

Description

The 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment Seizes Goronne, Belgium, Battle of the Bulge
7 January 1945



Few men in the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) paid much attention to the distant artillery fire on December 16, 1944. Things had been relatively quiet along the front for the last four weeks while the Regiment rested and refitted at Camp Suippes, France, but their rapidly crumbling Allied front. Unbeknownst to the Allies, Adolph Hitler had deployed four German Armies for a bold counteroffensive through the Ardennes Forest. This German attack had to be stopped before it gained momentum.

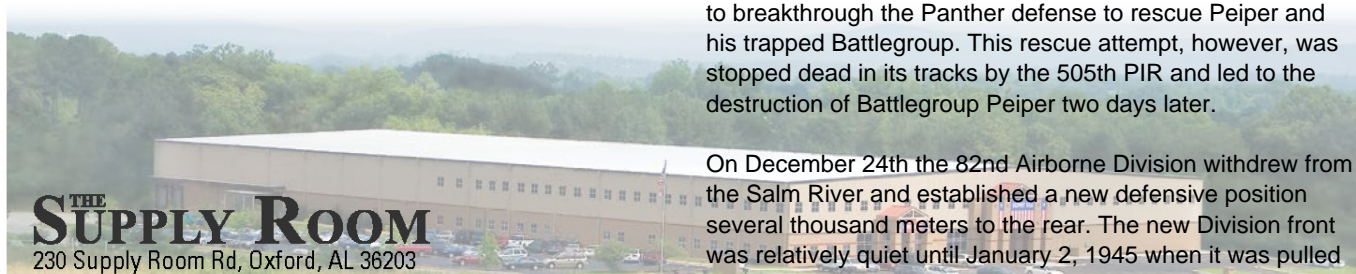
The 82nd and the 101st Airborne Divisions, the only reserves available to the Allies, were immediately committed to blunt this German penetration. The 82nd Airborne Division was initially deployed to the northern flank on the German attack, to counter the German main effort. The 505th PIR was assigned and occupied a 4½ mile defensive line along the Salm River stretching from the Belgian towns of Trois-Ponts to Rencheux on 19 December 1944 and engaged in heavy fighting with elements of two German Panzer Divisions over the next four days.

2/505 occupied the Belgian town of Trois-Ponts on December 19, 1944. They immediately blew all remaining bridges, established defensive positions, and waited for a German attack that finally came on 21 December 1944. Using mortars, machine guns, bazookas and captured German Panzerfausts, the Panthers inflicted heavy casualties on the Germans; stopping repeated frontal attacks by the 1st SS Panzer Division.

3/505 fought a similar action at Grand Halleux when elements of the 9th Panzer Division attempted to cross the River Salm on December 22. Although 3/505 suffered heavy casualties, they stopped the German attack.

During both battles not a single German soldier penetrated the Panther's defense. Their defense of the Salm River Line delayed the German advance and decisively disrupted their timetable, two factors which led to their eventual defeat. Most significantly, the Panther's defense of the Salm River Line sealed the fate of Battlegroup Peiper, the most powerful element of the 1st Panzer Division. The Germans were trying to breakthrough the Panther defense to rescue Peiper and his trapped Battlegroup. This rescue attempt, however, was stopped dead in its tracks by the 505th PIR and led to the destruction of Battlegroup Peiper two days later.

On December 24th the 82nd Airborne Division withdrew from the Salm River and established a new defensive position several thousand meters to the rear. The new Division front was relatively quiet until January 2, 1945 when it was pulled



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off the line to participate in an allied offensive scheduled for January 3, 1945. The Division mission was to advance to the Salm River and reoccupy the positions vacated one week earlier. During this attack the Panthers would face two determined foes, weather and the 62nd Volksgrenadier (VG) Division. The weather was extraordinarily cold with snow piled two feet deep throughout the Ardennes; and the 62nd VG Division was a good unit well supported by a significant amount of artillery and armor.

On January 3, 1945, the Panthers attacked and sustained more casualties than on any other day in its history. German artillery inflicted significant casualties in both 1/505 and 3/505 during their successful attacks on Reharment and Fosse respectively. The Panthers resumed their attack on January 4th seizing the high ground above Abrefontaine where they dug for a miserable night without overcoats or sleeping bags. Abrefontaine was occupied on January 5 and the men's overcoats, packs and sleeping bags finally caught up with them, enabling the Panthers to get their first real sleep in over 60 hours.

The Panthers attack resumed on January 7, 1954. 2/505, supported by elements of the 628th Tank Destroyer Battalion, attacked across open ground to seize Goronne, Belgium from a company of the 62nd VG Division and four King Tiger tanks of the 501st SS Heavy Panzer Battalion. 2/505 suffered heavy casualties losing two tanks and two destroyers, but the remaining tank destroyers managed to knock out two German tanks with flank shots. The two remaining German tanks withdrew and the Panthers overran the town, capturing 100 prisoners. The day was a disaster for the battalion however, as their Battalion Commander, LTC Vandervoort, was seriously wounded and evacuated. His loss stunned the Regiment, as he was the longest serving Battalion Commander and the men considered him invincible.

The fight for Goronne marked the end of the Battle of the Bulge for the Panthers. During the night of the 10-11 January 1945 they were relieved by the 75th Infantry Division, boarded trucks and redeployed to Theux, Belgium where they were placed in XVIII Airborne Corps reserve. Although not as glamorous as the 101st Airborne Division's defense of Bastogne and largely ignored by historians, the battles fought over the last three weeks had cost the Panthers dearly. The Regiment that boarded the trucks on 11 January 1945 was a mere shadow of the unit that left Camp Suippes on 18 December. Approximately 50% of the Panthers were casualties; the enemy caused half of these casualties and the other half were non-battle losses. The past had finally caught up with many of the old veterans. Exposure caused old wounds to flare up and triggered many relapses of malaria that had been contracted during the regiment's service in the Mediterranean theater. Some of the veterans were able to return after short stays in the hospital but most were gone for good with frozen limbs and wounds. The 505th continued to serve until the end of the war but the unit was never the same after the loss of so many of its veterans during the Battle of the Bulge.

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veterans of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment. We will never forget your valor and sacrifice made under the most trying of conditions.

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