

This is an oral history interview being conducted with Mr. William D. Hardy, a veteran of the 377th Parachute Field Artillery, 101st Airborne Division. This interview is being conducted at the 101st Airborne Division Reunion in San Antonio, Texas, on the 9th of August 2001. The interview is being conducted by Scott Schoner and John O'Brien.

Sir if you could start off by telling us how you came into the Army.

Mr. Hardy: Well I came into the Army, I got out of high school in 1939, I didn't go on to school. By 1940 most people could see that war was imminent. I wasn't exactly too high about getting into the Army but I did want to fly an airplane. At that time you had to have two years college or pass an equivalent test to get into the flight school. So I passed the test equivalent two years college so I was accepted for flight training. I had entered in a junior college in Modesto, California. That was in the fall of 1941. Of course December 7, 1941 was Pearl Harbor. I thought, "Boy I got to go!" So that is when I took that test and I passed it. Unfortunately I washed out of flying school; primary flying school at Muskogee, Oklahoma. Soon after that I qualified for OCS. So I went to artillery OCS at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Then I batted around in different artillery outfits mostly with draftee troops. I didn't like it so I signed up for the Airborne and I signed up two or three times for different reasons. I was needed where I was or whatever and for different excuses I didn't get to go. I finally got into the Airborne at Fort Benning, Georgia, on June 6th. That was the week we were taking our jump training. I can't remember whether it was my first jump or last jump. It was made on D-Day; what was D-Day, the invasion of Normandy. I thought I was going to miss at all. But things went pretty fast after that. The 4th of July we were on the high seas going to England. I got to England and was assigned to the 101st just as they were returning from Normandy, D-Day at Normandy. I got there sometime early in July. I spent the summer in England. We had several missions that we got ready for that were cancelled as troops broke out of Normandy and started across France. But finally the Market Garden, the invasion of Holland, which is referred to often times as "A Bridge Too Far." I got to make that. I went in on the first day as a forward observer.

I just want to ask you, you mentioned that you were with draftees before you joined the Airborne and you didn't like that. What was it that you didn't like?

Mr. Hardy: Well I thought too much bitching. I didn't think they were exactly with it you know.

You were trying to volunteer to go to the Airborne. Why did you want to go to the Airborne?

Mr. Hardy: Well because I had felt safer fighting with those kind of people.

Where we were, we were just getting ready for Operation Market Garden. Can you describe for us a little bit of the type of briefing that you got before you went? Did you jump into Holland?

Mr. Hardy: Yes, jumped in. I was assigned to the 101st, 377th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion but our artillery didn't go in on D-Day. The 101st sent some observers in and the mission was that we would be in range with the British artillery and we would adjust the British artillery. Our artillery didn't come in for two days. There was a pretty bad snafu there. When we got there our radios weren't coordinated with the British and we didn't have communications like we were supposed to have had. So the 101st went two days without.

What was the plan for communication with the British?

Mr. Hardy: By radio.

What went wrong with the radios?

Mr. Hardy: We weren't synchronized. We didn't have the right crystals for our radios to communicate with the British.

Did somebody test that before leaving England?

Mr. Hardy: Oh gracious, evidently not. It was all assumed that we would have communication. I spent the first two days in Holland kind of useless. I got to go with the 3rd Battalion, later 2nd Battalion, 502 down to the Battle of Best which originally one company was to go there and take one bridge. But quite a battle ensued there; one of the greater battles of the 502 I think. That was touch and go until the third day and the British tanks linked up with us and we prevailed. Quite a sizable bunch of prisoners were taken. In the meantime our artillery had gotten in. Most of the 377th came in by glider; one battery parachuted in. As the fight ended at Best I went back to my outfit and they said to go down to Zohn, the 506th was being attacked from the town of Hellmont (?). I went down there and looked over the canal and sure enough it was quite an attack; at least three tanks. So here I am, first artillery mission, I called for artillery fire and got it laid down pretty good. I thought I contributed quite a bit to stopping that attack. As far as knocking out any tanks, I didn't. I don't think I did. But the tanks stopped and the Germans withdrew. I thought we made a contribution there. That little battle got over with so I went back to the outfit again and he said, "Hardy go over the aerial OP." The 1/502 are getting quite a bit of pressure from the town of Shindel. So I went over to their OP and went up with this pilot, Bill McCrae. We got up and sure enough we could see the road coming down from Shindel into St. Oden Road. There were troops, there were trucks and it was quite a target. Supposedly we did an awful good job on that. As the mission was ending we got a report over the radio, "Watch out for enemy aircraft." We looked down and here was a ____ 109 it was coming at us with all guns blazing. This Bill McCrae he put this little piper cub into a dive and slid on a cow pasture and scrambled out just as the 109 made a u-turn, came back and strafed us but didn't get the plane or didn't get us. After things quieted down we took off.

How many of those aerial OP missions did you participate in?

