

**Stony Brook University  
The Graduate School**

Doctoral Defense Announcement

**Abstract**

The Sword of St. Michael: the 82nd Airborne Division in World War II

By

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In a host of works published shortly after the end of World War II and continuing through the early 1980s scholars and military analysts almost without exception made sweeping generalizations about the relative ineffectiveness of Allied ground combat units, especially when compared to similar units in the German Army. But beginning in the late 1980s historians began challenging this prevailing orthodoxy and while some took to task the evidentiary underpinnings of the previous work others disputed the notion that the German Army of World War II was as good on the battlefield as had previously been thought.

This study enters the historical debate at the micro level by focusing on one American combat unit, the 82nd Airborne Division, which saw about as much combat as any American unit in the European Theater. It takes as its measure of success the sine qua non of effectiveness on the battlefield—mission accomplishment—and demonstrates that despite fighting surrounded, outnumbered, or both the 82nd never failed to accomplish any mission assigned it. Moreover, it did so while confronting some of the very best ground combat units Germany had to offer.

Why and how the 82nd was able to perform so well in combat is an essential theme of the work. Two factors stand out. One was an organizational culture that prized aggressiveness and initiative and instilled these attributes in the ranks through training and by example. A second was an ethos of up-front leadership that permeated the division's officer and noncommissioned officers corps.

The study draws on official records and histories, interviews, and the reminiscences, letters, diaries, and writings of veterans who fought with, alongside, and against the 82nd to both present a narrative history of the division during World War II and explicate the reasons for its success in combat. Moreover, it also provides a look at the early development of American airborne warfare, to include the struggle for its acceptance by the U.S. Army and the tactics and techniques that made it viable.

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**Dissertation Advisor:** Michael Barnhart