

Colonel Thomas J.B. Shanley

By Irving T. Shanley

Tom Shanley began his military career as a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1935 graduating with the class of 1939. He was born in Butte, Montana, the son of Doctor and Mrs. Thomas J.B. Shanley. His parents later moved to El Paso, Texas. While at West Point, he joined the boxing team and was the eastern collegiate lightweight champion in 1938. The following year he moved up to the welterweight division and added that championship to his collection. He ended his boxing career with 25 victories in 26 official starts.

Colonel Shanley's first assignment as an officer put him in charge of an antitank platoon of the 30th Infantry followed by some special instruction at The Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Upon graduation, he qualified as a parachutist in August 1941 and was assigned to the newly-formed 502nd Parachute Battalion. He was later transferred to the 501st Parachute Battalion and served with that unit in Panama where he was promoted to Captain. Colonel Shanley's achievements in the 501st prompted his return back to the states and gained him an excellent reputation as one of the more promising young parachute officers.

Colonel Shanley was then assigned as Regimental Operations Officer of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment being formed at Camp Blanding, Florida in October 1942. The Regiment consisted of raw recruits from the recruiting stations throughout the country who had volunteered for parachute duty with the 508th. He put together a training schedule of strenuous physical exercise, long hours, and detailed instructions in military subjects and weapons qualification that even the cadre was astonished by its thoroughness. But like the new men he was training, the then Major Shanley soon saw the success of such efforts when the Regiment gained a superior reputation by qualifying as a unit at the Parachute School and establishing an enviable record during maneuvers in South Carolina and Tennessee. By June of 1943 he had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and given command of the 2nd Battalion which he led during tactical training at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, and maneuvers in South Carolina and Tennessee, and the parachute drop on D-Day, June 6, 1944, on Normandy, France.

In his book, "Paratrooper," Gerard Devlin writes, "The only fighting force of any size from the 508th Parachute Infantry that was able to accomplish part of its Regiment's mission on D- Day was a group under Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J.B. Shanley (West Point, 1939), the commander of the 2nd Battalion. Shanley's Battalion mission had been to seize a bridge over the Douve River at the town of Pont L'Abbe, but after roaming around following the bad drop, Shanley was only able to assemble about two companies of Red Devils, most of whom were not members of his own Battalion. With sunrise due in just a couple of hours, Shanley decided to march for the bridge with what troops he had assembled. His group was just a mile short of Pont l'Abbe when it was stopped cold by a German battalion. Seeing he was outnumbered and outgunned, Shanley recovered his wounded and withdrew to Hill 30. There, for the next two days, he and his surrounded troopers beat off several strong German units attempting to overrun the main paratroop landings. Many historians have credited Shanley's defiant stand on Hill 30 as being one of the major reasons for the overall success of the American airborne effort in Normandy."

German troops rushing to repulse the beach landings of the American forces to the east found their progress stopped by Shanley's troopers on Hill 30. To reach the beaches, the Germans knew they had to eliminate the determined troopers on Shanley's Hill. The Germans made several assaults against Hill 30 but each assault was driven back.

Shanley's provisional unit continued to defend this important defensive area until it was joined by other elements of the Regiment. The 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment was awarded the US DISTINGUISHED UNIT CITATION for its participation in the Normandy invasion. Following is an excerpt from the General Orders conferring upon the Regiment battle honors for the first three days of fighting in Normandy, France:

The 508th Parachute Infantry is cited for outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy between 6 and 9 June 1944 during the invasion of France. The Regiment landed by parachute shortly after 0200 hours, 6 June 1944. Intense antiaircraft and machine gun fire was directed against the approaching planes and parachutist drops. Enemy mobile anti airborne landing groups immediately engaged assembled elements of the Regiment and reinforced their opposition with heavily supported reserve units. Elements of the Regiment seized Hill 30, in the wedge between the Merderet and Douve Rivers, and fought vastly superior enemy forces for three days. From this position, they continually threatened German units moving in from the west, as well as the enemy forces opposing the crossing of our troops over the Merderet near La Fiere and Chef du Pont. They likewise denied the enemy opportunities to throw reinforcements to the east where they could oppose the beach landings—The courage and devotion to duty shown by members of the 508th Parachute Infantry are worthy of emulation and reflect the highest traditions of the Army of the United States."

The 62nd Troop Carrier Squadron of the 314th Troop Carrier Group carried the 508th into Normandy. Colonel Shanley was the jumpmaster of the lead airplane, and Colonel Clayton Stiles, Group Commander of the 314th, was the pilot. Colonel Shanley's stick was dropped exactly where it was supposed to be dropped; however, most of the other planes in that squadron took evasive action because of the flak and got lost. Colonel Shanley sent a patrol out after dark on D+2 to clear the Germans off the Chef du Pont causeway so that a relief convoy could bring desperately needed ammo and medical supplies over to Hill 30 before daylight. The patrol, headed by Lieutenants Lloyd Polette and Woodrow Millsaps, accomplished its mission that night so that a relief convoy could have crossed successfully in the dark, but for some reason, the convoy didn't come across. Colonel Shanley waited until it was almost daylight hoping that the convoy would come and then he ordered the patrol to return to Hill 30.

Colonel Shanley was directed by Colonel Roy E. Lindquist to maintain his hold on Hill 30. It would not have been a wise decision to have the Hill 30 group, with about 400 men, to move to the east to join other elements of the Regiment since the American forces were supposed to be attacking from east to west to cut the Cotentin Peninsula in two.

