

# SS Parachute Battalion 500

This article describes a small and special unit of the SS, namely SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500.

In just two years, this unit managed to serve on most of the fronts of the war, but its greatest effort, which is also separately described here in the article, was probably the failed attempt to capture Tito (Operation Rösselsprung).

## Setting up a paratrooper unit in the SS



Even before 1937, the first fledgling SS paratrooper unit was organized. After a call for volunteers, a small hard core of soldiers was gathered, mainly from the SS Verfügungstruppe.

However, the project was finally abandoned by order from Berlin in 1939.

In 1943, the Command Headquarters ordered an SS paratrooper unit set up for special operations. Half the strength of the 1,000-strong battalion came from volunteers from the SS. The rest came from military penal camps, i.a. SS-Military prison Danzig-Matzkau, where they served sentences for minor offences, e.g. disobedience.

The volunteers, on their entry into the battalion, were given back their former rank and, in addition, the punishment imposed was cancelled.

Despite the designation as a penal battalion, this battalion did not consist only of criminals, as can be seen.

The battalion - SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 (SS-Fj.Btl.500) - was officially raised in Chlum (Czechoslovakia) in October 1943 under the command of SS-Sturmbannführer Herbert Gilhofer of the 10. SS Panzer-Division "Fruntsberg".

The battalion was divided into a staff company and four companies.

In November 1943, the personnel were sent for parachute training in the Luftwaffe-Fallschirm-Schule Nr. 3 in Mataruska-Banja, near Kraljevo in Serbia (Yugoslavia). In addition to spring training, the crew was subjected to extraordinarily hard physical training to strengthen the unity of the unit.

In January 1944, the battalion was transferred to Hungary, but already in February it was deployed against Tito's partisans in Bosnia-Herzegovina in cooperation with other German units, e.g. 7. SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-

Division "Prinz Eugen".

In the period February to April 1944, one operation followed another in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia. During these operations, the battalion is not used as a parachute unit, but only as an elite infantry unit.

At the end of April, the battalion was withdrawn from the front and command passed to SS Hauptsturmführer Kurt Rybka.

The battalion soon received new orders from Berlin. The next mission was not only to be a parachute operation, it was also to have a special objective: to capture or neutralize Josip Broz better known as "Tito".

## **Task: Defeat Tito!**

In early 1944, Tito was a top priority target for the Germans in the Balkans. On the one hand, he had managed to assemble a partisan army (NOVJ) of more than 300,000 men, on the other hand he was regarded by the allies as their only negotiating partner in the Balkans. The English, the Americans and the Russians all had permanent delegations with Tito.

Since 1941, Tito had led major and minor operations against the German occupation forces since 1941, based in the rugged Yugoslav mountains.

The Germans kept enough road junctions and major cities occupied, but out in the countryside and up in the mountains, they did not have the same control. It was a "cat's game with the mouse" and the constant fighting was a big problem for the Germans. These battles required great resources and drained the German troops of combat power. Reprisals were answered with reprisals and eventually the situation was so brutal in Yugoslavia that in 1944 no more prisoners of war were taken.

The communist guerrillas generally made life miserable for the German forces in Yugoslavia.

The nature of the landscape, with the high mountains and deep ravines as well as many caves, gave the partisans ample opportunities for hiding places and the narrow roads which made it difficult for the German motorized columns to advance quickly, made it very difficult, if not almost impossible, to trace Tito.

At the same time, the battles against both the Russians on the Eastern Front and the Western Allies in Italy meant that the Germans did not have the resources for a large-scale operation in the Balkans.

The only troops available for the task of tracking Tito were the 7th SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs Division "Prinz Eugen" supported by a few regular and volunteer Serbian, Albanian and Bosnian units.

Despite all these indignities, in February 1944 a Brandenburg commando under the leadership of Major Benesch still managed to locate Tito's headquarters in Drvar. A small town at the bottom of the Unac valley in western Bosnia.

It was fantastic news and several plans were immediately drawn up. The only plan that seemed likely to succeed was an airborne operation and this is where the SS-Fj.Btl.500 came into the picture.

