



We Badly Needed Something to Do*

*T/5 Daniel Morgan

Glider Jumping At Camp Mackall, 1943

by Troy J. Sacquety

CAMP Mackall, North Carolina, now a training area for Army Special Operations, was the headquarters of the U.S. Army Airborne Command during World War II. It was named for Private John Thomas Mackall, 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion, one of America's first paratroopers killed in action. Mackall was wounded by a strafing Vichy France fighter aircraft on 8 November 1942, and died of his wounds four days later. It was at Camp Mackall that the 11th, 13th, and 17th Airborne Divisions were activated and trained. It was also where the U.S. Army Airborne Command evaluated airborne tactics and techniques and tested equipment. One dicey test was to jump paratroopers from towed gliders. After six tests, the method was deemed impractical and too dangerous for both jumpers and the jump platforms. The activity is a little-known aspect of Camp Mackall's history.

The unit chosen for the test was the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion (PIB). The 551st, known as the GOYAs based on commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Wood C. Joerg's favorite expression, "Get Off Your Ass!" was a unique unit.¹ It became one of only two independent parachute battalions that saw action in WWII, the 509th PIB was the other one. The GOYAs were formed to guard the Canal Zone against possible Axis attack. When an infantry battalion was sent to Panama, the jungle-trained GOYAs were reassigned to Camp Mackall on 8 September 1943. There, they remained until 11 April 1944, when they left for Italy. By the time the GOYAs arrived at Camp Mackall, they were bored and itching for excitement. They welcomed the opportunity to test new parachuting techniques.

Camp Mackall was an ideal location for the U.S. Army Airborne Command to validate airborne tactics and techniques. In contrast to its current size of 7,916 acres,

the Camp Mackall area encompassed more than 70,000 acres in WWII, counting the adjacent civilian-owned land where the Army had maneuver rights. Much of the area collectively known today as the North Carolina-owned Sandhills Wildlife Areas was part of Camp Mackall during the war. This large expanse provided a large maneuver area for the airborne-forces-in-training that surrounded what became a small "city" in the Carolina Sandhills. Mackall was also close to the Army airfield at Laurinburg-Maxton and in an area that was free of commercial air traffic.

In October 1943, the Airborne Command decided to evaluate the suitability of CG-4A Waco gliders as paratrooper delivery platforms. The logic was that with paratroopers simultaneously jumping from two CG-4As and their C-47 Skytrain tow aircraft, then the number of combat paratroopers jumped could be doubled. It was anticipated that the paratroopers would land in a more compact group, thereby avoiding a scattered drop.² The fact that the towing C-47s would be flying so slow, however, meant that the entire flight would be "sitting ducks" for anti-aircraft fire. Technician Fifth Grade Daniel Morgan recalled that a few weeks after the 551st got to Camp Mackall, LTC Joerg volunteered for jump testing. "Notices appeared on the company bulletin board calling for volunteers . . . signature sheets immediately filled to overflowing, for we badly needed something to do."³ Lieutenant Richard Mascuch does not remember volunteering. He recalls being told that he would be jumping from gliders later that day.⁴

In all, paratroopers of the 551st made six test jumps from



The unofficial insignia of the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion. The Spanish motto "Aterrice y Ataque," means "Land and Attack."



Lieutenant Colonel Wood G. Joerg, Commander, 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion



