

## **Major General Jean Henry Trahin**

By Irving T. Shanley

Jean Trahin was born September 12, 1920 in Paris, Arkansas. He was commissioned a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant on May 28, 1942 and completed the Basic Infantry Officers Course at Fort Benning, Georgia in September 1942. He graduated from the Parachute School at Fort Benning in 1943 and was awarded his silver parachute wings after completing the required five parachute jumps from a C47 troop carrier plane flying over Lawson Field.

General Trahin had participated in the Reserve Officers Training Program (ROTC) for four years at the University of Arkansas before requesting active duty with the Army as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant. While serving with the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, he jumped with the famous toilet tissue jump stick during the last regimental jump at that base. One of the paratrooper's wives, who planned to watch the jump at the edge of the drop zone, wanted to identify her husband as he floated down in his parachute, so the trooper told her he would drop a roll of toilet tissue after he jumped from the plane. Jean and the rest of the stick decided to confuse things so every man in the stick also dropped a roll of toilet tissue. Jean said that he "remembered his time at Camp Mackall for the mud, rain, and forced marches through real backwoods country." Once his platoon stopped at a small house in the woods where the lady of the house prepared fried eggs and biscuits for them. Jean paid her generously and later mailed the biggest dolls he could find to the woman's two daughters.

From Camp Mackall Jean and the 508<sup>th</sup> were transferred to Camp Shanks, New York, and after a few days of final processing there, they boarded the United States Army Transport (USAT) [James Parker] for their overseas voyage to Europe on December 27, 1943. There were uncomfortable days and nights of four hours sitting for sleep and four hours standing aboard ship until the Red Devils debarked at Belfast, Northern Ireland on January 8, 1944. They trained at Port Stewart until March 11, and then were ferried across to Scotland and traveled by train to Nottingham, England. They set up their base camp at Wollaton Park on the outskirts of Nottingham living in six-man tents. Sergeant George Fairman said that Lieutenant Trahin was voted their favorite lieutenant because he worked his men the hardest but always worked with them.

Jean parachuted into Normandy, France at 0215 hours on June 6, 1944 (D-Day) and he was with his 81mm Mortar Platoon for the assault on Baupre when a call came in for mortar fire on a German machine gun. His mortar crew quickly set up the mortar and delivered accurate fire with the first round eliminating the Kraut position. Lieutenant Trahin was told that he trained his men well but he replied, "That's not so. The sergeant had them trained before I came to the platoon."

On July 15 Jean waited with the entire regiment on Utah Beach for the Navy's landing craft to come ashore at high tide and transport them to Southampton for a promised furlough. Left behind were 1,161 casualties with 307 of them buried in French soil.

On September 17, 1944 Jean loaded into a C47 Troop Carrier jump plane for an hour-long flight to Nijmegen, Holland for his second combat jump. Participating in this invasion to liberate Holland from the clutches of the Germans were the US 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division to which the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment was attached, the US 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, the British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, and the Polish Brigade. Jean landed in a pasture near the Waal River just outside of Nijmegen. Jean and Sergeant Schlemmer, who was a forward observer for the 81mm Mortar Platoon, were on their way to help secure the highway bridge that crosses the Waal River into Germany when they heard a train approaching on a nearby track. As the train came closer they realized it was a German troop train. They pulled out their entrenching tools and began digging foxholes under some trees. The train was heading toward Germany when it stopped suddenly and the Germans, realizing that an invasion was in progress, dismounted and moved out quickly to join the battle. The Nijmegen Bridge was the big prize of the Holland invasion and it was captured by the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment.

