

Airborne Signal

The 112th (Special Operations) Signal Battalion in World War II

by Cherilyn A. Walley



“THOUGH the life of this unit was only seven months and its achievements or name will never be recognized by the historians of World War II, the role it played during the invasion and liberation of Southern France will be remembered in the heart of every soldier

in the First Airborne Task Force.”¹ This lament is found in a 1945 pamphlet recording the brief history of the 512th Airborne Signal Company. Little did the authors know that the unit they served and loved would form the foundation of today’s 112th Special Operations Signal Battalion (Airborne), a vital part of Army special operations combat support. This article chronicles the adventures and accomplishments of the 512th Airborne Signal Company and 112th Airborne Army Signal Battalion in World War II.

Beginning in 1943, Allied war planners considered an invasion of Southern France in support of Operation OVERLORD, the Normandy invasion. The decision whether or not to execute Operation ANVIL was debated, made, and retracted more than once, even as planning continued.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s argument that the port of Marseilles, France, was needed to support a thrust into Germany prevailed over British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s desire to push north through Italy and into the Balkans ahead of the Russians. When Allied forces seized Rome earlier than expected in June 1944, the necessary men and assets became available to conduct ANVIL. With Allied troops stuck halfway up Italy and unable to break out of the Normandy beachhead, and with storms further limiting use of northern French ports, the second half of August was determined to be the ideal time to execute what was now being called

Operation DRAGOON.²

Like Normandy, the invasion of Southern France was a combined sea and airborne assault. The division-sized 1st Airborne Task Force (ABTF) led the air phase of the operation. It was under the command of Major General Robert T. Frederick, former commanding officer of the First Special Service Force (FSSF). In addition to the battle-hardened FSSF, which made an amphibious assault, the task force was composed of virtually every available parachute and glider unit in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations to support Seventh Army’s three-division VI Corps landing force. The British 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade and 64th Light Artillery Battalion were joined by American parachute and glider units: the American 517th Parachute Combat Team (consisting of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, 596th Airborne Engineer Company, and the newly glider-qualified Antitank Company of the Japanese-American 442nd Infantry Regiment), the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion reinforced by the 463rd Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion, and the 550th Glider Infantry Battalion. Various other specialized units were drawn from forces in Italy and North Africa, including the 512th Airborne Signal Company.³

The 512th Airborne Signal Company’s mission was to provide communications support to the airborne element of the Allied invasion force. Headquarters Seventh Army at Lido de Roma, Italy, issued General Orders No. 41 on 14 July 1944, activating the 512th Airborne Signal Company.⁴ When the Seventh Army Airborne Division (Provisional) was renamed the 1st Airborne Task Force



Troops with the 512th wore the Airborne Command shoulder patch during Operation DRAGOON.



First Airborne Task Force Tab



First Special Service Force



British 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade



517th Parachute Infantry Regiment



460th Parachute Field Artillery



596th Airborne Engineer Company



509th Parachute Infantry Battalion

on 21 July 1944, the 512th was already organizing men and equipment in support of the task force's mission.⁵

Company personnel came from a number of sources. Many of the 512th's soldiers hailed from the 6766th Signal Service Company (Provisional), while others were recruited from the Airborne Training Center in Rome, and the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. Private First Class Dane Wolfe, however, was recruited out of the replacement depot in Santa Maria, Italy. He had been a switchboard operator with the Telephone and Telegraph Section of the 45th Infantry Division since the invasion of Sicily and operations in Anzio; as a result, Wolfe was assigned to train other men in the 512th on switchboard operations. As of 31 July 1944—fifteen days before

D-Day—the strength of the 512th stood at 3 officers, 102 enlisted men, and 2 warrant officers, with 27 more enlisted men attached to the company. Even with the additional personnel, the 512th was not equipped to support the division-sized 1st ABTF.⁶

The 512th used the month before D-Day (15 August) to train personnel and gather the necessary equipment to support the imminent operation. Because the majority of the company had not served in airborne units, all soldiers immediately entered into a training program designed to bring them up to speed on airborne signal equipment and basic airborne skills. At the Airborne Training Center located outside of Rome, the signalmen received special training in the loading and lashing of equip-

ment in Waco CG-4A gliders, and all personnel qualified as glidermen—most having actually gone through the training. Wolfe's glider qualification was slightly more perfunctory: [Major William James, 1st ABTF Signal Officer] came to me and said "Hey, Wolfe, I want to talk to you. Would you go in without any glider training?" I said, "Let's get this d— war over with." And he said, "This is our boy." After a moment's further reflection, however, Wolfe did remem-

ber to ask for the all-important airborne bonus: *But wait a minute, give me that fifty dollars more a month.* The order went through on 9 September 1944, effective 6 August 1944.⁷

The company was divided into five functional sections—Wire Section, Radio Section, Message Center, Signal Office Section, and Supply Section—and each section's personnel focused on its mission-specific tasks. The Wire Section was responsible not only for internal telephone communications in the task force command post, but also for extending hard wire communications to higher headquarters and to the major combat units of the command. Even as they trained, the Wire Section soldiers installed two telephone exchanges (the corps-level TC-4 and smaller TC-12 intended for use by the Army Air Force) at 1st ABTF Headquarters, and assisted an Airborne Training Center signal detachment with installing trunk lines from Headquarters to the 509th Parachute Infantry, 551st Parachute Infantry, 550th Glider Infantry, and the 51st Troop Carrier Wing. Wire Section personnel developed and successfully tested a standard Waco CG-4A glider-load setup for their ¼-ton truck (jeep) with mounted RL-31 wire reels. The load configuration was a significant factor in ensuring that the 512th wire teams landed with-



Photo courtesy of Dane Wolfe

Dane M. Wolfe served with the 512th Airborne Signal Company during Operation DRAGOON as a switchboard operator.



The jeep-mounted SCR-193 radio set provided Morse code and voice capability at a range of 25 to 100 miles, even while the vehicle was moving.



The workhorse radio of the frontline troops was the SCR-300 walkie-talkie. At 40 pounds, the SCR-300 was man-portable and had a range of up to 25 miles.



Cap badge worn by glider troops 1944.



463rd Parachute Field Artillery Battalion



551st Parachute Infantry Battalion



550th Glider Infantry Battalion



442nd Infantry Regiment

out mishap or loss of equipment, unlike many other glider-borne troops.⁸

The Radio Section was responsible for the 1st ABTF Headquarters' wireless communications, including operation and maintenance of all radio equipment. The training period was primarily spent acquiring and familiarizing the soldiers with the equipment used by



Photo courtesy of Edwin S. Van Dusen Collection, Military History Institute

Message Center personnel often relied on motorcycles, such as this 1941 Harley Davidson WLA 750, to deliver important messages during Operation DRAGOON.



