



# DIABOL



The Link for All Veterans, Spouses, Family and Friends of the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment Association – December, 2016

## 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reunion a Huge Success

November 2 – 6, the Family and Friends of the 508th PIR Assn celebrated its 10 year anniversary in Charleston, SC. Donna and Troy Palmer did a spectacular job hosting the reunion despite numerous obstacles. One week prior to the reunion, they were told the hotel had suffered damage from Hurricane Matthew and the kitchen was closed for repairs. They had to find a local caterer to prepare the Welcoming Breakfast and Banquet and they found a great one and saved money for the association in the bargain! Many, many thanks to Donna and Troy for a fantastic job under the most adverse of circumstances.

We had around fifteen active duty soldiers in attendance with many more arriving for the banquet Saturday night. One of the attendee highlights for all of us was the arrival of CSM (Ret.) Bert Puckett and his lovely wife, Chris. One of our most memorable reunions was in 2008, when CSM Puckett and 2-508th hosted our reunion at Ft. Bragg. In 2010, Bert was the key note speaker at our banquet in Oklahoma City. We were all thrilled to see the Pucketts and hope to see them at future reunions.



*Ernie Lamson with active duty 508th at The Citadel*

Highlights of the reunion include a dinner cruise around Charleston Harbor; tours of the USS Yorktown and Fort Sumter; a visit to The Citadel which included a tour of the facility and the Citadel Twilight Parade. As an added bonus, the son of Chris and Burt Puckett, Hunter, is a freshman at The Citadel and participated in the parade.

At the Saturday night banquet, LTC Justin Reese honored the Family and Friends board of directors by presenting them with certificates signed by the Secretary of the Army making them honorary members of the regiment.

LTC James Browning, C.O. of 2-508th spoke at the Welcoming Breakfast and LTC Justin Reese, C.O. of 1-508th spoke at the Saturday night banquet. Both men gave excellent speeches. Our color guard was made up of both 1st and 2nd battalions of the 508<sup>th</sup> and was the best we have ever had. Saturday night we had 110 attend the banquet. The evening ended with our annual raffle. †

## **Dwindling Connections**

**The below is a reprint from a special Veteran's Day issue of the Fayetteville Observer by Drew Collins**

There are 13 men in the photograph that retired CSM Kenneth "Rock" Merritt holds in front of me. I'm in Merritt's Fayetteville home, a few weeks ahead of Veteran's Day, to talk about World War II. The walls are covered in the evidence of decades of service, including photos of past military leaders and presidents.

There are a number of awards, too. The Silver Star the Merritt earned for destroying a German machine gun position, North Carolina's Order of the Long Leaf Pine and, more recent, the Doughboy Award he received earlier this year for a lifetime of contributions to the infantry. But amid all that evidence of his grand career, Merritt returns his focus again and again to the photo. It was taken last year in San Antonio, during an annual reunion of Merritt's World War II unit, the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment "We had 13," Merritt said, rattling off the names of the men surrounding him in the photo. "We will be lucky to have 10 this year." It's not that Merritt expects the men to bail on the reunion. No. Merritt knows that men like him are becoming an endangered species.

More than 70 years ago, Merritt jumped into Normandy as part of the Allied invasion of France. He would go on to fight in Operation Market Garden and the Battle of the Bulge. After some of these battles, which could rage for weeks, fewer than half of his fellow paratroopers would return to friendly lands to prepare for the next fight. But the men didn't give up. Merritt still looks up to those men. Men who knew they would likely die, but who did what they could to save their fellow soldiers. Men like Leonard Funk.

Amid heavy fighting and a driving snowstorm that at times reached the waists of American troops, Funk found himself in a difficult position when he turned a corner and found himself in the midst of more than 80 German soldiers, recently freed as prisoners by a roving enemy patrol. He was ordered to surrender with a pistol in his stomach and, at least at first, Funk pretended to comply. But as he unslung his Thompson submachine gun from his shoulder, he quickly brought the weapon into line and riddled the German officer with bullets. He then turned to the other Germans, rallying his fellow Americans to seize their weapons. Once the dust settled, 21 Germans had been killed, many wounded the others captured, according to reports. Funk, who stared down death on a frigid European battlefield would live to the ripe age of 76 before his death in 1992.

