

## **Sergeant Alfred W. Raymond**

Headquarters 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment

By Irving T. Shanley

Alfred W. Raymond was born in Central Falls, Rhode Island on March 1, 1923. He was living in Reading, Pennsylvania on October 30, 1942 when he volunteered for the United States Army and for the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment being organized for active duty during World War II at Camp Blanding, Florida. At Camp Blanding he was immediately assigned to Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion for 13 weeks of training in basic military subjects, such as close order drill, the manual of arms, intense physical conditioning, judo (self defense), distance running, long foot marches carrying heavy equipment, care and cleaning of weapons, bayonet training, and guard duty.

Upon completion of basic training, he was transferred with his Battalion to Fort Benning, Georgia for three weeks of parachute training in February 1943. The usual course of instruction at the Parachute School lasted four weeks — first week was physical training, second week's training included jumping out of the 34-foot towers, practicing parachute landing falls, and learning jump procedures by jumping out of a mock plane -- jumping from the 250-foot towers with a parachute and learning to pack parachutes was undertaken during the third week. During the fourth week, the trainees donned parachutes and actually jumped out of C47 aircraft over Lawson Field at Fort Benning. The men were in such excellent physical condition that the Parachute School cancelled the first week's training. Each trainee had to pack his own parachute for the first five qualifying jumps but for all subsequent jumps, the parachutes were packed by riggers. One jump was scheduled for each day beginning Monday and the fifth and final qualifying jump took place on Friday. For Alfred's company, the jump on Monday was cancelled because of bad weather, so the Company made two jumps on Tuesday and was able to complete their parachute training on Friday. The troopers were then awarded their coveted silver parachute wings on Saturday by the Regimental Commander, Colonel Roy E. Lindquist and his staff.

Alfred and his Regiment were then transferred to the newly built Camp Mackall in North Carolina where they underwent nine months of intensive tactical training, including maneuvers in South Carolina and in Tennessee. The tactical training included six additional parachute jumps with weapons and full field equipment. The Regiment was then transferred to Camp Shanks, New York for shipment overseas to Port Stewart, Northern Ireland where they continued their training in preparation for the invasion of mainland Europe. After two months in Northern Ireland, Alfred moved with his Regiment by boat to Scotland and then to Nottingham, England by train where they set up a base camp in Wollaton Park on the outskirts of the city in mid-March 1944. Wollaton Park is situated in Sherwood Forest where it is rumored Robin Hood and his merry band of thieves roamed the countryside taking from the rich and giving to the poor. At Wollaton Park, the troopers slept on canvas folding cots and lived in 6-man squad tents and everyone in the company shared a common latrine for washing and toilet facilities at the end of the company street. While at this base camp, the Regiment made one more tactical jump. A second jump was scheduled and the planes actually took off and were in formation but the jump was cancelled due to heavy fog and poor visibility and the troopers returned to the airfield in the planes. For most of the men, it may have been a good omen since the cancelled jump would have been their twelfth jump and the jump into Normandy would have been the unlucky thirteenth.

Near the end of May 1944, the Regiment received word that it would be moved to Saltby Air Base located in the Nottingham/Leicester section of England in preparation for its first combat jump. The Regiment was also informed that it would be attached to the 82nd Airborne Division commanded by Mayor General Matthew Ridgeway and Brigadier General James (Slim Jim) Gavin). The troopers were housed in a large hangar, slept on canvas folding cots, and ate their meals there. The hangar was sealed with barbed wire and was guarded by armed sentries to protect the security of the upcoming mission. The troopers packed and repacked their equipment bundles, which would carry heavy weapons, ammunition, and other items required for the invasion. At the airfield they practiced assembling units on the drop zone after simulated jumps and were briefed by their officers around maps and sand tables to familiarize them with the area they were to drop into. They were not told that they were to jump into Normandy, France until the day before the drop to protect the security of the operation. You could feel the tension in the air

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as time drew near for the actual loading of the jump planes, which were waiting in readiness on the runways.

On the 5th of June 1944 just before midnight, the troopers bravely walked from the hangar to their previously assigned aircraft. The troopers were so heavily laden that they required help in climbing up the ladder to get into the plane. Each trooper carried two parachutes, the large main chute on his back and a smaller reserve chute on his chest, his individual weapon with a good supply of ammunition, bayonet strapped to his leg, fragmentation grenades, gammon antitank grenades, musette bag with toilet articles, three day's food rations, a change of underwear, entrenching tool, first aid kit, mess kit, canteen filled with water, steel helmet, jump rope, and gas mask. Their heavy equipment bundles were secured under the belly of the aircraft. There were six bundles under each plane and each bundle had its own parachute attached. The bundles would be released at the same time the troopers jumped out of the plane when they reached their drop zone over Normandy. This first combat jump for the men of the 508th took place about 2:15 AM on June 6, 1944 (D-Day). Three planes were assigned for each platoon of about 40 men.

Although assembly after a jump had been practiced many times, the Battalion was not able to assemble on the ground as planned due to heavy automatic fire and anti-aircraft fire being thrown at the unarmed troop carrier planes over the drop zone by the German defenders on the ground. Many of the planes were hit but only a few did not make it back to England. Some paratroopers were killed or wounded while standing in the planes waiting for the green light to jump. Others were killed or wounded as they descended in their parachutes. The darkness, fog, the numerous tall trees in the hedgerows, and the inability of the Troop Carrier pilots to maintain their tight formations, also contributed to the assembly problem. So the troopers assembled in small groups and fought off the Germans whenever they confronted them. It was not only the 2nd Battalion of the 508th that had assembly problems — all battalions of the 82nd Airborne Division also had similar problems. But this problem did not prevent the paratroopers from accomplishing their mission, which was to keep the enemy from reinforcing their troops at the beaches on the east coast of the Cotentin Peninsula where the American ground forces were to come ashore at daybreak.

