

The History Of 502 Parachute Infantry Regiment

(By Chip Cifone)

Perhaps it is fitting that we take a quick look back at how the concept of vertical envelopment was thought of. It was Benjamin Franklin who first conceived the idea of the airborne army. Franklin said “might not ten thousand men descending from the clouds do in many places an infinite deal of mischief before a force could be brought together to repel them?” Thus the idea was born.

During the 1st World War another American, General Billy Mitchell revisited the idea of vertical envelopment to try and break the trench warfare stalemate. A great deal of planning went forth to try an experimental drop behind the German lines but by the time that Mitchell and his staff could overcome the logistical obstacles the war had ended.

Over the next ten to twenty years the US Army had basically shelved the idea, although there were some small-scale experiments conducted during this time frame. It was not until the Germans skillful use of Airborne troops in 1939 that the US Army turned up the heat on the idea and seriously preceded with the US program.

In June of 1940 a test platoon was formed at Fort Benning with volunteers from the 29th Infantry Div. Many experimental jumps were conducted over the next few months with the test platoon including a mass jump that took place in late August of 1940. These initial experiments were so successful that in mid September of that year the War Department authorized the formation of an Airborne Battalion, which was designated the 501st Parachute Battalion. It was not known at the time, but many of the officers who took part in the battalion would go on to be future WWII heavyweights. Officers like Cole, Sink, Michaelis, Ewell, Cassidy and Strayer just name a few all worked on developing the US airborne doctrine that would be put to significant use over the next 5 years. It should be noted that this battalion is a completely different unit than the 501st Regiment that would later be a part of the 101st Tactical Organization

It was determined that further expansion was needed beyond the 501st Battalion, so in July of 1941 the 502nd Parachute Battalion was formed. The 502's history would begin with a bang when they jumped twice in the Carolina maneuvers that year. The expansion of the US Army Airborne program continued to grow and on January 30, 1942 the 502 expanded from a battalion to a regiment.

On March 2, 1942 the 502nd Parachute Infantry was activated under the command of Lt. Col. George P. Howell. When the unit was formed it had much of the same personal it had when it was activated as battalion back in 1941. It should also be noted that the 502 is the only parachute regiment that maintained its identity and personal from its inception as a Battalion. Shortly after the formation of the unit Col. Howell left to take command of the Parachute school at Fort Bragg. Command was handed over to his executive officer Lt. Col. George Van Horn Moseley, a West Pointer, who quickly began to form the regiment into his own liking. His rigorous work effort and will power, which he instilled on his men, would go a long way in forming their future combat record.

Later that year in July of 1942 the activation of two full Airborne Divisions the 82nd and 101st was ordered. The 502 would become the original parachute infantry regiment of the 101st division. Shortly after they became part of the 101st they moved from Fort Benning to join the rest of the division, which was stationed at Fort Bragg.

Through out the rest of 1942 and into 1943 the 502nd PIR took part in a grueling training program, which consisted of individual, unit, and combined division training. During March of 1942 they took part in division maneuvers in Southern Pines. This was followed by the Camden maneuvers which started on May 23rd of that year. Shortly after the Camden Maneuvers the big Tennessee maneuvers were held. It was during the Tennessee maneuvers that we would get a glimpse of what the 502nd was made of when men of H Company set a new marching record. They marched a total of 145.5 miles in 57.25 hours in which the first 33 miles were done in 11 hours.

On September 4 1943 men of the 502nd boarded the SS. Strathnaver bound for their new home in England. The Strathnaver sailed for 6 days before she had to make port on September 11 in St. Johns Newfoundland for repairs. It was discovered that the ships fresh water tanks had salt water in them. The 502nd was in port from Sept. 11 –26th. During this time in St. Johns the men did not get to rest. They took part in road marches, barracks inspections drills and physical conditioning exercises. On September 26th the ship headed back out to sea only to return again after striking some rocks in the harbor. On the 27th she made another attempt to leave but returned to port after taking on some 28 inches of water. Here the man stayed stranded, continuing the routine until October 4th when the SS John Ericsson picked the men up and set sail for England. On October 18th the ship finally arrived in Liverpool. The journey would end up taking a total of 44 days.

When the deuce arrived in England they boarded military trucks and headed for what would be their home for the next 7 months. They settled into quarters in the Chilton Foliat and Denford near Hungerford, Berkshire. The 1st days and weeks were spent by getting used to their new surroundings. The quaint countryside surroundings, in which they would be living, where a far cry from their days at Fort Bragg. The English county was littered with small cottages topped with thatched roofs. The sides of these little shanties were covered with rose vines. The English fog and the change in their diet from fresh milk & eggs to powdered were other changes the men needed to get used to.