Mr. Hardy: Not very many. That one I just described and then when I got back from Pathfinder school to Bastogne about the last mission of the 101st “Attacked on _____” was his boot. I got to go into aerial OP again to help with that. Those were the only two Airborne missions. The day after this aerial OP when the plane was attacked I was assigned the 1/502 on an attack on the town on Shindel on this road where I had fired on the night before. It was quite an attack and an experience for me. We pushed up this road about two miles; we pushed the Germans back. We got to fire on some artillery that they had; take it out. I saw a battle tank across the front that I got to fire on. But we prevailed on that mission. About that time about the next day I’m going to say this to be up around D+5 or 6. Well of course this Market Garden was to take a long road from the Wilhelmina Canal to the town of Arnum and along the same corridor. The Germans were able to cut it from time to time. They cut the road between St. Oden Road and Vagel. I got to go with the 1st Battalion up to help open that road.

1/502?

Mr. Hardy: I think we were 1/502; from our side and part of the 501 came down the road from Vagel to meet. There was a self-propelled gun that was giving trouble. One of the infantry lieutenants said, “Can you get that gun?” So I got out on a sand dune to see if I could see the gun and damned if the gun didn’t see me first and put a round in awful close to me. I got away and was able to sneak around and see the gun and I was able to knock that self-propelled gun out and I want say exactly what it was; but it was an 88 or smaller. I think it was a smaller gun. I got several shots there, different squads of infantry and so forth. I’m getting a little ahead of myself. Before I got that self-propelled gun I was going to set up an OP in a Dutch windmill. I was climbing the stairs to this windmill and wham, wham, maybe it was this same self-propelled gun. It shot about three holes in the top of it. So I decided to look for another place for my OP. This all happened in the area of Zohn, St. Oden Road right in front of...we were the first division in front of the British Second Army as they started up this road. But after they got with us and their troops took over our land that we had taken, we moved up on what they call the island between Arnum and Ninemegan. The total time in Holland was about 73 days. I think it was about the second week, about D+12 when we moved up on that island. The Germans were determined to put us off of that island when we first got there. My first experience there was with the 501 just across the river from the town of _____. I was up on the dike that overlooked the North Rheine. I was getting some targets. I looked off to my left and there was a squad of troops of about nine men followed by a machine gun; a couple of people packing a light machine gun and probably an MT40 to. They were right on us and I didn’t think I had time to get artillery on them and there was no infantry right there. So I took my M1 and mowed down that whole squad. Later I was decorated for it.

What became of the MT 40?

Mr. Hardy: It’s still laying there I guess.

Were you able to take that out also?

Mr. Hardy: Well they didn't have the MT 40 zeroed in on us. They were just packing it; this incident that I am speaking of.

Which decoration did you receive?

Mr. Hardy: Silver Star. I had been there about three days and somebody came to relieve me just shortly after that. In the meantime the 501st prevailed in their fight and repelled this attack and taken several prisoners; I want to say 20. They were marching them back to the rear and I was following them along, me and my radio operator, and the Germans picked up and saw us I guess. They sent down a mortar barrage and God they really pelted us with those damn mortars; mainly these prisoners that we were herding along. There were some Americans wounded and some of the German troops a couple of them were killed. One of them was badly wounded. One of the guards to these troops, I think his name was Heide. I remember saying to Heide, "Why don't you shoot that son of a bitch?" I mean I didn't see any help for him and I'm pretty shook up with these Germans at that time. He gave me an answer that I thought about sometimes later. He said, "Lieutenant, I want to come out of this service with a clear conscience." I'm not sure of that man's name if I would have been in later years I would have written him and complimented him. There was several more couple of good scraps up on that island.

There have been some authors that have written that the 101st was not happy with that mission because they were being used like a regular infantry division. Did you remember any...?

Mr. Hardy: Yes, definitely. During our time in Holland, we spent about 73 days and we weren't used like we thought we should have been. When we came out of Holland, I was recommended for Pathfinder school. One or two people from each battalion were designated to go to Pathfinder school and that is to lead the troops in on other missions, run a navigation to lead the planes in. I thought it was a great honor to get to go to this Pathfinder school; to go to Oxford, England to Pathfinder school. The company commander's name was Fred Culpepper. That was a pretty belated honor to get to go to this school. I just got settled in there good when the Battle of the Bulge started. It must have been crazy as hell because I wanted to get back to Bastogne; to hell with that pathfinder stuff. That was my feeling then. Thinking so highly of Fred Culpepper for recommending me for Pathfinder school, I got to thinking he was a son of a bitch for trying to get rid of me. There were about two sticks from the pathfinder school that got to jump into Bastogne to lead in to resupply. I wanted to go with them but no we might have to have some more people later on. I didn't get to go.

Who was conducting the Pathfinder school? The first airborne allied army or...

Mr. Hardy: It was the 101st Division. You'll have to give me some time to think about who was in command of it. Right off I can't say.

What was the reputation of the Pathfinders that had two operations with; you indicated that you were honored to be selected. Was it pretty much known throughout the division that they were a special outfit?

