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Title: Report on the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment in Operation "Market"

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Abstract: This report is on the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment's mission in Operation Market which was accomplished in four locations in Southern England, Welford Airdrome, Greenham Airport, Ramsbury Airport, and at the base camp at Chilton Foliat, England. The mission had three objectives: **First** – To seize the bridge across the Wilhelmina Canal near the city of Best, Holland; **Second** – To occupy the town of St. Oedenrode, Holland; and **Third** – to support the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment in the attack on the city of Eindhoven, Holland.

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REPORT ON THE 502ND PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT

On Sunday, 17 September, 1944, the 502nd Parachute Infantry was committed to the operation called "Market".

Marshalling for this mission was accomplished at four locations in Southern England, namely, Welford Airdrome, Greenham Airport, Ramsbury Airport and at the base camp at Chilton Foliat, England.

The mission as given had three (3) objectives: First - To Seize the bridge across the Wilhelmina Canal near the city of Best, Holland; Second - To occupy the town of St. Oedenrode, Holland; Third - To support the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment in the attack on the city of Eindhoven, Holland. It was a mission of preparation, a mission of securing the bridges and holding a corridor open so that the British Second Army might move forward unhampered by the enemy from the Belgium and Holland Border to the lower Rhine.

To undertake this mission the Regiment committed to action 151 officers and 2,043 enlisted men. The parachute lift consisted of 143 officers and 1,910 enlisted men and the glider lift totaled 5 officers and 35 enlisted men while the sea-borne element contained 3 officers and 98 enlisted men.

The take-off was accomplished at 1025 hours and the rendezvous completed a little after 1100 hours the morning of the 17th. The Regiment reached its target at 1320 hours that afternoon and the first stick had landed on the drop zone at approximately 1325 hours.

The drop and assembly were completed in less than two hours and the Regiment was ready to move out to its objectives at no later than 1530 hours. The drop was made at Heide, between the towns of Best and Zon, St. Oedenrode and Eindhoven, Holland.

The First Battalion met small delaying actions on the outskirts of the town of St. Oedenrode and these were overcome. But on the attack on the bridges, it was found that the Germans had concentrated their power on these. After a bitter determined effort the enemy was routed and resistance ceased in the town by 1800 hours. The Battalion then set up a defensive position for the night. Due to the large area the Battalion had to protect, almost every man remained on the line. The next day, on the 18th, the town was attacked from the South, the attack being composed of artillery and infantry. The Battalion repulsed this attack and, advancing, overran the enemy mortar positions capturing a number of prisoners. During this action a force was sent forward North toward Schindel to rescue a group of men that were pinned down by enemy small arms and mortar fire. This force drove the enemy off and returned to safety 12 men and 5 jeeps of the First Airborne Army. The enemy continued to shell our positions and sent out patrols throughout the day.

About 0700 hours, the 19th of September, the positions were attacked again by two companies of infantry supported by artillery and mortars. The situation became critical, even Battalion C.P. personnel and a crippled tank, which had dropped out of the British Second Army column, was pressed into service. The attack was finally smashed, the enemy withdrew, and 50 Germans were killed and 50 captured. The Battalion's losses were repulsed. The bridges and the corridor remained secure. On the evening of the 20th, the Regiment took over the positions supported by a Regiment of British Tanks and a Battalion of British

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light artillery.

The Second Battalion moved from the drop zone to the vicinity of Zon and remained there overnight in readiness to support the attack on Eindhoven. The morning of the 18th, the Battalion moved out on orders toward the town of Best to support the 3rd Battalion's attack on the Wilhelmina Canal Bridge. About 0900 hours, the leading element of the Battalion was fired upon. The fire was intense small arms and mortar fire pinning them to the ground. Immediately the second and third companies were deployed to the right. The second company advanced and succeeded in entering the Eastern edge of the town of Best. Here, a number of prisoners were taken.

The first two companies had kept up their fire protecting the advance of the third company and had advanced, but their losses were high. Two of the company commanders were casualties before noon. The terrain offered little protection against the enemies prepared positions. The enemy was afforded excellent observation and fields of fire. Many units, in their eagerness to gain ground, became separated from their companies and were surrounded by the enemy, only to fight their way clear.

The third company's position became so vulnerable later on that they withdrew to consolidate and reestablish contact with the Battalion.