Waco C6-4A glider tow ropes had to be laid out very carefully to avoid tangling during takeoff. The sturdy ropes served as a literal lifeline until gliders were aloft and able to maintain altitude on their own.

airborne units. The most common radio sets used by the 512th were the long-range SCR-499, the medium-range SCR-193, the short-range SCR-284, and the man-portable SCR-300, also known as the walkie-talkie. The Radio Section spent its last preoperation days finalizing radio procedures and glider-load configurations. An 8 August command post exercise revealed certain "inefficiencies" in the task force radio network—problems the Radio Section was then able to fix before D-Day. Radio Section personnel also concentrated on preparing all radio equipment for airborne operations. Notably, the SCR-499 and SCR-193 radio sets were installed in ¼-ton trailers that could be safely loaded into gliders.⁹

The Message Center Section acted as the distribution center for all hard copy messages. In addition to glider training, the Message Center soldiers spent their initial training time learning Message Center proce-

dures and practicing cryptography. The company initially lacked enough qualified motorcycle messengers and had to conduct an intensive course on motorcycle operation during the training period. The relative scarcity of motorcycles in prewar America made it a challenge to find skilled riders during World War II. Only one third of all soldiers even possessed licenses to drive cars. An oblique reference to pre-D-Day activities in a 1945 unit history—"Practical experience received at ABTF Headquarters was mostly of physical nature"—indicates that the Message Center also spent much of its training time acting as runners for the command.¹⁰

The Signal Office Section acted as the company's headquarters and consisted of the 1st ABTF Signal Officer, Major James, and a small staff, which included the unit commander, Captain Charles L. Howard. As would be expected, Signal Office personnel spent their training time organizing equipment and personnel, and planning for the operation. They spent a great deal of time and effort finalizing the task force signal plan and producing the Signal Operations Instruction booklet, the instruction manual for signal operators and commanders that contained the procedures, call signs, frequencies, challenges, and passwords for the operation. In addition to time constraints, production of the booklet was further complicated by the lack of experienced personnel and a shortage of office supplies. Major James wrote Paragraph 5 of the operational Field Order, and the Signal Office Section had to prepare numerous copies of both Paragraph 5 and the Signal Annex. In spite of the challenges, the section met all deadlines.¹¹

The Supply Section was perhaps the busiest of the sections as it scrambled not only to acquire the equipment itemized in the Table of Organization and Equipment



1st Airborne Task Force Headquarters personnel kneel in prayer before boarding their glider "The Leakin Deacon" for Southern France early the morning of 15 August 1944.



On D-Day for Operation DRAGOON, thousands of paratroopers dropped from the sky near the town of Le Muy. More than half the men missed their drop zones, sometimes to their salvation since German defenses were concentrated on the designated landing sites.

and Table of Basic Allowance, but also to seek additional equipment required for the upcoming airborne operation. While most requisitions were filled from the Signal Depot at Naples, Italy, some items had to be obtained from signal depots in Oran, North Africa, and on Corsica. Upon inspecting available equipment, the Supply Section also requisitioned additional equipment for delivery by air on D+1 and D+2. Supply issues were an ongoing challenge for all signal units involved in the invasion of Southern France, and kept the 512th's Supply Section more than occupied for the duration.¹²

On 13 August 1944, just one day short of the one month anniversary of the 512th Airborne Signal Company's activation, the company separated into three groups (flights) and moved from Lido De Roma to the Voltone, Orbatello, and Canino airfields near Rome. At the airfields, the troops were assigned to specific gliders, into which they loaded and lashed down their equipment. The signal soldiers passed the final hours before launch receiving final mission briefings, rechecking equipment, and waiting.¹³

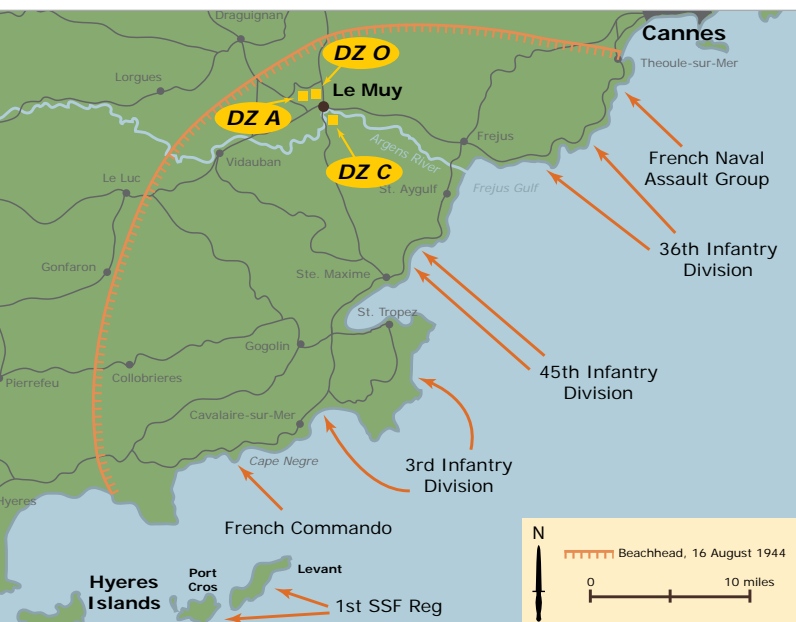
The invasion of Southern France began at 1045 hours on 14 August, when the First Special Service Force left Corsica in preparation for amphibious assaults on Isle du Levant and Isle de Port Cros to prevent German

artillery from firing on VI Corps as it approached the coast. A naval bombardment and a dummy parachute drop between Marseilles and Toulon then preceded the invasion proper, which began early in the morning on 15 August.¹⁴

The main body of the 1st Airborne Task Force used ten departure airfields along the Italian coast to marshal troops and aircraft. The route into the drop zones was over five hundred miles long, and was flown in the dark with the aid of navigation aids onboard ships in the Mediterranean. Once the aircraft approached the drop zones, beacons emplaced by nine pathfinder teams were supposed to provide final guidance to the drop zones. However, six of the nine pathfinder teams missed their drop zones and were unable to properly emplace their signals. Lack of pathfinder assistance and poor visibility caused fully 60 percent of the paratroopers in the first wave to be dropped outside their drop zones.¹⁵

The 512th made its airborne assault in three glider flight waves on D-Day, beginning at 0525 hours. The first group of signal gliders landed near Le Muy, France, at approximately 0900, with little opposition and relatively few incidents, in spite of the Rommel Asparagus—short telephone pole-thick stakes driven into the ground all over the landing zones. Only one of the 512th's gliders failed to land at Le Muy that morning—the one carrying Major James. The glider's tow rope broke over the Mediterranean Sea, forcing the aircraft to make a water landing. All personnel were recovered by the British Royal Navy, but a motorcycle, radio equipment, and two crates of courier pigeons on board were lost. Wolfe was on the downed glider—his first glider trip ever—and described the incident:

The pilot said, "Boys, we are going down." The rope off the C-47 lay right over the nose of the glider. I said, "Holy s—!" . . . But anyway, down we go and boy did they bring us in perfect . . . Well, I didn't strap myself in, because I was sitting close to [this] little window [here, and] the door is back there . . . Anyway, I was the first one out of there on that side. I'm out there pedaling water, and the wings are right here and the holes are here, and the guys are coming out on both sides. I'm helping them come out . . . Finally, I saw the canvas flapping. I said, "My God, there's somebody in that." I reached in there—[the man] was about 180 pounds; I weighed about 140 soaking wet—I reached in there and got him, and I finally got him untangled and came up. He fought me, and I cursed him and sort of shook him and slapped his face in the water, and we finally got him calmed down and we pulled him



Seventh Army advance.



