

Pacific Parachute Infantry

Ernest McCullough Kirven of Darlington was a member of Clemson's Class of 1944 majoring in animal husbandry. Unlike the cadets ahead of them in the Classes of 1942 and 1943, Kirven and his classmates weren't allowed to finish their studies. The military's insatiable need for manpower trumped any individual's plan for a college education.

At the end of the 1943 academic year, Mac Kirven and most of the rest of his classmates were ordered to active duty. Those who performed well in a three-month training program continued on to Officer Candidate School. Those who succeeded in OCS were commissioned as second lieutenants and sent to join troop units in the European or Pacific theaters of operations.

Kirven was assigned to Company I, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment. The 503rd, originally formed as a battalion, was the third of four airborne units established by the Army prior to the outbreak of World War II and the first assigned to the Pacific theater.



On February 16, 1945, the 503rd parachuted onto the island of Corregidor, the island fortress dominating Manila Bay from which American and Filipino forces had made their doomed last stand three long years earlier. Of the estimated 6,550 Japanese defenders, only fifty survived the battle.

After returning from Corregidor, the 503rd was again ordered into combat, this time to reinforce the 40th Infantry Division which was locked in a fierce battle against the Japanese on the Island of Negros in the Central Philippines. Initial plans for the operation called for the 503rd to jump on a strategic bridge and lumber mill, but both were destroyed by the Japanese before the operation could be mounted. As a result, the 503rd sailed into combat in a more conventional manner: amphibious landing craft.



The regiment arrived on April 7,

1945 and for the next five months battled the Japanese in fierce combat in the mountainous areas of Negros. Sadly, Ernest Kirven's war ended on May 4, 1945 when he was killed in action.

Airborne operations in the Pacific theater were on a smaller scale than the massive deployments of parachute and glider infantry in the European theater. While airborne losses were far less in the Pacific, the tragic arithmetic of war ensured that many young Americans made the ultimate sacrifice in this theater of operations.

Ernest Kirven was reinterred in Darlington's Grove Hill Cemetery in 1948.