On October 15, 1944, Lieutenant Trahin, now Assistant Machine Gun Platoon Leader, was requested to make a sworn statement concerning the capture of the Nijmegen Bridge. Following is what he wrote about the incident:

“Ordered at 0400 on 18 September 44 to move with Lieutenant Polette using ½ section LMG’s the unit moved out at 0415. The unit contacted Lieutenant Tomlinson’s platoon on the road block at Materet at break of day, and moved on to carry out their mission. Scouts were fired on at 300 to 500 yards range from the bridge at approximately 0630. A fire fight followed in which the platoon was first pinned down and then forced to withdraw to cover. At 0900 I contacted Lieutenant Tomlinson’s platoon and a section of 81mm mortars under command of Lieutenant Ott, moving up to reinforce Lieutenant Polette. The mortars put approximately 75 rounds on and about the bridge and the enemy withdrew to Northwest towards the Waal River. Lieutenant Polette then moved in on the bridge. After the bridge had been taken a Sergeant with a squad from the 504<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry appeared at the bridge. He stated that he had come up the road from the Southwest without opposition. At this time I returned to the Battalion CP as men and weapons had been knocked out. To the best of my knowledge, no members of the 504 were present when the bridge was taken.”

After almost two months in Holland, the regiment was finally relieved by British and Canadian forces. The troopers walked about 22 miles south before they boarded trucks to continue the rest of their journey to Sissonne, France where they set up a new base camp.

The men of the 508<sup>th</sup> were resting and recuperating at Sissonne when, on December 17, 1944, they were alerted to prepare immediately to move to Belgium to stop a German breakthrough there. The German high command had assembled their crack divisions and launched a last-ditch counter offensive breaking through the thinly held American front lines in the Belgian Ardennes in an effort to reach the Belgian port of Antwerp. Heavy

casualties were inflicted on the American divisions during this offensive in what was later to be known as the “Battle of the Bulge.” That same evening, the 508<sup>th</sup> along with the rest of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division were loaded, with full combat gear, onto tractor-trailer trucks for the long overnight ride from Camp Sissonne to Houffalize, Belgium. The 508<sup>th</sup> established a defensive position along the Thier du Mont ridge west of the Salm River and a thousand yards south of the village of Goronne, and here they waited for the German juggernaut. The gallant troopers of the 508<sup>th</sup> fought the bold Germans for almost 60 days and finally pushed them back into Germany. The troopers were relieved by the 78<sup>th</sup> US Infantry Division on February 18 and they returned to their base camp in France once again.

Like many men who fought in the deep snow and coldest weather in many years in Belgium, Jean was evacuated with frozen feet to a hospital in France. He rejoined the regiment later at Frankfort, Germany where they had moved to become General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s elite Honor Guard.

Following the cessation of hostilities in 1945, Jean returned to the states and was transferred to the United States Army Reserve (USAR) and reentered the University of Arkansas to complete his Bachelor of Science degree in 1947. General Trahin served in many challenging positions in the USAR and the Army National Guard (ARNG) for about 30 years following his separation from active duty in 1945. During the early 1950’s he was ordered to extended active duty at Fort Benning, Georgia to attend the Infantry Officers Advanced Course, and as an Infantry Tactics Instructor. In 1975 he became the Commanding General of the 122<sup>nd</sup> United States Army Reserve Command stationed in Little Rock, Arkansas. General Trahin passed away August 14, 1998 in Shalimar, Florida and was buried in full dress uniform in Arlington National Cemetery near the Tomb of the Unknowns. He was buried with full military honors including drum and fife band, rider-less horse, caisson with flag-draped casket drawn by four horses, and rifle and cannon salute. It was a truly respectful and impressive ceremony.

General Trahin’s awards and decorations include the Silver Star Medal, the Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, Parachute Badge, American Campaign Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Europe-Africa Campaign Medal with four battle stars and invasion arrowhead, World War II Victory Medal, World War II Army of Occupation Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal with 10-year device, Army Reserve Components Achievement Medal, Presidential Unit Citation, French Croix de Guerre with palm, Belgian Fourragere, and the Militaire Willems Orde Degree of Knight (Orange Lanyard of the Royal Netherlands Army).