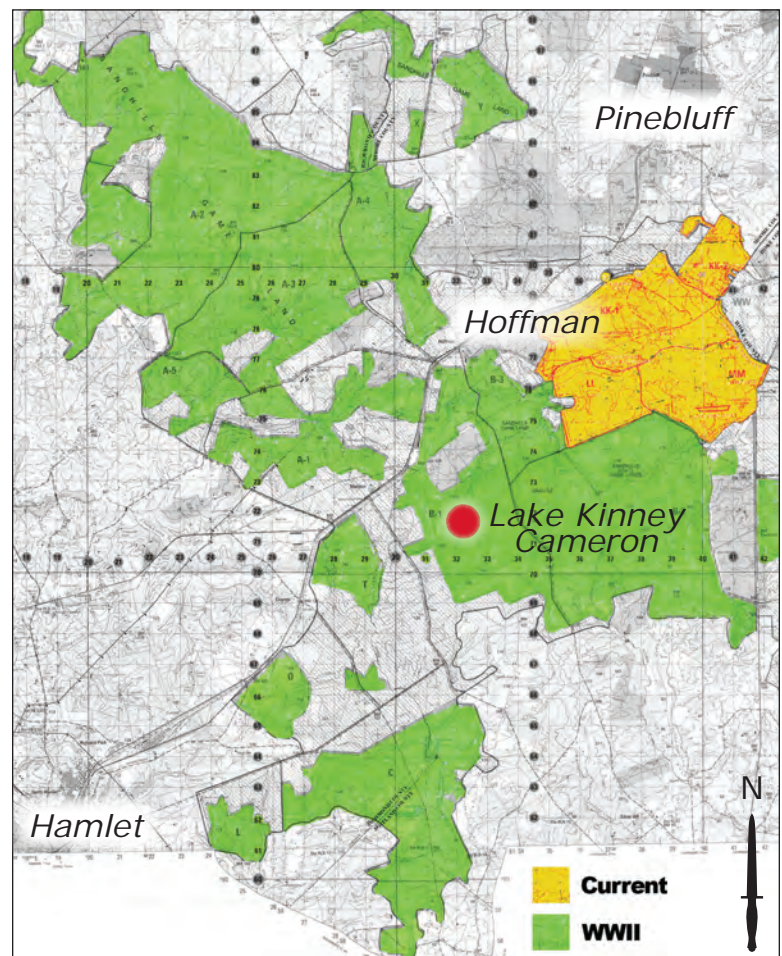
the CG-4A Waco glider from late October 1943 to November 1943; five at Camp Mackall and one at Alachua Army Airfield in Florida.⁵ The first test jump took place at Camp Mackall on 18 October. It was followed the next day by another with some eighty paratroopers involved. On the 20th, a few paratroopers flew from Camp Mackall to Florida for their first demonstration jump.⁶ Back at Camp Mackall, on 21 October, a demonstration jump was made for British and American “top brass,” which included a British Air Marshall, Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair, Commanding General Army Ground Forces, and Major General E.G. Chapman, Commanding General of the Airborne Command.⁷ Staff Sergeant Jack Carr recalled that the men jumped on a drop zone that was concealed by a grove of trees, where fresh troops lay hidden. After the paratroopers had landed, the other group left their hiding places and rushed out into the clearing to show the assembled “brass” that the experiment was an unqualified success!⁸

In reality, the glider jump tests were anything but successful. Gliders had not been designed for jumping

and the experience was unique. Richard Field recalled thinking, “What the hell am I doing in this thing! They were built like model airplanes. I was so happy to get out of those things.”⁹ Alfred Garrety remembered that “the ride in the ‘Flying Coffin’ was bumpy. . . . I kept a firm grip on one of the wooden structural members as I had the feeling that the plywood floor would collapse at any time.”¹⁰ Paratroopers jumped out both sides of the



Camp Mackall in 1945.



Map showing present (yellow) and former (green) sizes of Camp Mackall.



For the Camp Mackall glider tests, the paratroopers would board the WG-4A Waco gliders at Laurinburg-Maxton Army Airbase. This group of 551st paratroopers are seen milling around on the tarmac prior to loading into the glider.

glider. If they did not jump out in unison from the opposite doors, the glider was thrown off balance and it would “heel over on one wing.”¹¹ As George Brower related, “A failure of the static lines to pull equally created a rocking effect that caused the last men to have to crawl out on their hands and knees.”¹² Staff Sergeant Charlie Fairlamb put it more colorfully: “There were five men on one side and six on the other. . . . I was the last man out—the glider lurched, and I was half-way out the wrong door. I knew I was supposed to go out the other one, but I was kind of hanging in the doorway. . . . I gave one push and hit the thin plywood flooring, skidded across and went right out the other door like I was doing a swan dive. I was in a terrible position . . . so my chute malfunctioned. I was coming down and couldn’t find my ris-