Seventh Army



Glider troops quickly moved from the landing zone to their designated rally points. Signalmen with the 512th rendezvoused and established their command post near the hamlet le Mitan.

up.

Now, the airplane had circled us and dumped its three two-man [rubber] boats. We were all up on top of the glider, two pilots and all [six] of us. Anyway, the major says, "Who is going to go after the boats?" I says, "I'll go." I'm not nuts; I'm dumb like a fox. So I jumped in and the jeep driver says, "I'll go with you." I says, "Come on, let's go." So we swam. Well, we can't get in. [When] one guy [tries], it tips over; so he has to hold one side [while the other man] crawls in. [We] got the second [boat], and the major [calls], "Hey, Wolfe! Come on back, two is enough." "We're coming, Major." We came back, [and we put] Tommy Rider—my buddy [who] I came overseas with—in a boat on top of the glider.

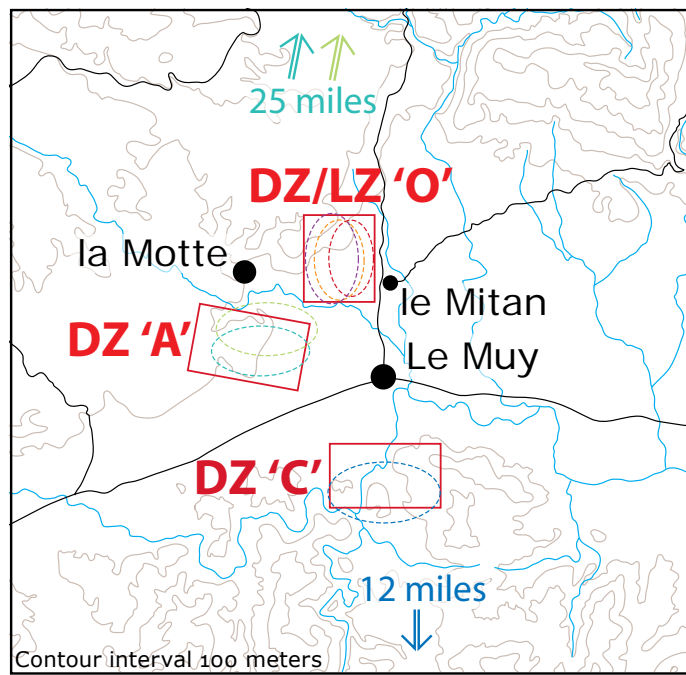
Now the major says, "I have a fifth of whiskey down in there. Do you think we could get it?" [The major] went down in there, and he came up with the bottle. [We] eight guys killed that whole bottle in about an hour. The major let us drink it all. So that's the story.¹⁶

In spite of their unsuccessful first flight, Wolfe, Major James, and most of the rest of the men on that glider participated in the second wave of glider launches in the afternoon.

Those of the 512th that landed in the first wave assembled on Drop Zone "O" north of Le Muy, gathered their equipment, and moved out to establish communications at the task force command post established in a farm house near le Mitan. The wire team quickly ran trunk lines to all the sections in the command post, and extended a line to the British 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade. However, the team running a line to the 517th Combat Team encountered enemy resistance and had to withdraw. When the rest of the company arrived at 1821 hours on the second glider flight, another wire team was able to safely approach from a different direction and patch a line through to the 517th.¹⁷

The first echelon of the Radio Section landed only a few hundred yards from the area designated for the 1st ABTF command post near le Mitan. Section personnel quickly organized themselves and their equipment, and

Designated and Actual Drop/Landing Zones 15 August 1944



Planned drop/landing zone
 Actual drop/landing zone
↓ Troops landing elsewhere

proceeded to set up the radio nets. A rear echelon radio net to Italy was established using the vehicle-mounted SCR-499 radio, which had a dependable hundred-mile range for voice communications and many times that for Morse code transmissions. The net between Seventh Army's VI Corps and 1st ABTF Headquarters used the SCR-193, which had a range of between twenty-five and one hundred miles. The 1st ABTF's own command net used "portable" SCR-284s (range less than twenty-five miles, weighing 250 pounds) and the short-range SCR-300 walkie-talkies. All nets worked efficiently, except the command net, which was hampered by the loss of some combat team radio sets. Once those sets were replaced the next day, the command net became fully operational. The rest of the Radio Section arrived in the second wave of gliders, and rendezvoused with the command post without incident.¹⁸

The Message Center Section and Signal Office Section both sent teams in the first wave of glider landings, and with the exception of the single downed glider, all arrived and began work as planned. The Message Center was up and running, or motoring, at 1027 hours. The center handled an average of twenty-nine electrical (teletype) transmissions, twenty-two foot messages, and ninety-one motor messages in every twenty-four hour period. Once Major James arrived in the second glider wave, the Signal Office was fully functional. Other than the downed glider and its equipment, the 512th suffered no losses during the landing operations.¹⁹

The 1st ABTF continued the attack north and the command post moved to the town of Le Muy on 17 August, two days after the landing. Even as the command post moved forward, the 512th maintained communications.



On 17 August, the 1st Airborne Task Force command post moved to Le Muy, where Major General Frederick and his staff continued to orchestrate the airborne elements of the invasion.

When the 36th Infantry Division arrived at Le Muy on 20 August, the 1st ABTF's initial mission was completed. The task force reverted to Seventh Army control and assumed the mission of protecting the army's right flank as it fought its way up the Rhone Valley.²⁰

As the task force moved northeast toward Nice, the speed of the advance created problems for the wire teams trying to keep up with the forward units, as the average demand for wire was approximately one hundred miles per day. By the end of August, the axis of signal communications extended northeast from Grasse through Vence and on to Colomars. With each relocation of the task force command post, the Wire Section successfully laid the necessary trunk lines to maintain communications. In order to keep up with the advance, the 512th attached wire teams to each of the three major combat teams (the First Special Service Force, 517th, and 509th/551st/550th). The installation of tactical switching centrals at les Adrets (half way between Le Muy and Grasse), les Veyans (half way between les Adrets and Grasse), and Vence (northwest of Nice, on the same axis as the previous switches) made wire communications possible to all combat teams and to Seventh Army's rear echelon.²¹

Switching centrals were rudimentary but crucial solutions to the extended line-of-communication problem. A trunk line from the command post fed into the switching central, where signals were transferred, or "switched," to the appropriate line to each combat teams. After running the main switchboard at the command post in Nice, Wolfe was tapped to maintain the switching central northwest of Nice:

Major James called me into the office. He says, "Wolfe, I want you to go up into the woods up here and maintain a switching central." I said, "Okay, who is going with me?" and he says, "Nobody." I says, "Wait a minute. You haven't got anybody? I'm not telling you [I'm not] going, but give me a couple of hand gre-

nades." "We haven't got any." "What do you mean? I want to have a fair fight if it happens. You can't blame me for that." He said, "Well, I can't." I said, "Okay," and I went up.

