

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Honvéd paratroopers: Evolution and combat history of
the parachute battalion between 1938-1945

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Previous information regarding the parachute battalion were incomplete and subjective (János Bárczy: Vádintítvány, Zuhanóugrás) until János Huszár published his high quality book in 1994. The only positive aspect of Bárczy's works was that former paratrooper officers (Edömér Tassonyi, Ferenc Makray, Tamás Szokolay) wrote their own recollections reflecting on the information contained in the two books.

Although the history of the parachute battalion had already been written, the articles and studies are principally concerned with the battalion's combat history. János Huszár's research provides an insight into the circumstances of the foundation of the battalion and the hardships of organization – with the help of contemporary documents, which are also used in this dissertation.

Our knowledge is also incomplete regarding the everyday life and training routine of the battalion. While some parts of the training have been researched in detail, an overview and summary of the complete training routine had not yet been published. The issue of the location of the battalion station is also closely linked to the question of training. In this regard, the works of most researchers – as well as the author of this dissertation – were based on János Huszár's research. In the Military History Archives there are 4 boxes of blueprints and plans related to the issue of location and construction of the battalion station.

With the inclusion of new sources, it seems to be necessary to investigate the history of the parachute-battalion involving new methods and aspects of research. The author had the opportunity to study materials and documents of the Ministry of Defence and Chief of Staff which are rarely, if ever, included in the published works.

The data collected and studied are outside of the already known - Ministry of Defence, Chief of Staff – official documents: 2 r. department (clothing), 3 a. department (artillery weapons, experiments conducted), 3 c. department (ammunition supply), 8 department (officers' personal issues, 8 b., 8 e, 8. Chief of Staff departments. Other types of sources - maps, photographs – were also added.

The involvement of the primary military history resources - Military History Archives, Military History Archives Central Archives – was supplemented by studying the resources of other institutions, including the Laczkó Dezső Museum, Veszprém County Museum, the Hungarian National Film Archive, Veszprém County Archives, Budapest City Archives, National Archives of Hungary, Archives in Pápa (subsidiary of the Veszprém County Archives).

In some chapters – for example in the case of the paratrooper training, or combat tactics - the available sources, recollections and memories have provided an opportunity to detail the

author's explanation, while in other chapters – in the case of paratrooper clothing, equipment, aircraft supply, paratrooper tactics, construction of the paratrooper's station, etc. – less detailed portrayal of issues was possible.

1. Aim of the dissertation

As the framework of personnel, on which the parachute battalion was based, had been set up in 1938, and the troop itself ceased to exist in 1945, the time frame was given, within which the military history of the battalion was to be studied. The research itself, however, goes beyond the chronological list of combat operations.

The thesis aims at utilizing the available resources, and new types of sources are involved, such as military equipment and tactics, loss databases – the sources served as thematic units during the course of introducing the formation, history and fate of the battalion. The thesis paper has also revealed details of questions formerly not studied thoroughly, thus elaborating the already existing black and white image of the battalion. The new, previously unexamined sources – Budapest City Archives, National Archives of Hungary - provide further information and other useful additions.

2. Research methods

The utilization of historical methods is determined by the number of available resources, quantity and nature thereof. The majority of the documents - especially the battle reports - of the parachute battalion was destroyed, thus the exploration and accurate documentation of the troop movements, changes in military personnel, data of losses and promotions of officers provide difficulties for the researcher. János Huszár received significant help from former paratroopers when writing his work and their recollections greatly supported his research. Recent researchers, however, could no longer rely on this group of resources. From the distance of past decades, subjective experiences may present inaccurate or loose data, the correction of which is not always possible.

The thesis consists of two parts: presentation of theory and practice. Based on the existing resources, the author has established a research method, separating the different thematic units within the chronological time-frame; this refers to both the theoretical (organization history) and the practical (combat history) part of this work. All the data, tables, figures and diagrams

serve the purpose of better understanding the organization and functioning of the parachute battalion.

3. Results of the PhD dissertation

Preceding the establishment of the parachute battalion, the theoretical works regarding the paratroopers were mainly published by one or two major authors, ignoring or merely mentioning several important periodicals and journals. Incorporation of the latter sources helps to understand why the quality of the articles concerned with military issues was greatly affected by the limited access to foreign works. Furthermore, the theoretical researchers and the officers serving in the actual battalion, whose opinion was based on their practical experiences, had completely different views on the subject.

