

## Corporal Biagio (Ben) Bennardi

When I was 16 years old, I joined the New Jersey National Guards. The age requirement was 18, but I figured I would take a chance and lie about my age. To my surprise, I managed to slip through and found myself in uniform at a very young age.

I was assigned 113<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 44<sup>th</sup> division, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Company 'G'. Each Tuesday night was drill night; where we were lectured on soldiering and the Articles of War. Each summer the regiment would report to Fort Dix, New Jersey for field training and combat maneuvers. I met a lot of young men and women and formed many friendships as a Guardsman. At this point, I felt very content with my decision to enlist in the Army.



During the summer of 1941, we were ordered to report to Louisiana for our first large-scale maneuvers. We were away from Fort Dix for most of the summer. We stayed in tents, and drilled everyday. The maneuvers were intense, as if we were in a full-scale war. It was hot, and very dry during that summer. While on maneuvers, there were many different National Guard outfits around from all over the United States.

On September 15, 1941, President Roosevelt mobilized our division and moved our status to Regular Army. We were the first Division in the United States to be inducted. The assignment was only supposed to be for one year. The draft was already in progress and would have allowed us to go back to being National Guards once the ranks were filled, but as fate would have it, this action added 6 more months to our time, shortly afterwards the United States joined WWII in full scale.

In December of 1941, while returning from duty in the South, I stopped overnight in Pennsylvania, where I received word that the Japanese Navy had just bombed Pearl Harbor. So it was pretty obvious that I was not going to be back in civilian clothes again for a long time.

After returning home to Fort Dix, about a month later in 1942, our regiment was given orders to patrol and monitor the East Coast for any offshore enemy activity. Our

Copyright of James T. Romano. All Rights Reserved. Unauthorized copying or use in any manner is strictly prohibited – April 2005

## **Corporal Biagio (Ben) Bennardi**

territory was from the Wildwood NJ coast south along Delaware and including the coast of

Maryland. Our Battalion was specifically assigned the Rehobeth Beach area where we were on 24-hour patrol along the beachfront looking eastward for any enemy submarine activity. We were looking for German U-Boats, which were rumored to be patrolling offshore and hunting in our military and civilian shipping lanes, but as far as I knew, there were never any reports from our Battalion of any sightings.

It was during this time that I decided to transfer out of the Regular Army and into the Paratroopers. The Paratroopers division was just being formed and offered an increased salary over that of the regular infantrymen, which was all the incentive I needed. I felt I had the opportunity to make the change rather than let the Army decide for me. I felt if there was a war, I might have a better chance of surviving if I was not an expendable infantryman. The decision was all my own and no orders were ever given that forced me to go. Like many, I simply volunteered. I didn't think twice about putting in my transfer papers. A short time later, I was cleared to go and on my way.

In February 1943, I received my approved transfer papers, packed my belongings at Fort Dix and left for Airborne Jump School at Fort Benning, Georgia. The training was tough; it was a fast four-week program that was very intense. The first week was relentless; calisthenics to weed out the weaker GI's that were not in physical shape to do the job. The next two weeks were spent hanging from rigging, jumping out of towers on a sliding cable harness (which simulated jumping out of a moving airplane), and descending by open parachute from a 250-foot tower by cable release. Any time we weren't hanging, jumping or descending, was spent in school packing chutes and of course, more calisthenics. Finally, the week I had been waiting for, 'jumping', and jump we did, several times a day from varied altitudes. We learned how to control the chute and make a safe landing in full combat attire. It was rough.

On March 17, 1943, I was awarded my Paratrooper Wings. I was very proud and to make the moment even more rewarding, I was asked to stay on as a Jump Instructor. There were many good men in the class, so I was surprised that I was chosen. Maybe it was because of my time in the Army, or my record, whatever it was, I was very grateful and accepted the position. I decided it would be a good experience and stayed on for an additional two months.