I was in the woods with a canvas over my head. About two o'clock in the morning, I finally called, "Boy, you had better come and help. Something is going on down through here and I'm going to take care of myself." And they said, "Hang on, Wolfe." Major James came with his driver and a couple of other guys, and they left a guy with me that night. About two hundred yards down the road there was a dead German, dead for about ten days. He was on the west side of me, so I could smell him every now and then. That was the last of my experience in, well I'll call it combat, because we soon pulled out of Southern France and went north.²²

The 512th provided signal support to all components of the 1st ABTF as they secured towns stretching from Nice northeast to the Italian border. The 517th Regimental Combat Team spent the rest of August capturing Fayence, Callian, Saint Cezaire, Saint Vallier, Grasse, Bouyon, and La Rouquette. Overcoming heavy German fortifications, in September the 517th took Col de Braus, Mont Ventabren, and Peira Cava. The unit also took part in the bitter battle for the Sospel Valley, finally moving into Sospel proper on 29 September, and took Mount Agaisen soon thereafter. Elements of the 517th pursued the retreating enemy throughout October and into November.²³

The rest of the 1st ABTF shared the 517th's fight northeast in pursuit of the Germans. The 509th and 551st Parachute Infantry Battalions and 550th Glider Infantry Battalion were part of the line of advance. Among the towns in the line of march were Cannes, Grasse, St. Martin Vesuble, Lantosque, Peira Cava, and Barcelonnette.²⁴ Having taken a short rest from its invasion of the Hyeres, the First Special Service Force joined the 1st ABTF southwest of Grasse near Le Planestel on 21 August, replacing the British 2nd Parachute Brigade, which returned to operations in Italy. The Force took part in the push to the east and north, liberating towns and villages such as Taneron, Chateaneuf de Entrenes, Velleneuve-Loubet, Biot, Vence, St. Jeannet, Gattieres, Carros, St. Paul, Cagnes-sur-Mer, Nice, and Contes—all by the end of August. Wire teams from the 512th kept up with the combat teams' movements, laying field wire as quickly as they could



36th Infantry Division



45th Infantry Division



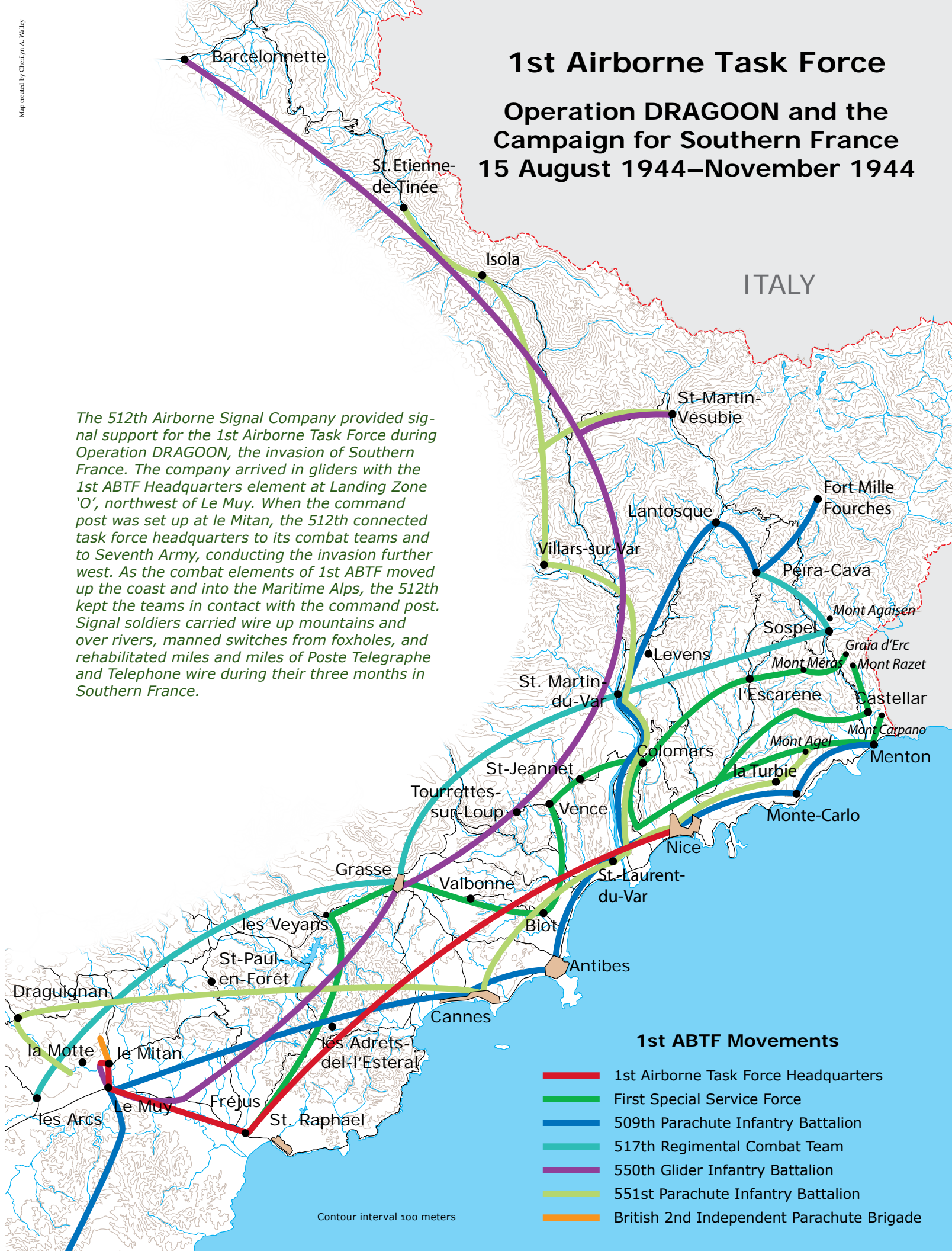
VI Corps

1st Airborne Task Force

Operation DRAGOON and the Campaign for Southern France

15 August 1944–November 1944

The 512th Airborne Signal Company provided signal support for the 1st Airborne Task Force during Operation DRAGOON, the invasion of Southern France. The company arrived in gliders with the 1st ABTF Headquarters element at Landing Zone 'O', northwest of Le Muy. When the command post was set up at le Mitan, the 512th connected task force headquarters to its combat teams and to Seventh Army, conducting the invasion further west. As the combat elements of 1st ABTF moved up the coast and into the Maritime Alps, the 512th kept the teams in contact with the command post. Signal soldiers carried wire up mountains and over rivers, manned switches from foxholes, and rehabilitated miles and miles of Poste Telegraphique and Telephone wire during their three months in Southern France.



1st ABTF Movements

- 1st Airborne Task Force Headquarters
- First Special Service Force
- 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion
- 517th Regimental Combat Team
- 550th Glider Infantry Battalion
- 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion
- British 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade

Contour interval 100 meters

in order to keep the teams connected to the command post.²⁵

Radio nets supplemented and occasionally replaced wire communications during the operation, especially as combat teams ranged further away from the command post. Radio communications were generally reliable, but distance and mountainous terrain did provide challenges to the Radio Section. In spite of the difficulties, the section established five radio nets by the end of August. SCR-193 and SCR-499 radio sets connected the 1st ABTF



As the 1st Airborne Task Force's fight moved into the Maritime Alps and fall turned to winter, snow became another factor in combat and combat support operations. The jungle-trained 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion added ski patrols to its tactical repertoire.



