



Sent by the Iron Sky

How the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment settled into UK life ahead of D-Day

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In 1944, the men of Third Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, were on UK soil preparing for the brutal battle ahead for Normandy, and the Allied liberation of Europe. In his new book, *Sent by the Iron Sky*, historian Ian Gardner tells the story of the Battalion; from their training in the British countryside to combat on European soil, telling the story of their involvement in Operation Market Garden, the Battle of the Bulge, their heroic defense of Bastogne, through to occupying Hitler's mountain retreat of Berchtesgaden. Here's an excerpt from the book looking at how those brave American soldiers settled into life on British soil.

Following their arrival at Liverpool on September 16, 1943, the regiment unloaded and headed inland to the nearest operational railhead in readiness for transportation south. Early the next morning the paratroopers arrived at a Victorian-era station in the Kennet Valley, 68 miles east of London. In the half-light, a sergeant from the divisional advance party welcomed everyone to Hungerford – emphasizing the word “Hunger” – before directing each battalion to its designated trucks. From here the Third Battalion was driven a short distance to a small camp in the picturesque village of Ramsbury. The ancient rural village lies beside the river Kennet, which flows through beautiful water meadows

that flourish in the valley below the airfield. Situated on the northern edge of town, beside Love's Lane, Camp Ramsbury consisted of 17 sparse wooden barracks and a Nissen hut, which became Colonel Wolverton's headquarters.

Adjacent to the camp's main entrance and connected by a tall hedge-lined footpath was Parliament Piece. The imposing 16th-century manor house had already been requisitioned as a billet, mess and club facility for the junior officers along with the old coach house, which became home for one platoon of troopers from C Company. Fifty-four-year-old widower Violet Wyndham was the lady of the house and was more than happy to share her spacious



Built during the reign of Charles I, Parliament Piece was utilized as a home away from home for most of Third Battalion's company commanders and junior officers

home with the Americans. Born in Paris, Violet had been a sophisticated debutante whose mother Ada Leveson was a popular writer and good friend of Oscar Wilde. Over the coming months the house became party central for the dashing young officers who were far from home and often in need of "Lady W's" sage-like advice.

Next morning the entire battalion formed up on the grass "parade ground." Colonel Wolverton explained that there were strict protocols governing how they should behave toward the local population. Everyone was issued a booklet entitled *A Short Guide to Great Britain* that outlined British customs and rationing and the complicated currency of pounds, shillings and pence. Each barrack hut could accommodate one platoon and had a row of double-tier bunks along either side of the room. Mattresses were stuffed with straw. The four lightbulbs in each block did not generate enough light to even read by and the two stoves provided just about enough heat to stop the water from freezing in the winter. As there was no furniture available the men had to keep their clothes and other possessions in barrack bags stored between the beds. Radios were installed to liven things up a little, but some who had brought their own short wave sets from the States soon tuned in to the likes of "Axis Sally" and her German propaganda channel which also played all the big band

music of the time. After one week confined to camp the men were allowed off base to explore the delights of their new English home. At that time there were eight pubs in the village and the battalion made full use of them. When the bartenders called "time" the men learned to finish their drinks quickly.

Most of the senior NCOs were sent to homes around the village that had previously been billets for the British 34th Army Tank Brigade. Most, like Hills Grocery Store in the High Street, were still furnished with basic Government Issue beds and blankets. To encourage closer links with British families, local children were often invited to spend a day at the camp, playing soldiers with the Americans. The battalion also took out a short lease on a property in Oxford Street, which became the camp laundry and tailor's shop. One of the troopers who worked here, Manny Barrios, spent six months happily co-habiting with a married woman across the road whose husband was a prisoner-of-war in North Africa. This was by no means unusual.

The enlisted men's mess hall was situated just down the road from the camp in an old schoolhouse along Back Lane. Not far from the mess was another place owned by the church dubbed "The British Restaurant." These restaurants were run by local authorities and subsidized by the government. This self-service chain pro-

vided, for soldier and civilian alike, good, cheap snacks without the need for ration coupons. Even though the Americans were reasonably well fed, poaching became very popular during the first few months. Double British Summer Time meant longer evenings. Often the smell of barbecues would waft across the entire camp, and despite numerous crackdowns and fines the practice continued right up until the battalion left for Normandy.

Midway along Ramsbury's High Street, just opposite The Burdett Arms, the American Red Cross set up a recreation club and Army Exchange (PX). The club was for enlisted men only and was housed within a large Nissen hut. The club was unofficially called the "Wolverton Donut Dugout" and run by Helen Briggs and Louise Shepard. Together Helen and Louise would organize quiz nights, bingo sessions, card games and sometimes outings by bus to Swindon, Reading or places of local interest. Dances and concerts were also held in the local village hall.

For soldiers on leave, Marlborough and Swindon were popular destinations, but London was the Mecca, and 48-hour passes to the capital were always the hardest to get a hold of – not that there was much time for that. No sooner had the Americans settled into their new home that there began a long period of intensified training. Colonel Sink called meetings with his



Privates Rosie, Abbey and Krebs from the 81mm Mortar Platoon standing next to their hut at Camp Ramsbury

battalion and company commanders, and in mid-September 1943, General Bill Lee, the 101st divisional commander, visited the unit and gave a sobering talk entitled, "The responsibility ahead of us." The first full-field exercise undertaken by the regiment was scheduled to take place over two days in early October. The aim was to drive "enemy" forces from Ramsbury and then defend and hold the village against any possible counterattack. The countryside around the village consisted mainly of small fields and hedgerows which would prove to be not very different to northern France. The 506th began training day and night in every location imaginable prior to the exercise and continued after it was successfully concluded. Local people were often surprised to find soldiers running through their gardens and hiding in sheds and outbuildings. An area just north of Ramsbury near to Pentico Farm was allocated and reserved extensively for live firing exercises including bazooka, grenade

and explosive demolition practice.

Tragically, on January 13, 1944, while G Company was making a demonstration jump for the Duke of Gloucester, Sergeant Homer Sarver was killed when his parachute failed to open. His death was the first suffered by the battalion as a direct result of jumping but was a painful reminder of the inherent dangers for all airborne troops. In March, due to ill health, General Bill Lee was replaced by General Maxwell Taylor as commander of the division. Nearly two weeks later Taylor, together with General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, watched a massive demonstration jump by the Second and Third Battalions of the 506th. The First Battalion remained on the ground and was inspected by the visitors. In the days that followed General Taylor did his utmost to get to know his regimental and battalion commanders and soon started preparations for the division's final D-Day training phase. ★



This 1930s view of Ramsbury's square shows 2 of the 8 pubs which belonged to the village during WW2



Find out more about the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment's WW2 involvement in *Sent by the Iron Sky* by Ian Gardner, now available in hardback from Osprey Publishing. Buy a copy from www.ospreypublishing.com or all good book sellers.