## **Operation "Rösselsprung" - Preparation**

The date of Operation "Rösselsprung" (Springer's move) was set for 25 May 1944.

The plan was for a large immediate movement towards Drvar and the surrounding terrain.

Several motorized columns, supported by the Luftwaffe, were to advance towards the towns of Bihac, Livno, Jajce, Krupa, Bosan and Kulen and then turn towards Drvar.

The German troops came from several units XV. Gebirgs-Korps consisting of 7.SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs Division and 1.Gebirgs-Division was to be responsible for the actual attack on Drvar supported by several battle groups from 373. Infantry Division (Kroatisches) as well as Serbian, Albanian and Bosnian volunteers.

To further ensure that Tito and his staff did not escape, SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 was scheduled to jump out directly over the headquarters. This attack was the battalion's first airborne operation.

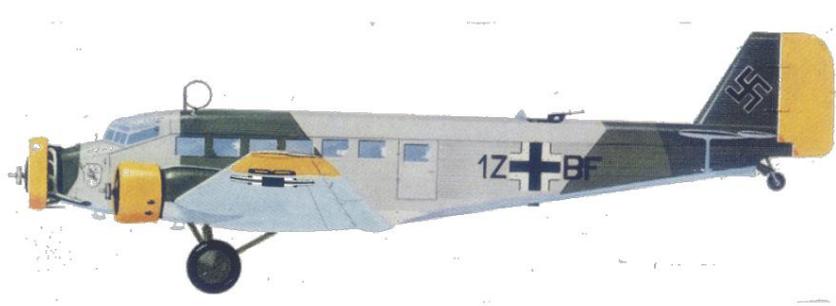
The paratroopers' task was described simply enough, but all the more difficult to carry out. They were to capture or kill Tito, destroy the headquarters, and at the same time eliminate the British, American and Russian liaison officers at the headquarters.

The first wave consisted of 654 paratroopers supported by a special command called "Abteilung Savadil", which consisted of Brandenburgers, signalmen from the Luftwaffe and interpreters from Division Eugen.

The command had the task of destroying the communication equipment and securing the Yugoslav partisan codes.

With this plan, the Germans hoped that - when they could not defeat the partisans - they would leave them without a central leadership.

### **The strengths**



The Luftwaffe was far from the strength it had in 1940 and 41 in the operations against Eben-Emael and over Crete.

In 1944, there was a great shortage of Junkers Ju-52 transport aircraft, so that only 314 men of the first wave could jump with a parachute. The remaining 340 had to be transported in DFS230 gliders from II/LLG1 and III/LLG1 pulled by Stukas, Henschel Hs-129 and some Avia!!

### **The German forces**

The paratrooper battalion was divided into several groups of different sizes. The 340 men who were to fly in the gliders were divided into six groups:

- Group "Panther" of 110 men, which was to take the "citadel" and capture Tito and his staff
- Groups "Greifer", "Sturmer" and "Brecher", each of approx. 50 men, who had the task of setting the allied representations or the English, the Soviet and the American out of the game.
- The "Daufnanger" and "Beisser" commands, reinforced with elements from the "Abteilung Savadil", were to secure the Yugoslav codes and destroy the communication equipment.

The 314 paratroopers who had to jump out were divided into three groups:

- Group "Blue" of 100 men
- Group "Grün" of 95 men
- Group "Rot" of 85 men (Battalion chief SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt Rybka jumped with this

group).

The task for these three groups was first to secure the landing zones for the gliders, then when the gliders had landed to surround Drvar itself to ensure that no reinforcements could enter and not least that Tito could not get out alive.

### **The Yugoslav forces**

Despite all precautions on the German side, the Yugoslav partisans suspected that an attack was brewing. They probably knew nothing about the presence of the paratrooper battalion and thus the risk of an air landing, but several Luftwaffe bombardments of Drvar, which had no particular strategic importance, had put them on high alert.

Tito reinforced the guard force and young Yugoslavs - both men and women - armed with automatic weapons kept watch over their leader around the clock.

An infantry battalion, an engineer battalion, a unit consisting of 150 officer cadets and several other smaller units were deployed in and around Drvar. In addition, the partisans had three captured FIAT Ansaldo L6/40 tankettes stationed in Drvar itself.

