

Band of Brothers

Easy Company, 2nd BN, 506th PIR

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The NCOs of Easy Company, 2-506th Parachute Infantry Regiment played a critical role in the successes that the company achieved during World War II. From the formation of the company, the NCO corps was the one constant and stable factor in the unit. Commanders and platoon leaders were reassigned within the regiment, but the NCOs who served with Easy were promoted from the original core of Toccoa privates. These NCOs shared a bond with the soldiers of the unit through some of the toughest fighting in the war. Historians often write about the exploits of units, and the accomplishment of the officers, without giving credit to the NCO leaders. Easy Company was Easy Company because of the NCOs.

Easy Company, 2-506th was constituted on July 1, 1942 at Camp Toccoa, Georgia. At the time, it was the first parachute infantry regiment that would complete basic training and parachute training as a unit. Lieutenant Sobel, the unit commander, and a NCO cadre made up from "Old Army" NCOs led the training at Toccoa. LT Sobel was determined that his company would be the best in the regiment. His method of insuring this result was to demand more of Easy's men. They drilled longer, ran faster and trained harder than the other companies. The training was rigorous. They were building a regiment from scratch. It took over 5,800 men to fill the 1,948-man regiment.

By the end of November, basic training was over. Every man in the company had mastered his own specialty. Each man was capable of handling any job in the platoon. Each private knew the duties of a corporal and sergeant and was prepared to take over if necessary. In December 1942, Easy Company began its jump training at Fort Benning, Georgia. Because of the exceptional training the unit received at Toccoa, the entire company graduated from Airborne

School. After airborne training, the regiment continued training at Fort Benning. The training concentrated on squad training, especially house-to house fighting. They also continued to make parachute jumps.

In March 1942, the unit moved to Camp Mackall, North Carolina for more intense and sophisticated training. Exercises included jumps with full combat equipment and platoon and higher level maneuvers. Preparations were being made for the inevitable invasion of Europe that would surely come. By this time, all of Easy's NCOs were from the original group of privates. The "Old Army" cadre types had quit as training grew more intense. "These were men," as one private said, "who were leaders that we respected and would follow anywhere."

Easy Company landed in England aboard the troop ship Samaria on September 15, 1943. They were based nearby the village of Aldbourne during their training. They were in England to prepare for the invasion of Europe and conducted intense training. The training consisted of marches, close combat exercises, booby traps, mine removal, and chemical warfare. In May 1944, Easy moved to Uppottery Airfield (their marshalling area and the airfield for the invasion of Europe).

On June 6, 1944, Easy Company parachuted into Normandy, France behind the beaches code named "Utah". The company mission was to kill the German garrison at Ste. Marie-du-Mont village and seize the exit at causeway Number 2, the road coming up from the coast. This would allow troops landing at Utah Beach to drive inland from the shore. Because of clouds, enemy anti-aircraft fire, and the evasive actions taken by the pilots, the company's troops were scattered over a 20-kilometer wide area of the French coast. Small groups of men from both the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions teamed up to engage the enemy in their areas. These actions actually confused the German defenders and slowed the flow of German reinforcing units. By morning,

the Easy could only pull together nine riflemen, two officer, two light machine guns, one bazooka, and a 60mm mortar. This group of men saved many lives that day by taking out a battery of 105mm howitzers that was firing at the Utah Beach sector. The unit eventually regrouped and fought until July 10, 1944 when they took the town of Carentan. They moved back to the beach where they were transported back to England to refit and await another mission. Easy had jumped into Normandy with 139 men, they left with 74 men present for duty.

On September 17, 1944, Easy jumped into Holland during Operation Market Garden. The task of the battalion was to take the bridge over the Wilhelmina Canal, then join the 3rd battalion in liberating Eindhoven. These actions would help allow the British guards Armored Division to move northward toward the bridges at Arnhem, and into Germany. Although successful in seizing their objectives and keeping the road open, the regiment paid the price. In ten days of fighting, Easy had suffered 22 killed. For the next two months, the company held a static defensive line in Holland. On November 25, 1944 easy was pulled off the line and sent to France for rest and refit.

Veterans were returning from the hospital, and new recruits came in. Officers transferred to battalion or regimental staffs. It was the NCOs who were providing the continuity and holding the company together. The heart of the company, the NCO corps, was made up of Toccoa men who had started as privates in August 1942.

On December 17, 1944, German forces made one last offensive attempt. This action was dubbed the Battle of the Bulge. Easy company, with little refit completed, was trucked to the front and dug in near Bastogne, Belgium. The men had little ammunition and almost no winter clothing. Easy held their positions on the line during bitter fighting with the enemy. None of the officers who led on D-Day were with the company. The core of the old company consisted of

what was left of the NCOs. They held the company together through inept command decisions and heavy losses among the enlisted ranks. When the siege of Bastogne was broken, easy went on the offensive. They would fight for two weeks to regain ground around Bastogne, and then they were moved to regimental reserves. The spirit of Easy Company was alive, thanks to the sergeants.

On February 5, 1945, the 506th relieved men of the 79th Infantry Division in the city of Haguenau. The Germans occupied the buildings on the north side of the Moder River. For two weeks the opponents sniped, mortared, and shelled each other. The 506th was pulled back to Mourmelon on February 25th for refitting and rest. This time, they enjoyed both.

On April 18, 1945, all German resistance in the Ruhr pocket came to an end. More than 325,000 German soldiers surrendered. Easy Company's final major offensive action in the war was the seizing of Berchtesgarden. As the German Army crumbled the 101st Airborne Division was to take Hitler's headquarters there to prevent the German High Command from using the mountaintop Eagle's Nest. The company captured the Eagle's Nest and afterward enjoyed the spoils of their victory. Hitler committed suicide and Germany surrendered formally on May 8.

Easy moved to Zell am See, Bavaria, some 30 kilometers south of Berchtesgarden, on May 8. The battalion's job was to disarm the approximately 25,000 German soldiers in the area. They would ship the German soldiers to POW camp and maintain order in the area. There were no problems with the Germans. After the POWs were sorted and shipped out of the area, the next job was to sort out and consolidate all the captured German equipment and the US Army equipment no longer needed for combat. As the material was gathered and registered, convoys of trucks took it to depots in France.

With their mission complete, the men of Easy enjoyed a lot of drinking and recreational activities. The company started to break up. Veterans were allowed to get out of the Army. By the middle of July nearly every veteran of Normandy was gone. Those who remained started a training regimen to support a possible attack on Japan. Of course, this attack never materialized because of the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6th. Shortly thereafter, the colors of the 506th were cased and the unit was deactivated.

Forty-eight members of Easy had given their lives in battle. More than 100 had been wounded, many severely, some several times. Most of the men left the Army and set out to make up for lost time. Some men stayed in the Army and rose to high ranks. They had faced many hardships in the Army. They had volunteered for the paratroops because they had wanted to be with the best. They had succeeded. They would accept nothing less in civilian life. Many went to college on the GI Bill. They came back, got married, and for the most part were remarkably successful.

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