

WILBERT HENRY ILLIG PRIVATE U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR II 1921 - 1944

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Wilbert Henry Illig was born to George and Ida Illig on August 25th, 1921, in Rankin, Pennsylvania. He and his siblings Howard, George, and Lilian lived with their parents in Rankin for some time before moving to Steubenville Pike in the Cross Creek District of Hollidays Cove, West Virginia. A small town, Hollidays Cove (sometimes spelled Holliday's Cove) remained independent of Weirton until 1947 when it was integrated into the city. Wilbert spent his boyhood in Hollidays Cove and came of age during the Great Depression.

The Illigs flourished at a time when few could afford housing. George H. Illig owned a home valued at \$7,000 and worked for Weirton Steel as a mechanic by 1940. Weirton Steel employed a large number of people, including George's sons: George Jr., Howard, and Wilbert. They built "the infrastructure and public utilities that tens of thousands of people relied on." Their efforts contributed to the success of Weirton Steel at a time when other businesses were failing en masse and, in turn, the steel company provided the vast majority of gainful employment in the town. The company encouraged its workers to think of themselves as a community and published a newspaper titled the *Weirton Steel Employees Bulletin*. While the company's workforce did unionize in the 1930s, it appears not to have done so out of any sense of grievance against the company—Weirton Steel employees repeatedly rejected joining national unions into the 1980s, opting instead for their own "company union." All in all, Weirton Steel's workforce appears to have been paid well and treated well.

This bears out in the case of the Illigs, as well. Like many families with members working for the company, their names crop up in the *Bulletin* on more than one occasion. Wilbert attended high school for at least two years before seeking employment with Weirton Steel. He was probably a student at Edgewood Public School, which enrolled many children connected to the company. In 1937, Wilbert appeared in a *Bulletin* article about "Bits of Blarney," an operetta staged by Edgewood Junior High School. He served as a stage manager with his classmate George Smerek.

While life seemed to be going well for the Illig family in the late 1930s and early 1940s, peace in the rest of the world was unraveling. Fascist powers driven by nationalist dictators—Hideki Tojo in Imperial Japan, Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany, and Benito Mussolini in fascist Italy—were violently expanding their reach across Asia, Europe, and North Africa. Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939 launched Europe into the Second World War, which the United States would join upon the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941.

Both Wilbert and his older brother Howard received the summons to serve their country when they were drafted in 1942. The former joined the U.S. Army and was assigned to the 504th Parachute Infantry, 82nd Airborne Division, 2nd Battalion, Company D. Wilbert was a robust young man, weighing in at 160 pounds on his five-foot, ten-inch frame. He had hazel eyes in a light-complexioned face topped with brown hair.

Originally the 82nd Infantry Division, the 82nd Airborne Division was known as the "All-American" Division because the men who joined it were from varied backgrounds throughout the United States. The division had fought in World War I and counted among its ranks Sergeant Alvin C. York, one of the most decorated soldiers of that conflict. On August 15, 1942, the 82nd Infantry Division became the Army's very first airborne division, and the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) was incorporated into the 82nd's order of battle a few months later.

Once merged, the 504th PIR's training was brought in line with the rest of the 82nd Division's paratrooper preparation. Men in parachute infantry units attended several parachute schools of increasing complexity. These training schools taught soldiers how and when to jump out of planes—mainly the Douglas C-47 Skytrain—and what to do when they hit the ground, sometimes in combat conditions. Courses were typically four weeks long and split into four stages. First, they would build up physical endurance. In the 82nd Airborne's 376th regiment, privates were instructed to do push-ups as often as possible to increase their strength. Long runs, such as those up Mount Currahee depicted in historian Stephen Ambrose's book *Band of Brothers* (and the screen adaptation), went beyond ordinary infantry training.

Proper parachute landings were among the most difficult but essential skills to learn. Each training stage incorporated some element of parachute jumps, working closer and closer to the real thing. Stage three included a mock-up of a jump, complete with suspended towers from which trainees would jump in their kits. Privates learned how to pack their parachutes right before the final stage, wherein they would make their first jump out of a plane. After the first jump, a graduation ceremony was held, and new paratroopers would receive a certificate of completion along with silver wings pinned to their uniforms.