Merritt, 93, said time is one battle the World War II veterans won't win. "They're dying at a rate of hundreds a day," he said. But if Merritt is slowing down, he's not showing it. He remains in high demand, appearing on Fort Bragg and regularly speaking to soldiers about his career. Earlier this year, he returned to the site of the Battle of the Bulge for the first time since the war. There, he found his old machine gun position. When those with him refused to believe it was his, he correctly told them where they would find the foxholes of his three ammunition bearers. "They were 15 feet back and to the right and left," Merritt said. "I told them they would be. This was my first night at the Battle of the Bulge. I could never forget it."

Merritt doesn't hesitate to talk about the war. He said it's part of his duty to mentor young soldiers when he can, especially his beloved squad leaders. They've got the toughest jobs in the Army if they're doing it right," Merritt said.

He knows he's part of a dwindling connection to the war. He saw America lose touch with World War I as its veterans died. And now, he sees it happening to his generation. According to the National World War II museum, more than 16 million Americans served in the war. Only 620,000 are alive today. And each day an average of 372 veterans are dying. In less than a decade, fewer than 100,000 are expected to be alive. What was once the most widespread war in history – with 100 million people serving in militaries worldwide – will be relegated to history books, museums and archives.

For many, it's a personal loss. Shortly before I visited with Merritt last month, I lost my own connection to World War II. My grandfather, Lawrence Stanton Quick, Sr. died at age 91 at his home in Wallace, SC. Grandpa Quick would have been 18 years old when he joined the Navy in June 1944. He arrived at Camp Peary, Virginia, the week after the Allied invasion of Normandy. Some time later, he would find himself aboard a heavy cruiser known as the USS Chicago that soon looped its way from Philadelphia to the Pacific. The USS Chicago guarded carriers as they conducted airstrikes and was among the ships that bombarded industrial areas in an attempt to hinder the Japanese war effort. It would later serve on occupation duty in Japan and patrol Chinese waters after the war. It was not a quiet job. Nor an easy one. The USS Chicago was involved in several sea battles during my grandfather's service, from 1944 – 1946.

But beyond the danger to his life in combat, his service would prove to have long lasting affects. My grandfather never smoked, but was often told he had the lungs of a smoker. The asthma that plagued him for most of his life instead can likely be traced to the bowels of the USS Chicago, he told me. But Grandpa Quick didn't regret anything. He was always a proud sailor. He loved the military. That love didn't stop in his later years. When I was able to visit, Grandpa Quick would always ask what Fort Bragg was up to. He was amazed by how advanced the military had become. It's a common theme I've found among veterans of his day.

And Merritt is among them. The old paratrooper, who 18 months into his military career was leading a squad of soldiers in France, said today's Army is the best it's ever been. "I really believe that," Merritt said. "It's got the best trained, best educated officers and noncommissioned officers our Army has ever produced. They are better equipped and better trained," he said. In comparison, Merritt said troops of his day were not as well prepared. "We had people that didn't read or write, but they could shoot a rifle," he said. The troops made up for those shortcomings on the battlefield, They earned the title of Greatest Generation through sacrifice and grit. And now, they've become a precious, endangered resource. "Everybody's gotten too old," Merritt said, gently holding his photograph. "They're dying too fast." †

## 1 FURY SETS THE PATH FOR 2017

Returning from the Joint Readiness Training Center means two things for an airborne infantry battalion... time to reset for a small amount of time, and then time to start training again.

1-508 PIR (1Fury) hit the ground running following our JRTC rotation. With just five days back on Fort Bragg, we assumed the duties of Outload Support Battalion (OSBn). Many logistical requirements are needed to ensure the 82nd Airborne Division can successfully meet its mission of fighting anywhere in the world at a moment's notice, and it's the OSBn's mission to make it happen. We exercised this construct by deploying 2nd Brigade Combat Team to JRTC, which required the rapid movement of 2BCT's personnel and equipment during a 96-hour sequence. The deployment was a great success for both 1Fury and 2BCT, and it demonstrated how lethal and agile the 82nd Airborne Division truly is.

In November, 1Fury quickly shifted gears and participated in the 508 PIR Reunion in Charleston, SC. We also hosted our annual ball at the Embassy Suites in Fayetteville, NC. CSM (ret) Kenneth "Rock" Merritt was our guest speaker, and we were honored to have the Family and Friends of the 508 PIR Association Board of Directors with us that evening.

