

Private First Class Alton H. Webster ASN 11084114

By Irving T. Shanley

With the fires of World War II ablaze in Asia, Africa, and Europe, and immediately following the sneak attack by the Japanese on the American Fleet and Army Air Base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii December 7, 1941, America once again called upon its young patriots to step forward and answer the call for the defense of freedom. Alton Webster from Canaan and Lebanon, New Hampshire was one of those patriots who wasted no time in responding to that call. Soon after graduating from Lebanon High School in June 1942, where he was an outstanding football and baseball player, Alton, who was born in Canaan January 8, 1924, went to the United States Army Recruiting Station in Manchester, New Hampshire and volunteered to enlist in the Army and to become a paratrooper on November 3, 1942.

After a very long ride on a crowded troop train from Fort Devens, Massachusetts to Starke, Florida he found himself at Camp Blanding, Florida with the newly-activated 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment heavily involved in the rigors of 13 weeks of basic training, including close order drill, the manual of arms, judo, weapons familiarization and range firing, and intensive physical training and long, never-ending runs. During basic training Alton was assigned to the 81mm Mortar Platoon of Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion and remained with this platoon until he was killed in action during the parachute invasion of Normandy, France. Following completion of basic training Alton was transferred with his unit to Fort Benning, Georgia for three weeks of parachute training, and after completion of five parachute jumps at Lawson Field, he was awarded the coveted silver parachute wings of a proud paratrooper by his commanding officer in March 1943.

On completion of parachute training at Benning, Alton was transferred with his unit to the newly-built training facility at Camp Mackall, North Carolina where he continued to undergo the serious business of soldiering for long hours each day. At Mackall, he participated in four tactical training jumps with full field equipment and weapons in preparation for war.

In late December 1943, Alton and his regiment were transferred to Camp Shanks, New York for shipment overseas to the European Theater of Operations (ETO), and in the late afternoon on December 27, 1943 the men of the regiment said goodbye to Camp Shanks, and with all their equipment, marched to the nearby train station for transport to the Weehawken Ferry for a trip across the Hudson River to Staten Island. On the pier they were greeted by the regimental band and the Red Cross girls with coffee, doughnuts, and candy. Some of the men of the regiment had expected to cross the Atlantic in a luxury liner but had to be satisfied with a converted banana boat. The hold of the United States Army Transport (USAT) James Parker had been refitted to accommodate the 2,000-plus men of the regiment by building canvas bunks supported by six-foot by two-foot iron pipes, four bunks high, with very little room in between. It was indeed a tight fit but everyone settled down into their new "homes" for the long voyage, and the following morning, December 28, the Parker slipped away from its Staten Island berth and headed for the Atlantic Ocean. As the Parker sailed further away from the

Statue of Liberty, it was soon surrounded by many other ships which would make up the large convoy for the dangerous crossing, including, the Battleship Texas, three aircraft carriers, destroyers, corvettes, and other troop ships. This vast armada of naval might was required to ensure protection from the many German U-boats (submarines) that roamed the Atlantic searching for such prize targets as American troop ships. But the German submarine crews were disappointed because the voyage of this convoy was uneventful thanks to the United States Navy.

From their port of debarkation, Belfast, Ireland, they traveled by train to a town called Port Stewart in Northern Ireland and here they trained for two more months before moving to Nottingham, England to be closer to their target in France.

The regiment arrived at Wollaton Park situated on the outskirts of Nottingham, England on March 17, 1944 after a crossing of the Irish Sea on a ferryboat from Northern Ireland to Scotland, and a train ride down to Nottingham. Wollaton Park is part of 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 in six-man squad tents and everyone in the company shared a common latrine for washing and toilet facilities at the end of the company street.

As a member of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, Alton parachuted into Normandy, France on D-Day, June 6, 1944. The 2nd Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. B. Shanley, was transported by buses to Saltby Air Base, located in the Nottingham-Leicester area in the midlands of England, about a week before D-Day to make final preparations for their first combat jump. The Battalion was sealed in at the airfield behind barbed wire, and armed guards were posted around the perimeter to prevent unauthorized entry. The men slept on folding canvas cots lined up in a large aircraft hangar inside the sealed area. Only the Regimental Commander, Colonel Roy E. Lindquist, and other senior commanders and their staffs knew that Normandy was to be the objective of the Regiment. The day before D-Day, all members of the Battalion were briefed by the staff officers about the mission, which was to prevent the enemy from reinforcing his coastal divisions at Omaha Beach where four American Infantry Divisions were to land at dawn on D-Day. The 508th, as part of the 82nd Airborne Division was to drop eight to ten miles inland from the east coast of the Cotentin Peninsula, just west of Ste. Mere Eglise. The 82nd Airborne Division was commanded by Major General Matthew Ridgeway and Brigadier General James (Slim Jim) Gavin.

The 62nd Troop Carrier Squadron of the 314th Troop Carrier Group, commanded by Colonel Clayton Stiles, took off with the paratroopers of the 2nd Battalion of the 508th from Saltby Air Base around midnight on June 5, and after rendezvousing with other troop carrier planes taking off from other airfields in England, headed for the west coast of the Cotentin (Cherbourg) Peninsula and their approach to the drop zones.

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. Alton'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 hoped and prayed that he would make it to the ground quickly and safely without being hit as he floated down into the blazing guns of the Fuhrer's welcoming committee.

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. However, