

"The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

Holland

September 17 to November 11, 1944

"Market-Garden"

Upon returning to Nottingham, half of the 508th PIR men went on furlough, later the other half went. Hq1 men scattered throughout the United Kingdom, some men went to Ireland to visit friends, and some men went to Scotland, and others braved buzz bombs to visit London.

On June 6, 1944, the 508th PIR had parachuted 2055 officers and men into Normandy – 1161 had become casualties. Obviously, reconstituting the 508th PIR was the first priority. In the next weeks, more than 1000 replacements were processed into the regiment.

Memorial services were conducted for the men who died in Normandy. The regiment formed on the parade ground, and a member of the band sang "My Buddy." Each battalion commander read the names of their lost soldiers - as each man's company guidon was lowered to the horizontal in salute.

Col. Lindquist, the regimental commander, reminded everyone that the "508th PIR heroes were left in Normandy." Moreover, he told the troops that the regiment would be ready for another combat jump within weeks.

In August, the 82nd Airborne Division with the 508th PIR attached held a review for General Eisenhower. He commended the division on its performance in Normandy, and predicted that the division would participate in bigger airborne operations in the near future.

Eisenhower also announced that Major General Ridgeway would command the XVIII Airborne Corps, and Brigadier General James Gavin would assume command of the 82nd Airborne Division.

A few days later, the 508th PIR moved to a marshaling airfield. Parachutes were issued, equipment bundles were loaded into pararacks, and the troops were briefed. Everyone hit the sack early for some sleep before a dawn takeoff. However, before dawn the jump was canceled - General Patton's Third Army had overrun the objective near Tournai, Belgium.

Planners immediately developed an alternate airborne operations plan for a drop near Liege, Belgium but that jump too was canceled. With many sighs of relief, the 508th PIR returned to Nottingham.

The respite was short. On September 14, the regiment was once again in a marshaling area. By September 16, everyone was ready for the next day's operations.

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Briefings indicated that the 508th PIR would parachute into Holland as a participant in Operation MARKET-GARDEN - a British conceived combined airborne and ground offensive.

Market-Garden envisaged armored units racing through Holland, turning west and springing across the Rhine River into Germany. If successful, it would end the war in 1944. It may have worked except for the bridge at Arnheim – the Bridge too far.

Market was the airborne phase of the operation. It required over 5000 fighters, bombers, transports and 2500 gliders. The airborne assault was scheduled for 1330, September 17 - a projected sunny Sunday afternoon.

Garden was the ground phase. It involved tanks and infantry poised on the Dutch-Belgian border. This all-British force was scheduled to attack at 1435 supported by artillery and rocket-firing fighters. The tanks were to attack along highways that paratroopers would hold open for their passage.



As the C-47 planes carrying the 508th PIR neared the Holland coast one could look down and see fighter-bombers searching for anti-aircraft guns.

About five minutes before drop time, the C47s began receiving flak and several were hit - some jump masters ordered the men to "stand up" and "hook up."

At 1330, as scheduled, Hq1 men were landing south of Nijmegen. German Infantry and anti-aircraft guns occupied the drop zone. However, the sight of hundreds of paratroopers descending upon them apparently frightened many of the Germans away from their weapons, and the regiment met with little resistance.



Within the hour, the First Battalion retrieved its equipment bundles and was moving toward its first objectives.

After seizing its objectives, the battalion was ordered to enter Nijmegen and secure the highway bridge over the Waal River.

Company C was held in reserve while Company A and B with the Hq1 81mm mortar platoon and a section of machineguns entered the city. The move into the city was uneventful until the leading forces reached a traffic circle near the bridge. Thereafter, heavy fighting continued all night as several unsuccessful attempts were made to capture the strongly defended bridge.

Hq1 Assembling on the Drop Zone

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Early on September 18, the battalion was ordered to countermarch to the drop zone area. It was ordered to clear the area of German Infantry with antiaircraft guns waiting to destroy the gliders carrying the 82nd Airborne Division Artillery battalions and engineer equipment scheduled to land in the area at 1300.



Led by four brave Company C men, the First Battalion supported by Hq1 81mm mortars and machine guns, launched the assault at 1245.