Orders were given then to move South toward the Wilhelmina Canal and capture the bridge at that point. When darkness came, the Battalion had fought its way to within 600 yards North-East of the bridge. Here, orders were given to hold and resume the attack at daylight. The Third Battalion was now in position on the right flank. Very little fire was experienced during the night and at 0600 hours the attack was launched and came under intense fire from machine guns, mortars, 88's and 20 mm guns. In spite of this, which caused many casualties, the Battalion advanced 200 yards before being forced to withdraw to the position it had held the previous night. Heavy fire continued during the rest of the morning and forenoon, however, the Battalion held and prevented the enemy from breaking through and severing the British supply route from Eindhoven to Zon.

The Third Battalion moved off the drop zone with the leading element of the Battalion pushing forward to establish a road block and capture the bridges over the Wilhelmina Canal. The remainder of the Battalion moved to the Divisional reserve position. As the leading element of the Battalion neared its objective it was met with heavy fire and was forced to stop. At this time it called for assistance. The remainder of the Battalion immediately moved out of Wolfswinkel and came in contact with the enemy at 1920 hours. The Battalion moved into a defensive position to await daylight.

Action began again at about 0520 hours on the 18th of September when the enemy opened fire with automatic weapons on the Battalion positions on the front and left flank. It became heavier through the day, with artillery and mortar fire supporting and augmenting the fire of small arms and 20 mm AA gun fire. This heavy fire continued throughout the day, with the enemy seeming to fire in an area rather than at separate targets. In the morning, the enemy made two determined attacks supported by heavy artillery and mortar concentrations. These were repulsed with heavy losses to the enemy. However, during the morning many casualties were caused by infiltrating enemy and the heavy concentrations of fire poured into the pine growths in which the Battalion had taken up its position. Support weapons of the Battalion were limited to two 81 mm mortars and five 60 mm mortars. Supply lines were long and hazardous, and vehicles were not available.

The Battalion actually established the road block near the town of Best, and was preparing to take the bridges when it was overcome by a numerically superior enemy and heavy artillery fire causing it to withdraw South-East at which time the leading element asked for assistance.

During the afternoon of the 18th, the Battalion remained in position near the objective denying the enemy the use of the bridges over the Wilhelmina Canal and the main highway to Eindhoven from Best. At this time the Battalion forced back two more limited scale attacks by the enemy. At 1330 hours, during a heavy attack by the enemy and when the situation was becoming critical, five P-47s arrived over the position. Panels and orange smoke were displayed to identify the lines immediately. Following this action, the aircraft strafed and bombed the enemy at very close range as the enemy advanced to within 100 yards of our lines. This support, which was the first the Battalion had received, resulted in the enemy attack being repulsed with heavy losses in troops and equipment. At 1410 hours, during the strafing and bombing, the Battalion Commander was killed by rifle fire while observing the enemy from the Battalion C.P. located very close to the front lines.

During the evening of the 18th, a road block was established and held on the highway South of Best, thus denying the enemy access to the road for relieving and resupplying troops on the Canal. In a hotly contested action at about 0130 hours, the 19th, the enemy was decisively defeated and a section of the road comprising about 250 yards was wrested from them. The road block was the focal point of the action of the morning of the 19th. Intense artillery and mortar fire continued to fall on troops at the road block and in the main defensive positions. During the action on the 18th and the 19th, more than 1,100 rounds of 81 mm mortar ammunition were fired by the two mortars supporting the Battalion. Contact was established with the Second Battalion at 1845 hours on the evening of the 18th.

The bridges which were an objective of the Regiment were blown by the enemy the morning of the 19th. Because of the stubborn and effective resistance put up by the Regiment to an enemy far superior in strength and fire power, the enemy was denied the use of the Eindhoven - Best Highway and the bridges across the Wilhelmina Canal. Denied these routes, the enemy was unable to move reinforcements South to Eindhoven to prevent the capture of this city and to interfere with the advance of the British Second Army through the city of Zon.

At 1040 hours, the 19th of September, orders were issued for an attack by the Regiment less one battalion on the bridge. For the first time artillery and tank support were available. The artillery was to fire a five minute preparation preceding the attack and one squadron of Cromwell Tanks was in direct support. The Third Battalion was to be on the right and the Second Battalion on the left. The axis of the attack was along the Best - Eindhoven Highway.