It is notable how few actual airborne jumps the new paratroopers made before employing those skills in the combat theater. The tactical doctrine of parachute infantry was less than a decade old—still very much in its infancy. The Soviets botched the first combat use of paratroopers during the 1939 invasion of Finland. It fell to the Germans during their 1940 invasion of Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands to pull off the first successful combat deployment of parachute infantry. Recognizing the importance of this new innovation, the U.S. Marine Corps hastily organized a parachute company in 1940-41 that never saw combat. The U.S. Army, instead, would have the honor of deploying the first American paratroopers, who joined Operation Torch's invasion of North Africa in November 1942.

The 504th's training period began only a month before their brothers in the 509th PIR jumped into the North African desert. Training lasted about nine months, from October 1942 to April 1943. The regiment thus missed the chance to help drive Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps out of Africa. The invasions of Sicily and Italy would instead be the 504th PIR's—and Wilbert Illig's—baptism of fire. Though the 504th trained extensively for the Sicily landings (Operation Husky) while staging in North Africa, combat zones inevitably introduced variables well beyond the control of individual units. This fact was to take a tragic toll on the regiment.

Wilbert's comrades in 3rd Battalion went in with the first wave of airborne landings on July 9, 1944, part of a combined force of 3,400 British and American paratroopers. While the contingent was badly scattered when wind and other mishaps disrupted their jumps, most landed safely and sowed confusion behind enemy lines, softening up the beachheads for amphibious landings. Italian and German resistance stiffened, and by July 11 General George S. Patton was calling for reinforcements near the town of Gela on the southern end of Sicily. That night the 504th Regimental Combat Team (RCT), consisting of the 1st and 2nd (Wilbert's) battalions, plus artillery and engineer units, loaded into 144 C-47 transport planes in Tunisia and took off across the placid Mediterranean Sea.

The drop was not to remain placid for long. General Matthew Ridgway, the 82nd Airborne's commanding officer, had been extremely concerned about

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the possibilities of friendly fire. Fearing any group of reinforcements being flown in would be mistaken for enemy bombers, Ridgway personally met with operational planners, navy officers, and onshore anti-aircraft battery commanders to ensure that his men would not be endangered by itchy trigger fingers. The entire airborne approach would be made over friendly forces, along a previous route established by another unit.

All of Ridgway's preparations came to naught when Axis planes attacked landing ships offshore near Gela earlier on July 11. The heavy aerial assault rattled U.S. Navy gunners and inclined them to shoot at inbound aircraft regardless of prior instructions—especially in the darkness at about 10:40 p.m. when the C-47s came rumbling in overhead. As the 2,000 men of the 504th RCT blithely rode in, expecting an easy drop into friendly lines, American navy ships and anti-aircraft guns below opened up with a vengeance. Dozens of aircraft were hit, killing paratroopers inside their planes or as they parachuted out. "Planes dropped out of formation and crashed into the sea," wrote a 504th company commander. "Others, like clumsy whales, wheeled and attempted to get beyond the flak which rose in fountains of fire, lighting the stricken faces of men as they stared through the windows."

Whole companies were decimated. "[American] guns along the coast as far as we could see" shot down 23 planes and damaged another 37. Even the C-47s carrying the regimental commander and his executive officer were badly damaged. The 504th RCT lost 81 killed, 132 wounded, and 16 missing as the unit was scattered throughout the hills and ridges of southern Sicily. It took days to consolidate the unit back into fighting shape around Gela, with many paratroopers being further shot at by fellow Americans as they tried to get back through friendly lines. No doubt the morale of Wilbert Illig and his comrades took a serious blow, as they watched friends die and their first combat operation literally go down in flames, all from American bullets and shells.

Three months later the 504th would finally have a chance to redeem themselves on the Italian mainland. Allied landings at Salerno on September 9, 1943, were bloody and difficult. German defenders on one flank of the landing beaches, dominated by the high village of Altavilla, were particularly dangerous to the Allied beachhead. On September 13, Fifth Army's commander sent a personal message to General Matthew Ridgway, CO of the 82nd Airborne, requesting immediate reinforcements from the division being held in reserve in Sicily. The 504th hastily re-equipped and boarded transports after one of the shortest briefings in Airborne history.

