

# Van R. Walker - Private to Private First Class

Served with distinction in the Hq1 81mm Mortar Platoon from September 1943 to January 15, 1945 when he was evacuated.



Van Walker was a courageous soldier, everlastingly friendly, exceedingly good-humored, and always willing to carry more than his share of the workload.

Van's habitual coolness under fire and overall industrious attitude clearly identifies him as a distinguished member of the "Greatest of the Greatest Generation."

Van R. Walker says.

"I entered the service from Hattiesburg, MS in July 1940. After basic training and several uninteresting assignments, I volunteered for parachutist training. Upon qualifying as a parachutist, I was assigned to the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (508<sup>th</sup> PIR) at Camp Mackall, NC. I spent the remainder of my Army career in the regiment – albeit an 'olio' career.

Initially, I was assigned to Service Company, 508<sup>th</sup> PIR. In September 1943, I was transferred to Hq1, and we moved to Tennessee for the Second Army maneuvers.

After countless days of maneuvering in rain and Tennessee mud, the weather cleared, and the regiment moved to an airfield near Tullahoma, TN and prepared for a practice combat jump.

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR dropped the night of October 5, 1943 near Gallatin, TN.

As planned, the regiment in C-47s approached the drop area in three serials. However, the 'green light' was turned on prematurely. At that moment, not all of the planes in the serial had 'closed up.' Therefore, the battalion was dropped over an area miles from the drop zone.

After we located our equipment bundles and stray jumpers, the Battalion joined the regiment and established a defensive position.

Hq1 sustained several casualties (mostly broken bones) but the word came down that the high command was pleased with the performance.

After several days of maneuvers, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR returned to Camp Mackall and began preparing to go overseas.

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR left New York, December 28, 1943, aboard the James Parker and eleven days later landed in Belfast, Ireland. After a few weeks of orientation and training, we moved by boat and train to Nottingham, England where a tent camp had been established.

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In Nottingham, we trained vigorously preparing for the long anticipated invasion of the continent. We made several night jumps with equipment and participated in many field exercises.

On June 6, 1944, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR parachuted into Normandy. I was hospitalized and missed the greatest opportunity of my life.

I did get a second chance. September 17, 1944, a bright sunny afternoon, I parachuted into Holland. I spent that night fighting in Nijmegen with a Bazooka team.

*Note: Van Walker's assignment to a bazooka team illustrates the versatility of WW II paratroopers. Airborne forces were vulnerable to armored vehicle attacks - they lacked adequate anti-tank weapons.*

Anticipating the Germans would use the flat terrain of Holland for tank and armored vehicle attacks, additional bazooka teams (armed with 2.5 mm rockets) were formed by drawing exceptional men from their primary duty assignments.

These special bazooka teams were carefully trained to find and destroy armored vehicles and tanks. Several courageous Hq1 men were killed operating with bazooka teams in Holland.

Van Walker continues.

"My bazooka team was supporting Company A during its first days and nights in Nijmegen. Two battalion rifle companies (A & B) with a Hq1 light machine gun section, the 81mm Mortar Platoon and several bazooka teams was sent into Nijmegen to capture the highway bridge spanning the Waal River. The unopposed reinforced companies advanced rapidly through the city. At dusk, they started encountering and destroying small groups of German soldiers.

Finally, near a traffic circle -- about ten blocks from the southern approach to the bridge -- a strong German force appeared. We deployed and a wild and furious firefight ensued. It was dark when our bazooka team arrived at the traffic circle leading to the bridge, but we could hear a tracked vehicle coming around the circle toward us.

Our bazooka team was ordered to destroy the approaching vehicle. Our gunner moved up and fired a rocket at a very close range. Our bazooka was disabled by the blast, and the gunner was wounded in the shoulder. I never did determine whether we had destroyed an armored vehicle, as Lieutenant George Lamm, Company A ordered me to accompany him on a patrol.

As we started the patrol, Captain Adams, A Company Commander took the lead with Lt. Lamm's platoon constituting the main body.

Captain Adams wanted to locate and destroy a building containing the controls for detonating explosives allegedly embedded in the bridge.

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We quickly identified the control building as a force of Germans armed with at least four machine guns and a 40mm AA-AT gun defended it. We deployed and assaulted the building. The Germans withdrew and we destroyed the building with grenades.

No attempt was made by the Germans to demolish the bridge.

Our patrol continued moving toward the bridge. At an intersection, we ran into heavy machinegun and rifle fire. We quickly determined we were cut off from the traffic circle by a large German force.

We fought our way out of the intersection -- I was the last one out as I had been ordered to provide covering fire for the remainder of the patrol.

Shortly thereafter, Lt. Lamm found a large empty building in which the patrol could take cover.

Deployed in that building, we spent the next three days fighting off German attacks. We escaped from our 'fortress' in Nijmegen through a series of connecting cellars.

We happily joined A Company - it had been withdrawn from the city and was fighting on 'Devil's Hill.'

After months of combat in Holland, Hq1 broke contact with the German forces and we moved to Sissonne, France, for rest, equipment repair, replacements and recreation.

We intended to sample the 'good life' rumored to exist in the cities of Reims and Paris.

However, our brief flirtation with hot meals, showers, warm beds, and no one trying to kill us ended abruptly on December 17, 1944.

The Germans had launched a massive surprise attack to destroy the allied forces, overrun Belgium and capture the English Channel ports.

Early in the morning of December 19, 1944, Hq1 loaded (lock, stock and barrel) into open trucks. After countless hours riding in the open trucks, in bitter cold and wet snow, we arrived in Werbomont, Belgium, a small village astride the junction of two major highways.

The mission of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was to help destroy the large determined German penetration. After days of maneuvering to find and confront the German forces from the most advantageous position, we met with German infantry and armored forces at Vielsam, Belgium, a small town on the Salm River.

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On Christmas Eve night, we were ordered to break contact with the Germans and withdraw to a defensive line established about eight miles to the rear. Hq1, less the machinegun sections supporting the covering force, spent the night traversing snow-covered hills, dense forests and fighting off German combat patrols to a ridgeline that provided an ideal defensive position.

During the following days of 1944, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR successfully fought off strong German infantry and armored attacks and helped stop any further advances.

On January 7, 1945, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was committed to the offensive and the final destruction of Third Reich started. Thereafter, Hq1 fought both the Germans and the weather.

We later were told that 1945 was the most severe winter encountered in Europe in many years. It was bitter cold, the snow was deeper, overcast stormy clouds were common, forests were heavily laden with snow, and the Siegfried Line fortifications were strongly defended.



Despite heavy casualties, we continued to attack German forces, reduce fortifications, seize terrain, and capture small villages and towns all the way to the Roer River where we unknowingly ended our combat career.

Both the Germans and the weather inflicted casualties on the regiment. The evacuation of casualties was difficult and critical because of the lack of transportation and covered facilities.

Hampered by snow-covered roads and the bitter cold, many wounded and injured men died waiting for or during evacuation. I was one of the few fortunate ones that were evacuated which ended my career in the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR."

Van R. Walker earned:

- ?? Bronze Star Medal
- ?? Purple Heart Medal
- ?? Invasion Arrowhead
- ?? Three battle stars
- ?? Parachute Badge with star for combat jump (Holland)
- ?? Combat Infantry Badge
- ?? Belgium Fourragere
- ?? Orange Lanyard of the Royal Netherlands Army.
- ?? Numerous defense medals including the National Defense Medal and the WW II Victory Medal.

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The U.S. Army refused to let Van reenlist because of his foot problems incurred in the Belgium cold winter. The Army lost a good man and the U.S. Air Force gained one. In 1947, Van enlisted in the Air Force and served as a fuel specialist. Van served in Okinawa, Hawaii, Greenland and England; no walking, always warm barracks, lots of good food and no one shooting at you. In February 1966, Van retired from the Air Force, as a Master Sergeant with 23 years cumulative service. Van keeps busy when not on the golf course.

Van married Allean Delancey August 11, 1948. They have three sons and five grandchildren. Van and Allean have consistently supported the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment Association, WW II, and Hq1 activities. In February 2000, Van and Allean sponsored the Hq1 reunion in San Antonio, Texas. They provided a fine hotel with clean rooms, a user friendly Hospitality Suite (with plenty of refreshments) and delightful meals. In March 2004, Van and Allean again entertained the Hq1 members and guests in San Antonio, and replicated their outstanding 2000 performance.



**Van and Allean Walker**

Van and Allean Walker reside at 8800 Starcrest Drive, Apt. 5, San Antonio, TX 78217- 4716

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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.

No reproduction or distribution restrictions are imposed or implied for the album or pages thereof – providing such actions are not undertaken for profit.

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**

**~~Georg. Soder~~**

**Hq1 Album Collator**