December brought about change for our battalion. We welcomed three new company commanders for Headquarters Company, Alpha Company, and Juliet Company. On December 8th, 1Fury farewelled LTC Justin Reese and welcomed LTC Rob McChrystal as the newest battalion commander. Just before the battalion change of command ceremony, 1Fury unveiled famed artist James Dietz's newest painting, "Fury From the Sky," which details the actions of the 508 PIR on Hill 30 following the airborne assault into Normandy, France. Mr. Dietz and Rock Merritt spoke at the unveiling, and Rock honored 1Fury's leaders with his recount of his time on Hill 30 in 1944.

Looking ahead, 1Fury will take Block Leave over the Christmas holiday to reset before training begins again in 2017. In January, our Delta Company will conduct crew gunnery at Fort Benning, Georgia, and our dismounted platoons will conduct platoon live fire exercises at Fort Bragg. These are key developmental events for young lieutenants, and some of the best training they will receive in their careers as we train to jump, fight, and win – anywhere in the world.

### ALL THE WAY! FURY FROM THE SKY!

By MAJ Dru Rhodes, 1-508 PIR Operations Officer †

## 2 FURY DEPLOYS TO IRAQ/TURKEY

2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment has been busy fall/winter season so far. After a Decisive Action Training Event rotation at the US Army Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, the battalion began training several teams for an upcoming deployment to Iraq with a Mission Readiness Exercise where leaders practiced their skills advising foreign military leaders.

On returning home from Louisiana the battalion transitioned immediately to outload operations, preparing Paratroopers and equipment to go forward for missions in both Iraq and Turkey. As the deployment nears the Paratroopers have been busy double checking equipment, ensuring all of their administrative tasks are complete, and finally taking some much-deserved leave before departing for the long deployment overseas.

Over the last several weeks the companies and Family Readiness Groups of the battalion have held Christmas parties, toy drives, and other holiday themed occasions such as a recent Cookies with Santa event.

While our deploying Paratroopers prepare to leave, the rest of 2-508 took responsibility as the Out-load Support Battalion for the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade Combat Team. As the OSBn, 2-508 ensures that all equipment and paratroopers from the Global Response Force are ready to deploy at a moment's notice. The GRF and OSBn work hand in hand to achieve the All American standard of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division as the nation's Guard of Honor.

Through training, dedication and discipline, the Paratroopers of the 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment stand ready to answer our Nation's call!

Airborne! All the Way! Fury From the Sky! †

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## **Dutch citizens still commemorate the American soldiers that gave their lives during WW2 to defeat the Nazis.**

*By Ton Hermes, Foundation for Adopting Graves American Cemetery Margraten (The Netherlands)*

MARGRATEN, Netherlands — They haven't forgotten. For 71 years, the Dutch are travelling to the American cemetery in Margraten to care for the graves of Americans killed in World War II. Several times a year, on Memorial Day or on the day they were killed in action, Dutch adopters place bouquets at 8,301 gravestones and in front of 1,722 names in the Walls of the Missing. All 10,023 Americans, men and women they never knew, have been adopted by a Dutch family, as well as local schools, companies and military organizations. An astonishing 100% adoption rate.

Arthur Chotin, 70, from Annapolis, Md., visiting his father's resting place, asked himself: "What would cause a nation recovering from losses and trauma of their own to adopt the sons and daughters of another nation? And what would keep that commitment alive for all of these years, when the memory of that war has begun to fade? It is a unique occurrence in the history of civilization."

The adoption program that started in February 1945 was the brainchild of the Margraten town clerk and a local pastor. A committee was formed and a large adoption campaign started. The purpose of the adoption program was to pay respect to the liberators. A lot of adopters also had contact with the families of the fallen in America. The Dutch wanted to make sure the American families knew that their sons were being cared for in a manner they would have done themselves. The grave adoption program was highly successful and on Memorial Day 1946 all 18,764 graves were adopted. The correspondence that developed between adopters and family members of the fallen soldiers often resulted in connections and friendship that have survived to this day.

The adopters aren't responsible for cutting the grass or cleaning the grave's marble cross — that's the job of the American Battle Monuments Commission, the federal agency that oversees the U.S. cemetery in Margraten. Instead, adopters periodically stop by their chosen graves, delivering flowers on soldiers' birthdays, dates of death, Christmas, Memorial Day.

When you are curious to know the adopters of the grave of your father, uncle, grandfather, great-grandfather you can find out through our website [www.adoptiegraven-margraten.nl](http://www.adoptiegraven-margraten.nl).