## Corporal Biagio (Ben) Bennardi



In May of 1943, things in Europe really began to heat up. I felt it was time to move on. Word got around that a new regiment was forming in the Army. Something totally new called Airborne Divisions. Basically, mobilized strike forces that were specially trained and could be dropped in behind enemy lines in strategic locations. I requested transfer from Jump School at Fort Benning into this new outfit. Without any problem, I was accepted right in. I was assigned to the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), which was attached to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Our regimental nickname was 'The Red Devils'. More specifically, I was assigned to the Headquarters Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. I was ordered to report to Camp Mackall in North Carolina for advanced training. After the training we moved around the southern region of the United States in and out of different military camps for more training and maneuvers. Then in December 1943 we were sent to Camp Shanks in New York to prepare for our trip overseas. On December 23, we were given overnight passes, and I decided to go home. I found out where my father was working, and I went to see him. I told him I would be home for Christmas Eve. But instead all passes were cancelled and no telephone calls could be made. It was then that we were told that we were to leave for the United Kingdom the next day. I never saw my father alive again and on top of that, I made Christmas Eve a disaster at home.

We shipped out December 26 on the USAT James Parker. We left New York, met up with a larger convoy in Boston and crossed the Atlantic Ocean. I was seasick the whole trip. The waves were high enough to bury the bow of the ship in the water and burst back out again. This went on across most of the Atlantic until we got closer to Ireland.

We finally arrived in Belfast, Ireland after a week of bouncing across the Atlantic. There was more training at a very nice place called Cronmore Estate. In March of 1944, we packed up and moved on to Nottingham via some trains and a ferry across to Great Britain. This was our base camp for the remainder of our stay in Europe. We constantly conducted practice jumps and prepared ourselves for combat action, not knowing when, or where we would be sent in Europe.

## Corporal Biagio (Ben) Bennardi

June 1944 gave us the answer to all of our questions. We were to take part in a massive operation, which would send us to France to invade the German stronghold in Europe. Our end of the overall plan was dubbed, 'Operation Neptune', the airborne invasion of France. We were ordered to assemble in one of the hangars at the airbase where the entire plan was unfolded in front of us. It was massive. The 508<sup>th</sup> initial objective was to take two bridges west of a town called Sainte-Mere-Eglise, and destroy them, halting the German movement to the beaches from the west. Then we were to move north toward the town of Cherbourg, and seal it off, allowing further beach landings and re-supply. For the next week, we ate like kings. The jump and invasion kept being postponed due to the inclement weather in the channel. We had to coordinate with the ground forces making the landing on the beaches, so weather was a big issue. The treatment we received was fantastic. We even slept on real folding cots. I began to think the Army was treating us too good and that we were sure going to pay our dues for this nice stuff.

The night of June 5, the orders came in that the operation was moving forward. We were alerted to prepare for action. We gathered all our equipment, parachutes and weapons, mounted up, assembled in our assigned 'stick', and then boarded the plane assigned to carry us to the target. There were hundreds of C-47s everywhere, all around the airbase. Thousands of men, suited up like myself, stood in line and boarded their planes heading for France. We taxied out, the engines ran up and with a bumpy ride down the runway, we were airborne and off to the target. Once airborne, we joined what looked like the entire Air Force and flew to France together. The ride was tight with all the equipment I had on, but I was used to it. We trained for this, so to me it was like any other jump. I did not think too much about what I was about to do, only that I wanted to get out of the plane as soon as the light was green.



Not long after we passed over the shore of France, the flak and antiaircraft guns started. The bursts were very heavy. One of the guys looked out the window and went into

## **Corporal Biagio (Ben) Bennardi**

a panic. We rallied him and sat him back down. I refused to look out. I didn't want to see what we were flying through. Feeling it was enough. The bursts were all around us. The plane bobbed up and down to avoid whatever it could. The sound of metal hitting the plane's skin from the flak bursts was all throughout the plane. I was scared as hell and was saying the rosary without holding the rosary. We dropped down real low to about 400 feet avoiding the AA guns of the Germans, which were everywhere. It was then we got the order to 'Stand up, hook up' and do our last minute equipment checks. We were going. The door was open, the light was green and we left the plane. I was number 13 out the door, I never thought 13 to be an unlucky number after that

Immediately after I left the 'safety' of the C-47, I was totally exposed to the massive amount of AA fire coming from the ground. There were tracers flying all around me, planes all above me, parachutes all over the night sky. It was lit up with sparks from the Germans shooting in every direction possible. All I could think was how fast could I drop to the ground.