As the first of the arriving gliders were released over the drop zone, the battalion was destroying the antiaircraft guns, and killing or capturing the remaining Germans. Fifty Germans were killed and 149 captured. Fourteen of the 15 antiaircraft guns were destroyed. The 508th PIR lost ten men.

The next photo titled "Wrath of the Red Devils" depicts an artist's conception of the First battalion's attack to clear the drop zone of Germans.



"Wrath of the Red Devils"
by James Dietz

The first man in the painting is 1st Sgt. Leonard Funk, Co C. He led the assault and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

The second man was awarded the Silver Star medal and the other two men received Bronze Star medals.

John Hardie, one of the men depicted in the painting, provided James Dietz, the artist, with technical advice and descriptions of the scene and paratroopers shown in the painting.

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That night, the First Battalion was ordered to seize and organize Tufel Berg (Devil's Hill), overlooking the Wyler Meer-Beek road - the international boundary between Germany and Holland. Devil's Hill was the highest landmass in the Nijmegen area.

After a fierce fight in which 17 men were killed. Company A, reinforced with a Hq1 machine-gun section, secured Devil's Hill. By nightfall Hq1 light machineguns were in position on the crest of the hill.

The Germans counterattacked several times during the night but in ferocious hole-to-hole fighting they were pushed back down the hill.

A few days later, the 82nd Airborne Division was able to seize and hold the Nijmegen Bridge over the Waal River.

Without exception, the 508th PIR Battalions were employed with a maximum of unit integrity and cohesiveness, on a well-defined and controlled battlefield that reduced the number of casualties.

All Hq1 men share in the regiment's accomplishments in Holland. Now hear from Hq1 men as they remember the campaign.

Kenneth Merritt. "I was a Sergeant in command of a Light Machinegun Section consisting of four 30 caliber light machineguns. We dropped into Holland, and recovered our equipment. My section was immediately attached to Company A. The night of September 17, my section manned two roadblocks. Apparently, during the night Co A received orders to enter Nijmegen and seize the bridge over the Waal River. In the morning, I discovered that Co A had moved out without telling us.

I assembled my section and led them into the city looking for Co A. We failed to find any American or German soldiers in the city. But we continued searching throughout the day. Finally, the Germans stopped us with heavy machinegun and rifle fire at a traffic circle near the bridge. Later, we met a regimental patrol that led us back to the drop zone.

The next morning, Company A reinforced with a Hq1 LMG section (not mine) seized Devil's Hill. My section assigned to support Company B and C. Throughout the day, we fought off strong German attacks. During one of the attacks, Tom Broderick of my section was shot in the head. We were sure he was dead but had him evacuated.

Several months later, we learned that Tom Broderick had survived but would be blind. Broderick's amazing story is presented in Tom Brokaw's book The Greatest Generation."

Lawrence Fitzpatrick. "On September 19, Company A, reinforced with my section of light machineguns was ordered to seize Devil's Hill; and establish a roadblock where the Nijmegen-Wyler Road joined a causeway.

As we approached the hill, Allied planes strafed us -- they were shooting at the Germans on the hill -- and apparently thought we were Germans.

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When the A Company men neared the top of the hill, they were pinned down by machinegun and rifle fire. The acting company commander called for our light machine guns.

Our machinegun squads (Larry Fitzpatrick, Albert Chrisman, R. J. Crawford, Ralph Booth and [Carlton] "Johnny" Johnson) attacked through the Company A men and drove the Germans off the hill."

For his heroic action Fitzpatrick was awarded the Silver Star medal, and Chrisman and Johnson received Bronze Star medals.

Albert Chrisman. "At dawn, a company of Germans supported by artillery attacked 'Devil's Hill' but was repulsed. Two hours later, they made a second attempt to take the hill. During the second attack, the Germans suddenly stopped firing and a German soldier appeared holding a white flag. As he was ascending the hill, I saw two German riflemen about 25 yards from him -- waiting for any of us to show ourselves. With a warning, shout to our men, I pulled the pins on two of my hand grenades and rolled them down the hill toward the two Germans. We later found both Germans dead."

Throughout the next weeks, the First Battalion fought off many German attempts to dislodge them from their positions. The attacks ranged from strong combat patrols up through and including battalion sized units supported by armor and artillery.

