

# The combat stories of **HUGH DRAKE**

**Dates of Service:** Dec. 1943-?

**Branch of Service:** Army

**Unit:** 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, 508 Parachute Infantry Regiment,  
Company E, 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad

**Locations:** England, France, Holland, Germany

**Battle/Campaigns:** Operation Market Garden, Battle of  
the Bulge

Hugh Drake describes his parachute drops into Holland and Belgium, several instances where he found himself alone, and the harsh conditions he had to endure.



These stories were compiled by an interviewer, who prefers to remain anonymous, and goes by the nickname 'Kilroy Was Here.' These stories are posted through a partnership between 'Kilroy Was Here' and the Witness to War Foundation. Permission to use any of these materials must be granted by 'Kilroy Was Here,' which can be obtained through the Witness to War Foundation.



Just lacking months during my last year in high school, I received my notice that I had been drafted and that I needed to report to the nearest draft board. Before leaving the school I was given a certificate of completion.

Following my basic training down in Blanding, Florida I was shipped overseas to England on the Queen Mary. The ship was crawling with soldiers and we spent 12 hours on top, only to have to spend 12 hours below decks. It was in England that I joined the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne and as for why I joined the 82<sup>nd</sup>, more pay. At the time, \$90 a month sounded a lot better than the \$30 to \$40 dollars, which was the basic infantry pay. I was also told that we would be sent on special missions and when the missions ended, we would return to our base.

By the time I had gotten to England, D-Day was over so I was one of the first replacements to come to the 82<sup>nd</sup>. Jump school was tough and I found my first jump to be a real experience and when it came time for me to jump from the plane, no one had to push me out. Also in jump school you had to double time everywhere you went and if you were caught walking you would be in a lot of trouble, and they were twice as hard on the officers as they were on us. You would spend one hour a day in class and the remaining seven to eight hours out in the field. That wasn't to say we didn't have the time to get off the base.



Two to three nights a week I would go to town, where I was treated nicely by the local people. In the evening I would listen to the older guys tell stories about D-Day adventures, one of which was about a Sergeant. They had captured a German motorcycle and this sergeant had ridden it down the road leading outside of the town they held. They went on to say that he wasn't gone but a minute when they heard the bike coming back down the road with the Sergeant yelling at them to shoot the bastards. The Germans were chasing him back down the road.

My first combat jump was in Operation Market Garden, which turned out to be a 45 day mission in Holland. At the time I weighed 180 pounds, but after I got all my equipment on and all the ammo I could carry, I weighed about 300 pounds. I had been given a M1 carbine to carry but I wasn't good with a rifle so I was given a Tommy gun. That was on the afternoon of September the 17<sup>th</sup>, and they loaded 18 men to a plane as a rule. We were told the drop zone was 50 miles behind the German lines. As far as the flight went, some of the guys were praying and some were joking around. As for me, I just sat there with my thoughts.

As we neared the drop zone the word came to stand up, hook up, and check equipment. You would check the guy in front of you while the guy behind you checked you. By the time you had done that, the light at the door went from red to green and as it did, the man at



the door jumped, followed by the rest of us. That day we were jumping at 400 feet so it wasn't long before my feet were back on the ground. The one good thing was that there wasn't anyone shooting at us as we made our way down. No sooner had I hit the ground than I was on my feet with my things together and with my group. Some of the groups made their way to a bridge, and I was part of the group that was to set up a defensive line to hold off the German counterattacks that would be coming from the Grosbeek area. Company E, 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad, of which I was a part, was made up of 12 men at the time.

By November the 10<sup>th</sup> we were relieved by some British soldiers and made our way back 22 miles to an area where some truck were waiting for us. We were taken to Camp Sissonne base in France where we were given replacements and trained.

In December word came that the Germans had broken the lines, and we were quickly loaded in trucks with each man carrying six days of rations. When they ran out, we found ourselves having to live off the land. The drop point was the Werbomont area. The day we arrived it was clear and cold but it wasn't long after arriving that the snow and bitter cold set in, and we found ourselves wadding through three to four feet of snow. Here we all lived in two man holes.

On December the 24<sup>th</sup> I was with an anti-tank crew watching a small road that ran through the woods



leading through the area. As we sat there, we heard the sound of vehicles coming down the road and as they cleared the woods, we saw not one but two German Tiger tanks come into view. The crew quickly knocked out the first tank and as it came to a stop, the second tank quickly moved back to the cover of the woods and as it did, it started shelling us with 88s which killed one of the guys.

It was during that month that I was in a hole with two other guys and as the shells started falling around us, we decided it was time to get out of there. As we were getting our things together, a shell hit near us and some shrapnel hit Johnny in the head. Johnny told me to check on the other guys, and as I looked back to say something to Johnny, he was lying there with a large hole in his head. By that afternoon, the Lieutenant pulled us back to two crossroads that came together. At each crossroad we were to set up a machinegun. Within 15 minutes of setting ours up, I went to check on the guys at the other crossroad only to find the machinegun sitting there and the crew gone. I picked up the machinegun, which at the time was a third of our firepower, and returned to my crossroad. As I reported to the Lieutenant what I found, I was advised that they had pulled back. However, the worst was on December the 24<sup>th</sup> when I was out on guard and two thirds of our men fell back without telling anyone, leaving me there alone. I knew something was up when I went to make



contact and found no one to my right or left. As far as Christmas Day went, I spent most of the day and night going from hole to hole, dodging artillery rounds. You learn very quickly the difference between the 88s and mortars by their sound.

After 45 days of living out in the weather in the same clothes, with very little food and even less sleep, we were relieved. At the end of the war, I was stationed in Frankfurt Germany where my duties were parades and standing guard duty. I returned to the States in time to join the 82<sup>nd</sup> in the New York ticker tape parade, and from there I was able to return home.