Tragedy at Lake Kinney Cameron

TESTING and validating airborne techniques was not without risk. On 16 February 1944, the GOYAs made an ill-fated night jump. In contrast to Panama, the C-47s were flying in tight “V” formations, making the battalion-sized jump on the narrow landing zone of 1,600 by 2,000 feet even more complicated. Their first night airborne operation was conducted in fog and rain and they were flown by inexperienced troop-carrier pilots. The drop zone selected was a small clearing bounded by small lakes.¹ Many of the paratroopers were dropped into Lake Kinney Cameron. Several, unable to free themselves from their parachutes and equipment, drowned. 551st veteran Richard Field, then a private first class, recalls, “I landed about ten or fifteen feet from the lake. When I exited the plane, I could vaguely see an area that I thought could be the drop zone. But, when the noise of the planes faded, I could hear screams and splashing. I then realized that it was water so I slipped my chute as much as I could. . . . It was very dark and misty (almost rain.) As soon as I got my equipment and

harness off, I waded out into the lake and helped get some of the men out of the water. As you can imagine, it was a hell of a mess. The jump should have been aborted. I think about forty men actually landed in the lake and eight of them drowned.” The tragic accident was revealed by Drew Pearson of the *Washington Post*. The tragedy convinced the U.S. Army to adopt the parachute harness quick-release system used by the British.² Difficulties in wartime production meant that most U.S. paratroopers used the old system.

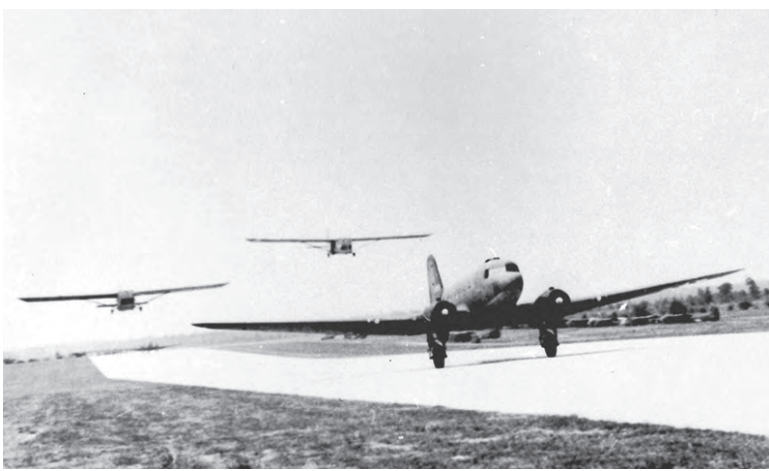
- 1 Daniel Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart: The Saga of the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion* (Wauconda, Washington: Alder Enterprises, 1984), 115–119, 124.
- 2 Gregory Orfalea, *Messengers of the Lost Battalion: The Heroic 551st and the Turning of the Tide at the Battle of the Bulge* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 7; also see Drew Pearson, “The Washington Merry-Go-Round,” *The Washington Post*, 9 March 1944.



Lake Kinney Cameron near where the eight 551st PIB paratroopers drowned on 16 February 1944.



In 1992, the 551st Parachute Infantry Association placed a memorial stone to those who drowned in Lake Kinney Cameron on 16 February 1944. Permission was granted by the State of North Carolina because that area is beyond the current boundary of today’s Camp Mackall. Those memorialized are Private First Class Shelley C. Ferguson, Technician Fifth Grade John F. Hoffman, Private First Class Kenneth D. McGrotty, Private First Class Ishmael H. Petty, Sergeant Benjamin Preziotti, Private First Class Zollie Ramsey, Private First Class Norval L. Reed, and Private John L. Wafford.



In the glider jump tests, a C-47 aircraft would tow two paratrooper-laden CG-4A Waco gliders.



This photo reveals how cramped it was inside a CG-4A when carrying eleven fully loaded paratroopers.

ers. . . . I spun around—not smart enough to open my reserve. I spun until I was almost horizontal, but I was lucky on the landing. . . . As difficult as our training was, I still appreciated it. I was almost glad to get into combat though; it was easier than the training.”¹³