The M-209 cipher machine encoded and decoded messages in five-letter groups. Because the British were unfamiliar with the machine, the 112th sent cryptographic teams with the 6th Airborne Division to ensure continuity of communication.

command post with Seventh Army Headquarters. The same setup also connected the command post with VI Corps, 3rd Division, 45th Division, and 36th Division, and supported the 1st ABTF's own command net. The SCR-499 enabled radio communications with the 1st ABTF rear echelon, and the portable SCR-300 radio sets made up the task force's antitank warning net.²⁶

As fighting progressed northeast along the coast and into the snowy Maritime Alps, distance and mountainous terrain made it increasingly difficult for combat units to maintain communications. The 512th remedied the combat teams' lack of long-range radios by attaching radio teams with medium-powered radio sets to each combat team. Resources were stretched so far that such assistance was only possible because of the attachment of 6759th Signal Detachment troops—four officers and fifty-six enlisted men—and equipment to the 512th, which enabled radio communications to be maintained with even the most far-flung combat units.²⁷

The Message Center's scope of responsibility expanded along with the battle. Beginning on 6 September, 6759th Signal Detachment personnel also provided invaluable assistance and equipment to the 512th's Message Center. The detachment's cipher machines expedited transmissions to higher headquarters, and the additional personnel enabled the section to train new troops while maintaining a high volume of message traffic. The 512th continued to use motorcycle couriers and established air dispatch letter service between 1st ABTF Headquarters and the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion and 550th Airborne Infantry Battalion combat teams, Sixth Army Group, Seventh Army Headquarters, and Continental Base Section to the west.²⁸

With the battle lines moving so quickly and spreading out so widely, the 1st ABTF Signal Officer concluded that field wire was inadequate to the needs of the task force and turned to the commercial wire system for a solution. With the cooperation of the director of Poste Telegraphique and Telephone of Nice, the existing wire system was absorbed into the military network. Civilian repairmen under military supervision performed the majority of the repair work, and soon all combat teams were again interconnected by wire communications. The high volume of telephone traffic on the system required an upgrade in switching capability, so in September the Wire Section installed two telephone exchanges (a TC-2 and a TC-4) at the 1st ABTF command post. Between the commercial wire system and the military trunk lines, the Wire Section handled approximately one thousand calls and twenty-five teletype messages per twenty-four hour period.²⁹

Once the Mediterranean port city of Nice was taken, the 1st ABTF went into an "active defense" along the French-Italian border, on a line extending southeast from Barcelonnette in the mountains to Menton on the coast. The 512th continued supporting the task force with much the same setup as before. The commercial wire system supplemented military trunk lines wherever possible,

Photo courtesy of the International Spy Museum



and proved vital to the success of ongoing operations. The Poste Telegraphique and Telephone system was extensive, but fifteen years old and run-down. Leaky insulators were especially troublesome. Wire maintenance was a constant challenge, and both civilian and military repair crews struggled to keep up with the damage caused by both enemy artillery fire and inclement weather.³⁰

As the front moved closer to the Italian border, shelling irreparably damaged parts of the

commercial wire system. Also in keeping with the de facto joint nature of the wire system, repair teams used military field wire to replace commercial wire taken out by shelling. Due to the long distances involved, the heavier spiral-4 cable was also used in lieu of field wire to connect combat teams to each other and to the new switching central established at Sospel. In spite of the work required to lay so much cable, especially in areas made hostile by both the enemy and the terrain, the Wire Section provided communications to all combat teams in time for offensive operations.³¹

Wireless communications continued to present challenges, but the Radio Section met them as well as possible. In spite of having signal teams with medium-power transmitters attached to each combat team, the mountainous terrain often interrupted communications with headquarters. Signals completely faded between 2000 and 0700 hours every night due to atmospheric changes, and no antenna could be found to remedy the problem. The Sixth Army Group net experienced similar difficulties, but in that case better antennas were helpful. Radio operators from the 512th working with the 325th Fighter Wing then 340th Fighter Group net found themselves faced with a completely different challenge: boredom. Message traffic on the net was so sparse that operators easily lost interest in the task at hand; rotating one hour shifts alleviated much of the problem.³²

The Message Center Section had to cope with bad weather as well as extended battle lines. Air courier service was discontinued to one combat team located up in the mountains, eighty miles from the command post. Motorcycle messenger service proved to be impractical for such a distance, so radios had to be used for tactical messages and administrative message traffic was passed along through the informal supply truck and traveling officer courier system. In spite of such challenges, the section continued to train personnel and refine its proce-



The work of a World War II signalman could take him to new heights—as in the case of this lineman atop a telephone pole—or to new depths, as demonstrated by these men burying spiral-4 cable near the Rhine.

dures, resulting in ever increasing efficiency.³³

In the midst of battle, the 512th Airborne Signal Company underwent an administrative change. The 6759th Signal Detachment was officially brought under the command and control of the 512th in October, making official a state of affairs that had existed since early September. At the end of October, the combined effective strength of the 1st ABTF signal units was 10 officers, 1 warrant officer, and 157 enlisted men.³⁴

In mid-November, the 1st ABTF was alerted to prepare to



XVIII Airborne Corps



First Allied Airborne Army



IX Troop Carrier Command



17th Airborne Division



British 30 Corps



British 1st Commando Brigade



Ninth Army



194th Glider Regiment

move west and join XVIII Airborne Corps at Soissons (about 60 miles northeast of Paris). In addition to inventorying and organizing all equipment and systems in preparation for a turnover to their replacements, personnel of the radio and message sections engaged in Operation JUPITER, a deception plan to mask the 1st ABTF's withdrawal. The Message Center serviced cryptographic messages prepared by each combat unit intended to create the appearance (sound) of business as usual on the front. The Radio Section collected the radio sets from each combat team and used them to carry out the deception. The ruse apparently worked, as the enemy did not adjust its tactics in accordance with 1st ABTF's troop movements.³⁵

On 21 November 1944, the 44th Anti Aircraft Artillery Brigade relieved the 1st ABTF and assumed responsibility for the wire systems and signal supply dump. At that point, the 6828th Signal Detachment was also transferred and attached to the 44th. The 512th spent the rest of the month inventorying and consolidating equipment in anticipation of movement orders. An advance party left Nice by motor convoy on 1 December, followed on 7 December by the main body via rail, and the rear echelon by motor on the following day. All three elements of the 512th reunited at Soissons on 12 December and bivouacked with the 517th Regimental Combat Team.³⁶

Signal personnel do not typically receive combat awards, but Staff Sergeant Harold G. Kauble from Upper Sandusky, Ohio, did earn a Bronze Star for "heroic achievement in action against the enemy near Les Arcs, France, on 15 August 1944." The only other person from the 512th to earn an award from the 1st ABTF was Major William L. James, the task force signal officer, who was awarded the Bronze Star "for meritorious achievement in direct support of combat operations in Southern France, from 1-18 November 1944."³⁷