On this website you can also find information about the "Certificate of Commemoration", a document that confirms the good relationship between the adopting family and the next of kin in America and is personified with the name of the American liberator. You are always welcome to contact us for additional information.

One of the main goals of our Foundation for Adopting Graves at the American Cemetery in Margraten is to share the stories of 10,023 American heroes that gave their lives for our freedom, to commemorate them and to cherish the warm and good relationship between the adopting families and the next of kin in the United States of America.

"Lest we forget" †

### **HELP WANTED**

Web site assistance with the following skills:

- 1 - Transcription assistants. From existing records to Word or Excel (or Open Systems equivalent applications). Accuracy imperative. Will provide master formats for input in either application environment.
- 2 - HTML experience for creation of new pages to include in existing website to record various types of facts. Raw data and web page templates available.
- 3 - Access Database design. Experienced person to extend existing design, should be a motivated self-starter. Will collaborate regarding design requirements, provide sample inputs and assistance in testing results.

Contact Dick O'Donnell at Jumpmaster@508pir.org or 321-759-6174

## Final Jumps

### Stoeckert, George

George Stoeckert of Hq. Co., 1st Bn passed away November 11. George jumped into Normandy as a platoon leader and became company commander during the Battle of the Bulge. He remained in that position until the 508th was deactivated in 1946.

“We have just lost a great soldier, a leader of men and a great combat leader. I first meet George Stoeckert at Camp Blanding Florida in October 1942. George retired the 508th Colors in New Jersey in November, 1946 and was a big supporter of the 508th PIR Association until we retired the colors at Camp Blanding, Florida October 20, 2004. It was George Stoeckert and I that put Tom Broderick on the stretcher when Tom got hit in September, 1944. It was George Stoeckert and I that put Lt. Epps on the stretcher when the 500-lb. bomb fell on him December the 24<sup>th</sup> 1944. I could not have retired the 508th association if I had not had help from George Stoeckert. God bless George Stoeckert and his family.

We love you George.

Your old platoon SGT Rock Merritt

Condolences may be sent to Shirley at:

6153 Roxbury Ave.  
Springfield, VA 22152-1625✈

## NEW LIFETIME MEMBERS

### Sustaining Members:

MSG (Ret) Ken Hamill – Ken saw combat in Vietnam with the 179th Airborne Brigade. He is currently in charge of the 508th Chapter of the 82nd Airborne Chapter of the 82nd Airborne Division which will be deactivated in 2017.

MAJ Dru Rhodes and wife, Alyson – Maj. Rhodes is the Operations Officer for 1-508th.

SFC Douglas Shuler – SFC Shuler serves in D Co, 1-508th.

### Patrons:

Susan and Lars Heus – Susan and Lars are friends of the 508th from The Netherlands.

### Supporters:

Nancy Gooding – Nancy was great friend with WWII veteran, Warren Brown.

Eddy Lamberty – Eddy is one of our Belgian friends and has adopted the grave of Capt. Bill Nation at the American Cemetery at Henri-Chapelle, Belgium.

Emmanuel Lepoittevin – Emmanuel is a friend of the 508th from France.

CSM (Ret.) Rock Merritt – Rock is the honorary CSM of the 508th PIR and a Trustee of the Association.

SGM Steven Noonan – SGM Noonan is the Operations Sergeant Major for 1-508 th.

Dominique Potier – Dominique is a Belgian friend of the association. He attended our reunions in Columbus, GA and Fayetteville, NC.

## WELCOME and FAREWELL

Family and Friends extends a warm welcome to the new commander of 1-508th, LTC Robert S. McChrystal, and extends a fond farewell and best wishes to the outgoing commander, LTC Justin Y. Reese. LTC Reese is a lifetime member of our association and was the speaker at the 2016 Reunion Banquet.

Family and Friends bids a fond farewell and to SFC Justin Graham who after eight years with 1-508th and three deployments to Afghanistan is leaving 1-508 to become an instructor at the Ranger school. Justin participated in our Veteran's Forum at the reunion in Charleston.