On the afternoon of D+3, there was a strong and determined assault on the Hill 30 positions. Colonel Shanley had been informed earlier that his supporting 75mm pack howitzers were in position on the other side of the causeway but there were no artillery observers on Hill 30. He ordered one of his officers, Lieutenant Barry Albright, to get on the SCR300 radio and direct fire from the howitzers onto the enemy positions. The attacking Germans were just one hedgerow away and could be heard shouting to one another. Lieutenant Albright took the radio and crawled up to a fairly exposed vantage point where he could get a good view. During training, Colonel Shanley had given his officers some training in adjusting artillery fire in tricky situations such as this, and Albright was able to direct heavy, effective, and devastating fire on the enemy

positions. Some of the short rounds fell close to the 508th perimeter but did not harm Shanley's troopers because they had dug foxholes and slit trenches when they set up their defensive positions. The artillery barrage gave the Germans everything they could handle for about five minutes. The Germans could be heard screaming and hollering for several minutes before the survivors retreated. A reconnaissance patrol sent out to the German positions immediately after the artillery barrage revealed a gruesome sight. The American beach-landing forces passed through Colonel Shanley's Hill 30 position on D+4 on their way to capture the deep seaport of Cherbourg to the north and other objectives.¹

Following reorganization of the Regiment on Hill 30, Colonel Shanley led his 2nd Battalion in a smashing drive to Baupre where they knocked out or captured 14 German tanks, and a motor pool of 775 vehicles in good condition, and huge stores of critical military supplies. Patrols sent out by Colonel Shanley as the battalion approached Baupre reported that they estimated that the area was defended by at least a battalion of enemy infantry supported by armor and artillery while still a mile or so from the objective. The 2nd Battalion bazookas accounted for ten tanks in seizing the motor pool, and German materiel of all kinds was found by troopers, including vehicles, fuel supplies, and food rations. In another brilliant offensive in the Normandy campaign, he led his battalion in the successful seizure of Hill 131, the high ground dominating approaches to La Haye du Puit. Colonel Shanley was wounded in this operation and was evacuated to a field hospital.

After 33 days of fighting in the Normandy operation without relief and with more than fifty percent casualties, the Regiment returned to England to prepare for its next airborne assault. Tom was promoted to the position of Regimental Executive Officer. He served in this capacity during the parachute invasion of Nijmegen, Holland on September 17, 1944 and the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium during the winter of 1944-1945.

In June 1946 Colonel Shanley was selected by the Army to study nuclear physics at Princeton University graduating with a PhD in 1951. He is also a graduate of the Command & General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the National War College in Washington, DC. Some of Colonel Shanley's military assignments following World War II were:

Chief, Weapons Analysis Division, Development and Test Section

Chief, Atomic Training Team, Headquarters United States Forces Far East, Eighth Army, Japan

Commanding Officer, 19th Infantry Regiment in Korea

Head of Nuclear & Chemical Weapons Branch in the Office of the Army Chief of Staff

While in the military service Tom wrote for military journals, including "Army" magazine, and technical articles for "Physical Review" and "Review of Modern Physics."

Upon retiring from the Army in 1961, Tom Shanley accepted a position as Research & Development Project Engineer and Program Manager at Philco-Ford (later named Ford Aerospace) transferring from Pennsylvania to Newport Beach, California where he served until 1968. For the next 14 years, he served on the technical staff at Rockwell

¹ Barry Albright was killed in Korea during the Korean War.

International in Anaheim, California. From 1984 to 1988 he was the Senior Scientist at Optical Science Company in Placentia, California and was working on a "Star Wars" project when he retired in 1988.

Tom Shanley was always in superb physical condition during his military career and he continued his excellent physical conditioning after he retired. In the late 1970's, Tom and his son, Roger, made three grueling six-week bike trips through Europe—the first brought them through France, Belgium, and Holland touring the battlegrounds where the 508th had fought during World War II, the second through the British Isles, and the last through Italy and Switzerland. In 1979, at age 60, he competed in a 75-mile bike race and finished 8th in a field of 175. He was also a marathon runner and won trophies in the over-50 and over-60 categories.

Tom Shanley married Agnes Danaher December 28, 1945 and they had three children—Anne, Thomas, Jr., and Roger. He has always been a dedicated family man and a devout Catholic. He sang in the church choir, painted beautiful pastel pictures, and cooked a 'mean' steak. Tom was also a little league coach and head umpire for many years and he taught his children camping and woodsmanship skills. Tom played guitar by ear and enjoyed singing operatic tunes. His dear wife, Agnes, passed away February 19, 1977. Tom remarried on June 26, 1987 to Lucille Carey. With his three children and eight grandchildren and her four children and four grandchildren, Tom and Lucille keep quite busy. He still enjoys playing his guitar, singing, and walking but there are no more marathons or hiking. The crossroads On Hill 30 in Normandy was dedicated to Colonel Shanley in June 2003 by the good people of Picauville. The ceremony was attended by the Mayor of Picauville, Philippe Catherine, members of the City Council, the Military Attaché of the United States in Paris, Captain Chester Graham representing the 508th, Colonel Shanley's wife, Lucille, many members of the Shanley family, and the people of Picauville. Colonel Shanley passed away January 10, 2004.

Colonel Shanley's awards and decorations include the Silver Star Medal for gallantry in action. Bronze Star Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, Purple Heart Medal, French Croix de Guerre with Palm, Parachute Wings, Combat Infantry Badge, American Defense Service Medal with oak leaf cluster, American Campaign Medal, Europe-Africa Campaign Medal with four battle stars and invasion arrowhead, WWII Victory Medal, WWII Occupation Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Republic of Korea Medal, United States Distinguished Unit Citation, United States Meritorious Service Citation, French Fourragere, Belgian Fourragere, and the Militaire Orde Degree of Knight from Holland.

Portions of this biography were extracted from the "Devil's Digest," a publication of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment dated May 7, 1945, and the "History of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment" authored by William G. Lord, II.