

THE 501st PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT

PREPARED BY: MAJOR GARY F. EVANS

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THE 501st PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT

AT

BASTOGNE, BELGIUM

DECEMBER 1944

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50th MILITARY HISTORY DETACHMENT

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THE 501st PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT

The 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment was in contact with the German forces along the Neder Rijn front in the Netherlands. They were located on an island just below Arnhem between the Neder and Rhine Rivers. In early November of 1944 they were relieved and sent down to Mourmelon Le Grande, an old Napoleonic barracks in Northeastern France.

The 501st was sent down to Mourmelon to rest up and make repairs on equipment. The small amount of training received was geared to preparing the troops for an offensive into Germany sometime in the upcoming Spring.

Early in December of 1944, VIII Corps held a front from Remich, Luxembourg, to Losheimergraben, Belgium, a distance of some 88 miles. On the morning of 16 December the Germans struck heavily, and the 106th Division was overrun. At 0800 on 17 December the 101st Airborne Division was told by Corps Headquarters to move to Bastogne.

At 2130 on 17 December Division Headquarters called down and wanted LTC Julian Ewell, commander of the 501st, to report to them. He returned an hour later and reported that they were to move out. No one at the company level knew why or where they were going. The quick move caught the Company somewhat unprepared. A lot of the men were just returning from leave in Paris, uniforms were in the laundry, and others were wearing low quarter shoes, as their boots were being repaired. However, they threw everything they had available into straw-filled trailer trucks, clearing the IP by 1600 hours on December 18. Extra blankets, clothing, weapons, and shoes were taken from civilians and other units in the area as they moved out.

The 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment was attached to the 101st Airborne Division, and under General McAuliffe's march orders they lead the column into Bastogne. LTC Ewell had become familiar with this area that was strange to all. In early November Ewell had visited this area on leave while seeing a nurse in Bastogne he had become acquainted with. During this brief stay he familiarized himself with the terrain, not realizing that he would soon use this knowledge in combat.

The 501st moved out well in advance of the column, and its commander, Ewell, was the first commander to arrive in the vicinity of the bivouac. Ewell ran into a wire stringing detail and asked what they were doing. In questioning the detail, he discovered they belonged to the 101st. Enroll then followed the wires into the Command Post, returned to the 501st, and guided his men into the bivouac area.

All down the route over which he had come, Ewell had found the traffic blocking and stopping. He didn't expect the 501st to arrive until 2300 hours due to this backwash of traffic. However, the 501st arrived one-half hour ahead of the anticipated schedule, and Ewell was closed in his area by 2400 hours. McAuliffe knew at midnight that he had one regiment ready, the 501st.

Ewell requested that he be given a definite assignment. It was a large request, but he got what he asked for. The exact mission given Ewell was to move out from Bastogne at 0600 and seize the road Junction et 676614. That would put him out on the Eastern road well beyond Longvilly.

Conservation of force guided Ewell in his opening moves. In giving his battalion commanders the march order, he told Major Bottomly, who was leading 1st Battalion, that he was not to put out flank security until he reached Mageret. He knew that this would slow the progress of the column. However, he also told his commanders that if they met any opposition, they were to take it "slow and easy." Being familiar with his men and their methods in past campaigns, he knew that they tended to throw themselves directly on the target. These methods had worked well in Normandy and Holland. But from what he had seen of the Bastogne terrain in November, he had concluded that his main chance lay in "fire and maneuver" rather than shock action.

The 501st moved out at 0600 on the 19th of December, 1944, passing its IP on schedule. First Battalion led out first with 2nd and 3rd Battalions being held in reserve. Battery B of the 81st ATA Battalion moved out behind the 1st Battalion. First Battalion had been on the march a little more than two hours, when the body was fired upon by a machine gun station along the road just short of Neffe. The column hit the dirt and developed the situation.

Ewell left 1st Battalion and decided to bring the rest of the regiment out of Bastogne. It was clear to him that 1st Battalion would not be able to reduce the roadblocks because of the German tanks and the defilade close to the hillside which was protecting them. Ewell ordered 2nd Battalion to seize Bizory. The map told him that the ridge adjacent to Bizory was the high ground and would be of use to him. He wanted to see if the enemy force east of there was holding a continuous position. This decision probably contributed as much to the salvation of Bastogne

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as anything that happened during the first few critical days. Second Battalion moved in and seized Bizory. Then they moved down the road toward Mageret, but 2nd Battalion was engaged across its entire front before reaching the town.

Third Battalion ran into the most difficulty. They moved Northwest into the town of Wardin. Here Company I ran into strong German forces, armor and infantry. They were overrun losing 45 men and 4 officers. Ewell then ordered 3rd Battalion to disengage and withdrew as best they could.

As a result of the fighting in Wardin, Ewell now abandoned all offensive intentions and tightened up his defensive positions. Between 1700 and 1800, 19 December, 1944, the 501st fell back and established a new defensive line. What had started out as an advance to contact and destroy the enemy had now become a defensive operation out of necessity.

