**LTC Damon K Harris - 31 October 2015**

**Speech at F&F 508th PIR Reunion Banquet – San Antonio, Texas**

It is an honor and pleasure to be here. It is very hard to explain how much this means to me. I was looking for the Color Guard, the high school kids that did the color guard. They did an outstanding job, and they are the future, and it is important any time we see them, to let them know to stick with it; do not just leave high school in ROTC; take it to college and then one day serve with persons like these great men of WWII that are here today.

First and foremost, I would like to say thank you to my Heavenly Father—who makes all things possible. None of us would be here without Him. Also, I would like to say thank you to the Gold Star families for the sacrifices that none of us or very few of us can imagine. Next, I would like to say thank you to one of the most incredible individuals I have ever met, Command Sergeant Major Rock Merritt. Thank you for that incredibly humbling introduction. It embarrasses me for a man of your many accomplishments and military history to say those very kind words about me. So now that I have the microphone, I would like to return a favor. There has never been a day or time since I took command of 2 Fury where I needed Sergeant Major Merritt, and he has not been there, so when he asked me to come and speak at the *Family and Friends of the 508th* Reunion, I was both humbled and excited to finally feel like I was doing something for him and this great organization. Command Sergeant Merritt and every WWII veteran in this room are a national treasure and they should be treated as such. So let’s give them a round of applause.

I would also like to thank and say “a job well done” to Donna Palmer as President of the Association. Outstanding work. I would like to thank Chris Harris, specifically, not because of the name, but because his efforts and coordination made this event as easy and as flawless as any trip I have ever taken. And next, on behalf of the 1st and 2nd Battalion of the 508th, I would like to thank each and every one of you for everything you have done and will continue to do for the two battalions that still fly the Fury flag. Please give yourselves a round of applause.

Tonight and this entire weekend has been very enjoyable, and I do not plan on changing that by speaking too long, but there are a few things I would like to talk about. First, I want to ensure we are all on the same sheet of music as we talk about the current state of the 508th. I would like to also briefly talk about the importance of this organization and how much each and every one of you mean to the paratroopers that still are on active duty in the 508th, and I would like to close by laying out a vision from a young paratrooper’s perspective of how we make the bond even stronger between the *Family and Friends of the 508th* and remaining 2 Fury battalions.

Since we were constituted, not activated, but constituted on 06 October 1942, in the Army of the United States as the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, the Red Devils have been activated, in-activated or re-designated multiple times. But one thing that has never gone away, whenever our nation—the greatest nation on earth—needed its best to defend its most precious possessions—freedom democracy—whether here in the United States or abroad, it called on paratroopers from the 508th. This Regiment has served in every major conflict facing our nation since 1942. World War II, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan, and stood ready for operations in Korea and during the Cold War. No matter how small or large the conflict, one thing has always been certain, the 508th stands ready to answer her nation’s call. Now once again, as our nation prepares to end the longest war in our history, and as we have for now ceased combat operations in Iraq, our military must get smaller. It must get more agile. And it must get more lethal. And it must re-organize for the challenges that it will face. As a part of the Army-wide reduction and reorganization, the 4th Brigade BCT PIR was de-activated on 16 March 2014. The two battalions that were activated 1st and 2nd Battalion were reassigned. Both inside the 82nd—2 Fury to the 2nd Brigade, and 1 Fury to the 3rd Brigade. The 3rd Battalion of the 508th along with the Headquarters itself was completely de-activated. But just like it has done since 06 October 1942, the 508th stands at a moment’s notice to answer her nation’s call. But until that day comes, the 1st Battalion and 2nd Battalion of the 508th want you all to know that we need, desire and want your support.

Which brings me to the second topic I would like to talk about—which is the importance of this organization. The reason this organization is so important is because of its name; the name of this organization stands for the exact reason that paratroopers since 1942 have been willing to make the ultimate sacrifice—family and friends. Family and friends are exactly the reason when our nation calls, we go to the recruiting station. The defense of those we love drives us to be the paratroopers that jumped into Normandy, face the IEDs of Iraq, climb the mountains of Afghanistan, and anything else that was necessary. The former Army Chief of Staff, General Ray Odierno, most perfectly said, “The strength of our nation is our Army. The strength of our Army is our Soldiers. The strength of our Soldiers is our Families.” The only thing he left out was Friends. Friends and family are truly the advantage that soldiers have had since 1776. The shear desire, the willingness to lay down our lives to make sure the lives of our family and friends will not change for the worst. And because our family and friends mean so much to us, when we are deployed in a foreign land, everything you do for us while we are there is multiplied ten-fold. There has been a lot of talk over the last few years about FRGs, associations, organizations like the *Family and Friends of the 508th*, and the need to send care packages, postcards, letters, and pictures to deployed paratroopers. The reason there has been discussion is because now, there are PXs, restaurants, shopping bazars—all in combat zones. But I am here to tell you there is nothing that replaces getting a letter in the mail, getting a care package, or seeing a photo of a friendly face. Just as in WWI, when there was very little support, when there was an almost non-existent support system, a simple letter in the mail, just like then, today still becomes a valued keepsake. So never underestimate the difference that you and organizations like this makes to the paratroopers whether stateside or deployed. The mere fact that you took the time out of your day to think about a paratrooper and send us anything means more than you will ever know. It is hard to put in words how important each and every one of you are.

So this brings me to my last topic. How do we make the bond even stronger between the *Family and Friends of the 508th* and the two remaining Fury battalions? My answer is: living up to the name of this great organization. Let us truly forge ourselves together as family and friends. But before we can do this, we must establish a common understanding for what it means to be a friend and what it takes to be a family. So what is a friend? A friend is a person attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard—a person who gives assistance, a patron, a supporter. What is a family? A family is a group of people united by common convictions, common affiliations. If that’s not this organization, I don’t know what it is. So what does this mean? What do these definitions mean? What does it mean to be friends and family? Well, to me it means, this is the last time we only have three active duty members of the 508th at this Reunion. It means when 2 Fury has a function, you are all invited. It means we must do a better job of taking care of one another. It means we are friends, and we are family. I do not know who came up with the name of this great organization, but I would just like to say that it’s perfect. Thank you for having me. This has been one of the highlights of my command. All the Way, Airborne. Fury from the Sky!