The artillery barrage was fired at 1415 hours and the attack was launched. Initially the fire from the enemy was intense; the 20 mm guns being extremely effective, but the fire of the Regiment and the tanks soon established definite fire superiority and the troops were able to advance. As the enemy positions were reached, small groups began to surrender. These groups became larger until they numbered fifty and more. A collecting point was established in an open field which was soon covered with prisoners. As the advance continued toward the Canal, the enemy withdrew toward the woods on the left flank of the Second Battalion. They entered these and were in a position to attack the

left flank and rear of the Regiment. Fortunately, this fact was discovered and every available man in the Second Battalion C.P. group rushed to man positions surrounding the woods. The fire of this group combined with fire from the left flank company and one tank forced the surrender of about 400 of the enemy who were in the wood.

During the height of the battle a group of about 50 Germans penetrated the right flank and were advancing from the rear toward the Regimental C.P. before they were discovered. They were engaged by the C.P. personnel and routed after considerable losses. By 1730 hours all enemy resistance had ceased and the bridge was under firm control. The Regiment immediately established a defensive position to protect it.

Subsequent investigation showed that the area covered by the Regiment on the 17th, 18th and the 19th had contained about 2,500 troops. Of these, 1,042 were captured and an estimated 800 were killed. This last figure was reported by a British unit which later occupied the area and buried the dead. Reinforcing his normal complement of machine guns and mortars, the enemy had eight 88 mm guns, two 75 mm A.T. Guns and five 20 mm A.A. Guns. A German oberleutenant, the aid of the Commanding General at Best, who entered the Second Battalion position on parole on the night of the 19th, stated that the Commanding General had thought it impossible for anyone to overrun his position as the Regiment had. He also stated that the troops had fought like American Paratroopers, even though he did not know such was the fact.

Casualties in the Regiment were particularly heavy, especially among the officers. The Second Battalion lost all three rifle company commanders, the executive officer, the S-2, and the S-4, while the Third Battalion lost its' commander. Total casualties were 29 officers and 420 enlisted men.

Following the attack, the Regiment continued to occupy its' gains North of the Wilhelmina Canal and no large scale attacks were launched. On the morning of the 20th, a large force of enemy was disgorged from trucks in the Southern outskirts of Best but before they could develop a general attack they were beat to pieces by extremely accurate concentrations of mortar and artillery fire. So anxious was the Third Battalion Commander over the situation that threatened, he personally supervised the sensing of the fire of support weapons. The force of enemy which was estimated to be 14 truck loads of about a Battalion of men, succeeded in getting a force of not more than 20 men within 50 yards of the line. These were all killed or wounded by small arms fire, with a sorty capturing five of the wounded.

At 1800 hours, on the 20th of September, the Regiment moved out in Regimental column from the sector occupied by the Regiment South of Best, to St. Oedenrode. On arriving at St. Oedenrode at 1940 hours the Regiment was joined by the First Battalion and established a perimeter defense securing the city of St. Oedenrode. The Regimental mission was to hold St. Oedenrode and prevent the enemy from severing the Zon - Veghel Highway, which was the British Second Army route of advance.

The Third Battalion received orders from Regiment near St. Oedenrode on the 21st of September, to send three strong combat units to set up strong points near Olland, Holland, and clear the enemy out of this area. Three combat units left at 1150 hours. "H" and "G" Company took the lead roles in the attacks with seven tanks in support, with "H" Company taking the southernmost

route and "G" Company the other two. Each combat unit was supported by two tanks. "I" Company occupied the Battalion defensive positions for the day, with one platoon as mobile reserve to support the lead companies. "H" Company met minor resistance along its' entire route, reaching its' objective at about 1730 hours. "G" Company met stubborn resistance about 250 yards short of its' objective, the opposition being chiefly in the form of 88 mm guns and mortars. Objective #2 was taken at 1550 hours. Mortar fire continued for a half hour after the seizure of the objective. The force from "G" Company encountered stiff opposition along its' entire route. At 1520 hours, this patrol called for assistance in taking its' objective and for additional medical aid, thus forcing the commitment of the reserve at 1534 hours. Objective #3 was taken at about 1830 hours but only after very heavy fighting. One tank was bogged down, and the other refused to move forward at a point approximately 300 yards short of the objective. Enemy strength was estimated to be about a company reinforced with artillery and mortars. After taking all three objectives, a force of one platoon, supported by two tanks, from "H" Company was left to man each strong point and "G" Company was withdrawn. At 2100 hours, "H" Company was ordered to return to the Battalion defensive area for the purpose of constituting a reserve in case of expected enemy attack from forces reported to be moving South from the direction of Schijndel. Casualties sustained by the Third Battalion in this section was 25 officers and enlisted men killed or wounded. The Battalion captured 42 prisoners, one 88 mm gun, four machine guns and two mortars. The enemy in this area was completely disorganized because of this action and failed to offer any threat to the Regiment during the tense period when the enemy forced a break in "Hell's Highway" between St. Oedenrode and Veghel. The Third Battalion extended its' defensive lines and attached "H" Company to the First Battalion during the attack by the enemy forces from the direction of Schijndel on the Regimental sector.

