

# Augustus (Gus) D. Labate – Private First Class

Served with distinction in the Hq1 Battalion Support Section 1943 to June 1944 when he was killed in Normandy, France.

Gus was one of the courageous Hq1 “Hells Half Acre” defenders (See Chapter II, Combat Operations – Normandy).

Gus was a distinguished member of the “Greatest of the Greatest Generation.”

Gus’s family and WW II comrades contributed information for this summary.

Augustus D. Labate was born November 1, 1918 in Granville, New York. He graduated with the Granville High School Class in 1937. Like most of the young people in the post-depression years, Gus went to work. He was an industrious, reliable, conscious, well-liked worker.

Gus worked in a large meat market. One of his many tasks was to care for the cows that were kept in a barn adjacent to the market awaiting slaughter.

One day in 1940, a huge fire erupted in the barn. When Gus saw the fire he realized that the (his!) cows in the barn were suffering and burning, he grabbed an axe and ran to the barn.

Gus chopped his way into the burning building through the back wall of the barn, and saw that the cows were being burned alive. At great personal risk, Gus used the axe to put the cows out of their misery, one at a time.

In September 1941, Gus Labate was drafted into the Army. After basic training, the Army decided that based upon his meat market experience, Gus would make a good cook, they were right. Gus was a good cook and at Fort Benning, Georgia, he was promoted to Sergeant.

Being a good cook was a satisfying experience; however, living among and feeding the students in the Airborne school, and daily watching them make parachute jumps was too much for the adventurous Gus Labate.

Gus reasoned “anyone can cook!” Therefore, he volunteered for parachutist training at the Airborne School. The Army accepted his application but only at the expense of Gus forfeiting his Sergeants’ stripes and entering the school as a Private.

Gus qualified as a parachutist July 10, 1943, and wearing the coveted parachute wings went home on furlough. His last visit with his family.

Gus was assigned to the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (508<sup>th</sup> PIR) stationed at Camp Mackall, North Carolina. He was assigned to Hq1 as a cook!



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WW II airborne companies did not have kitchens, each parachutist carried his own emergency rations when he jumped into combat. The cooks were trained and fought as riflemen, they performed security functions, and participated in patrols.

At Camp Mackall, Gus participated in the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR's arduous advanced infantry and airborne operations training program. He fired various weapons, experienced countless field exercises, made dangerous night parachute jumps with full equipment, and participated in large-scale maneuvers in Tennessee and South Carolina.

Upon completing the extensive training program the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR troopers were well trained, confident, and physically and mentally combat ready.

The regiment packed up and moved to Camp Shanks, New York.

Warren Brown, one of Gus Labates' many comrades recalls how Gus provided him and others with "goodies" purloined (borrowed) from the kitchen, loaves of bread, jars of jam and peanut butter, and occasionally a pie baked for the officers mess.

Warren remembers that Gus was very religious. He and Gus went to Christmas Eve mass at Saint Patricks' Cathedral in New York City, and then Gus called home to talk with his family.

On December 28, 1943 the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR left New York aboard the "James Parker." Eleven days later, the regiment landed in Belfast, Ireland and moved into Port Stewart.

Warren Brown says that when Hq1 arrived on the pier to board the ship, Gus became seasick while still on the pier. He suffered chronic sea-sickness throughout the 11-day voyage, he could neither eat nor drink.

Gus was so weak that when Hq1 disembarked from the ship his comrades had to support him and carry his equipment. Once ashore, Gus was hospitalized for several days.

Warren Brown also remembers how often Gus's comrades speculated about what Gus would do if he survived the war, they were certain that no one would ever get Gus aboard another ship.

In Port Stewart, Hq1 men received orientations on local customs, rationing and living under blackout conditions; they fired weapons, experienced hours of physical training to restore muscles lost during the sea voyage, and participated in field exercises. A short time later, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR moved to a tent camp in Nottingham, England.

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Gus liked Nottingham, a large pleasant city just a ten-minute walk from his tent. The many pubs in Nottingham were delightful places to spend a few friendly hours. And the many dance halls always contained pretty willing dance partners. Moreover, the local people were friendly, helpful and happy for the “Yanks” presence. Many of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men were invited into their homes and became life-long friends. Life was good.