When I landed, I was in an open field near a hedgerow. It was totally dark and I didn't see any other parachutes from my company, or any other friendly soldiers anywhere around me. It was then I thought to myself, 'What the hell am I doing here?!?'. I was exhausted and crawled into a hedgerow that night, hoping not to get caught. A few hours later, it was daylight. I had fallen asleep, so I crawled out and began to sneak around hoping to find another trooper, or at least make contact with American forces. I traveled from hedgerow to hedgerow, staying low to avoid being found by the Germans. At times I could hear them on the other side of the hedgerow, they were very close to me. It was some time in the afternoon, when I met another guy from my outfit. We were so happy to see each other. From that time on we kept together, if we were brothers we couldn't have been closer than we were.

We kept moving east toward the beach, not knowing what was ahead of us, and looking for more troops from our unit. That's when we came across a group of troopers from the 508<sup>th</sup>. It just so happened that our Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. B. Shanley was in the group. As we moved forward, the group got bigger and bigger until we were a fighting unit. Our orders had changed by then. We were reassigned to assemble on a hill west of the Merderet River and form a strong point to prevent German penetration from the west side of the La Fiere Bridge. This hill was known as Hill 30. This is when the Colonel took one look at me, and ordered me to remain with him as his personal bodyguard. From then on, at no time was I allowed to leave his side. I carried a Thompson submachine gun as I was originally a Mortar Squad Leader, but since I was now separated, according to the Colonel, I was available for the job.

Once assembled on the hill, Shanley ordered us to establish a perimeter around the hill and we dug in. As expected, the Germans came at us. The counterattack by the Germans was intense and seemed never-ending. It went on for three days, sometimes for hours at a time. At one point they attacked us from three different directions. Time after time, we held and drove them back off the hill. This is where I earned my Bronze Star. I was defending the Colonel while he was directing the men at each side. A German soldier got close enough to sight the Colonel, and raised his rifle to shoot him. I saw this in time, stepped in front of the Colonel and fired a burst at the German, killing him instantly. I didn't think that action was worth a medal, but apparently the Colonel did. He felt if I had not stepped in front of the

## **Corporal Biagio (Ben) Bennardi**

German, he would have been shot for sure. We finally drove back the Germans enough times that they gave up the fight and broke contact. We were very low on ammo, food and medical supplies so the timing could not have been better.

The bridgehead was established and we were reinforced, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June. We were ordered to move south into Baupre. This was a major assault on the village that was occupied by a larger German Battalion. They must have been preparing for a counter-attack as we caught them with their pants down. We hit them hard, took out some tanks and other armor and sent the rest of them running. After all was said and done, we took a lot of prisoners, as well as tanks, equipment and more importantly, supplies which we took back to reinforce our troops behind us. After the action I saw on Hill 30, Baupre was almost too easy. I was thankful it was. I got a look at a German Tiger tank up close and I was happy I did not have to face it in combat. It was big, bigger than our Sherman's and carried the 88mm Flak gun on the turret. That gun could shoot through anything we had. If the Germans wanted to, they could target a single soldier with that gun it was so accurate. To overrun Baupre that quick was a gift for us.

Our next orders had us push west from Baupre across the Cotentin Peninsula and capture Hill 131. The action on Hill 131 was fairly heavy but we knew that we had beaten back the Germans enough and that we would take it without too much trouble. It was there that Colonel Shanley was nearly killed after he tripped on a German booby-trap. I was moving with him but slightly behind when it happened. The explosion was directly to my left and between us. It was big enough to blow me off my feet and onto my back before I even knew what happened. When the smoke cleared, Shanley lay there wounded, but thankfully not gravely. One of the other soldiers shouted for a medic that responded very quickly, and Shanley was evacuated. I never knew what happened to him after that as I was assigned to a new duty other than being his bodyguard. What I did think was ironic about the accident was that Shanley always told us to look down and be careful of booby traps. Now there he was being carried away from the battlefield after setting one off.