On October 6, 1944, the 508th PIR were detached from the 82nd Airborne Division and attached to the 50th British Division. Hq1 loaded into amphibian trucks and rode across the Waal River Bridge to the Arnheim-Nijmegen Island, and the regiment established a defensive position near the town of Bommel.

There were no spectacular large-scale attacks, but every night patrols went deep into the German lines and there was always artillery fire.

On November 11, 1944, the 508th PIR was relieved. It marched 22 miles to Oss, Holland to meet trucks. Three days later the regiment arrived in Sissonne, France.

Casualty totals revealed that 681 of the more than 2000 officers and men that had parachuted into Holland were killed, wounded or missing in action. It is significant that the 508th PIR was the first American unit to:

- ?? Operate in Germany.
- ?? Capture prisoners in Germany.
- ?? Kill German soldiers in Germany.

A comparative analysis of the Normandy and Holland campaigns is neither necessary nor relevant to the purpose for this album. However, Historians will appreciate that the campaign objectives were exceedingly different, the political environment belied comprehension, and the tactics varied with the terrain. Nonetheless, three denominators persisted in both campaigns.

- ?? The determination of the Germans to destroy the airborne forces at all costs.

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?? The zeal of the allied forces for the destruction of the Third Reich.

?? The insistence of the Allies for the "unconditional surrender" of the German Nation.

Although the significant differences between the two campaigns make comparison difficult, several obvious insights are helpful.

Normandy was the baptism of fire for the 508th PIR, whereas many of the German soldiers it met on the battlefield were combat veterans of campaigns in Africa, Italy and Sicily.

The 508th PIR parachuted into Normandy at night amid the chaos and confusion of antiaircraft and machinegun fires. Many of the planes lost formation and pilots lost orientation.

The 508th PIR men and equipment bundles were strewn all over Normandy, inhibiting equipment recovery and unit assembly for several days. Whereas, in Holland the 508th PIR dropped on a bright Sunday afternoon on the designated drop zone. It quickly assembled and within hours was in the City of Nijmegen, preparing to seize the critical Highway Bridge over the Waal River.

On October 8, 1945, the 82nd Airborne Division became the first non-Dutch unit to be awarded the Militaire Willems Orde, Degree of Knight of the Fourth Class. In addition to having the Division Colors decorated, this award entitles all members of the Division who fought in Holland during the period for which the award was made, to wear the Orange Lanyard of the Royal Netherlands Army. The 508th PIR was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division at this time.

Appropriate quotations from the citation follow.

The Netherlands Orange Lanyard 1 Netherlands Degree

Nassau, etc., etc.

On the recommendation of Our Ministers of War and Foreign Affairs, dated October 3, 1945, Secret Nr. Y. 22;

In accordance with the provisions of the amended Act of April 30, 1815, Nr.5 (Statute Book Nr.33);

In view of clause 18 of the regulations of administration and discipline for the Militaire Willems Orde, as laid down in the Royal Decree of June 25, 1815, Mr.10;

Considering the 82 Airborne Division of the United States Army during the airborne operations and the ensuing fighting action in the central part of the Netherlands in the period from September 17 to October 4, 1944, excelled in

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performing tasks allotted to it with tact coupled with superior gallantry, self-sacrifice, and loyalty;

Considering also that the actions fought by the aforesaid Division took place in the area of Nijmegen.

HAVE APPROVED AND ORDERED

To decree that the Division colours of the 82nd Airborne Division of the United States Army shall be decorated with the Willems Orde, Degree of Knight of the Fourth Class.

To authorize the Division to carry in its Divisional colours the name of the town of NIJMEGEN 1944.

THE HAGUE, October 8, 1945...

WILHELMINA

In presenting the award, Her Majesty The QUEEN said "...it is desirable for each member of the Division who took part in the aforesaid operations to possess a lasting memento to this glorious struggle;

DECREES: that each member of the personnel of the 82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION, UNITED STATES ARMY who took part in the operations in the area of NIJMEGEN in the period from September 17 to October 4, 1944 is allowed to wear the ORANGE LANYARD, as laid down in Article 123g of the Clothing Regulations 1944 of the Royal Netherlands Army.

THE HAGUE OCTOBER 8, 1945

The minister of war



**Netherlands Citation
(Orange Lanyard)**