

"The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

Chapter I

The Beginning



The 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (508th PIR) was activated October 20, 1942 at Camp Blanding, Starke, Florida. Camp Blanding was the Florida State National Guard training reservation.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Camp Blanding became a multi-purpose training center for Army units. Nine divisions and several separate regiments and battalions trained at Camp Blanding.

However, the 508th PIR was the only airborne unit activated and trained at Camp Blanding during WW II.

Hq1 provided the battalion headquarters support personnel, a company headquarters, and a communications, machinegun, and mortar platoon.

The battalion headquarters support personnel staffed an operations section (S3), intelligence section (S2), and administrative and supply sections.

The communications platoon operated the battalion headquarters message center, and provided radio and wire connectivity from the battalion command post (CP) to the three rifle companies.

The machinegun platoon consisted of a platoon headquarters and two sections of four squads each. A squad leader commanded each squad that included a gunner, assistant gunner and ammunition bearers that operated a .30 caliber light machinegun (LMG).

The LMG sections usually operated with the battalion rifle companies.

The mortar platoon provided the battalion's overhead fire capability. It included a fire direction and communications center, and two mortar sections of two squads each. Each

"The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

squad was commanded by a squad leader and included a gunner, loader and ammunition bearers that serviced a three-piece 81mm mortar. Two forward observer teams operated in the battalions' forward areas. These observers often adjusted division artillery fire to support the battalion.

During the latter part of October 1942, the Hq1 cadre welcomed and processed recruits, and their basic training began immediately. It was conducted concurrently with a parachute school physical training program of exhaustive runs, rope climbing, tumbling, hand-to-hand combat, and hundreds and hundreds of pushups.

Starting with the first day of training, the Hq1 men looked anxiously to going to the parachute school and qualifying for the coveted parachute wings.

Competition was encouraged. The companies competed in marksmanship, physical fitness, and close order drill. As their proficiency increased so did the enthusiasm of the Hq1 men that eventually resulted in a dilemma.

As the cadre had anticipated that some recruits might fail to meet the physical and mental standards required for parachutist training, additional recruits had been assigned to each company for training. However, in early November, the 508th PIR was told that it could not exceed its authorized regimental strength when it reported to the Parachute School for training – the excess men had to be identified and eliminated from the program. The magnitude of the dilemma increased as the training progressed. Each day it became increasingly more difficult to identify men for elimination. Therefore, the standards for physical fitness were drastically raised.

For example, if a man dropped out of a formation run from exhaustion, he was eliminated from the program and shipped out of the regiment. The 508th PIR lost many good men.

Hq1 moved to Fort Benning, GA on February 3, 1943. The men were in outstanding physical and mental condition, confident and proud. After two weeks of specialized training, tumbling, tower exits, parachute packing, and more physical training, the day arrived for the first of the five required qualification parachute jumps. Within hours, the Hq1 men had made their first jump. They were closer to those coveted silver wings.

Thereafter, each morning entailed a parachute jump, and each evening was spent carefully packing a parachute for the next days jump.

By the end of the week, the men of Hq1 proudly wearing their silver wings had departed on ten-day furloughs. Their first days of freedom since October 1942 - when they had arrived in Camp Blanding.

When everyone had returned from furlough, the 508th PIR moved to Camp Mackall, North Carolina.

"The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

Camp Mackall was a complex of newly constructed buildings, mud and upturned soil, sitting between Pinehurst and Rockingham.

The "paratroopers" of the 508th PIR quickly learned a new skill. Their first lessons in what was to become a recurring story – picking up debris, clearing weeds and brush from the area, and painting rocks. They called it "beautification of the area."

Concurrent with the "cleanup" work, an arduous training schedule was implemented. Schooled in infantry weapons when they left Camp Blanding, the Hq1 men quickly developed into smoothly functioning weapons teams. Subsequent weeks were devoted to small unit training, field exercises, and learning to maneuver in the Carolina swamps.

In May, the regiment moved to Cheraw, SC to maneuver with the 101st Airborne Division. At the end of several weeks of maneuvers, everyone was dog-tired but proud of their performance and accomplishments.

The summer of 1943 passed quickly, as the men participated in advanced ground and airborne maneuvers, proficiency tests, and traversing infiltration courses with live firing. By the end of August, everyone went on furlough.

In the fall, the 508th PIR went to Tennessee for the Second Army maneuver. Embarrassingly, the regiment was employed as ground infantry. Finally, on October 5, the regiment had an opportunity to show case its airborne skills.