A month after I arrived on the ground in France, we finished in Baupre, and made our way back to the Normandy Beach to hop a ride back to England. We went across the Channel in a small LST boat that was used to carry supplies to France from England so it was a little cramped. When we left England on the night of June 5<sup>th</sup>, the 508<sup>th</sup> were approximately 2,100 men. When we got back, we were just a little more than 900, the rest were killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

When we arrived back at our base camp in Nottingham, England, we were given the rest we needed and appreciated. It was there that I received the Bronze Star. I was so proud of it, but I still wondered if I had done anything more than anyone else to deserve that medal. But if the Colonel said I deserved it, then I did. Nottingham was a nice place and the local people took very good care of us. As the days and weeks passed by, our boys that were left in France started coming back. You can rest assured they were received with open arms. We talked for days about what we saw, where we landed and whom we wound up with. Some of us were absorbed in other outfits like the 101<sup>st</sup> and fought with them; others stayed in small pockets from their stick and fought the Germans alone. It was amazing. I guess I was one of the lucky ones; I landed somewhere close to where I was supposed to be.

About two months after the successful action of D-Day, we were alerted and put on

## **Corporal Biagio (Ben) Bennardi**

standby. We got word that there was to be a jump into the outskirts of Paris to make a breakthrough and storm the city. We prepared ourselves with practice jumps and more training. Not long after our alert status was raised, it was cancelled. Patton and his tanks were able to push through and overrun the Germans from Paris. France was close to liberation.

Next plans for our unit were to jump in another massive assault into Holland called 'Operation Market Garden'. At this time, I got word that my father was gravely ill with tuberculosis. The Army was giving me the green light for emergency furlough to go home. Our Parish Priest wrote a letter explaining how grave the situation was for my father, but the Army needed the Red Cross (RC) in Patterson to verify the condition before I could be released. My mother and sister went everyday to the local RC office and pled with them, but they said the RC did all it could do. I would go to the RC Field Representative to ask everyday, but was told nothing had come back from stateside, so they could not verify the condition. Hence, I never went home. A few days later I received a letter from my mother stating that my father had passed away. I never realized that the last time I saw him before I came to England, was the last time I would see him alive. Knowing that all it would have taken was a simple letter from the Red Cross to release me, I never sent or supported the Red Cross's cause from that day on. Anytime a donation is asked of me, I'd rather spit in the plate as it comes by.

The Holland invasion came and went without me because of my waiting for release back to the states. Not only was I let down by the Red Cross, I did not help the cause of my brethren in combat. I found out later when I came home that the mortician sponsoring my father's funeral held up the services for a week in hopes that I might make it home in time. Imagine that.

December brought us a tough winter. It was cold as hell. Our orders came in at night that we would be sent to the Ardennes to relieve a thoroughly beaten up US screen composed of some very 'green' soldiers. We had heard that they were run-over and basically slaughtered by much superior German SS troops. The Germans were known for their counterattacks and that's exactly what those poor young men got. We were ordered along with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne to pack up, get in trucks and haul out to relieve those men and reinforce the front lines. Our final destination was a town called Werbomont, north of the 101<sup>st</sup> position at Bastogne. It was a very long and cold trip in the back of that truck, remember, I signed up to jump out of planes, now I was in the back of a truck. The roads were a mess, the ice and snow made traveling slow and very dangerous. Often we'd pass a wrecked transport vehicle rolled over on the side of the bank, or one that broke down and had been pushed off. It was terrible. Trucks slid and bumped into each other more often than not. But we finally got to the Ardennes on December 19.

The 101<sup>st</sup> were ordered to hold Bastogne and as you know, did a great job under tremendous pressure from frontline German soldiers. We were ordered to back-up the Army troops, who by the way had just come from stateside to the front. Army intelligence had no idea that the Germans were going to make a breakthrough, so 'green' troops that were ordered to make a holding line never knew they were there for more than bearing the cold. But instead, Hitler ordered his SS Panzer Divisions to push through. Those 'green' troops learned the taste of action the hard way, by fire.