The 1st and 2nd Battalions winged over the Tyrrhenian Sea in the dark, jumping from their C-47s in the dark onto a narrow, contested beachhead. Only 75 men were injured in the drop—a minor miracle under the circumstances. By the night of September 16, 504th PIR was moving on foot into the hills surrounding Altavilla in a confused infiltration. The two battalions' assignment was to seize a hill beside the town from which the Germans had been coordinating artillery fire onto the Allied beachheads.

Wilbert and his comrades almost stumbled blindly through German defensive positions in the dark, somehow taking their objectives without serious resistance. That would change the following morning.

The morning of September 17 brought ceaseless attacks from German platoon- and company-sized units with tank support. That night, German artillery pounded the hilltops occupied by the men of the 504th, many of whom slept for the first time in 36 hours despite the bombardment. When orders for the regiment to withdraw were received during the night, the regimental CO Colonel Reuben C. Tucker III famously replied, "Hell no! We've got this hill, and we are going to keep it. Just send me my other battalion."

The following day, the German defenders evacuated their now-untenable position in the village of Altavilla below, leaving the exhausted 504th to be relieved by Army regular infantry. General Mark Clark, commanding the invasion, said Illig's regiment was "responsible for saving the Salerno beachhead." The 504th fought its way to Naples with the Allied advance and was the first American unit to enter the liberated city on October 1. As Illig and his elite compatriots contemplated more fighting ahead in 1944, however, another airborne drop was in the offing.

Operation Shingle proposed to surprise the enemy by landing on the coast in the German rear at Anzio. Though many in the Allied ranks were less than enthusiastic and there was a shortage of landing craft (then being hoarded for Operation Overlord in Normandy later in 1944), the initial landings on January 22, 1944, were virtually unopposed. The 504th pushed about ten miles inland to the village of Borgo Piave, an important road junction. Despite stiff opposition, the 2nd Battalion and portions of the 1st entered the town. Wilbert's Company D successfully pushed 200 yards east of the town, but a counterattack forced Company D to retreat with heavy losses.

Tragically, Operation Shingle's commander General John P. Lucas botched the opportunity for a rapid advance against light resistance. The Germans rushed reinforcements to the area, and soon tens of thousands of American and British troops were bottled up on the beachhead. The 504th was trapped along with the rest of the invasion force. T. B. Ketterson, the division historian, believed the soldiers were unprepared for what awaited them. They were trapped in a defensive situation, despite being trained for the opposite. "With the exception of the first week of fighting on the beachhead, no appreciable advance was made by our forces" in eight weeks, he explains. "It was strictly trench-type warfare characteristic of the First World War."

While Anzio was where the 504th acquired their immortal nickname "Devils in Baggy Pants" from a captured German diary, Wilbert Illig would not long enjoy the moniker. On February 16, nearly a month after the battle commenced, the Germans launched their counteroffensive, Operation Fischang, against the Allied bridgehead. The main thrust of the assault followed Via Anziante and the Mussolini Canal, which placed Illig and Company D directly in their path.

The Germans swore to "run [the defenders]...into the sea." It was a powerful threat: unable to cross the canal and lacking tank support, the men of Company D could not retreat. According to Second Lieutenant Chester Garrison of 2nd Battalion HQ Company, the "German troops closed in on D Company and in [the] canal in front of [the] right flank of E Company. [It] lasted about an hour." Garrison concluded that Company D suffered the most, with six killed and eight wounded. Illig was one of those tragic six.

Wilbert Henry Illig was posthumously awarded a Purple Heart and subsequently laid to rest in Grafton National Cemetery, though not until four years later on August 13, 1948, when many other war dead were returned from temporary burial sites in Italy. The community of Weirton did not forget its hometown boy. His service was commemorated by Weirton Steel on its employee "Honor Roll," a monument erected in Weirton that stands to this day.

A ceremony honors Weirton's World War II dead on December 7, 1948, in a photograph displayed in the *Weirton Steel Employees Bulletin*. The same issue listed Wilbert Illig among the names of those whose remains had been repatriated the previous year. *Weirton Area Museum and Cultural Center digital archive*



SOURCES FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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