

Lieutenant Colonel Irving Thomas Shanley

Irving T. Shanley enlisted in the United States Army October 27, 1942 at the recruiting station in Providence, Rhode Island for the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment being formed at Camp Blanding, Florida. He served with this Regiment for four years participating in the parachute invasions of Normandy, France on D-Day, June 6, 1944 and at Nijmegen, Holland September 17, 1944. He also served with this Regiment in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium during the winter of 1944-45. During these two parachute invasions and the Battle of the Bulge, the 508th served with the 82nd Airborne Division commanded by Major General Matthew Ridgeway and Major General James Gavin. The Regiment also served as General Dwight D. Eisenhower's honor guard at Frankfurt, Germany in 1945. During his service with the 508th, he was assigned to the 81mm Mortar Platoon as a gunner and later as a squad leader.

The parachute jump into Normandy took place about 2:15 am, June 6, 1944. The C47 unarmed jump planes began to encounter slight to moderate enemy antiaircraft fire when they approached the west coast of the Cotentin Peninsula. The hostile antiaircraft fire joined by automatic weapons firing tracer ammunition became more intense as the planes reached the drop zones in the middle of the peninsula making it difficult for the pilots to maintain formation causing some to deviate from their planned route. As the troopers were standing in the open door of the planes anxiously waiting for the pilots to turn on the green light at the jump door, there were numerous, thunderous explosions from the exploding antiaircraft shells all around the planes. There were shouts of "Let's go!" from some of the troopers as they anxiously waited for the green light. They felt that they had a better chance of survival floating down in their parachutes or on the ground than staying in the plane. It was dark in the plane and the troopers were glad that the darkness hid the fear that showed on their faces. Irv Shanley's plane did not take any direct hits but some planes were hit. The troopers were actually standing in the door for just a short time but it seemed like an eternity. As they dropped from the sky in their parachutes, the sight and sound show displayed by the Germans looked like the biggest Fourth of July celebration one could ever imagine. Each trooper, of course, hoped and prayed that he would make it to the ground quickly and safely without being hit.

Most of the men in the Regiment had completed 11 parachute jumps prior to the Normandy invasion, including the five jumps made at the parachute school at Fort Benning, Georgia in March 1943 while qualifying as parachutists. The other six jumps were tactical training jumps with weapons and full field equipment --- four at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, one at Tullahoma, Tennessee on maneuvers, and the other in England just before the Normandy drop. On these training jumps emphasis on the speedy assembly of units immediately after hitting the ground was stressed since assembly after a parachute drop is very crucial to the success of any operation. Assembly is all the more difficult during darkness and under enemy fire. At the Saltby Air Base in England where the 2nd Battalion was sealed behind barbed wire about a week before the invasion, the Battalion practiced assembly again and again. So that men of each platoon could find their leaders in the darkness, each officer was given some luminescent tubing to wrap around his arm so that he could be spotted quickly during assembly. Officers could also be easily identified by the vertical white stripe painted on the back of their steel helmets--noncommissioned officers had a horizontal white stripe on the back of their helmets. These stripes made it easier for the paratroopers to locate their leaders on the battlefield but they also made it easier for the Germans to spot our leaders. For the Normandy drop, the 2nd Battalion planned to assemble on a light held aloft by a member of the Battalion staff with one company dispersed to the north of the light, one to the south, one east, and the other to the west. Colonel Tom Shanley found a light that was attached to an equipment bundle and he climbed a tree and attached the light to a branch. The planned assembly of the Battalion never happened because of the darkness, heavy enemy fire, the hedgerows with their towering trees, and the evasive actions taken by the troop carrier pilots causing the dispersal of the troopers over a wide area. Intelligence reports that the crack German "Schnelling" Division was moved into the area of operation turned out to be accurate. The drop zones were crawling with Krauts.

On the jump into Normandy, PFC Shanley landed in a tall tree in a hedgerow and had to cut himself down with the trench knife strapped to his leg. He was momentarily stunned from the fall of about 15 feet into the hedgerow ditch but recovered in time to challenge and be challenged by the trooper who followed him out of the aircraft, PFC Alton H. Webster of Maine. Moments later they were joined by PFC Joseph L. (Junior) Demairais of Roxbury, Massachusetts. These three mortar platoon members then joined up with 14 other troopers from their Battalion, and several hours after the drop, joined up with a much larger force commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J.B. Shanley, their Battalion Commander.