The related articles show that the Hungarian paratroopers were interested in the German and Soviet developments. However, lack of experience – which German and Soviet paratroopers also had to deal with – led to the necessity of trying their own developments.

Although the training of the paratroopers had been mentioned several times, mostly the infantry training and listings of paratrooper training were highlighted. It is important to emphasize that certain elements of the so-called paratrooper training appear at certain points in the infantry combat training – such as physical exercises and workouts – but the two training methods are distinctly separated. However, from the second half of 1944 the paratrooper training had ceased and the infantry combat training became dominant; thus rendering the paratroopers nearly identical to the Hungarian infantry (differentiated by the paratrooper badges and some clothing items). The thesis added to the already existing documentation a detailed and chronologically arranged system of data and factual information about the history of combat training of the paratroopers.

The Hungarian paratrooper had specially designed clothes: he pulled an overall, also used by the airmen, over his jacket. The only difference was that the overall could be narrowed by the zippers at the feet and the forearm. The jumping boots were also different from the ordinary boots in service: the thick rubber soles helped smoother landing and walking within the vehicle. Specially designed paratrooper helmets were not put in service. The paratroopers, while fighting on the ground, did not wear their jump-suits, but the ordinary infantry clothing and equipment. In 1944, the Szent László Division, into which the paratrooper battalion merged, issued large numbers of laced boots and a sleeveless leather vests to supply all of the soldiers serving in the division. These were the only examples of special clothing. Another

indication of the special aspect of this force was the Parachute Badge and that of the Szent László Division.

Similarly, little is known of the types of injuries that could occur during parachute jumps, although this might let us know the types of dangers faced by a paratrooper during practice jumps nearly 70 years ago.

The successes of the training of the paratroopers seem to be an outstanding achievement especially in the light of the shortage of transport aircrafts, these carriers were outdated Italian models (Savoia-Marchetti SM-75's, Caproni Ca-101's). Efforts had been made to modernize the aircrafts (purchase of Fiat G-12T's), but these changes have already been late, and the few planes served minimal time in their original function, as paratrooper training and transport aircrafts.

It can be concluded that the setting up and expansion of the paratrooper unit proved to be partial because of the costs thereof and this, added to the constant lack of personnel, contributed to the unit remaining below the level of regimental strength. The lack of transport aircrafts at the squadron to drop an entire battalion was a further contributing factor to the above mentioned facts.

From the training – as well as from the TOE's (table of organisation and equipment) – it can be concluded that a new approach to combat methods was adapted by the Hungarian paratroopers in 1941, which also meant the introduction of changes in the course of training. This can be traced back to the German Fallschirmjäger successes during the years 1940-41. Instead of the initial (1938-40s) method of small sabotage-type destruction detachments – which would have been dropped to the target area from high altitudes – the tactics of the battalion was based on surprise onslaught of the important targets and on holding them until the arrival of the ground forces. The paratroopers were trained to carry out low-altitude (300-180 m) mass jumps and invasion of tactically important targets. This was similar to the German paratrooper combat tactics.

The battalion, despite the unreliability of the available technology, until 1941 successfully prepared its paratroopers to carry out jumps into combat sectors. The author could draw the conclusion that by 1941-42, personnel serving in the parachute battalion had the required number of jumps, which also included fully-armored jumps combined with field practice.

In 1941, during the battalion's first and only battle engagement, the leading aircraft crashed, presumably due to mechanical failures; all of the pilots, the paratroopers and the battalion commander died. There was also a supply jump (1941) and airborne practice (1944). Other

missions have not been carried out due to the impossibility to use the parachute battalion in its original, offensive role within the framework of the Hungarian Army.

Interestingly enough, despite the understandably strong German-Hungarian economic and military ties, there was little contact between Hungarian and German paratroopers. There were donations of insignia to each other, mainly for propagandistic purposes. The Hungarian officers had been retrained to use German troop type parachutes during 1942 in Germany, the training was accomplished by the crew in 1944 in Pápa. German clothing and parachutes had not been taken over, since the Hungarian parachutes, jump suits, weapons and containers were fully adequate for the required tasks. The details regarding retraining of the soldiers to the German troop type parachute were also less known until now.