Family and Friends bids a fond farewell to SPC Aaron Hadley who is leaving 2-508 and will deploy to Iraq with the 319th Field Artillery Regiment †

## ASSOCIATION ACHIEVES 501(c)3 CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION STATUS

Sincere thanks to the many Members who reviewed the Association's Amended Bylaws and cast ballots this past summer. The IRS favorably reviewed our extensive application package and notified us in late September that the Association is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt charitable organization. This means that donations, sponsorships, in memoriam gifts, and bequeaths to the Association are generally fully tax-deductible. The Association now aims to diversify our funding so that we can expand activities to help honor, preserve and communicate the history of all generations of 508th Paratroopers. †

## 1-508th MEMORIAL PROJECT

During a visit to Ft. Bragg last March, our Family and Friends BOD learned that the government was no longer funding the memorial stones with the names of the KIA's from the various deployments. 1-508th is missing the names from their last three deployments. Our board made the unanimous decision to fund this project. Our vice-president, Chris Harris, did the research, got the cost estimates and mock-ups for the stones and missing names.

At the 1-508th Ball, Rock Merritt announced that our association would fund this project and kicked it off with a \$500.00 donation. Our board followed suit making \$2,000.00 in donations. After the speeches, a soldier came up to me and said, "Ma'am, I'd like to donate to this project." and gave me \$20.00. That really touched my heart. Many, many thanks to this unknown soldier.

LTC Reese expressed his gratitude and spoke of a Gold Star mother visiting Ft. Bragg during All American Week. As he was showing her around 1-508th HQ, she, of course, saw the stones and asked him, "Where's my son's name?" No mother should ever have to ask that question; and no commanding officer should ever have to tell a mother her son has not been memorialized by his unit due to lack of funding.

We put the word out and two weeks later the project was fully funded. The deposit check has been sent to the stone mason and we expect the stones to be installed in April, 2017.

Thank you to all who donated to this worthy project. †

## CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations to CSM Lawrence, CPT Suslik, CPT Kearney, CPT Joshua, SSG Cole and SSG Ramos of 1-508 who made their 100th jump earning their Senior Parachutist Badges.

Congratulations to 1SGT Jacob Gilmer who earned his Master Parachutist Badge. 1SGT Gilmer made his 65th jump with his son, who exited the plane at the same time on his 3rd parachute jump in the Airborne School at Fort Benning.

Congratulations to Dick O'Donnell who was named Person of the Year at the 2016 Family and Friends reunion. As Troy said when presenting the award, truly Dick is the Man of the Decade. Dick was the founder of our Family and Friends association and is our webmaster. Over the last decade, Dick has worked tirelessly to ensure the success of our Association and we are most grateful for his efforts.

Congratulations to Rock Merritt who received the Doughboy award which is the highest award an infantryman can receive; was selected as Grand Marshall in the Fayetteville Veteran's Day parade and he was selected to represent the 82 nd Airborne Division at the Army-Navy football game this year. Below is a letter from Rock to the CG of the 82 nd Airborne Division detailing his trip to the football game. †

## LETTER FROM ROCK MERRITT

Commanding General  
82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division  
1 All American Way  
Fort Bragg, North Carolina 28310

December 12, 2016

Subject: Trip report from the Army and Navy game Saturday December 10, 2016

Dear General Erik Kurilla,

Sir, first let me say it was such a great honor you trusted in me to represent the 82<sup>nd</sup> All American Division at the Army and Navy football game Saturday December 10, 2016.

It would have been impossible for me to do all the Radio and Television interviews and to meet all the VIP's without the assistance of your Public Affairs Staff. (LTC Joe Buccino, Maj. Rob Lodewick, SSG Will Reinier) They did an "Outstanding" job getting me to and on time to all the numerous places where I was supposed to be.

I cannot say enough about First Sergeant Erik Salo, Charlie Company 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 325<sup>th</sup> AIR, 2<sup>ND</sup> Brigade Combat Team, and Staff Sergeant Benjamin Salmon of the Command Group, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division.

These two Non-Commissioned Officers were just "Awesome" and they were not going to give up until I got to meet and speak to President-Elect Donald Trump. I was the last person to talk to President-Elect Donald Trump. I told the President-Elect: Sir, I am a WW-II Veteran, and a Retired Command Sergeant Major, here representing the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, and when you become our next Commander-in Chief, the day will come where you might have to call upon the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, and if and when that day comes, the "All American Division, the famed 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division" will be ready. His words back to me were: I know you will, and Thank you Sergeant Major."

