

## **Unit History for 1st Battalion 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment**

When the 501<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment was activated at Camp Toccoa, Georgia, on 15 November 1942, it began life with a rich airborne heritage. The famous test platoon, the prime ancestor of all American Parachute Units, provided the nucleus of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion, which in turn provided part of the cadre, the unit number, the genealogical lineage and the heraldic background of the 501<sup>st</sup> Parachute Regiment. It's initial group of officers were hand picked by its first commander, Colonel Howard Johnson, known by his peers as "Skeets". He was very much in the swashbuckling mold of most of the original parachute regimental commanders, of whom the popular saying was "To command a parachute unit, you don't have to be nuts, but it helps!"

An Annapolis graduate, who had boxed while a midshipman, Johnson had transferred to the Army on graduation and had most recently been at the tank destroyer center before volunteering for parachute duty. To say that he took to parachuting is a gross understatement: he ate, slept, and breathed it, and jumped whenever he possibly could, often jumping many times in a single day. His nickname among his men became "Jumpy Johnson". He was a zealot on physical conditioning, for himself and everyone in his regiment, and personally led calisthenics, running and all other physical activities. He set a record for running up Currahee Mountain (which loomed over Camp Toccoa) and challenged anyone in the regiment to beat his time. A heavy punching bag hung outside his quarters, and when not punching that, Johnson could often be seen throwing his huge knife at hanging plywood replicas of Hitler and Hirohito. Johnson was no less attentive to the mental conditioning of his new men, ensuring their mental toughness and imbuing them with his own intense dedication to fighting and to defeating our enemies, truly, Johnson created a regiment in his own image.

All members of the regiment were parachute volunteers, but only a minor fraction was actually qualified jumpers during training at Camp Toccoa. So, when that very arduous training was over, in March 1943, the unit marched to Atlanta, GA (a distance of 105 miles). They then moved to Fort Benning, GA to jump train all members not previously qualified.

With jump training over, the regiment was assigned to the Airborne Command at Camp MacKall, NC. This was its homebase during prolonged maneuvers in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana, and until January 1944, when the regiment deployed to England, by way of Camp Myles Standish, MA. Once in England the 501<sup>st</sup> became a permanent attachment of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and was a vital part of that famous unit for the duration of World War II.

In England, training was as hard and realistic as ever, and became increasingly oriented toward an airborne assault into German held Europe. Though none of the soldiers knew initially, the regiment was actually training for Operation Overlord, the super-secret allied plan for the combined air, naval, amphibious, and airborne operations to breach Hitler's "Atlantic Wall". As D-Day drew closer, a few key commanders and staff were briefed on the part the 101<sup>st</sup> would play in Operation Overlord.

Then with D-Day just days away, the 501<sup>st</sup>, with the rest of the division, was sequestered in well guarded marshaling camps, where every man finally learned not only his own mission, but the overall mission of the 501<sup>st</sup>, and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (these very extensive and intensive briefings were to pay big dividends during actual operations). In a nutshell, the 501<sup>st</sup> (less 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion) was to take off from Merryfield Airport at 2245, June 5, 1944, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was to depart at the same time from Welford. All units were to fly across the English Channel and drop into Normandy, five hours prior to the seaborne landing. The 501<sup>st</sup> drop zones were north and east of the town of Carentan. Two battalions were to seize key canal locks at La Barquette and destroy bridges over the Douve River, while the third battalion was in division reserve.

The many books written on the night drop into Normandy, all point out the break-up of the troop carrier formations, from a combination of low clouds, and enemy anti-aircraft fire. This caused highly scattered drops, in most cases not on or near planned drop zones. Accordingly, actions that night bore little resemblance to those so carefully planned and briefed. Amazingly, the regiment (and the division) accomplished its multiple missions, but none of them as rehearsed. The successes were the result of the initiative, stamina, and daring of the individual parachutists, who each assessed his own situation on landing, decided how best to accomplish some part of the overall mission. Typical was the capture of a key causeway from Utah Beach, at Pouppeville, by a scratch force of about 100 officers and men, formed around a nucleus from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (division reserve) of the 501<sup>st</sup>. Members of this ad hoc force included both General Maxwell Taylor and Assistant Division Commander Gerald Higgins. General Taylor quipped that, "Never were so few led by so many".

Fierce fighting in Normandy by no means ended with D-Day, but continued with important results in assisting the amphibious landings and joining the beach at Utah to that at Omaha. The gallant efforts of the 501<sup>st</sup> were at high cost; the regiment lost 898 men killed, wounded, missing, or captured.