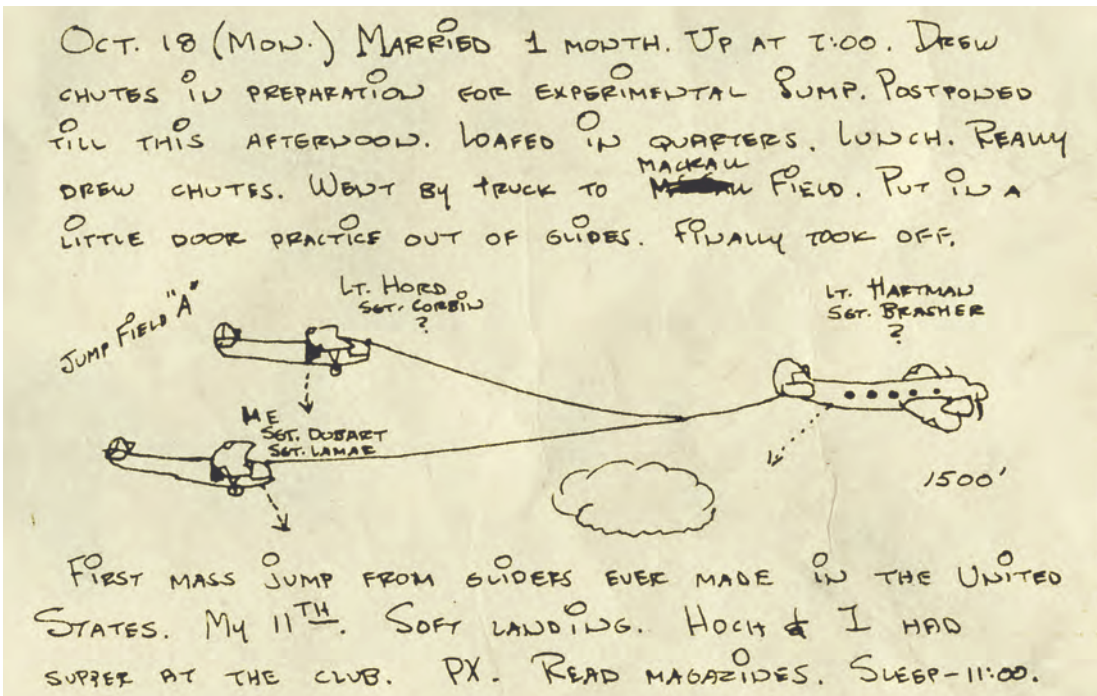
Glider balance was not the only problem. The glider’s cargo compartment was cramped. Wearing a full combat load did not help. Albert Garrety explained his jump on 31 October: “common sense would tell a person that it couldn’t happen for real. The door was too small, if it were approached standing up, one would have to duck down to get out. The top of your backpack would hang up on the frame otherwise. The door was approached in a duck walk fashion with 130 pounds of equipment. . . . One didn’t jump out of a glider, they waddled up, ducked down, and fell out. The only difference [with jumping] from a plane was the drop was farther because there wasn’t the prop blast to help open the chute.”¹⁴ On landing, Garrety went into a backward somersault. When someone asked if he were all right, he replied that he had a “perfect three-point landing, my feet, my ass,

my head.”¹⁵

Another serious problem was the glider. It had to be specially rigged. First, the doors from both sides were removed. Then static line anchor cables were mounted and six personnel seats were installed on each side.¹⁶ Many veterans commented on the problems associated with loads on the anchor lines. Technical Sergeant Robert Van Horssen related, “I heard that when Sergeant Blaiszik jumped (he was pretty big) he pulled the anchor-line cable right out of the glider with him.”¹⁷ Technician Fifth Grade Daniel Morgan added, “That happened more than once. The cable bracket would pull out of the glider’s forward bulkhead. Fortunately, the cable-bracket U-bolt remained fixed to the anchor-line cable end, thus retaining all the anchor-line snap fasteners. When these particular gliders landed, the anchor-line cables were hanging out of their



Qualified glider pilots were authorized to wear the glider pilot wing.



Lieutenant Richard Mascuch kept a wartime diary that tells of his jump and of life at Camp Mackall.



Lieutenant Richard Mascuch demonstrates how small the CG-4A glider door was. Jumpers had to avoid hitting themselves on the head or catching their backpacks on the top of the door.