Sir: here is a list of all of my Media engagements

Sirius XM College Radio,  
KNRB San Francisco  
Fox News

Key Personnel whom I was introduced to:

President-Elect Donald Trump  
Secretary of the Army Eric Fanning  
Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus  
Under Secretary of the Army Patrick J Murphy  
Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army: General Mark Milley  
Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army: General Daniel Allyn  
Many West Point football players, along with several Naval Academy football players.

I spent a lot of time with General Milley, especially when he told me about a farmer in France who found a rifle which belonged to a soldier in the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR during WW-II.

General Milley informed me the weapon (M-1 Garand) was presented to him, by the soldier's family and he was donating it to the U.S. Army Museum. When I informed the General the soldier whose weapon he was donating to the Museum was in my Company during WW-II, General Milley "Jumped" out of his chair, and told his Aide (a Full Colonel) "I want CSM® Rock Merritt) to visit my office in the Pentagon" So it looks like I will be visiting General Milley in his Office at the Pentagon in the near future.

In closing, let me say again: Thank you Sir, for your trust in me, and I feel very good about the trip representing our famed 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. I am very sure the Alumni of the Military Academy at West Point were extremely pleased with the outcome of Army finally beating Navy after 15 tries. I also wish to give a very "Special" Thank you, for First Sergeant Erik Salo, and Staff Sergeant Benjamin Salmon, for they are both well qualified above their current military ranks.

Sincerely yours,  
Kenneth "Rock" Merritt  
Command Sergeant Major (Retired)



*Rock Merritt with President-Elect Donald Trump*

### NEW JAMES DIETZ PRINT AVAILABLE

On December 8, a new painting by famed military artist, James Dietz was unveiled. The painting, titled "Fury from the Sky" depicts the 508th in the famous battle for Hill 30 on D-Day. Prints are available for \$125.00. If you are interested in purchasing a print, make your check out to "508 Dietz Print" and mail it to:

CPT Jason Decker  
2124 Yellowbrick Road  
Fayetteville, NC 28314



*"Fury from the Sky" by James Dietz*



*Rock signing prints*

*(Editor's note: The above photos were obtained from the 1-508th Facebook page.*

## CONDOLENCES

Linda Cole, daughter of O.B. Hill, the founder of the 508th Veteran's Association, has passed away. Her brother, Joe, writes, "We are not sure what caused her death, but believe it was her heart. She was undergoing treatment for cancer, but the doctor said the cancer was going away and they had hopes she would be okay."

Condolences may be sent to Joe Hill at:  
3232 N. 159th Ave.  
Goodyear, AZ 85395†

## SEARCHING FOR...

Derrick Kulcsar is looking for information on his uncle Tech Sergeant Stephen J. Kulcsar of Hq & Hq Co. and C Co. If you have any information, please contact me at [Editor@508PIR.org](mailto:Editor@508PIR.org) or call me at 214-632-136 and I will relay the info. Derrick is a veteran who saw combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. †

F&F member, Frits Janssen of The Netherlands, recently acquired some items belonging to SSGT Odell E Cannon and would like to contact his relatives. If anyone has any information, contact Frits at [fritsj1968@gmail.com](mailto:fritsj1968@gmail.com)†

Every soldier has a story and we want yours! If you are a 508th veteran of any generation and have a story about your service with the 508th be it a combat story or another story, we would like to hear from you. Please contact [Editor@508pir.org](mailto:Editor@508pir.org)†