The senior man in the 17-man group was a staff sergeant from D Company of the 2nd Battalion and he took charge of the group. The Sergeant said that since the rest of the Battalion was lost they should head for the causeway across the Douve River, which was one of the two bridges the 2nd Battalion was to destroy. As they headed toward the causeway with the three mortar men serving as point men, the 17-man group passed through a deserted enemy bivouac area, and then a short time later, came under heavy automatic weapons fire as it attempted to exit a pasture onto a small road near a large farm house in Picauville. Webster was shot in the chest from the initial burst and the group withdrew to find another route to the causeway. Webster was helped back away from the road and the enemy fire by Shanley and Desmairais. They moved him to a safer spot and went back to the group, which was still moving away from the enemy fire, to get the medic who was with the group. Shanley, Desmairais, and the medic returned to Webster, and the medic administered first aid as best he could under the circumstances while Shanley and Desmairais stood guard while still being fired on by the enemy. They reluctantly left Webster, who was severely wounded, to return to the group. They felt his chances of survival were far better if he was captured by the Germans and treated by their medics than if he was carried away. During that initial phase of the operation, there were no field hospitals or first aid stations set up by the American forces to which wounded troopers could be taken.

Long after the war, Irv Shanley was informed by Zane Schlemmer that the house where Webster was wounded, and surrounding farmland, was owned by Monsieur Pierre Cotelte and was the headquarters of the German Luftwaffe in that area. During the Normandy invasion, Zane Schlemmer was a Forward Observer for the Mortar Platoon. He later became the Platoon Sergeant of the Mortar Platoon. The Germans did not have many planes at this stage of the war but there were a few of their fighter planes at a small local airstrip. Schlemmer made frequent trips to Normandy after the war and became quite friendly with Monsieur Cotelte and his family and other residents of the Picauville and Ste Mere Eglise areas. Monsieur Cotelte insisted that Schlemmer stay with him and his family at his home whenever he visited Normandy. Monsieur Cotelte gathered many pieces of equipment from his fields left behind by the Americans and the Germans. One of the items found was a folding-stock carbine that could well have been carried by PFC Webster.

After intensive fire fights during D-Day with the enemy, Colonel Shanley moved his group to Hill 30, near Picauville, where a perimeter defense was established for four days thereby preventing the enemy troops from getting to the beaches to forestall the landings there. None of the four 81mm mortars the mortar platoon jumped with were recovered by the platoon. The mortars were packed in equipment containers made of felt-lined heavy canvas with heavy-duty end caps, daisy-chained with heavy rope, and slung under the bellies of the jump planes, six bundles to each aircraft. A parachute was attached to each bundle and the bundles were released at the same time the troopers jumped out of the aircraft. There were three planes assigned to the mortar platoon. Some members of the platoon said they saw the mortar bundles hanging from tall trees, tried to retrieve them, but were driven off by heavy automatic weapons fire from the enemy.

On Hill 30 Irv and the rest of the mortar men were assigned to defend one segment of the perimeter and were sent out on frequent patrols to determine the strength and location of any German units in the area and to locate any of the equipment bundles. The men on Hill 30 had only small arms, their individual weapons, several light machine guns and one .50 caliber machine gun, and only two 60mm mortars for supporting weapons, and not too much

ammunition. On the afternoon of D+2 while on guard duty on the Hill 30 perimeter, Irv spotted enemy soldiers approaching Hill 30. He alerted other members of the platoon who grabbed their weapons to defend their positions while Irv ran to the Battalion command post, a short distance away, to alert Colonel Shanley. The Hill 30 group engaged the enemy in a heavy firefight. Colonel Shanley instructed Lieutenant Barry E. Albright of Company E to get on the radio and call in artillery fire on the enemy. The fire from the 82nd Division Artillery 75mm Howitzers delivered an accurate and devastating barrage directed by Lieutenant Albright on the enemy positions killing many of the enemy and driving the rest off. The Mortar Platoon captured one enemy soldier who said he was a Pole who was forced to fight for the Germans. He was disarmed and taken to the Battalion Command Post for interrogation. Colonel Shanley dispatched a patrol to mop up and to assess the damage inflicted on the enemy. The patrol found that the Germans were routed from the area in a hurry leaving equipment, weapons, and their dead behind. Irv and other members of the mortar platoon found American cigarettes, food rations, and mortar aiming stakes with florescent tubing on them that they had packed in their equipment bundles along with the 81mm mortars. The retreating Germans did not leave behind the 81mm mortars.