After a week of planning and briefing, planes were loaded and the regiment jumped at night into the objective area. Following several days of maneuvering, the 508th PIR returned to Camp Mackall, and after a three-day pass, Hq1 started preparations for moving overseas.

On December 20, 1943, the 508th PIR arrived at Camp Shanks, NY. Processing was completed, and on December 27, the regiment loaded on the "USAT James Parker." Everyone began drawing overseas pay as the Parker left the New York pier on December 28, and joined a convoy.

The eleven days aboard the Parker was new to Hq1 men, eating, sleeping, gambling [prohibited], boat drills, and seasickness.

The Parker arrived in Belfast, Ireland. January 8, 1944, and the regiment settled into Nissen huts at Port Stewart. The men of Hq1 were oriented on local customs, and for the first time experienced candy and cigarette rationing, and living under "blackout" conditions.

The long trip from Camp Mackall ended on March 10 when the 508th PIR settled into a tent camp in Nottingham England. The tent camp met everyone's approval. It was a ten-minute walk into the City of Nottingham with a population of 250,000 friendly people - pleasant pubs, delightful dance halls, pretty girls, and a marvelous history. For many 508th PIR men, Nottingham became a second home.

"The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

Life at Nottingham was not all pubs, dance halls, and friendly people; it included dangerous night jumps and many field exercises. Jim Lutton's experience demonstrates the danger of night jumps and field exercises.

Near the end of April 1944, after a week of pouring rain, the regiment made a night jump, near the town of Grantham, England.

Jim Lutton landed in the swiftly flowing water of the Chatham Canal. He managed by walking and swimming to reach the canal bank and to grab a young sapling. However, the strong current dragged him under with the tree clutched in his hands.— It had come out of the canal bank.

The webbing of Jim's parachute harness had tightened due to shrinkage and he could not standup or unstrap the shoulder and leg straps.

When he tried to cut the web straps, he dropped his knife in the water. Meanwhile, his parachute had filled with air and water and was dragging him downstream.

A 508th PIR trooper threw Jim an end of his jump rope and tried to pull him to the canal bank. The current was too swift and the rescuer was being dragged along the canal bank.

Without regard to how deep the water was or the danger to himself the trooper leapt into the canal and swam to Jim. With his knife, the trooper freed Jim of his chute and helped him out of the canal. It was then that Jim Lutton recognized his Hq1 tent mate – Garfield Wilkinson.

After two night jumps and many field exercises, the 508th PIR was in a high state of readiness - prepared for the invasion of the continent.

In late May, Hq1 moved to the Folkingham airport in the Midlands of England.

Kenneth (Rock) Merritt, a Corporal machinegun squad leader summarized life in the marshaling area. "From May 29 to June 5 we were busy getting briefings and studying sand tables, and maps.

We inspected our equipment and ammunition and rolled it into parachute deliverable containers. Most of our equipment bundles were loaded into pararacks fixed to the bottom of each plane, six bundles per plane. Some bundles were loaded into the plane – we would push these bundles out the door as we left the plane.

On June 5, 1944, we had a steak dinner and were watching a movie in the hangar. The movie was stopped and we were told to blacken our faces with soot from the cook's stoves. After one final briefing, we said farewell to buddies and started putting on our equipment.

We wore impregnated jump suits with an American flag on one shoulder and an 82nd Airborne Division patch on the other. We coated our boots with a waterproofing compound and wore a wool cap under our helmets.

"The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

We carried a rifle, cartridge belt and a musette bag. Everyone carried four hand grenades, an antitank mine, a canteen of water, a firstaid kit, an entrenching tool, gas mask, compass, knife, dog tags, 200 rounds of ammunition, three K-rations, three chocolate bars, socks, underwear and a life preserver for the flight over the English Channel.

My plane had six bundles in pararacks, and we had two door bundles, that held 30 Cal. light machineguns and ammunition. We also for some unknown reason had the regimental executive officer's folding bicycle as a door bundle - it mysteriously fell out of the plane somewhere over the English Channel. All the noncoms were issued an escape kit and everyone received five to ten dollars in Francs."

David Jones of the Battalion S-2 (Intelligence) Section says, "We prepared sand tables of the drop zone using aerial photos taken by high flying aircraft. We knew exactly the kind of terrain and the general area where we would land, and the objectives we were expected to secure. However, we did not know where we were to land in France.

At the last minute, after we boarded the C-47s we were told we would drop five to ten miles behind the beaches in Normandy."



Ready to Go!