The staff and crew of the battalion consisted of volunteered soldiers who had undergone selection based on strict aspects as was the case in other paratrooper units of other countries. This was the case until 1944, although the end of the war and the shortage in personnel brought along the filling up of the ranks from other units; the same applied to the German Fallschirmjäger.

The medical examination of the volunteers to the parachute battalion was the same as of the airmen. This resulted in a high dropout rate: the least organ abnormality or disability became a reason for rejection. The existing myths and preconceptions about the service in paratrooper units strongly reduced the number of volunteers. The attitude of the high-ranking officers and their influence on who are to be transferred to the paratroopers negatively influenced the number of the personnel. The insufficient number of officers did not let the second battalion to be set up before 1944.

Previously, in other works - except for János Huszár's book – information about the history and organization of the levente paratroopers was insufficient. This thesis provides a new type of insight into the so far unexplored area, and also leads us to the conclusion that the pre-training was uniquely Hungarian in terms of recruiting personnel from the civilians.

A separate levente organization was concerned with the youth volunteering to join the paratroopers, however, due to technical conditions and material shortages made it impossible to extend the structure of the organization to country level. The existing levente units organized the training of the prospective paratroopers, based primarily on ordinary shooting and physical practices: the special conditions (experienced instructors, parachutes) necessary for special paratrooper training were not available everywhere. At the end of the levente training there should have been jumps carried out from the jump tower, however, due to the late building up of the tower in 1944, there was only one practice jump carried out.

Nevertheless this practice was exceptional among the paratroopers of the Axis powers, because only Hungary used its single jump tower to train those entering the ranks of the parachute battalion.

The researcher may meet the name of the Hehs parachutes a number of times, however, the development history and the unit and dropping-practices carried out have not been documented in detail. The unit prices and the total number of parachutes also support the assumption that the Hungarian military economy was able to provide the pilots and the parachute battalion with the necessary number of parachutes in the necessary quality, thus German material support was not needed. The Hungarian parachute worked adequately and both the test drops and the documentation of parachute jump accidents show that the majority of parachute accidents occurred as consequence of faults on the jumper's side. The quality standards of the Hungarian training are also shown by the fact that during thousands of practice jumps only 19 people were killed.

The wide range of weapon technology experiments are remarkable; they were conducted in order to extend the possibilities of the paratroopers: special machine guns and foldable bikes were developed for the unit. A number of sources confirm that the paratroopers have been equipped with small arms (rifles, machine guns) and ammunition. It can be stated that the "honvéd" paratrooper was much better equipped - at least in terms of weaponry - than the German paratrooper who, after landing, had to find his container and until then had minimal defense. The series of drop practices carried out using anti-tank-, mountain gun-, grenade launcher and radio technique – and of which little is said in the pertaining literature - showed that the Hungarian parachute battalion worked with the same quality as the respective German units. It is, however, important to state that the heavy weapons dropping tests have mostly been carried out in theory and calculations - the shortage of valuable artillery material and the technical limitations of the available aircrafts limited the possibilities. The drop containers have also been developed by Hungarian paratroopers.

Similarly to the Allied units, the Hungarian paratroopers also touched ground fully armed. The drop containers brought the support weapons and radio equipment. During the practice jumps it became apparent that the rifle in service was unsuitable for paratroopers, thus the machine guns came into view. Although the battalion has never been equipped with the Király-machine guns in sufficient numbers, these weapons had been designed to meet the special needs of the paratroopers.

The fate of the Hungarian paratrooper unit shows a number of similarities with that of the German Fallschirmjäger. Both the Hungarian and the German paratroopers were deployed

mostly in defense combat actions in infantry role, divided into sub-units different from their original structure.

After the occupation of the country, as independent Hungarian military leadership no longer existed; the Germans tried to deploy this excellent unit on the most vulnerable sections of the front, against deep penetrations of the enemy, in the same manner as the German Fallschirmjäger.

The second, major thematic unit of this thesis is the presentation of the combat history of the parachute battalion; although this was researched thoroughly by many excellent authors, new results are available now, including interviews with the former paratroopers and other sources previously neglected.

The aim of this thesis is to introduce the unit history of the parachute battalion. One of the most important goals was to contradict the popular misconceptions regarding the insufficient equipment and inadequate training of the Hungarian paratroopers. The author hopes that his works contributes to detailing the picture of the battalion's history with the exploration of some barely researched areas.

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