The deuce men could not ponder their setting for long because their days were soon filled with physical condition training which would include 15–25 mile hikes and daily close combat exercises. Instructions were given in a wide variety of items from 1st-aid, map reading, chemical warfare and the use and firing of German weapons. Company and battalion size parachute drops were also rehearsed during this period.

During the winter a couple of things took place which would affect the deuce. Capt. Frank Lillyman commander of I-Company departed for a new assignment as the commander of the 101st pathfinders. Lillyman was replaced by Capt. Ivan Hershner who commanded the unit until June 9, 1944. The 502nd was also given its call sign or unit code (Kickoff), which it would retain through out the war.

In early spring the soldiers of the deuce participated in a number of full-scale exercises. In March it was Exercise Beaver, In April Exercise Tiger and in May, Exercise Eagle, which would be the deuce's, dress rehearsal for the D-Day Invasion of Fortress Europe. Each time the men rehearsed capturing key bridges leading inland from the shore and the destruction of mock gun positions. It was during Exercise Eagle that ominous misfortune had taken place. Eight of the nine planes carrying men of H-Company dumped their troopers some nine miles from their intended drop zone. They did not know it then but this was a sign of what would take place one month later when they dropped into Normandy.

As the days drew closer and closer to the invasion, the men were moved from their base camps to the marshalling areas. Once in the marshalling areas the soldiers were cut off from the rest of the world for security reasons. Here they received the equipment needed for the invasion and waited for their final orders. Those orders came and the men of deuce now understood what the previous months training was all about. The Normandy mission for the 502nd 3rd Battalion was to seize and secure exits 3 and 4 , the two northern exits behind Utah Beach. 1st and 2nd Battalion of the deuce were to knock out four concrete German 122mm howitzer gun position near exit 4(St. Martin-de-Varreville), to prevent them from being used against the beach forces that would land that morning.

On the night of June 5 the deuce men loaded up in their planes. Flying out of Membury and Greenham Common in the first serials to depart, they headed for drop zone 'A'. 1st and 3rd Battalion landed in the general vicinity of DZ 'A' while 2nd Battalion landed in a concentrated group on DZ 'C'. Men from two sticks of 'A' Company got the green light too late and were dumped out over the channel drowning some of the heavily laden troopers. One of these troopers was Capt. Richard L. Davidson commander of 'A' Company. Another incident forced the Commanding Officer of the Regiment (Col. Moseley) to relinquish his command to Col. John Michaelis, when he broke his leg on the jump.

The soldiers of the Deuce fought gallantly through the night and into the morning meeting all their D-Day objectives. When they were relieved the next Day June 6 by the shore landings, the men of the 502 were assembled and sent south along the N13 where they would meet their toughest challenge. The orders were to capture a piece of high ground known as Hill 30 near La Billionnerie, to block the enemys escape route from Carentan. In order to accomplish this, they had to first travel down a section of elevated road, surrounded on both sides by marshland. This was known as the Carentan Causeway or better labeled by the soldiers of the deuce as Purple Heart Lane. As if it wasn't going to be tough enough, the road had 4 bridges over it, of which bridge #2 had been destroyed

by the Germans. On June 10 the men from G-Company under Capt. Robert Clements and Lt. David Irwin were chosen to lead the attack. The men from H and I Companies would follow. For the next day the men fought down the sides of the road being picked off by the Germans in the marshes on both sides of the road. On June 11 the battle was slowing in its tracks. Col. R.G. Cole leader of the 3rd battalion ordered his men to fix bayonets and charge the Ingouf farm house just to the right of bridge four. Cole gave the word, and with only his 45-caliber sidearm, threw himself across the field rushing the farmhouse where the Germans were held up. For this courageous action he would be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the 1st of two that would be bestowed upon the 101's throughout the entire war. Later that day and into the next the Germans counterattacked and were halted by the men of 1st battalion in a cabbage patch to left of the Ingouf farm house. On June 13th men from the 2nd battalion joined soldiers from the 506th to repel a German assault south west of Carentan. This was the end of the major fighting for the troopers of deuce in Normandy. They were pulled back to Cherbourg and in late June sent back to England and refit to get ready for their next mission, which would come on a bright sunny day in September.

For the next 2 months the men of the 502nd would heal and reflect on their Normandy mission in England. They fell back into a routine of conditioning and training just as they had done before the Normandy Invasion. Many times in August the men were called on alert to prepare for another mission but time after time they were canceled. That all changed on September 11, 1944.