On the 21st of September, the First Battalion made an attack to the North to widen the corridor around St. Oedenrode, stiff resistance was met. The enemy was in prepared positions and in addition to having his normal complement of automatic weapons and mortars, he was supported by artillery and 20 and 40 mm AA weapons depressed for firing on ground targets. One company succeeded in pushing 900 yards to the North, but another company which was attacking to the West, met with numerically superior forces who had gotten around to its' flank. A bitter struggle ensued, but through determined pushing and fighting, this company was able to straighten its' lines, drive the enemy from its' flank and dig in and hold the ground gained.

Late in the afternoon of the 21st of September, the Second Battalion received orders to move to a position just North of St. Oedenrode to support the First Battalion. It arrived there just prior to darkness.

During the night of the 21st and the 22nd, orders were issued for an attack of the Regiment less one battalion supported by a squadron of tanks. The objective was a road which crossed the St. Oedenrode - Schijndel Highway at a point approximately 2,500 yards North of St. Oedenrode. The attack was launched at 0630 hours across open ground against heavy machine guns, AT Guns, artillery and 20 and 40 mm fire but yard by yard the enemy was pushed back 1,500 yards. At about 1000 hours, the Regimental Commander, the S-2, the S-3, the assistant S-3 and several enlisted men of the Regimental Staff became casualties; however, the attack continued without slackening until the objective was reached.

The Regiment held the area North-East of the town and repulsed attacks of various strength until the 24th of September at 1630 hours when, as the Regiment was preparing to extend its' lines further North along the Vechel - St. Oedenrode Highway, a strong enemy force, estimated at two companies and supported by artillery, was reported approaching from the North toward the Highway. At 1700 hours, this force succeeded in cutting this vital supply route, destroyed over 25 supply vehicles and many tanks, and halted all transportation of the Second British Army South of St. Oedenrode.

During the night, the enemy, who had gotten to a position on the exposed right flank of the Regiment had dug in on either side of the road and had emplaced 88 mm guns in concealed positions with fields of fire down the Highway. To open this, the only route of communication for the British Army North of St. Oedenrode, "C" Company, plus "H" Company and ten tanks, attacked at dawn on the 25th. Four of the supporting tanks were knocked out by 88 mm guns fire almost immediately upon getting into position. When the 88 mm guns were spotted, friendly troops were so close to them that it was unsafe to bring artillery fire on them. A 57 mm AT gun was brought up and laid on the 88 mm SP gun which was in a position behind a hedgerow near the road. Several hits were made on the 88 guns and it was soon out of control. However, two other 88 mm guns were bringing fire on the troops who were advancing along the ditches which ran through the fields and one on either side of the road. Automatic and small arms fire was brought on these two guns and forced them to withdraw. In a fire fight that lasted until 1800 hours the evening of the 25th, the enemy was pushed back bit by bit and finally forced to withdraw to the North, thereby clearing the road. The enemy suffered severe casualties in this action and the many prisoners captured stated that it was their mission to cut the road and hold their positions at all costs.

During this entire period, from the 17th to the 25th of September, the First Battalion suffered 122 casualties and there were 372 prisoners taken.

The Regiment remained in a defensive position surrounding St. Oedenrode until the 3rd of October, when it was ordered to move to the vicinity of Nijmegen.

During the period from the 17th to the 27th of September, the 502nd Parachute Infantry accomplished every mission assigned although it was consistently opposed by enemy forces numerically superior both in personnel and supporting weapons.

The casualties sustained during this period totaled 51 officers and 556 enlisted men. Enemy losses numbered 1,498 captured, and an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 killed or wounded. The Regiment captured or destroyed the following equipment: 14 -- 88 mm guns; 2 - 75 mm A.T. guns; 7 - 20 mm A.A. guns; 7 - 81 mm mortars; and an unestimated number of machine guns and machine pistols.

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Commanding

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