### Belgium Trip By Rob Palmer

#### Article One

During the week of August 24<sup>th</sup> –September 1<sup>st</sup>, my father Troy Palmer and I had the great honor of traveling to Belgium with retired CSM Kenneth "Rock" Merritt. Neither of us had been to Belgium before, this was my first trip outside of the US and this was Rock's first time since WWII and the Battle of the Bulge, almost 73 years since he had been in country. None of us knew what to expect, especially not the incredible kindness and generosity we received from our Belgian hosts, members of the C-47 Club Ardennes Salm River Chapter. From the moment we arrived, our friends, drivers, interpreters and constant companions Dominique Potier and Eddy Lamberty were ready to begin our adventure. My father and I were a bit tired from the flight and enjoyed some coffee, bread and cheese at the Auberg du Carrefour, our hotel and command post for the next week. The Auberg sits on the site of Parker's Crossroad and is lovingly operated by Bernadette and her daughter Esmerelda, the fifth and sixth generation of the same family that has run the Auberg. Rock was motivated and insisted we head straight for Vielsam and the village of Rencheux. Driving through the beautiful Ardennes, my father, Eddy and I, three men over 200 lb's crammed into the back of Domi's Ford Escort hatchback drifting in and out of sleep. Rock was in the front seat expectant and eager, pointing at sites and telling stories as memories from that time came racing back after 73 years. As we walked through the streets of Vielsam, seeing buildings that had stood since WWII, bullet holes still present in many of the structures. Rock immediately located the former command post of Lt. George Lamb in a two-story café set in a depression near the bridge of the Salm River where George Lamb received the Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver star for his actions in this area December 23-24 1944. Rock was very specific in his approximation of the CP's location, where 100 yards up the road, he witnessed the bodies of over 100 men from the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry neatly lined up in a courtyard with only their boots sticking out of the snow. Rock was looking for the site where an American P-51 mistakenly dropped a 500-lb. bomb on Lt. Epps burying him alive. That day, Rock was sent to find Lt. Epps as they were beginning to withdraw from Vielsam. On the path to find him, Rock ran into another soldier who informed him of the bombing, hurriedly saying "a bomb fell, clearing 5 acres of new ground and buried Lt. Epps alive." They found Lt. Epps with his boots sticking out and a medic confirmed his death with the Chaplin performing last rights. Rock retrieved Lt. Epps' shrapnel riddled briefcase; which contained the company mail along with maps and other tools. From that day, Rock thought Lt. Epps had died, but it wasn't until many years later that he heard a group from West Point was arriving to Fort Bragg under the command of a Major Epps. He quickly phoned the Major and introduced himself, learning that he was in fact the same Epps he had helped dig out of that bombed house in Vielsam. A dinner was promptly arranged, where Rock returned the briefcase the then Lt. Epps had left behind in Vielsam. While we walked the streets that first day, we were unable to find the site of the bombing, Rock kept insisting that if we could only find someone who had lived in Vielsam at the time or find a courthouse with the local building records he could remember exactly where the bomb fell. It wasn't until several days later on Saturday at a wonderful dinner given in Rock's honor at the Auberg, that we met Mr. Fernand Hiernaux who was 10 years old and living in Vielsam when the American Paratroopers arrived to liberate the town. He graciously agreed to escort us through the town the next day in hopes of finding the spot where Lt. Epps was buried alive by a 500-lb. bomb.



### Article Two

That Sunday, the day after the honorary dinner that introduced us to the man who grew up in Vielsam, we found ourselves back in the town of Rencheux, in front of Lt. George Lamb's CP. With our interpreters and guides Eddy and Dominique, other members of the C-47 Salm River Chapter also accompanied us we continued our search.

Heading up the hill from Lt. Lamb's CP, Rock was looking for a bar that he recalled was emptied of all available alcohol by other paratroopers and hauled away in a truck, this being a landmark on the route up the hill from the CP on the day he went to find Lt. Epps. We inquired if the local guide recalled this bar and with a confused expression he told us at the time the paratroopers were in Rencheux there were more than 14 bars in the village that fit Rock's description; this is a country that loves their beer.

As we continued up the hill, passing buildings where the bullets from 73 years before still showed their mark, we got as far as the old military base in the village and Rock knew we had gone too far and this was not the spot. We turned around and walked 50 yards until we were in front of an old two-story brick building with a courtyard. Rock immediately knew this was the spot where he had witnessed well over 100 dead soldiers from the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry neatly lined up in rows, with just their boots poking out of the snow. This was a sight that had haunted Rock for years, but there was anticipation in his movements, as if he had finally stepped back onto the same path he had tread during that day so many years before. Making our way past the courtyard, we approached a narrow alley to the left. As our party began to walk past this alley, Rock immediately turned to the left and headed down the street at a brisk pace, the rest of us hurrying to catch up. At the end of the alley, the road ended in a gravel walkway between two houses sloping down into a driveway and then into an open pasture with cows grazing. Without missing a beat, Rock picked up his speed and ran down the loose gravel path as the rest of us attempted to keep up and prevent him from falling. Looking around at the open valley before him, Rock knew immediately that this was the spot overlooking where Lt. Epps was buried alive by that 500-lb. bomb. Standing there pointing out at the land before him and describing the events of that day, with a catch in his voice he whispered to no one "After all these years I finally made it." It was difficult for the rest of us to contain our emotions, just witnessing the conclusion to this story for Rock would have been enough to make our trip but we still had many other notable moments on this amazing trip. †

Merry  
Christmas



## The Diablo

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