Returning to its base in England, in mid July, the 501<sup>st</sup> slowly regained its' pre D-Day capabilities with many replacements and another round of intensive training. There was good news of a presidential citation for actions in Normandy, and many planned assaults into France, which aborted as the allies overran, planned objectives. Then, in the early fall of 1944, plans were made for what was not a "dry run", the airborne assault into occupied Holland.

Code name "Market Garden", it combined a deep airborne thrust, through western Holland, by the 1<sup>st</sup> Allied Airborne Army, with an overland drive by the British 2<sup>nd</sup> Army. The plan visualized airborne forces seizing key bridges over rivers and canals, so 2<sup>nd</sup> Army could move very deep, very fast, a distance of over 100 miles, past the Rhine River, the last major water obstacle short of Berlin. This airborne assault would be made in daylight. The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division was assigned the southernmost bridges at Eindhoven, Zon, Saint Oedenrode and Vechel, with the 501<sup>st</sup> assigned the Vechel Bridges.

The airborne assault went as scheduled, on 17 September 1944, with an improved performance by troop carrier units. Most drop zones were hit, with good drop patterns. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 501<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, however, was dropped some 5 miles east of its planned drop zone. In spite of this, the four bridges in Vechel were captured intact. Then began the really difficult part of the operation, keeping open the highway over which 2<sup>nd</sup> Army must pass to reach the 1<sup>st</sup> British Airborne Division, which was fighting for its life at the northern end of the airborne corridor. The fatal flaw in the plan became more evident each day as the forces proved too few to both keep open the key highway and also fight on to a linkup with the 1<sup>st</sup> British Airborne, across the Rhine. The 1<sup>st</sup> British Airborne Division paid the full price for this flaw as they went down fighting against overwhelming odds; less than two thousand men escaped death or capture.

The 501<sup>st</sup> with the rest of the division, moved from initial objective areas to positions on “the island” between the Waal and Rhine Rivers; it became clear that they would not be withdrawn from Holland after a few days, as they had been told; our combat skills were too much needed by the British. The prolonged fighting on “the island” was anything but the way to use an airborne unit. After the initial hard fighting it became a static war of patrolling and attrition, principally by artillery and mortars. One such mortar attack, near Heteran, on 8 October 1944, fatally wounded Colonel Johnson. As he was being evacuated, his last words to LTC Ewell were, “Take care of my boys”. Colonel Johnson was the best-known loss, but with him they lost 661 other fine soldiers. LTC Julian Ewell, a taciturn West Pointer, succeeded COL Johnson. Much less an extrovert than Johnson, he more than made up for any lack of “flash and dash” with a keen mind, tactical prescience and all around professional competence.

After 72 days of combat in Holland the division returned to a new staging area, in Mourmelon, France, for what everyone thought would be a long, well deserved rest. Accordingly, many men were on leave or pass, the Division Commander was in the United States, the Assistant Division Commander was in England (leaving the Artillery Commander, General McAuliffe, in command), and there still were major shortages of equipment and supplies, not replaced after Holland.

To put it mildly, the division was ill prepared for the word they got in the late evening of December 17<sup>th</sup>. The Germans had launched a major offensive at dawn on 16 December, through the Ardennes, in the lightly held sector of our VII Corps. At that time Sheaf’s Reserve consisted of our division and the 82<sup>nd</sup>. We were ordered to move “truchborne” to Bastogne, the hub town of a major radial road net, to stem the oncoming Germans. General McAuliffe ordered the move by regimental combat teams, without waiting for any absentees. The 501<sup>st</sup> was the lead combat team in the division move, and after a grueling truck ride, reached Bastogne about 2230 hrs. Thus, by midnight, the 501<sup>st</sup> was the first and only regiment combat team ready for action. Ewell asked McAuliffe for a definite assignment and was ordered to move out on the eastern road, through Longvilly and seize and hold a key road junction beyond Longvilly. Thus, the 501<sup>st</sup> was the first to fight at Bastogne, when its battalion ran into the enemy near Neffe, a few kilometers out of Bastogne.

Thus began the heroic defense of Bastogne in which the 501<sup>st</sup> gave up not one foot of ground, and in which the division, and its comrades in arms, stopped cold everything the Germans could throw at them, ruined Hitler's offensive time table and eventually won the 101<sup>st</sup>, the first presidential unit citation ever awarded to a full division.