## Corporal Biagio (Ben) Bennardi

For the next 5 days until the 24<sup>th</sup> we held our own against the Germans. They tried to break our line with artillery and attacking but we held them off. It was there I was introduced to what the boys called a 'Screaming Mimi', basically an artillery shell that exploded in midair and dropped a wad of screaming munitions all around you. It was more psychological than anything else. But our artillery answered theirs every time. We spent a lot of time diving into our foxholes, and running for cover. Those days seemed more like an artillery war than anything else. But we held. I was with about 30 other men forward of the main line and acting as cover so the other troops behind us could withdraw to a stronger position. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, we were ordered to withdraw and form another line of resistance. I had no idea it was Christmas Eve that day, in times like this, you lose track of what day it is. We were told another German attack would take place and we had to hold until the next day, then we would be able to fall back to where our outfit was. We waited all night, and a cold night it was. We then received word to pull back and believe me, we moved. We had to walk about three miles, carrying all the equipment and supplies to get back to our command post (CP) where the rest of our outfit was. It was a long walk and again, cold. When we got back to the CP, we were offered some hot coffee and told it was Christmas Day. So that night for dinner, I had cold cheese 'C' rations and warm coffee. But you know what, it wasn't that bad, I thanked God I was still alive. We were not going anywhere that night so we were told to dig in. We dug some shallow igloos where we could and the rest like me, simply covered ourselves in deep foxholes with blankets. When I woke-up in the morning, my blanket was stiff as cardboard and I was covered in a few inches of snow. It wasn't that bad. The snow actually kept me warm.

This went on for a few more days until we were thoroughly rested. On January 3, we were ordered to attack the German positions to our east. We plowed ourselves through 2 ½ feet of snow, carrying everything we could carry to fight the Krauts. We attacked and pushed them back into the forest, but we took heavy casualties, including myself. Somewhere in between riding in the truck, carrying the equipment through the snow, and being out in the cold, my back gave out severely. I had to be evacuated from the line on a stretcher and brought into the temporary infirmary. I was examined and found that I herniated two discs in my back and one was bulging out of my spine. The pain was incredible. I could not stand up, let alone walk. I was sent to a hospital in Belgium. I was kept there in complete bed rest for about 10 days. That was fine, as I could not move anyway. When my spine finally corrected itself, I was sent to Reppel [G.I. slang for "Replacement"] Depot and waited for my orders to catch up with me. Meanwhile, my unit returned from the Battle of the Bulge successfully. We had won the war. It was over in Europe. The 101<sup>st</sup> pushed through from Bastogne and took Hitler's Eagle's Nest, thus securing the fact that we had basically knocked Germany out of the war.

Shortly after, the war ended in Europe. We were stationed in Germany for a while as we waited to find out what was to become of us. It looked as though we were going to have to get ready to take on the Japs in Asia, but thank God for Truman, he dropped the Atomic Bomb and sealed the fate of them, the war, and us.

At this time, our regiment was moved to Camp Sissonne, France, and was made part of SHAEF reserves. We didn't do much of anything there but train and get ourselves ready for whatever mop-up duties were to follow. In April of that same year (1945) we were moved to Chartres and were told that we might be dropped in and around POW camps to recover prisoners if needed be, but that didn't happen. We then were sent to Frankfurt-am-Main for occupation duty until the war was officially over. The 508th was detached from the 82<sup>nd</sup> and



## **Corporal Biagio (Ben) Bennardi**

assigned as guardsman to General Eisenhower's headquarters, but shortly before this, for me, the war and my military life came to an end. In September 1945, I had enough points for years in service and my age to receive an Honorable Discharge and a ticket back to the States. So I took the option, packed my bags, said my goodbyes and went back to Fort Dix, in New Jersey. There, in one week, I was a civilian again.

.....

My uncle Ben was honorably discharged from the Army September 21, 1945 as a Corporal. His awards and decorations include Bronze Star Medal for Valor, Bronze Star Medal for Meritorious Service, Combat Infantry Badge, Parachute Badge, Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, American Campaign Medal, Europe-Africa Campaign Medal with bronze invasion arrowhead and four bronze battle stars, World War II Victory Medal, World War II Occupation Medal, French Fourragere, Belgian Fourragere, Presidential Unit Citation.

I extend a special Thank You to Irv Shanley, Chet Graham, Francis Lamoureux, Richard O'Donnell (Webmaster of the 508<sup>th</sup> historic site and archive), and James Dietz (historian and artist).

I'd like to take this moment to thank the members of the 508<sup>th</sup> that I had the pleasure of talking with, and whom helped research my Uncle's career. Not only did I find this experience rewarding, but extremely educational.

As a proud nephew I dedicate this memoir of my Uncle's career with the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR to my Uncle Ben, and all the men whom he served with in the regiment, side-by-side, in combat and life during World War II. Thank you for the suffering you endured, the heroics you performed and the unselfish sacrifices that you made. It was an honor for me to learn everything about what made all of you become 'The Red Devils'.

Sincerely,



**James J. Romano**