On 18 December, the 512th was ordered to join the First Allied Airborne Army (FAAA) at Sunninghill Park, near Ascot, England. Within six hours, all sections were en route to Airstrip A-70 near Reims, where the majority of personnel and equipment were loaded on aircraft and transported to England. Remaining company assets traveled by motor convoy and sealift, rejoining the unit in England. Once established at Sunninghill Park, the 512th and the 6966th Signal Service Company (Provisional), which was already located in England, provided communications for the FAAA Headquarters.³⁸

The First Allied Airborne Army had been activated on 2 August 1944 as a higher command over all available (uncommitted) Allied airborne forces in the European Theater of Operations: the newly formed XVIII Airborne Corps, which comprised the 17th, 82nd, and 101st Airborne divisions; British 1st and 6th Airborne Divisions; 1st Polish Parachute Brigade; U.S. IX Troop Carrier Command, and any British Royal Air Force troop carrier units allocated for airborne support. As the 1st ABTF fought its way up the French coast and into the Maritime Alps, the FAAA—including signal elements assigned to FAAA Headquarters—had participated in Operation MARKET-GARDEN, the invasion of Holland.³⁹

Soon after the 512th Airborne Signal Company relocated to England, elements of the FAAA were sent to the Battle of the Bulge. The majority of 512th and 6966th signal personnel continued to provide communications support for the FAAA main headquarters in England, but on 23 December 1944, six enlisted men—including Technical Sergeant 5 Dane Wolfe—were assigned on temporary duty to forward headquarters at Maisons-Laffitte, France. The signal section was set up in the Hotel Royal, a location the battalion maintained through the war's end. At the same time as the majority of the 512th and 6966th personnel were providing signal support to FAAA head-

quarters in England, the two signal units reorganized and readied for their inactivation and reactivation as a new element. Soon after the Battle of the Bulge ended and the FAAA could concentrate on activities other than survival, the 512th Airborne Signal Company was inactivated on 6 February 1945.⁴⁰

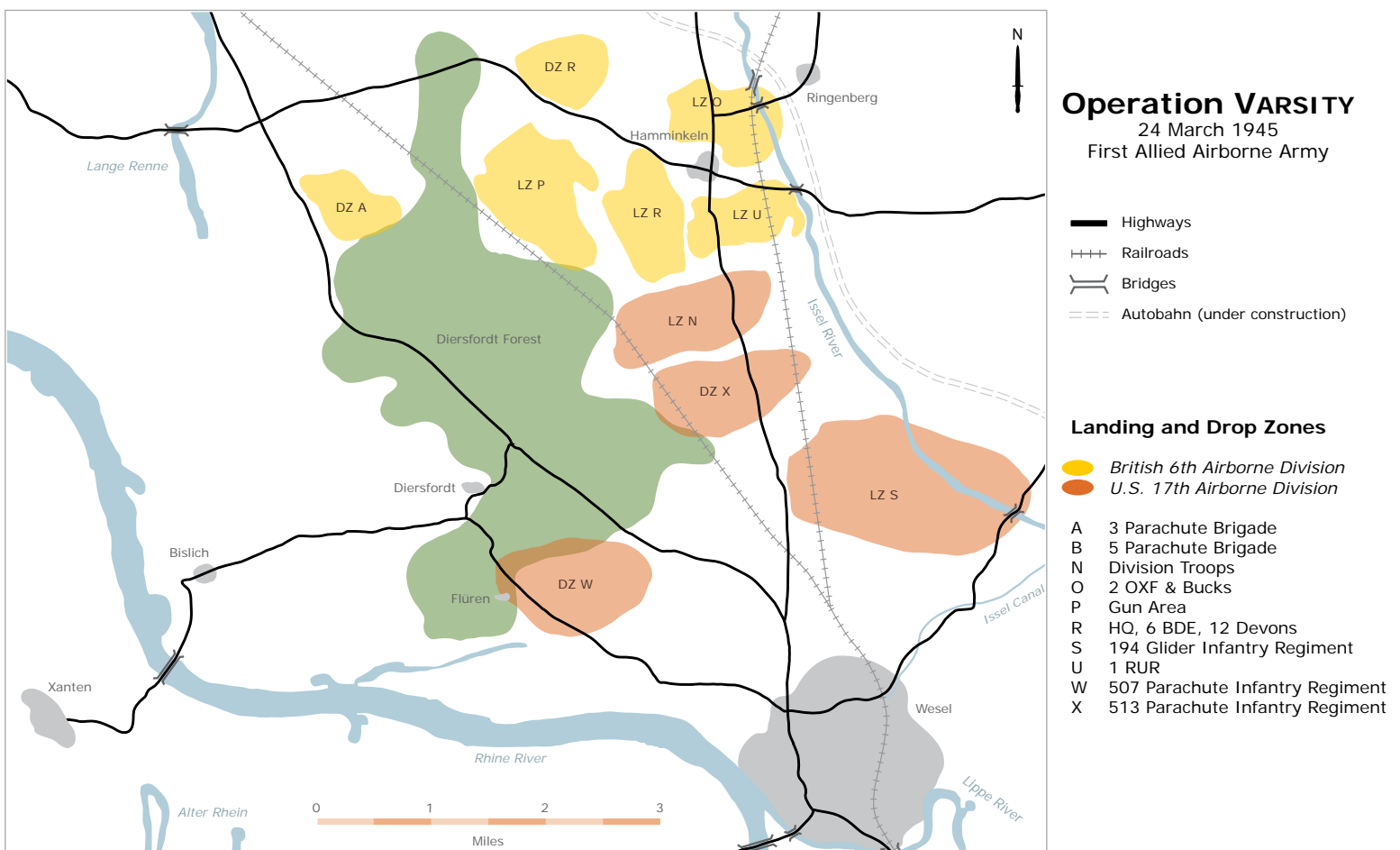
From the remnants of the 512th and the 6966th, the 112th Airborne Army Signal Battalion was created to support First Allied Airborne Army Headquarters. Officers for the new battalion were drawn from every source available. As First Lieutenant Alphonse J. Pacella, who was from the 6966th before the 112th was formed, said, "I'm telling you, they had officers from all over." In spite of their diverse military origins, Pacella knew many of the signal officers from their shared pre-war Army Reserve days, including the FAAA Signal Officer, Lieutenant Colonel William L. James. Pacella noted that many of the officers had worked for American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T): "The Signal Corps was loaded with them."⁴¹

While the FAAA was involved in planning a number of possible airborne operations, the first—and last—to be executed was Operation VARSITY in support of the last major Allied offensive: crossing the Rhine. Assigned to support the British Second Army's crossing at Wesel, the XVIII Airborne Corps, commanding the British 6th Airborne Division and the American 17th Airborne Division, was to capture and hold the high ground northwest of Wesel. Contrary to typical airborne planning, Operation VARSITY would not be the vanguard of the assault. The

ground attack needed heavy artillery support and was planned for the early hours of the morning; both requirements were dangerous to airborne troops. The decidedly unconventional solution was for the paratroopers and glidermen to wait until the British ground troops had crossed the Rhine, and then in daylight land the airborne elements ahead of them near their assigned objectives.⁴²