Once again, the 501<sup>st</sup> paid a dear price of 580 killed, wounded or captured. One casualty was Colonel Ewell, who was badly wounded and relinquished command to LTC Robert Ballard, who had commanded 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion from the beginning. Bob Ballard was a quiet, Floridian, who was not a professional soldier like Johnson or Ewell, but a fine officer who had learned how to command quietly and effectively while winning the admiration and respect of his men. Ballard continued in command of the 501<sup>st</sup> until the end of World War II.

Operations after Bastogne would have been anti-climatic under most any circumstances, except for the light skirmishing in Alsace, and the drive into Germany's last redoubt, Bavaria, truly seemed like a cakewalk. The living in Germany after V-day was good indeed, but rudely interrupted by orders to move back to billets in Joigny and Auxerre, France (and P.S., don't try to take any of those captured cars or loot with you!)

Once in France the 501<sup>st</sup> tried to get enthused about training for an invasion of Japan, but quite honestly, their hearts were not in it; they felt they had done their share, and that someone else should finish off Japan. On 20 August 1945, the 501<sup>st</sup> was disbanded, ahead of the inactivation of the 101<sup>st</sup> Division in November 1945.

The 501<sup>st</sup> was reconstituted 1 August 1946 as the 501<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion, at Fort Benning, GA., but was inactivated at Fort Benning, 23 November 1948. Then, between 1951 and 1956 the 501<sup>st</sup> served with the 101<sup>st</sup> as a regular army training unit on two occasions, once at Camp Breckinridge, KY., and once at Fort Jackson, SC. In the spring of 1956, the 501<sup>st</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup>, moved (less personnel and equipment) to Fort Campbell, KY., where they were activated as a provisional organization to test the "Pentomic" concept. The word pentomic referred to the five battle groups, which were in lieu of regiments and to the division's organic atomic weapon capability. One of the five battle groups was the First Airborne Battle Group, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry. Its first commander was COL Harry Kinnard, who had been a member of the WWII regiment and also G-3 of the division from Holland. As to matters on lineage, on 25 April 1957, the 501<sup>st</sup> Regiment ceased to exist as a tactical unit and was redesignated as the 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry, a parent regiment under the combat arms regimental system. Simultaneously, on the same date, 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry was reorganized and redesignated as Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Battle Group, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry, and remained assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (organic elements were concurrently constituted and activated).

Believe it or not, an element of the 501<sup>st</sup> actually served with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division when the 82<sup>nd</sup> reconfigured in the pentomic format. On 1 September 1957, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry was reorganized and redesignated as Headquarters and

Headquarters Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Battle Group, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry as an organic element of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, and activated at Fort Bragg, NC (concurrently, organic elements constituted and activated at Fort Bragg).

When the pentomic concept gave way to the road division, with brigades and battalions instead of battle groups, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Battle Group, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry became the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry. On 1 February 1964, it was relieved from assignment to the 82<sup>nd</sup> and assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> at Fort Campbell, KY. The 101<sup>st</sup> was also becoming a road type airborne division, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Battle Group, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry became the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry, of the 101<sup>st</sup>.

Thus, when the 101<sup>st</sup> fought again, in South Vietnam, it included the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions of the 501<sup>st</sup>. The division participated in twelve campaigns and was decorated by the Republic of Vietnam on three occasions. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 501<sup>st</sup>, while attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> received a presidential unit citation for the heroic actions of all elements of that brigade, in the bloody fight at Hill #937, in the Ashau Valley. The news media called it “Hamburger Hill”, but the battle streamer is embroidered: Dong Ap Bia Mountain (because the 501<sup>st</sup> Regiment automatically shared this honor with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, it became one of very few army regiments able to display three Presidential Unit Citation streamers on its colors). In all this unusual and difficult combat, both 501<sup>st</sup> units performed as bravely as their predecessors had in WWII.

As part of the post Vietnam reorganization, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry was inactivated on 31 July 1972, and in the restructuring to the U.S. Army regimental system, the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, Infantry was inactivated at Fort Campbell on 5 June 1984. Then, in October 1989 the 501<sup>st</sup> Regiment was reorganized under the U.S. Army Regimental System with Headquarters at Fort Richardson, Alaska. Simultaneously, 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry was assigned to the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and activated at Fort Richardson. There it remains as the sole active part of the 501<sup>st</sup>, but what a worthy representative it is. Wonderfully well trained in both airborne and arctic operations, it is the fire brigade for that theater.

*Whenever and wherever all or part of the “Geronimo” 501<sup>st</sup> may again be called to take up the tomahawk-**Let the enemy beware!!!***