Tito did not stay in the city, but instead in a wooden hut built in one of the caves in a nearby mountainside, where he and his staff were well protected from the German air raids. Several camouflaged positions were set up around the entrance to the cave and anti-aircraft machine guns were deployed around the area.

The village's church bell had been dismantled and brought up into the mountains to be used as an alarm bell in the event of an attack.

Even at the Allied representation in Potoci east of Drvar there was heightened alertness.

By the evening of May 24, only four Allied officers remained in Tito's headquarters, so it can be inferred that the Yugoslavs were ready to receive the German troops.

In between, the German paratroopers had been transported by truck and train from their positions in Kraljevo and Mataruska Banja to the airfields in Zrenjanin, Banja Luka and Zagreb.

For these many days, the troops had been under orders not to mention their upcoming mission and to ensure against detection, their parachute equipment (helmets, parachutes, etc.) had been kept hidden. All precautions were generally taken to avoid Tito's spies becoming suspicious and identifying the Germans as paratroopers. Even the uniform badges had been ordered removed.

## **Operation "Rösselsprung" - D-Day**

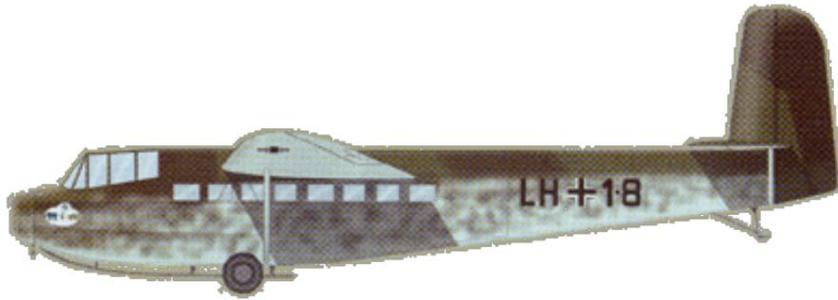
While the German columns crept towards Drvar, the paratroopers boarded their Ju-52 and DFS-230.

At 0500 Luftwaffe attacked Drvar and the surrounding area. At 0650 the first German paratroopers jumped over the area.

To minimize losses, the German paratroopers jumped at low altitude, so the trip down took only 15 seconds. SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt Rybka among the first Germans on earth. The Germans met little resistance and in a few minutes had secured the landing zones for the gliders.

Then it was the turn of the gliders. Group "Panthers" gliders landed on the target, but during the landing were taken under fire by the Yugoslav forces from the mountainsides and many Germans were killed by the fire or in the wreckage

of their glider.



Rybka, who had orders to join Gruppe "Panther", had moved with his men to this landing zone.

The troops from the gliders that had landed got out in good order, but the fire from the Yugoslav partisans increased in strength.

The paratroopers had their automatic small arms with which to return fire, but seriously lacked heavy weapons with which to engage enemy positions.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Rybka organized the defense of the landing zone and battalion command posts were set up in the wreckage of one of the gliders.

At 0900 Drvar was in the hands of the Germans, but they still needed to get hold of Tito.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Rybka decided - despite the heavy fire from the partisans - to attack the cave where Tito was believed to be. The attack instantly turned into pure carnage. The partisans, from their well-designed positions, had free fields of fire against the Germans, who tried in vain to fight their way up to the entrance of the cave. After the attack stalled, the paratroopers were attacked in the flank by the officer cadets, the SS men's situation was almost nightmarish.

Rybka ordered another attack, which was as futile as the first. Yugoslav reinforcements had begun to arrive from all sides, but the worst thing for the Germans was that - now that day was dawning - it was still not known whether Tito was still in the cave.

The sources disagree about when Tito fled. Some claim that it happened as soon as the airborne landing was recognized (ie around 0700), others that he had left the area much earlier (during the night) and still others that he only fled after the first - failed - attack on the cave, but one thing is certain: Tito had escaped from the Germans again - at the last minute.

He and his staff had used a secret tunnel that led to the top of the mountain and from there by rail to Kupresko Polje airfield, from where a Russian plane transported him to Bari in Italy. The German planners had not foreseen that possibility in their plan to cut off Tito from any possibility of escape.