Mr. Hardy: Yes, that is what I thought. They went in first and they set up navigation equipment to lead the planes in. In Normandy they were confused like the rest of the drop was. Holland, that was a parade ground jump; everything went together good for Holland. The Pathfinders I guess contributed to it but the troop carrier pathfinders did too. Something that went through my mind while I was sitting over here a while ago was going into Holland. We got loaded up and the planes all got assembled and we started out for Holland. I was looking out the door of this C-47 and I looked down and I saw these white cliffs. I thought, "My God, that is what the song was written about, White Cliffs of Dover." I really don't think I was scared, but I was damn apprehensive. One of the flashbacks I had in later years was thinking, "I wonder if I will ever see those white cliffs again?" I went back to the 50th Reunion at Holland and took a side trip back to England and coming from _____ headed over, I saw those white cliffs again. I got to Pathfinder school and finally got back to Bastogne well after the siege. I got there about the 13th of January. The 502nd was preparing an attack on I think the town of _____. I was directed to go over their OP and adjust some artillery in front of it. So I flew about three missions that day in their OP. About that time the troops from the north end of the Bulge linked up with troops from the south end. The 101st was sent to _____ Lorraine to a defensive position. We were there about 30 days and I spent the whole time up on the line. I felt very guilty because I didn't contribute very much to the Bastogne campaign. So I just stayed up on the line; a little town of Newberry on the _____ River. It was a short ways from the town of Hagenal. So from there we came back to France, Marmelagne outside of _____ and was awarded a full division unit citation for their conduct in Bastogne. From there we went up on the Rheine River, across the Rheine River from Dusseldorf. I got to fire some more artillery there across the river into what they called the rural pocket (?). The first army had gone up on one side and the third on the other. They had the rural valley cut off. We were across the river from the town of Dusseldorf and quite a few targets of opportunity I got to shoot at. We were there when President Roosevelt died and none of us knew who the Vice President was. The reports came in on this read out that the Germans were going to establish in the Alps Mountains; in the Bavarian Alps. So about the 20th of April, and keep in mind the war ended the 8th of May, while we were sent around to help the 7th Army put pressure on this read out.

(changed tape)

This is the second tape with Mr. William D. Hardy and Sir if you can talk about the rural pocket (?).

Mr. Hardy: There's a rural pocket (?) that the Americans prevailed there while we were sent there to help the 7th Army. The thought was that the Germans were going to put up a lot of resistance in the Alps Mountains in the Bavarian Alps. We were sent to reinforce them. We went from this town of _____ which was across the river from the town of Dusseldorf. We went to Kempton, Germany. At that point I was selected for one member of advanced detail to go between Kempton and the town of Lansburg. We were

supposedly going into the line to pull some resistance. When we got there it was under control. When we got into this town of Lansburg, I wanted to address this; we started getting into some of the concentration camps. Ever since we had been in Germany we had seen some of the slave labor camps. They were mostly foreigners that came to work in the industry and so forth. When we got to Lansburg we saw some of the Jewish population wearing white striped uniforms and so forth. My gosh, pitiful looking people. There was nothing to do at Lansburg and the report was to go on to Munich. So we went on to Munich and there again things were fluent. We took over this house and it was the north side of Munich and it was just a few miles from Dachau prison camp. A couple of Lieutenants from the 502nd named Lieutenant Dorsey and Lieutenant Gunn, they came by this house and had taken over which happened to be a retired German Generals house. These were a couple of Lieutenant's that I thought were improperable. I'm probably not using the right word. But I didn't think anything could shake them up. But they had just been through the Dachau prison camp; the ovens where the people were cooked. Some of the people that were still alive there, just barely alive, and Lieutenant Dorsey or somebody was describing it and I said, "By gosh I am going to go up and see that." They said, "By God you do want to go and see it." That must have been about the 2nd of May. From there the 506th went on in to Berchtesgaden. We took over an area Bad Reichenhal and Unchen. That is where we were on the 8th of May when the war ended. Then our job, I guess that was the most relaxing time in my life. The war was over and there was no pressure from the war. All the discipline, I wouldn't say the Army fell apart it sure didn't, but things eased up.

Was there any concern about going to Japan at that point?

Mr. Hardy: We were. As a matter of fact, I was at a ____ back in France at a Japanese order of battle school at Drew, France on VJ-Day sometime August 7th in the first part of August. We were close enough to Paris and four or five of us got in a jeep and took off for Paris. We celebrated VJ-Day in Paris in great style I will say.

So were you separated from service when the division was inactivated or did you transfer to another outfit?

Mr. Hardy: We were separated on a point system. I didn't have enough points to be separated and the 101st was deactivated along in December of 1945. Those of us that were still with the 101st went to the 82nd and a bulk of them got to come home and march with the 82nd down 5th Avenue in New York.

Any thoughts on your service with the 101st about it as a division or what it meant to serve in that unit?

Mr. Hardy: Oh gracious. I don't whether to start with if I would have volunteered or not but if it was ever to start up again well I would want to be in the 101st.

Is there anything that we didn't ask you that you would like to talk about?

Mr. Hardy: I think I covered my notes pretty well. I certainly appreciate what you folks are doing; get a record from some of us before we go plum senile.

Well thank you very much.