," he said. "We recognize that we have to go on."

This is the essence of Wednesday's tragedy. This is the airman's and the soldier's answer to any questions about it.

## *You Don't Stop A War*

The thousands of civilians who saw Wednesday's crash, who left Sicily drop zone with soot from the burning C-130 in their hair, surely weren't in the mood to go straight to an Army firepower demonstration, as many of them did.

But this too is the lesson. In the civilian world, if, say, a school bus crashed and five children were killed, school would likely be called off that day and the next.

But you don't stop a war. If one plane crashes trying to drop off a tank, you send another one in.

There are Airborne soldiers on the ground. They have only light weapons. To carry on the fight, to avoid being slaughtered, they need tanks. They need big guns.

It's the Air Force's job to put those tanks and big guns on the ground for the Airborne, and when a plane crashes, there will be time later to mourn the dead.

Because you don't stop a war, not even to cry.

## *A Grim Opportunity*

Odd. In a grim sense, because no one would ever order up a tragedy for training purposes, Wednesday's crash was an opportunity for the military. Death is routine, even ordinary, in war. So must be the reaction.

A plane goes down.

The war doesn't stop, and this week the people involved in Ft. Bragg's capability exercise had a chance to keep going, to keep flying and jumping and shooting, while the rest of us stared over and over at the pictures of the disaster.

It was — is — the saddest kind of practice. Soldiers and airmen must have felt stunned, especially those flyers who were friends of the men on the C-130. But so in war would friends be lost.

While their buddies stayed in the sky.

## *A Memory of D-Day*

In war, Wednesday's crash would be a blip against the backdrop of bigger tragedy. It also would not be unusual.

Wars are fought on difficult ground. Somebody suggested that Wednesday's crash would not have ended in fire and death if the LAPES run had taken place on a long, concrete runway at Pope, rather than a dirt track at the drop zone.

Maybe. But sometimes airborne troops need tanks before they can capture an airport. The enemy is not there to make such drops convenient. So they must take place in clearings, on dirt or in alfalfa fields.

Not on long, paved runways.

Remember D-Day? How many hundreds of gliders did we lose, not to enemy fire, but to crash landings? How many thousands of airborne troops died in those gliders, or drowned when they landed far from their designated drop areas, because the night was dark and hostile and confusing?

Then there were the helicopters which burned in the Iranian desert, nowhere near an enemy.

Our military leaders know accidents will happen in a war. They also know the best way to lower the risk of such accidents is practice.

And they know, too, what some of us may have forgotten.

Dress rehearsals are real.