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NCOs of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion during World War II

What unit conducted America's first combat parachute assault, was the first airborne unit awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, and contained the first American paratrooper awarded the Medal of Honor? It must have been some battalion from the famed 82nd Airborne Division. Well, it was not; it was the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion. NCOs formed the backbone of this heroic and highly decorated unit during World War II. They performed their duties superbly in austere conditions and led through heroic examples. The actions of these NCOs produced a highly trained and disciplined unit that greatly assisted the Allies in defeating the Axis Powers.

World War II brought about the need for highly mobile units that could be expeditiously inserted onto the battlefield. In response to this need, the United States Army created airborne units. The 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion was originally activated as the 504th Parachute Battalion "on 5 October 1941 at Fort Benning, GA" (Lineage and Honors). The battalion's designation was changed to the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment after it completed Parachute School. Shortly after this, the battalion moved to Fort Bragg, North Carolina to continue training for war. In June of 1942, the battalion sailed to England to conduct final preparations before entering World War II. Six days before the battalion conducted America's first-ever combat parachute assault, it became the 2nd Battalion, 509th Parachute Infantry. The battalion's designation was later changed to the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion.

The 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion retained this designation until it was deactivated shortly after the Battle of the Bulge on 1 March 1945.

During World War II, the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion conducted five major combat assaults: four airborne and one amphibious. The battalion conducted its four major airborne assaults near Oran, Algeria; Youks-Les Bains, Algeria; Avellino, Italy; and Le Muy, France. They conducted their major amphibious assault near Anzio, Italy. The 509th also fought in the Battle of the Bulge and in many other offensive and defensive missions.

The NCOs of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion performed some extremely challenging duties. Not only did these NCOs have to prepare a newly formed unit for intense combat, they had to train them to perform a mission that American forces had never performed: a combat parachute assault. They physically and mentally prepared their Soldiers, enabling them to complete Parachute School and deploy to England in just seven months. After arriving in England, the NCOs of the 509th led their Soldiers through the toughest and most demanding training that was available. Their Soldiers performed admirably on all tasks, and they were routinely commended by American and British leaders for their outstanding accomplishments. When the call for combat came, these NCOs once again rose to the occasion and led their Soldiers through America's first combat parachute assault; it was also the longest airborne operation conducted during World War II. During the war, these NCOs had the duty of keeping their men motivated to accomplish their missions even when confronted with heavy casualties and extreme weather conditions. This was no easy challenge and often required NCOs to perform heroic acts, which cost several of them their life.

The 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion began intense training the day it was activated. The leaders of the battalion knew that paratroopers "had to be resourceful, extremely self-confident,

and hard as nails to stand an even chance of getting the job done and surviving” the war (Doyle and Stewart 3). The NCOs of the battalion immediately undertook the awesome task of preparing their Soldiers for combat against the Axis Powers. Initially, they led their Soldiers through rigorous physical training and basic infantry tasks. After all most four months of preparations, the battalion attended Parachute School. The battalion completed airborne training with the fewer refusals than any other unit (Doyle and Stewart 4). This accomplishment was a great credit to the training and motivation provided by the battalion’s NCOs. The battalion then focused its training on combat-simulated live-fire exercises and strenuous foot marches while waiting for deployment orders.

Shortly after arriving in England, the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion resumed its intense training regimen. In addition to physical training and foot marches of up to 35 miles, NCOs focused on gas mask drills and mock airborne training. The battalion increased its combat focus by negotiating the famous British Assault Course. The battalion completed this course, which was considered “the closest thing to the real thing short of getting people killed or maimed” in record time (Doyle and Stewart 19). The focus then turned to airborne operations. After conducting numerous proficiency jumps, the battalion executed a jump with the follow-on mission of destroying a bridge. The battalion then attended the 16-day British Commando School. The battalion’s NCOs once again superbly led their Soldiers through training, which included the most realistic live-fires the unit had conducted. Training once again focused on parachute proficiency and culminated with an airborne assault to seize a heavily defended objective. The battalion was now ready to enter the war and take on any assigned mission.

The Soldiers of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion were some of the most disciplined to ever serve the United States Army on the field of battle. They followed orders even in the face

of grave and imminent danger. Their outstanding display of discipline is a credit to the great NCOs that guided and led these Soldiers each and every day. The 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion displayed immense discipline on several occasions during World War II.