On land, the situation looked critical for the German paratroopers. Losses increased hour by hour and many wounded awaited medical aid, which their comrades were unable to provide due to the heavy shelling. The partisans from the Lika Brigade and the Dalmatian Corps gained ground and managed to push the German forces away from the mountain cave where Tito was supposed to be

SS-Hauptsturmführer Rybka anxiously looked skyward for the Ju-52s that were to bring up the next paratroopers. Finally at At 1150 another 200 SS paratroopers under the command of SS-Hauptsturmführer Obermeier jumped over Drvar.

They are immediately taken under heavy fire from Yugoslav machine guns and the losses during and just after the landing were heavy. The survivors of the second landing wave joined the German forces.

From the air, German Stukas try to support the paratroopers with attacks against the positions of the 1st Yugoslav People's Brigade. However, the attacks did not have much effect as the Yugoslav forces in positions in the rocks and in the caves were well protected and as soon as the German planes were gone and the smoke cleared the Yugoslavs reappeared.

Gradually the German paratroopers began to run out of ammunition and as it was not possible for them to fight their way back to the gliders to resupply. Against this background, Rybka made the decision to put everything on a map.

He ordered a renewed attack on the cave where Tito's headquarters were located and the German paratroopers left their positions and advanced in a zig-zag. Many fell along the way, but in the end the Germans, led by Rybka, reached the positions of the Yugoslav partisans. A bloody melee ensued, man against man. The partisans - including many young women - fought hard to defend the positions and Rybka was seriously wounded by shrapnel.

Eventually the Germans reached the cave, only to find it abandoned!

The "green devils" found only one of Tito's uniforms. The rest of the headquarters had been evacuated and all the equipment and paraphernalia had apparently been taken with them.

Rybka was brought back to the German positions.

The Yugoslavs now intensified their attack and threatened the German position in the mountains. SS-Hauptsturmführer Bentrup, who had taken command of the remnants of the German battalion, ordered a retreat down towards Drvar. The wounded were carried as best as possible and the battalion gathered in the cemetery to take up positions there and await help.

Bentrup arranged for a Fieseler Storch to evacuate Rybka, whose condition had worsened. He subsequently ended up spending many weeks in an SS military hospital in Prague.

Kampfgruppe "Willan" of the 373. Infanterie-Division (Kroatisches) should have arrived on the afternoon of the 25th, but by dusk no one had yet arrived. The paratroopers were not yet aware that the Yugoslavs had surrounded the city and by frequent ambushes delayed the advance of the motorized columns.

The partisans now launched an attack against the cemetery with the support of a mortar battery. Even the inhabitants of Drvar took part in the fighting. The situation became untenable for the German paratroopers, who successfully broke out of the position and moved towards a large sawmill on the outskirts of the city. During the night they again arranged for defense. The wounded who could, had to fight side by side with their comrades. The weapons were examined, the ammunition counted and the last cigarette was smoked.

Soon after, the 1st Yugoslav People's Brigade renewed the attack and advanced again and again against the Germans. The fighting lasted throughout the night.

In the early morning hours of May 26, a reconnaissance unit from the 13. Regiment/7.SS-Freiwilligen " finally broke through the Yugoslav encirclement and reached the Gebirgs-Division " Prinz Eugen German

The Germans now had an opportunity to investigate Tito's cave again and, in addition to the uniform from the day before, they found a Jeep and a stack of leaflets urging the Yugoslav people to support the fight against World War III. Realm.

After the action, the command headquarters issued an announcement that Tito's headquarters had been destroyed and that the Yugoslav losses were 6,000 men. However, they forgot to report that SS-Fallschirmjäger Bataillon 500, out of an originally deployed force of 1,000 men, only had 200 men left.

## The further efforts of the SS paratroopers



For the 200 survivors, there was no time for leave or relaxation. The force was almost immediately thrown back into the search for Tito's partisans, particularly in the area of Petrovac, where the 26th Division of the NOVJ was located.