The morning of 20 December, 1944, saw the 501st maintaining a defensive sector across Bizory, Neffe, and the small village of Mont. (Appendix 2) Enemy Artillery and flat trajectory fire was heavy, indicating strong enemy concentrations. In the biggest action of the day F Company repelled a very heavy enemy attack, consisting of a reinforced company of infantry and armor on the ground northeast of Bizory.

Enemy contact continued across the entire regimental front throughout 21 December. The 501st remained in defensive sector receiving heavy shelling and flat trajectory fire. Third Battalion beat off a strong and determined attack by two battalions of infantry only after vicious close in fighting.

On the 22nd of December, the regimental baggage train was dispatched south through Sibret in attempted evacuation. Cut off by enemy advances, it was destroyed and abandoned. The 501st defensive positions were improved across the entire regimental front and vigorous patrolling was maintained. Heavy shelling was encountered by both sides. There was considerable vehicular movement by the enemy across the 501st's front toward Noville.

Positions remained unchanged between the 23rd and 26th of December. Aerial re-supply support came for the first time on 23 December. Sporadic engagements at scattered points along the front continued. Active patrolling by both sides was carried out during this time. Air and artillery fire was also sporadic.

During the perimeter defense of Bastogne, the front line of the 501st ranged east of Bastogne. The front line was just under 2 miles long running from Bizory to a sector between Mont and Marvie. They were flanked on the left by the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment and on the right by the 327th Glider Infantry Regiment. Team O'Hara was held in reserve along the right flank of the 501st.

The 907th Glider Field Artillery Battalion supplied most of the fire support during the early operations of the 501st. Fog was very thick, and the 907th worked under several other handicaps. During the first day its radios had never been tested, and 5 of its guns had never been fired. Nevertheless, the 907th batteries were very effective only 1,000 yards behind the skirmish line. The batteries were placed in defilade on the spur of the moment on 19 December. These places were so well chosen that the guns worked there for almost a month without receiving a single round of German counter-battery fire. Artillery fire was turned mainly against the German tanks and small groups of infantry. There were many such targets during the first eight days of the fighting. Tank destroyers were also a main fire support element for the 501st. The tank destroyers were not organic but came from Task Force Cherry, which was operating in the same sector.

Due to the poor weather conditions during 19–24 December, there was no friendly air support. On Christmas Day it cleared off, and the German lines were bombed repeatedly for the first time.

German fire support was limited to shelling and flat trajectory fire until Christmas Eve. However, the battalion CP was heavily damaged on the 24th by German aircraft. Regimental Headquarters was also hit heavily. A 500 pound dud aerial bomb was found draped over the steel girder of an "I" beam when the attack was over. German tanks were the most damaging fire support element the enemy had. Heavy periods followed by light periods of fire characterized each day's fighting.

With the exception of 3rd Battalion casualties remained light considering the kind of defensive operation the 501st was engaged in. Company I of the 3rd Battalion was overrun in the town of Wardin. The Company suffered severe casualties and several of the men were captured. They had just arrived in Wardin and hadn't had time to dig in before the Germans hit them.

The only Americans captured, outside of I Company, were the Regimental Chaplain and his assistant. In an attempt to find the front lines in extreme fog, they followed the wrong road into a German occupied village where

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they were captured. The regimental CP was set up in an old school. A chapel near the CP on the eastern end of Bastogne, was converted into a regimental aid station for the 501st. Wounded bodies were laid out on the floor of the chapel. Medical service was provided by organic medics of the 501st.

Civilian casualties became quite high several could be seen lying around the courtyard. Many civilians were hit as they moved outside to search for food and other necessities. The 501st helped obtain water and food for the wounded civilians. Nuns aided civilian casualties in a sub-basement of the chapel.

From the beginning of the battle on 19 December, the 501st had good information about the enemy. POW's were captured early on the 19th. More German prisoners were captured throughout the battle. An interrogation house was set up across the street from the regimental CP. Wounded POW's were interrogated in the regimental aid station. A team from IPW conducted all interrogations. They were aided by the assistant regimental S-2 who could speak German and Russian. German POW's were very talkative. The IPW was amazed at how willingly they disclosed pertinent information. With little prodding they openly talked about German strengths, morale, and future plans. They also identified German positions on maps.

Intelligence revealed that German morale was low because of the heavy casualties suffered. German troops continued to move in open areas and were repeatedly caught in the open and cut down by fire support. From the OP's of the 501st, dead German bodies could be seen in large numbers. It was only a little over quarter mile between the opposing fronts.

Patrolling was another major intelligence source. White bed sheets were used for camouflaging the 501st OP's. The Germans had very little snow equipment and were good targets in their dark uniforms against the snow. The 501st patrols would move just enough to draw the enemy's machine gun fire, and map coordinates quickly marked these enemy positions.