The plan worked beautifully. With intense artillery support fires, at 2100 hours on 23 March 1945, elements of the British 30 Corps crossed the Rhine west of Rees (approximately ten miles northwest of Wesel). At 2200 hours, the British 1st Commando Brigade crossed the river just west of Wesel. Again with heavy artillery preparation, the British 15th Scottish Division crossed north of Xanten at 0200 hours on 24 March. The U.S. Ninth Army continued the assault south of Wesel, with similar success. All up and down the Rhine, the German units were undermanned and unprepared to withstand the Allied offensive. The end of the war in Europe was in sight.⁴³

The airborne assault began at 1000 hours on 24 March, capitalizing on the heavy artillery and bombing preparation throughout the morning. The 17th Airborne Division seized its objectives at Diersfordt by dark, in spite of some battalions landing miles from their designated drop zones. The British 6th Airborne Division overcame both flak and ground fire to seize its main objective, the town of Hamminkeln, and several bridges over the Issel River. The 194th Glider Infantry, the last to land, had the best luck hitting its drop zones north and northeast of Wesel. By 1230 hours, all airborne troops were on the





In March 1945, C-47 airplanes and Waco CG-4A gliders lined a dozen airfields near Paris, waiting for the order that would send them aloft as part of the largest single-day Airborne operation in the war.



While a success, VARSITY was a costly operation. A total of 706 men were killed, another 1,253 wounded, and at least 640 missing in action.

ground, and by that evening, the FAAA achieved all its D-Day objectives—Operation VARSITY was a resounding success. In the process, the FAAA landed 21,680 paratroopers and glidermen, 695 vehicles, 113 artillery pieces, and 109 tons of ammunition.⁴⁴

Signal planning for Operation VARSITY began in late 1944 and continued up until the operation's execution in March 1945. Unexpected headquarters relocations made planning difficult, so the signal plan for VARSITY was basic but sound. FAAA Main Headquarters forward deployed to the Combined Command Post northwest of Paris in Maisons-Lafitte, France, on 18 February. First Lieutenant Pacella recalled the journey: "We went by C-47. I remember my wife had sent me a fruit cake; we shared eating it over the English Channel. You know, we had one of the cargo doors wide open. Pretty stupid, when you think about it. Dangerous." The move required the 112th Airborne Army Signal Battalion to provide communications from the continent to all attached units

on the continent and in England, all on a scale sufficient to provide control for planning and executing a two-division airlift starting from two separate locations. With a few extra men and some specialized equipment, it did just that.⁴⁵

The 112th established its primary signal facility at the Combined Command Post alongside FAAA Main Headquarters. From that facility it established wire communication circuits (telephones and teleprinters) with both France-based units and commands and those located in England. All told, it established sixty-six circuits, forty-two speech and twenty-four teleprinter, primarily to the U.S. and British troop carrier units assigned to the FAAA. The IX Troop Carrier Command Forward, in Louveciennes, west of Paris, was responsible for running three speech circuits from the airfield switchboards out to the transit camps for the airborne troops adjacent to the airfields.⁴⁶

The 112th also put in place special signal traffic control measures at FAAA headquarters, limiting the number of extensions with access to trunk lines and local calls. These protocols ensured that the eight-position switchboard would not be overloaded, and that trunk lines would always be available for operational needs. With the heavy traffic that the circuits endured during Operation VARSITY—1,979 trunk calls from FAAA Headquarters on 24 March alone—the precautions were wise.⁴⁷

Radio nets also needed to be established, both as backups to landlines and cross-channel circuits, and as the sole means of communication between the Combined Command Post and the airborne units in the drop and landing zones. With approval from Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, the 112th used twenty radio frequencies for Operation VARSITY. All equipment and almost all personnel used to establish and operate the radio nets came from the 112th, enabling the unit to draw on the experience of those who had been with the 512th in Southern France. Any necessary equipment lacking from the 112th's table of organization and equipment was acquired, ranging from specialized radio receivers to typewriters.⁴⁸

By the signal battalion's own calculations, wire communications were so reliable that the radio nets were mostly superfluous, if necessary insurance. That same backup protocol, however, proved very necessary when it came to radio equipment sent with the airborne troops. Forty-five SCR-300 radio sets were sent with 17th Airborne Division to enable the heavy weapons companies to direct mortar fire from forward positions, not something they were usually required to do. Two radio sets were sent for each one required, and with a 60 percent radio loss rate, the precautions were more than justified.⁴⁹

The 112th Airborne Army Signal Battalion was also responsible for the FAAA's cryptographic systems. Lacking a common cipher for British and U.S. airborne forces, the 112th used a combination of the British one-time pad system and the American M-209 cipher machine. To make the technology swap work, M-209 teams were assigned

to the British 6th Airborne Division and 1st Commando Brigade, and one-time pad teams were assigned to FAAA and XVIII Airborne Corps headquarters and to 17th Airborne Division. The British cipher officer assigned to XVIII Airborne Corps was “invaluable as he was able to assure the smooth functioning of the one-time pad system.”⁵⁰

Radar systems also fell under the aegis of the 112th. A committee of signal and radar officers from the various air commands involved in VARSITY decided to rely on the “Gee” (short for grid) network of navigational beacons, as well as the Rebecca-Eureka beacons usually employed in airborne operations. In spite of enemy jamming of the Gee network, the signals operated well. The Rebecca-Eureka beacons also sufficed, and both networks averaged more than 95 percent serviceability. On the other hand, weather was so good that most of the planes were able to fly without relying on the radar at all.⁵¹

Operation VARSITY was a success, if a costly one. Of the 21,680 British and American paratroopers and glidermen that participated in the assault on 24 March—two full airborne divisions and a glider regiment—706 were killed, 1,253 wounded, and at least 640 were missing in action. The two U.S. infantry divisions that crossed the Rhine by amphibious assault that day suffered only 41 killed, 450 wounded, and 7 reported missing in action.⁵²

While the last great airborne operation of the war had ended, the 112th Army Airborne Signal Battalion had not yet finished its work. At FAAA Headquarters at Maisons-Lafitte, the signal battalion regrouped and readied itself for possible future airborne operations. The FAAA’s combat elements continued to fight and move further into Germany, which challenged the battalion to provide communications support to a headquarters responsible for an increasingly diffuse force.⁵³

The war in Europe finally came to an end on 7 May 1945, when the German High Command signed the surrender act in Reims, France. From his position on the 112th switchboard in Maisons-Lafitte, Dane Wolfe got the word before the official announcement was made: *I’m on the switchboard at Maisons-Lafitte. Eisenhower comes through on the phone [from Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force]. I hooked him up with his light colonel, his aide. I listened in; this I’ve never done very much, but the war was over with. And [Eisenhower] says, “Colonel?” [The aide responds], “Yeah, General?” “The war’s over tomorrow in Reims.” And I just pulled my cords [in surprise and excitement]!* When the official statement of surrender was issued, Corporal Patricia A. Malone of the 112th’s Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps Detachment, handled the message.⁵⁴