Irv continued to serve with the 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment during the assault on Baupre and on Hill 131 in Normandy until he was slightly wounded and evacuated to a field hospital. He was at the field hospital for three days and then returned to his unit for duty. Shortly after Irv's arrival at the field hospital, he saw many more wounded men coming into the hospital from his battalion and company. One of the wounded men told him that Colonel Shanley was wounded and was at the hospital also. So Irv found Colonel Shanley in one of the large tents at the hospital and spent a few minutes with him. Colonel Shanley told Irv that he had tripped a booby trap when the Battalion was assaulting Hill 131. Long after the war Irv contacted Biagio Bennardi in New York who was Colonel Shanley's bodyguard during the Normandy operation. Biagio said that he was close to the Colonel when the blast from the exploding booby trap knocked him off his feet but he was not wounded.

In November 1946, the 508th returned to the United States and was inactivated at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. He was then transferred to the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment at Fort Bragg, North Carolina where he served as a Rifle Platoon Sergeant in Company E. During his service with the 504th, he completed the Noncommissioned Officer's Course and the Jumpmaster Course. While at Fort Bragg he was also a Basic Training Drill Instructor for recruits being trained for service in Korea. In 1951, after serving with the 504th for 4 1/2 years, he received a direct commission from enlisted status (Master Sergeant) and was reassigned to the 11th Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky as a Rifle Platoon Leader. He then completed the four-month Officer's Basic Infantry Course at Fort Benning, Georgia before reassignment to the 17th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division in Korea as a Rifle Platoon Leader and later as an 81mm Mortar Platoon Leader

During his 10 years of service in airborne units, Irv completed 66 parachute jumps from C46, C47, and C82 aircraft. He never had a main parachute that malfunctioned and never had to use his reserve parachute. He was injured only once and that happened on the jump into Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944 when he landed in a hedgerow tree, cut the risers, and dropped about 15 feet into the ditch below. He was momentarily stunned but recovered quickly. After the excitement of the jump wore off somewhat, he found that he had injured his right shoulder and had difficulty running with heavy equipment. Irv had much praise for the unknown riggers who packed his parachutes.

In 1955 he served as a Company Commander in a training regiment at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. While at Fort Jackson, he served as the Post Reenlistment Officer and was later integrated into the Regular Army as a Captain in the Adjutant General's Corps. After completion of the nine-month Adjutant General Advance Course at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, he served in Headquarters, First Army at Governors Island, New York; Headquarters, United States Army, Europe in Heidelberg, Germany; the Combat Developments Command in Virginia; and Headquarters, Military Assistance Command in Vietnam.

Irv Shanley retired from military service in 1969 as a Lieutenant Colonel after more than 26 1/2 years active service. He served for 14 years in the infantry and 12 1/2 years in the Adjutant General's Corps. His awards and decorations include the Legion of Merit, Bronze Star Medal w/OLC, Purple Heart Medal, Commendation Medal, French Croix de Guerre avec Etoile, French Fourragere, Belgian Fourragere, Militaire Willems Orde Degree of Knight (Orange Lanyard of the Royal Netherlands Army), Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation, Meritorious Unit Citation, Combat Infantry Badge with star, Master Parachute Badge, Good Conduct Medal with clasp, National Defense Service Medal, American Campaign Medal, Europe-Africa Campaign Medal with four battle stars and invasion arrowhead, WWII Victory Medal, WWII Occupation Medal, Korean Service Medal with two battle stars, United Nations Medal, Republic of Korea Medal, Vietnam Service Medal with three battle stars, and Vietnam Campaign Medal.

Colonel Shanley resides in Northborough, Massachusetts with his wife, Florence. They have five children and four grandchildren who also reside in Massachusetts.