The 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion

THE 1st Battalion of the 551st Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) was activated at Fort Kobbe, Panama, on 1 November 1942, under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Wood C. Joerg. Subsequent battalions were never activated, thus the 1/551st became a separate Parachute Infantry Battalion (PIB). The 551 PIB, or GOYAs, (coined by LTC Joerg, meaning “Get Off Your Ass”) were to protect the Canal Zone. In May 1943, the 551st was preparing to parachute assault on the Vichy-French-controlled island of Martinique in the Caribbean. It was feared that German submarines would seek safe harbor and resupply at the island. The French commander, given an alternative to an attack, turned the island over to Free-French control. As a result, in August 1943, the 551st was ordered to Camp Mackall, North Carolina, to validate air drop techniques and to test airborne equipment. In March 1944, the GOYAs were then sent to Italy.



Prior to their first combat jump, the men of the 551st camouflaged their faces with grease paint.

The 551st PIB became part of the Operation DRAGOON assault element of the First Airborne Task Force, under the command of Major General Robert Frederick. During the invasion of southern France, the GOYAs got their “baptism of fire” on 15 August 1944, making a daylight combat jump near Le Muy. On 18 August 1944, the battalion liberated Draguignan because the French Resistance feared German reprisals. Since this was the first major city in southern France liberated by the Allied forces, the 551st

PIB was awarded the Croix-de-Guerre with Silver Star.¹ In doing so, they surprised Generalleutnant Ferdinand Neuling, the German LXII Corps Commander and his staff, and the German regional commander, Generalmajor Ludwig Bieringer. Capturing them effectively neutralized German command and control in the area. As part of the Seventh U.S. Army’s right flank, the GOYAs fought eastward along the French Riviera, and helped liberate Nice and Cannes. By late fall 1944, the 551st had pushed the Germans into the Maritime Alps. That winter, the jungle-trained GOYAs became ad-hoc mountain troops. Ski patrols became the routine in the snow-covered area as they performed holding actions for the next three months. After being relieved by the 100th Infantry Battalion on 17 November 1944, the GOYAs enjoyed a short respite in St. Jeannet, France, near the Italian border.