In June 1944, SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 was withdrawn from the front and transferred to Ljubljana to reorganize. Reinforcements were added, but the strength still did not exceed 292 men. Command was taken over by SS-Hauptsturmführer Siegfried Milius.

At the end of June, the SS paratroopers traveled across Europe to the Baltic Sea coast. Berlin had intended that they should be air-landed on Åland to protect the island from the Soviet advance. However, the plan never came to fruition.

The battalion - reinforced with a number of volunteers - was then transferred first to Estonia and from there to Kaunas in Lithuania, where it came under the command of Army Group Mitte.

On 10 July 1944, a battle group was formed consisting of the paratroopers and the remnants of I./Panzer Regiment-Grossdeutschland. The task was to secure the retreat route for the German troops who are being surrounded by the Red Army in the ruins of Vilnius.

For two weeks the SS paratroopers held their ground against the Russian tanks and a corridor was kept open through which supplies could be brought forward and wounded returned from the Lithuanian capital.

After the Battle of Vilnius, the battalion was tasked with delaying the advance of the Soviet divisions from the 11th and 33rd Guards Armies. In these battles, which spanned the entire month of August, the battalion fought side by side with parts of the 7th Panzer-Division and the remnants of several infantry divisions.

In October, the battalion, now not even numbering 100 men, was attached to the famous Panzer-Korps Grossdeutschland.

During November, the battalion was transferred to Austria, where it formed cadres for the formation of a new unit - SS-Fallschirmjäger-Battalion 600.

This new battalion was formed from the survivors of the previous battalion and 500 volunteers. There were no convicts among the new personnel and the new battalion did not have the status of a penal unit.

The newly formed battalion was not an airborne unit, but rather a special unit capable of conducting commando raids. The battalion took part in, among other things with two companies in 150. Panzer-Brigade's operation "Greif" during the Battle of the Ardennes under the command of SS-Sturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny.

In early 1945, the now 1,000 strong SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 600 was transferred east again. Recruits had arrived from both the army and the navy. The task, in short, was to delay it

Soviet advance at all costs and the battalion was deployed in combat on the east side of the Oder near Schwedt. On 1 April 1945 the battalion was forced back to the west bank and at the end of. In April, the remnants of the battalion were transferred to Northern Germany and deployed there against the Western Allies.

Only the capitulation of the Third Reich put an end to the unit's struggle. The few survivors were captured by the US Army.



## **SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 as a wargame unit (Command Decision)**

I have not found any primary sources that specifically mention the organization of the SS-Fallschirmjäger Battalion 500, but based on Bob Mackenzie's proposal, the battalion could be set up as follows:

### **SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500**

Battalion staff  
Chief

Parachute Company (3 total)  
Command sharing  
Parachute Division  
Parachute Division

Paratrooper Platoon (Machine Gun)  
Paratrooper Platoon (Machine Gun)

Heavy company

Command sharing  
Medium machine gun division  
Medium machine gun division  
Mortar division (80 mm mortar)  
If 8 ammunition wagon  
If 8 ammunition wagon  
Engineer division, flame thrower  
If 8 engineer ammunition wagon  
LG40 cannon (75mm recoilless)  
If 8 ammunition wagon (75 mm ammunition)

*Source: The thin Gray Line by Bob Mackenzie*

Given that the report which forms the basis of the article precisely points out the Germans' lack of heavy weapons, it can be considered whether the heavy company should be as strong as stated above during Operation Rösselsprung. On the other hand, the battalion was at optimum strength at that time.

Bob Mackenzie also estimates that when deployed together with Grossdeutschland in the autumn of 1944, the battalion should probably be represented as one of the above paratrooper companies reinforced with one machine gun platoon and a medium heavy mortar platoon.

Incidentally, a company of the paratroopers was part of a combat group "1001 Nächte" that fought against the Russians in front of Berlin.

## **See more here**

About the battalion and its history

## **Sources**

<http://www.1939-45.org/articles/500ss.htm>

<http://www.eagle19.freemove.co.uk/ss500.htm>

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*Waffen-SS, Its Uniforms, Insignia and Equipment 1938 - 1945* by DSV Fosten and RJ Marion, Almark Publications, 1971, ISBN 0 85524 031 8

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