The FAAA and the 2nd Armored Division were to be the initial occupying force in the American sector of Germany. In

anticipation of moving into Berlin, First Allied Airborne Army Headquarters and most of the 112th advanced to Halle, Germany. Arriving at Halle in a convoy of one hundred vehicles, the men and women (Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps personnel) of the 112th quickly established communications capability for FAAA Headquarters and the other elements readying for the occupation of Berlin. Near Halle, this forward element of the 112th met up with its first Russians: “Strangely enough, an all female unit. It was a reconnaissance unit. They were a tough outfit; they had been through a lot of war,” recalled First Lieutenant Thomas E. McNeary.⁵⁵

The Russians did everything they could to resist the turnover, but during the night of 3–4 July, the Americans moved in. Signaller Dane Wolfe again found himself making history: “We went to Halle, Germany, first . . . and we finally moved to Berlin. We couldn’t get into Berlin because the Russians wouldn’t let us in. They were taking the toilet stools and everything else.” Once in the city, but still being held off by the Soviet command, FAAA Commanding General Major General Floyd L. Parks became the first U.S. military Commandant of Berlin by moving into his new headquarters early the morning of 5 July—before the Russians awakened. Finally, on 12 July, the last of the Russian troops left the American sector.⁵⁶

The 112th left a rear element in Maisons-Lafitte when the battalion advanced to Berlin. Soon after the U.S. took possession of its sector of Berlin, First Lieutenant Pacella and twelve enlisted men set out in seven trucks to join their fellow signalmen. Typical of the confusion and delays common in the weeks and months immediately following the end of the war in Europe, Pacella’s journey to Berlin was anything but direct. The convoy first traveled northeast to Bielefeld, Germany, taking its signal equipment with it, including an M-134-C Sigaba cipher machine and accompanying equipment housed in

During World War II, the 15-rotor SIGABA machine was used by the U.S. Army (and the U.S. Navy under the name Electric Cipher Machine) for highly secret communications. This machine system was the only mechanized cryptographic system used by any country that was never broken by an enemy.



Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense



Map showing the location of the meetings in Potsdam, Germany.

an HO-17 plywood shelter. Pacella and seven other men then traveled by freight train to Halle, south of Berlin, where they received word that they had to go to Helmstedt railhead, where trucks would pick them up and take them to Berlin.⁵⁷

Taking enough rations to get them to Helmstedt by train and to Berlin by truck, Pacella and his men arrived at the railhead, only to find no trucks. "We were there about three weeks. We lived like a bunch of bums, because all we had was the food we had taken with us, and it really wasn't a lot of food. While we were waiting there, a big train pulled in loaded with Russian people who had been prisoners of the Germans. The English Army was shipping them back to Russia. We were cooking some bacon, and the aroma of bacon had reached all these people. I looked up and there were all these people; I couldn't really give them anything. I figure there were at least a thousand people." The trucks finally arrived, and Pacella and his men made their way to the Zehlendorf suburb of Berlin, where the 112th's officers were quartered. "We lived in these apartment houses that were built by the Germans

before the second world war. They were really nice; they were built for working class people."⁵⁸

With Berlin's own telephone system stripped bare by war and Russian soldiers, the 112th moved quickly to establish communications for the occupation forces. As McNeary recalled, "The headquarters for the First Allied Airborne Army moved into Berlin, and of course we moved with it. The signal center was set up at the [former] telephone company. We took over the telephone system, and we had German civilians doing all of the repair work." As happened throughout Germany during the Occupation, German civilians had to be vetted before they could work for the U.S. Army. First Lieutenant Pacella was in charge of hiring personnel to work on the telephone system: "We had hired about six hundred Germans. But before we hired them, I'd have them fill out a form and I'd give it to CID [Counterintelligence Division]. And once in a while they'd say, 'No, don't hire this one.'" The CID tipped Pacella to one woman who "looked like anything would melt in her mouth. She was the private secretary, during the war, to the officer in charge of running Yugoslavia. So we didn't hire her."⁵⁹

After V-E Day, the Army announced the point system for sending personnel home to the U.S. McNeary recalled that "everybody in the battalion was eligible to go, because they'd piled up a lot of points. I think the eligibility started at 70 points, and most of our people had about 114. We took a big hit; a lot of people went home. But even those that were eligible, myself included, were held; I think we were held almost six months." Wolfe was caught up in the 112th's freeze on rotations home: *Lieutenant [Philip S.] Bundschu says, "Wolfe, I think you're going to take over the VIP switchboard, and the general's." I said, "Baloney. Give it to somebody else. I got 101 points . . . I want to go home." "No," he said, "Wolfey, I'll give you four WAACs [Women's Auxiliary Army Corp personnel] daytime and four*

The Potsdam "Big Three" meetings were held in the Cecilienhof Palace. Flags from the USSR, United States, and Great Britain flew over the entrance while Soviet officers served as guards. The floral star in front was planted by the Soviets.



The first ever color photo transmitted by radio: British Prime Minister Clement Atlee, U.S. President Harry S. Truman, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin at the Potsdam Conference, 3 August 1945.



GIs nights; you just run it." I said, "It's a deal."⁶⁰

As the primary signal element in the early days of America's occupation of Berlin, the men and women of the 112th supported the Potsdam Conference. From 16 July through 3 August, the FAAA signal personnel provided the radio, telephone and teletype capabilities required for the "Big Three" leaders—U.S. President Harry S. Truman, British Prime Minister Clement Atlee, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin—to conduct business. The communications setup included a six-position switchboard, five hundred telephones, approximately seventy miles of cable, two radioteletypewriter systems, and two very high frequency radio relay systems.⁶¹

The Potsdam Conference also featured the Army Command and Administrative Network system, the Army's secure semiautomatic radioteletype system, a predecessor of today's Defense Switched Network. However, the most significant signal accomplishment during the conference was the first ever radio transmittal of a color picture. On 3 August 1945, Army Pictorial Service transmitted a color photograph of Truman, Atlee, and Stalin from Berlin to Washington DC. The radiophoto transmission took twenty-one minutes: seven minutes for each of the three color negatives that comprised the final photograph.⁶²

In late 1945, over the very signal networks it had established, the 112th received orders to return home to the United States—this time by train and by ship, with no parachutes or gliders involved. On 12 December 1945, one

year and five months after the 512th was organized in Lido de Roma, Italy, the 112th Airborne Army Signal Battalion was inactivated at Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia. The battalion remained inactive until its reorganization and activation in 1986 as the 112th Signal Battalion and—in keeping with its airborne heritage—was assigned to support Army special operations units at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.⁶³

As the very first airborne signal battalion in U.S. Army history, the 112th provided signal support in two major World War II airborne operations, served as the signal element for two unique airborne commands, and was one of the first U.S. units to enter Berlin. The men and women of the 112th traveled by truck, airplane, motorcycle, glider, and foot to string wire, establish radio nets, operate switchboards, and run teletype machines. They served in Italy, France, Britain, and finally Germany, suffering heat, cold, hunger, and combat. While sixty years of technology and time separate the men and women of today's 112th Special Operations Signal Battalion from their predecessors in the 512th Airborne Signal Company and the 112th Airborne Army Signal Battalion, they still share a common ethos and a common mission—to provide superior communications to highly specialized airborne headquarters and tactical units. It is a mission that is still "remembered in the heart of every soldier" the battalion has served. ♣

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