The plan was code named Market Garden. It was a combined ground and air operation. The men of the deuce would be part of the air operation. Their job was to drop in behind the German lines and guard drop zones 'B' & 'C' north west of Zon. The second part of the mission was to capture the bridge at St. Oedenrode and the railroad and road bridges at Best. Another part of 502's mission was to be ready to assist the 506th in the defense of the town of Zon if needed. On September 17th men from the 1st Battalion took off from Welford in 45 aircraft heading for their DZ, which was, designated DZ 'B'. The rest of the Battalion took off from Greenham Common in another 90 planes also headed for DZ 'B'. After an uneventful daylight drop, the men of the deuce gathered up and headed for their objectives. First Battalion went north to capture the little town of St Oedenrode. Third Battalion sent patrols through the Zonsche forest, trying to move toward the town of Best and the bridge. German resistance was tough and they were able to stop the deuce soldiers from meeting one of their objectives at Best by blowing up the bridge. In fierce fighting around the bridge, Private Joe Mann was killed when he threw himself on a German grenade to save his fellow soldiers who were in the same foxhole with him. Mann received the second and only other Congressional Medal of Honor awarded to the whole 101's division during the war. In another tragic twist Col. Robert Cole was shot and killed by a snipers bullet in the action around the Zonsche Forest. The fate of the third battalion was now in the capable hands of its executive officer Maj. John Stopka. The deuce would lose another of its original officers on 22 September when LT.Col. Michaelis was WIA by an artillery shell outside of his headquarters. Command of the 502 passed to 2nd Battalion commander, Steve Chappuis.

With fighting becoming very intense in the Zonsche Forest the 502 pressed on. Finally they received some much needed help when armor, from the British 30th Corps arrived. The troopers of deuce, minus 1st Battalion, were able to sway the tide on the enemy and captured hundreds of German troops near or in the area. After the major battles for their objectives were won, the men of the 502 moved north with the rest of the 101st to take hold of defensive positions on the 'Island', south west of Arnhem. The 502 were the reserve unit bivouacked near the town of Dodewaard. Action was limited to patrolling the area looking for enemy infiltrators. During these actions the 502 incurred some casualties, mostly from German landmines.

Finally in December the men of the 502 with the rest of the 101st were moved off the line and back to a former French artillery garrison near Reims France called Camp Mourmelon. While in this camp the men were given a chance to rest, and training was limited to close order drill and calisthenics. The task of overhauling all equipment and weapons was undertaken. A few Red Cross clubs were even opened for the entertainment of the troops.

The rest would be short lived for on December 16 1944 the Germans launched one of their biggest offensives of the war in the west. Its main thrust was through the heavily wooded area of the Ardennes forest Its goal was port town of Antwerp where they hoped to choke off the allied supply line. The soldiers of the 502 were hastily loaded up in trucks and swept north with the rest of the 101st. Their main job was to hold the crucial road and rail junction in and around the town of Bastogne. It was not long before they found themselves surrounded by the German forces. The 502 held positions on the north and northwest portion of the envelopment. After the enemy had failed to break through in other sections of the circle, they sent probes, which began hitting the areas where the deuce soldiers defended. In an attack that took place on Christmas morning in the Hemroulle area of Belgium, numerous German tanks penetrated the line. Simultaneously farther north strong German infantry elements infiltrated the town of Champs. Two of the German tanks which drove north from Hemroulle attempted to bypass the 502 Regimental C.P. at the Rolle Chateau. In this attack Sky Jackson of the 502 won the Silver Star for single handedly hitting the two tanks with bazooka fire knocking out one. The other tank escaped only to be destroyed at Champs by another 502 member John Ballard of A Company who was killed on January 3 1945 in another action. Also On 3 January 1945 another large engagement took place around Longchamps, Belgium. It involved soldiers from 2nd Battalion 502. The Germans pressed forward and as many as forty jumpers, mostly from F company, were rounded up and taken prisoner that day. On January 14, 1945 3rd Battalion 502 would again suffer the loss of its commander. Lieutenant Col. John Stopka and some of his troopers were advancing through a pine forest along an elevated rail line. Enemy Tanks were advancing along the other side. Someone called in for air support and the planes strafed too close to the friendly positions, resulting in the death of Col. Stopka and thirty other soldiers near Michamps. With Stopka KIA, command was handed off to Cecil Simmons who would become the third and final commander of 3/502. Shortly after this battle the objective, Bourcy, Belgium, was finally taken.

After Bastogne, the Deuce was sent to the 7th Army front with the rest of the 101st Airborne. There they held a line along the Moder River for over a month. In February the men climbed aboard cattle boxcars to make camp in Mourmelon le Petit, France. The men of the deuce saw action again in April 1945 when they took up position in the vicinity of Dusseldorf, helping to close the Ruhr Pocket along the Rhine River. In May, the paratroopers arrived at Berchtesgaden Germany where their stay was a short one. The 502 spent the summer of 1945 on occupation duty near Mittersill, Austria. Returning to France in September, the soldiers continued waiting for transport stateside. The 101st Airborne Division was deactivated in December of 1945 with that went the 502.