Many of the men of the 2nd Battalion, along with men from the two other battalions of the 508th and also men from other regiments of the division did manage to fight off the Germans on their way to set up a perimeter defense on Hill 30 near Picauville under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J.B. Shanley, the 2nd Battalion Commanding Officer. The troopers on Hill 30 repulsed repeated attempts by German forces to reinforce their units at the beaches. Alfred Raymond, because of his fluency in French, was assigned to the intelligence section of the Battalion as a scout, and spent much of his time within enemy lines gathering information about the enemy and capturing prisoners. On one patrol in Normandy, he was trapped behind enemy lines for 12 hours but returned to friendly lines with five Nazi prisoners in tow. For this action, Raymond was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for valor. Raymond served with the 2nd Battalion on Hill 30, and later during the battle for heavily defended Baupre where ten enemy tanks were destroyed, and a German motor pool was captured with 50 vehicles, gasoline, ammunition, and food supplies. After 33 days of combat in Normandy, and with a 55 percent casualty rate, the 508th returned to its base camp in Nottingham to prepare for the next mission.

Raymond also served with the 508th when they parachuted into Holland on a Sunday afternoon, September 17, 1944. Assembly of the units on the ground after the jump went like clockwork with minimum enemy resistance. The Germans were initially taken by surprise but they soon recovered and were able to confront the troopers with substantial numbers of infantry, armor, and artillery. During 60 days of combat in Holland, the determined paratroopers succeeded in overcoming strong enemy resistance and were relieved by elements of British and Canadian troops. In Holland, while on patrol, Raymond and his men were pinned down by enemy fire and he went back to his own lines for reinforcements. On the way, he met several American tanks, climbed atop one of them, and directed their fire into the Nazi's positions allowing his pinned-down buddies to escape. Raymond was awarded his second Bronze Star

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Medal for valor for this action. Following the Holland campaign, Raymond and the 508th transferred to a new base camp at Camp Sissonne, France.

The Regiment wasn't at Camp Sissonne very long when it was alerted on December 17, 1944 that the Germans had penetrated the American front line in Belgium and were heading toward Antwerp. Raymond and the 508th, with full combat equipment, were loaded onto tractor-trailer trucks for an overnight trip to the Battle of the Bulge. Instead of jumping out of airplanes for this operation, the troopers jumped off the back end of a truck.

For the Germans, this offensive was to be a last-ditch effort to turn defeat into victory and they threw everything and everyone into this effort. After the arrival of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions in Belgium, the Germans were stopped cold. During the next two months, the Germans were in full retreat. The winter of 1944-45 in Belgium was one of the worst in its history, and the Americans had to fight off the cold as well as the Germans. Many of the men were treated for frostbite and some were so bad that they were evacuated. The deep snow and cold weather were too much for the once highly-polished paratrooper boots, and the Army replaced them with "Mickey Mouse" boots which provided much better protection for the men from the elements. But when the proud men of the 508th returned to base camp at Camp Sissone after the fighting in Belgium, the shiny paratrooper boots were back in vogue.

During the Battle of the Bulge, Raymond was ordered by his superiors to go behind the enemy lines to obtain intelligence that was vitally needed for an upcoming mission. At this time, his unit was attached to the British Army. Sergeant Raymond and his patrol, including Corporal Ted Lafree and a private, were fired on from a German machine gun position. The private was killed and Raymond and Lafree returned the fire killing a German officer. Raymond stealthily crawled over to the dead German officer and deftly removed some documents from the dead man's pocket and vanished back into friendly lines. The intelligence obtained by Sergeant Raymond and his patrol turned out to be so important that he was awarded the Military Medal of the British Army, which is the British Army's second highest award for bravery.

In early April 1945, Raymond and his Regiment was moved to Chartres, France southwest of Paris. At Chartres, the men of the 508th lived in tents at nearby airfields, awaiting orders to jump on short notice into German prisoner of war camps if the German resorted to atrocities on allied prisoners. But these jumps were not necessary because the allied prisoners were being freed, without being harmed, by the allied ground forces as they raced across Germany in the final days of the war in Europe. At Chartres, the Regiment received word of the unconditional surrender of all German forces on May 8, 1945. In the latter part of May 1945, the Regiment returned to Camp Sissonne to await further orders.

On June 8, 1945, the Regiment moved by train to Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany to serve with the occupation forces and as honor guard for General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force. The Regiment was billeted in Hedderheim, a suburb of Frankfurt, where they enjoyed a little bit of luxury after all those months of living in tents or out in the open in all kinds of weather. Each squad occupied a comfortable furnished apartment including kitchen, bath, and hot water.

As the months wore on during occupation duty, the men of the 508th were gradually being rotated back to the states for discharge based on a point system. Sergeant Raymond's number came up in September 1945 and he was discharged from the Army on September 22, 1945, and returned to his home in Reading, Pennsylvania. He married Stella M. Maciejewski and they had five children— four sons and one daughter, and 12 grandchildren. Sergeant Alfred Raymond passed away on June 2, 1981.

Sergeant Raymond's awards and decorations include the Bronze Star Medal with two oak leaf clusters, Combat Infantry Badge, Parachute Wings, Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, Europe-Africa-Middle East Campaign Medal with four battle stars and the

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Spearhead for the Normandy Invasion, National Defense Service Medal, WWII Victory Medal, WWII Occupation Medal, and the Military Medal of the British Army for bravery, US Distinguished Unit Citation, Meritorious Unit Citation, French Fourragere, Belgian Fourragere, and the Militaire Willems Orde Degree of Knight (Orange Lanyard of the Royal Netherlands Army). Of the three Bronze Stars he was awarded, two of them included the "V" device for valor.