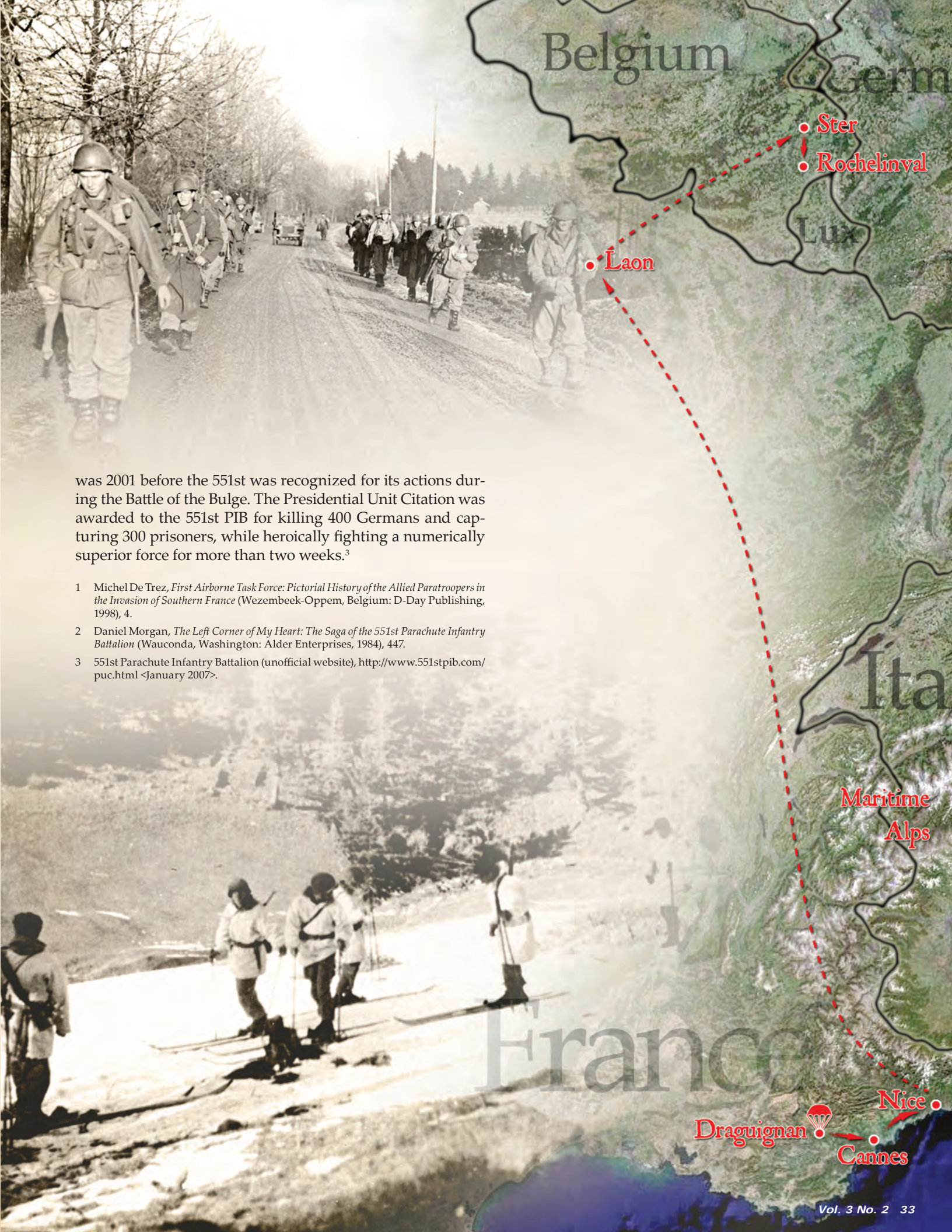
The Battle of the Bulge put the GOYAs back into action on 21 December 1944. Attached first to the 30th Infantry Division near Ster, Belgium, they were quickly diverted to the 82nd Airborne Division to support the 508th PIR. During the first ten days of January 1945, the 551st saw brutal action and had many cold weather injuries on account of the harsh winter. On 7 January the battalion was ordered—against the protests of LTC Joerg—to frontally assault the town of Rochelival, Belgium. Well-registered German artillery and devastating machinegun fire decimated the battalion. Lieutenant Richard Durkee, an A Company platoon leader who assaulted directly into Rochelival, remembered: “I yelled at [Private Pat Casanova] to get the riflemen up to me so we could continue the attack. . . he shouted back, ‘Sir, they’re all dead’. . . I found out I was now company commander of a company of nine men.”² B Company, attacking from the rear, fared little better. By the second week of January 1945, the battalion was down to company strength, and most of its officers, including LTC Joerg, were dead. Declared combat ineffective, the 551st PIB was deactivated on 10 February 1945. Most of the survivors were reassigned to the 82nd Airborne Division. It



Shown here is the 15 August 1944 daylight combat airdrop of the 551st PIB over southern France as part of Operation DRAGOON.

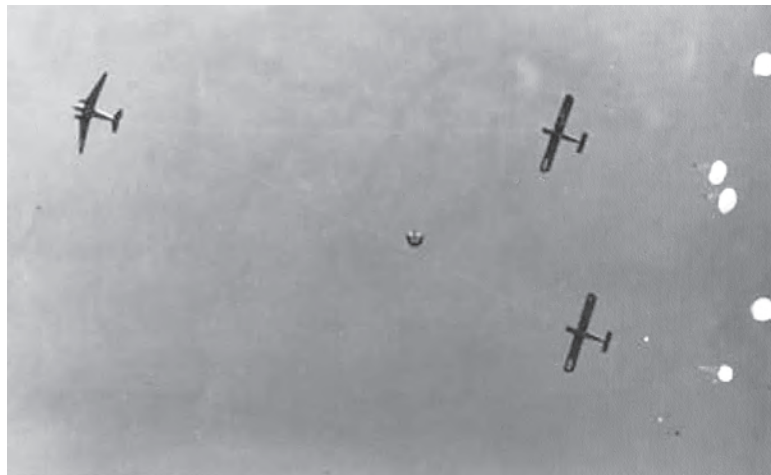


As the 551st entered towns in southern France they often received an enthusiastic welcome. Shown here is Private First Class Richard Field riding in the back of a jeep trailer on 29 August 1944 in Nice.



was 2001 before the 551st was recognized for its actions during the Battle of the Bulge. The Presidential Unit Citation was awarded to the 551st PIB for killing 400 Germans and capturing 300 prisoners, while heroically fighting a numerically superior force for more than two weeks.³

- 1 Michel De Trez, *First Airborne Task Force: Pictorial History of the Allied Paratroopers in the Invasion of Southern France* (Wezembeek-Oppem, Belgium: D-Day Publishing, 1998), 4.
- 2 Daniel Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart: The Saga of the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion* (Wauconda, Washington: Alder Enterprises, 1984), 447.
- 3 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion (unofficial website), <http://www.551stpib.com/puc.html> <January 2007>.