Morale remained surprisingly good all throughout the East Bastogne Operations of the 501st. Even though other American units had been beaten back and some of their men were withdrawing as the 501st entered Bastogne, this didn't have much of an effect on their morale. No sense of panic ever set in. The 501st never took a large number of casualties from a regimental standpoint. Aerial bombing didn't hurt the regiment as much as it did the other units of the 101st Division.

The fighting men of the 501st didn't know they were completely surrounded by the Germans until 24 December. Word filtered down to the squads that the 501st and other units in Bastogne were surrounded. Again there was no real panic, as the men had ammunition, occupied favorable terrain, and had plenty of food for subsistence. An occasional tank could be seen in the distance, but the 501st couldn't tell if they were German or disabled American tanks. No tanks ever got close to the 501st's front lines. When the Germans made their surrender proposal, the 101st Division Headquarters mimeographed a run down on the terms. It was obvious to the men of the 501st that surrender was not imminent. Most of the men thought of it as a joke.

After the first three days of fighting in Bastogne, the emergency rations of the 501st ran out. The regimental supply trains were overrun as they were being sent to the rear for re-supply on 22 December. This presented a challenge to the unit commanders to keep their front line soldiers fed. Every effort was made to get hot meals to the men of the 501st. The men were hungry, but at no time did they miss more than one meal. When they did get food, it was always hot. Bastogne and surrounding villages were farming communities, and the hot meals were made up in large part with livestock from civilian farms. Oxen were used quite often.

During the first week of the 501st's operations east of Bastogne, the weather was damp with heavy fog and bitter cold. On 20 December the unfrozen ground was blanketed with an eight inch snowfall. Visibility was reduced to 500-800 yards throughout much of this time. Actually the weather worked to the advantage of the 501st. The Germans didn't really know what the American strength was in Bastogne. Consequently, the Germans over-estimated the number of tanks and artillery support during the first few days of fighting. By the time the weather had cleared, the 501st was well dug in and fortified. Christmas Day was the first good, clear day since the 501st had moved in. However, they were not as vulnerable now as they had been on the 19th and 20th.

The 501st PIR's perimeter defense was set up to take maximum advantage of the terrain. The front line was dug in just in front of the woods with open fields to the front. The woods were artificial pine plantations on rolling hills. German forces had to cross open snow-covered fields to the front of the 501st to get to them. Outside of the danger of tree bursts, the woods to the rear provided excellent cover for the men to move around in.

Terrain also enabled the Americans to control the roads and intersections leading into Bastogne. Without

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access to the road e, mobility was greatly reduced due to snow, woods, sod terrain. This denial of access to road Junctions was critical for the German Panzer Divisions. For the most part the 501st relied on wire telephone for communications. At times there were breaks in the lines and the unit commanders had to hand carry messages. Control was made easier by the narrow front of 3,000 yards the 501st was responsible for. Physical contact was the best means to control the men and company. Platoon and squad leaders would go out to unit positions and physically contact the men where they were dug in.

If the Germans would have put the crunch on the 501st from all around the perimeter at the same time, they could have feasibly penetrated the American's front lines. As they conducted the operation, one attack at a time, they were always repelled without penetration. Whenever the Germans would make a move, the 501st would mow them down in open fields. The Germans showed a lot of courage, but their tactics made them easy targets. Team Cherry's tank destroyer force was quickly shifted to support the 501st wherever it was needed.

Statistically, the Germans should have overrun the 501st. However, the Americans occupied good defensive terrain and were well dug in. They controlled the air, and effectively carried out aerial re-supply. Operations were strictly defensive after the first day. The men of the 501st were able to hold their positions and inflict heavy losses on the Germans.

Although the Bastogne operations were ground operations due to the nature of the tactical situation, the actual disposition became similar to an airborne operation. Units of the 501st were virtually isolated from all rear installations when they became surrounded by enemy forces. Being an airborne unit the 501st was conditioned to the type of defensive operation it was required to establish at Bastogne. This type of circular pattern contemplated all around defense with offensive thrusts in all directions. This was designed to conceal from the enemy the exact intentions of the 501st and the location of the bulk of defensive strength. The effectiveness of using parachute regiments in the role of advancing infantry in the East Bastogne Operations was clearly demonstrated. Regular infantry units had been beaten back by the German offensive, and many stragglers were withdrawing to the rear. Ewell quickly realized that it was no use to try and obtain information from these disorganized and aimless wandering soldiers. The 501st PIR, with their superior training and pride, paid little attention to these withdrawing infantrymen. They were confident that they could complete their mission.

The 501st endured artillery shelling, aerial bombing, and flat trajectory fire for eight days, suffering few casualties. Aerial re-supply was able to keep the men in fighting condition, and they had adequate supplies of ammunition to repel all attacks launched by the Germans. After the 26th of December there was little contact with the enemy, and the 501st was relieved in early January and reassigned to operations to the South.

[NOTE: Six reproduced maps drawn from published sources were appended]