Nottingham wasn't all pubs and dance halls. The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR started another arduous training program with night jumps and field exercises.

In June, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR moved to an airport, received detailed briefings on objectives, bid farewell to comrades and climbed (with help) into C-47s.

After a smooth flight over the English Channel and a hostile greeting by German anti-aircraft guns and low flying clouds, Gus finally got the word to stand up, hook up, and to jump into a violent night of detonating anti-aircraft shells, machinegun bullets and exploding airplanes.

Gus landed, assembled his rifle, and moved away from his parachute. A friendly paratrooper quickly challenged Gus and the two men joined up with a small group of Hq1 men and others.

Later, Gus met Staff Sergeant Raymond Hummel and followed him into what became “Hells Half Acre” where he was killed by a German armed with a Shmeizer machine pistol.

Gus Labate was a courageous soldier he was entitled to:

- ?? Bronze Star Medal
- ?? Purple Heart Medal
- ?? European African Middle Eastern Theatre of Operations Medal
- ?? Invasion Arrowhead
- ?? Combat Infantry Badge
- ?? A Battle Star
- ?? Parachute Qualification Badge with star for combat jump (Normandy)
- ?? Presidential Unit Citation (awarded to the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR for action during the period June 6-9 1944)
- ?? French Fourragere (awarded to the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR for action during period June 6-20 June 1944)
- ?? Numerous defense medals including the European Victory Medal

Augustas D. Labate was a loved and respected member of Hq1. He was a reliable comrade, always carried his load. He was a kind, compassionate man that loved his family, loved his country, and befriended everyone he met. His sacrifice in Normandy, France affected many lives.

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## Epilogue

Hq1 veterans never forget Gus Labate. In June 1995, Hq1 held a reunion sponsored by Bill and Mabel Goudy in Marietta, Ohio. Gus Labate's brother Frank and his son Fran Labate (Gus's nephew) attended the reunion.

This was Frank's opportunity to meet some of Gus's comrades and especially some of the men that were with Gus when he was killed.

The Labates quickly made friends with everyone and spent long hours discussing Gus Labate's time in Hq1. They were especially interested in meeting with Ray Hummel, O.B. Hill, Dave Jones and Jim McMahon who were closest to Gus when he died.

The handsome Fran was an immediate hit with the ladies, and Frank Labate and Jim Wynne spent hours comparing their woodworking skills, Frank must have been the better woodworker as Jim had lost more fingertips.

Everyone was disappointed that David Jones who occupied the same foxhole with Gus Labate when he died was not present to meet Gus's brother and nephew. Fran rectified the situation by going to California and spending several enjoyable days with Dave and Dolly Jones.

Unfortunately, Frank Labate died a few months after the reunion. However, Fran Labate escorted Gus Labate's two sisters to the Hq1 reunion sponsored by Rock and Sally Merritt in Fayetteville, NC in April 2001. Gus's delightful sisters Anne and Jennie Labate enhanced the reunion by their friendliness, interest, and participation in the reunion activities.

Warren Brown visited Gus's family after the war, and years later met Gus's nephew Fran Labate.

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## This Album is Not For Sale

**T**his excerpt from the “We Served Proudly, The Men of Hq1” album contains the recollections of men who in their youth risked their lives in furtherance of our national interests. These memoirs are sacred to them -- especially those events alluding to activities in which comrades lost their lives on the battlefields of Europe.

This album was prepared for perpetual residence in the archives of the Camp Blanding Museum complex, operated by the Camp Blanding Museum and Historical Associates, Inc. Starke, Florida. We are grateful for the support and assistance of the Camp Blanding Museum and Historical Associates, and for their kindness in having the museum make our album available to historians, students, researchers and others interested in our background and brief history.

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Copies of the album have been presented to the Hq1 veterans or their survivors that contributed information for the effort. To facilitate reproducing copies of individual memoirs for relatives or friends, the memoirs have been developed as separate entities.

**October 19, 2004**

**George S. Stokel**

**Hq1 Album Collator**