Seen from the ground are 551st paratroopers exiting the towed gliders.

doors with all the static lines bunched at the end of the cable."¹⁸

Parachuting was difficult, but flying the glider while men were jumping out was no picnic either. Glider pilot Gale Ammerman recalled that, "when each man jumped, the glider load was reduced by somewhere around 200 pounds. As a result, the nose of the glider came up at the time each man exited from the glider. . . . By both me and my copilot pushing forward on the controls and adjusting the trim tab, we eventually got the glider back into normal position just above the C-47"¹⁹

After two more experiments, on 31 October and a final one in late November, the 551st PIB troopers were finished with glider jumping.²⁰ After several injuries, the Airborne Command determined that gliders were not a viable parachute platform. Lieutenant Richard Mascuch, veteran of five of the six glider jumps, felt that the gliders were a viable platform for parachute jumping, but flying at near stall speed, the C-47 tow plane and its covey of CG-4As was too vulnerable to ground fire.²¹ However, the spirit of the 551st PIB earned a citation from Major General Chapman. In part it read, ". . . the Commanding General has noted the fine spirit existent in the 551st Parachute Battalion which prompted many volunteers to hazard tests in parachute jumping of a type which has not been done before. The test conducted . . . materially contributed to the progress of parachuting. The unselfish cooperative attitude expressed by individuals of the battalion insured success of tests in jumping from both doors of gliders in double tow."²² These parachuting experiments had left the mark of the GOYAs on Camp Mackall. ▲

I wish to thank 551st veterans Colonel Doug Dillard, Richard Field, and Dick Mascuch; Les Hughes for providing several of the images and the 551st unit patch; Lowell Stevens for help with the Camp Mackall portion; and the Airborne and Special Operation Museum for providing photos of their CG-4A.



Camp Mackall memorialized the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion by naming a road after the unit.

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Endnotes

- 1 A more polite, if not false, explanation for GOYA is "Great Outstanding Young Americans." One finds it hard to believe 18–25-year-old soldiers getting "charged up" by this expression. According to 551st veteran Richard Field, Lieutenant Colonel Joerg called the men of the 551st his "GOYA-birds."
- 2 Gregory Orfalea, *Messengers of the Lost Battalion: The Heroic 551st and the Turning of the Tide at the Battle of the Bulge*, (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 75.
- 3 Daniel Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart: The Saga of the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion* (Wauconda, Washington: Alder Enterprises, 1984), 94.
- 4 Richard Mascuch, telephone interview by Troy Sacquety, 1 March 2007, notes, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 Orfalea, *Messengers of the Lost Battalion*, 76.
- 6 Richard Mascuch, diary, 17 October 1943–2 November, 1943, copy of select pages, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 Mascuch, diary.
- 8 Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart*, 99.
- 9 Richard Field, interview with Troy Sacquety, Fort Bragg, NC, 28 February 2007, notes, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Albert P. Garrety, unpublished memoir, (Redwood City, CA, circa 1986), ii.
- 11 Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart*, 94.
- 12 George Browder, *The Road to Tokyo* (unpublished, undated), 42–46, quoted in Tom MacCallum and Lowell Stevens, *Camp Mackall: and its Times in the Sandhills of North Carolina*, unpublished manuscript, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 13 Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart*, 94, 99.
- 14 Garrety, unpublished memoir, ii.
- 15 Garrety, unpublished memoir, ii.
- 16 George Browder, *The Road to Tokyo*, 42–46.
- 17 Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart*, 99.
- 18 Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart*, 99.
- 19 Silent Wings Museum newsletter, *Glider Paratroopers, Part II*, 8.
- 20 Mascuch, diary; Orfalea, *Messengers of the Lost Battalion*, 77.
- 21 Mascuch interview.
- 22 Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart*, 98.