



Sent by the Iron Sky: The Legacy of an American Parachute Battalion in World War II by Ian Gardner.

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Sent by the Iron Sky is the prolific military historian¹ Ian Gardner's comprehensive account of the actions and legacy of the 3rd Battalion 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) during World War II. It is enhanced by detailed maps, vivid photographs, and stories told by the paratroopers themselves.

The 506th PIR was officially activated on 20 July 1942 in furtherance of the War Department's goal of creating a "super unit" to be inserted behind enemy lines in support of strategic Allied objectives. Comprised of highly motivated recruits and experienced non-commissioned officers, the 506th prepared for combat at Camp Toccoa GA. Their rigorous drill regimen stressed intense physical training and weapons mastery. Their commander, Lt. Col. Bob Wolverton, fostered a strong esprit de corps that later paid off in combat.

The 3rd Battalion of the 506th PIR jumped into Normandy early on D-Day. From the start, things did not go according to plan. But, even though many paratroopers landed some distance from their intended drop zone, their ingenuity, courage, and decisive action helped secure the Allied victory. The Battalion fought to secure bridges, towns, and main roads in the Cotentin Peninsula, allowing the 4th Infantry Division to amass forces and firepower on Utah Beach. Gardner provides in-depth paratrooper profiles and vivid images of combat and destruction in Normandy. He notes that, on 27 August 1944, the 506th PIR honored its 414 members killed or gone missing during the Normandy campaign.

The Germans in Normandy called the 101st Airborne Division (which included the 3rd Battalion) "butchers with big pockets" (97). The reputation the 3rd earned in combat set the stage for future engagements on the continent of Europe. After reconstituting with replacements in England, the 3rd received new equipment and intense training for their next action in the European theater.

For the Battalion, Operation Market Garden would start out easy. As compared to their experience on D-Day, the men encountered little resistance in landing in their assigned drop zone. But in the battle for Eindhoven (17-25 Sept. 1944) and subsequent engagements, German resolve proved more formidable than Allied intelligence indicated. Gardner tells of the many Dutch civilians who assisted in the fighting to dislodge the entrenched German forces in the city and surrounding countryside. As Gardner explains, the wisdom of conducting Operation Market Garden in Holland has been hotly debated by strategists for decades. That said, he highlights the "unquestionable courage and determination" (149) of 3rd Battalion and the rest of the 506th PIR.

The opening of the German offensive in the Ardennes (15 Dec. 1944) caught the Allied high command off guard. The 101st Airborne Division, as well as the 506th and 3rd Battalion, were called upon to secure the vital road-crossing town of Bastogne in Belgium. Elements of the 3rd

1. And veteran who served in a parachute battalion (1988-93).

helped stem the tide of the German army in the town of Foy, about three miles northeast of Bastogne. The brutal fighting lasted over a month and the town changed hands several times. Throughout, 3rd cemented its legacy as an elite fighting force: despite suffering daunting casualties, it halted the Germans' advance in Belgium and eventually took part in combat operations in Germany itself.

As the war wound down, 3rd Battalion was called upon to act as a security force in their assigned sector of control. Gardner describes its encounter with slave labor camps, a harrowing experience its men remembered the rest of their lives. Two years after boarding C-47s bound for Normandy, the battalion held a reunion to honor its two hundred men killed in action. The bonds they formed during training grew stronger in combat and lasted a lifetime.

Ian Gardner's *Sent by the Iron Sky* offers a carefully researched fresh look at the history and exploits of the 506th PIR and 3rd Battalion in the European Theater. Serious students and non-specialist readers alike will find it to be an engrossing and reliable account of a Parachute Infantry Regiment in the Second World War.