On one such occasion, 509th Soldiers demonstrated a level of discipline that could have never been expected. The 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion retained a vital section of the Anzio beachhead after its amphibious assault. The battalion suffered several casualties while holding this section. On 29 February 1944, the 509th held its ground during a tremendous artillery barrage and dismounted attack from a numerically superior enemy force. The highly disciplined 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion opened fire at the last possible moment, which enabled it to inflict significant enemy casualties, but the Germans continued to advance. The battalion's Soldiers "fought desperately, disdaining retreat, engaging the overwhelming and constantly increasing German force with the rifle butts and even fists" (Doyle and Stewart 403). The 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion's courageous and disciplined performance prevented the Germans from penetrating the Allies' defensive line and separating two infantry divisions.

The 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion had several heroes during World War II. Paul B. Huff from Cleveland, Tennessee is the most famous of all the 509th heroes. As a Corporal, he was the first American paratrooper awarded the Medal of Honor. He is also the only Soldier from the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion to receive this prestigious award. Corporal Huff was awarded the Medal of Honor for his exemplary actions during Operation SHINGLE on 8 February 1944. His citation reads:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at risk of life above and beyond the call of duty, in action on 8 February 1944, near Carano, Italy. Cpl. Huff volunteered to lead a 6-man patrol with the mission of determining the location and strength of an enemy unit which

was delivering fire on the exposed right flank of his company. The terrain over which he had to travel consisted of exposed, rolling ground, affording the enemy excellent visibility. As the patrol advanced, its members were subjected to small arms and machinegun fire and a concentration of mortar fire, shells bursting within 5 to 10 yards of them and bullets striking the ground at their feet. Moving ahead of his patrol, Cpl. Huff drew fire from 3 enemy machineguns and a 20mm. weapon. Realizing the danger confronting his patrol, he advanced alone under deadly fire through a minefield and arrived at a point within 75 yards of the nearest machinegun position. Under direct fire from the rear machinegun, he crawled the remaining 75 yards to the closest emplacement, killed the crew with his submachine gun and destroyed the gun. During this act he fired from a kneeling position which drew fire from other positions, enabling him to estimate correctly the strength and location of the enemy. Still under concentrated fire, he returned to his patrol and led his men to safety. As a result of the information he gained, a patrol in strength sent out that afternoon, 1 group under the leadership of Cpl. Huff, succeeded in routing an enemy company of 125 men, killing 27 Germans and capturing 21 others, with a loss of only 3 patrol members. Cpl. Huff's intrepid leadership and daring combat skill reflect the finest traditions of the American infantryman (Medal of Honor).

Paul B. Huff continued serving in the Army after World War II and eventually achieved the rank of Command Sergeant Major. He retired from the United States Army and returned to Cleveland, Tennessee where he was born and raised. Cleveland, Tennessee honored their hometown hero on Veterans Day in 1988 by renaming a major thoroughfare as Paul B. Huff Parkway (Paul Huff).

Sergeant Mike Baranek and Corporal Boggs G. Collins are two more 509th heroes from World War II. They were the only two NCOs from the battalion who were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross during the war. They both received this award for their exemplary actions during Operation SHINGLE near Carano, Italy. Corporal Collins demonstrated outstanding bravery and dedication to duty after his platoon was relieved and withdrew. Corporal Collins stayed behind with a two-man security team to assist the relieving platoon with machine gun emplacement (Doyle and Stewart 245). Meanwhile, the enemy began a second counterattack, so he engaged them with a machine gun. Then he charged forward from his position to secure another machine gun but found it to be inoperable. Corporal Collins retreated to his men under heavy enemy fire and corrected the malfunction on their machine gun. He continued to engage the enemy until the last two enemy survivors surrendered to him.

The 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion may have been the most successful battalion that served in World War II. They were so successful during Operation SHINGLE that Lieutenant General Mark Clark, the Fifth Army Commander, ordered a special awards ceremony for the unit. At this awards ceremony he stated, “that ‘yours is the finest outfit of its size that I have ever seen. I consider it my own personal elite battalion’” (Doyle and Stewart 249). The NCOs of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion played a vital role in every success this unit achieved during World War II. They ensured that the battalion’s Soldiers were trained, disciplined, motivated, and ready for any mission. Several NCOs also stepped up at critical moments with heroic acts that saved many lives and led to mission accomplishment. The NCOs of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion were the backbone of their organization just as NCOs are the backbone of today’s Army. Their exemplary performance of duty should inspire all NCOs to do their best every day.

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