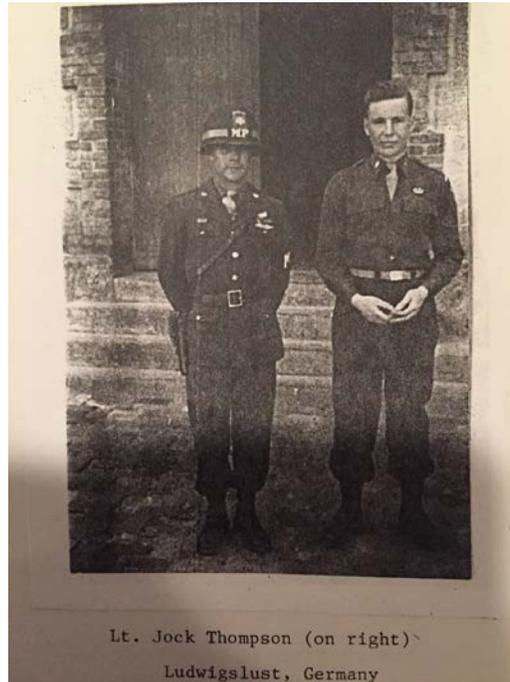




OPERATION MARKET GARDEN



During the month of September, the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, commemorates the WWII events that occurred during OPERATION MARKET GARDEN in 1944. On September 15th, word came down for a proposed jump ahead of Gen. Dempsey's British Second Army. The mission called for the Airborne Army to descend from the skies and occupy bridges over the extensive waterways of Southern and Central Holland. The 504th, jumping as part of the 82nd Airborne Division, was to descend 57 miles behind enemy lines in the vicinity of Grave, Holland and take the longest span bridge in Europe over the Maas River, along with two other bridges over the Maas-Waal Canal.

At 1231, pathfinder men of the 504th landed on the DZ and thus became the first Allied troops to land in Holland; 34 minutes later the regiment "hit the silk" and the greatest airborne invasion in history was officially on

The 2nd BN, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), was given the mission to take the bridge over the Maas River. E Company of the 2nd BN, 504th was to jump south of the Maas River while the remainder of the 2nd BN would descend north of the river.

The Hero of this article is 1LT John Thompson, who was 27 years old and the Platoon Leader of 3rd Platoon E Company, 2nd BN, 504th PIR. His mission was to take the southern end of the grave bridge over the Maas River. At fifteen hundred feet long, with nine spans, the bridge was the largest and most modern in all of Europe. It was also, of course, Market Garden's most vital objectives. In fact, the bridge was so important that Colonel Reuben Tucker, commander of the 504th PIR, had decided to envelop it by dropping two companies from his 2nd Battalion to the north of it and the other company to the south.



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1LT John Thompson vividly remembers standing in the door of his C-47, carefully studying the terrain below, “watching for landmarks familiar on the maps. There was a slight haze, even though the sun was shining brightly. Soon, the green light was flashed on, and this was it. I was still looking for our company drop zone but could not make it out. I guess our plane was a little too far to the left to the formation. I could see up ahead the little walled town of Grave with the majestic bridge just 1,000 yards to the north of town. There was also a good-sized road running north and south leading to the entrance of the bridge.”

“I could not recognize the actual drop zone from my vantage point. All I could see was a series of fairly wide crisscrossing canals. The land area in between was not very large. We were now fast approaching the bridge area and the feeling innermost in my mind was that the bridge was our one and only objective. The fastest way to get there was to jump as close as possible to it and use the surprise factor to overcome any possible superiority in numbers the enemy might have.”

“The bridge was in clear view now and I could plainly see the flak towers straddling the southern approaches to the bridge, gun emplacements and many foxholes. Men were running around and there were several vehicles on the road. I picked out a plot of land just before the bridge and gave the signal to jump. We were only 900 to 1,000 yards from the ground, and the descent was uneventful.”

1st Lieutenant “Joko” and his stick landed in open fields seven hundred yards southwest of the Grave Bridge.

“We were all separated when we landed, which worked out well. There was considerable enemy fire now coming from the vicinity of the bridge and along the road. Four of my men landed in the canals,



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which were quite deep. This left us with 17 men, two wet walkie-talkies, and plenty of firepower, including two bazooka teams, which turned out to be a very decisive factor in our attack on the bridge.”

“We could tell that there was mass confusion around the bridge, of which we took advantage. We moved quickly toward the bridge as enemy fire from the left side of the bank, particularly from the flak tower, continually kept going over our heads. The road leading up to the bridge was highly banked on either side, and from our depressed elevation we could not actually tell how many enemy we were facing.”

“Two men were sent to inspect the bridge spans to look for possible demolition set-ups and, if possible, work their way to the north approach to the bridge. We set up one machine-gun emplacement on the right side. We also acquired a good supply of their potato-masher grenades, which came in very handy.”

“All of the sudden, down the road from the vicinity of Grave came a commander car loaded with personnel followed by two truckloads of troops. WE HAD THE BRIDGE, we were well dug-in and had plenty of firepower. So far, our casualties were one waterlogged paratrooper and two men with slight flesh wounds.”

The tactical surprise achieved by the 2nd BN, 504th PIR was so complete as to deny to the enemy the full advantage of their extensive network of defenses. The bridge was secured and it was named The John Thompson Bridge, which is commemorated every year during the ceremonies and events of the Commemoration of Operation Market Garden.

Taken from

The Devils in Baggy Pants

Battle of the Bridges Author: Frank van Lunteren

September Hope Author: John c. McManus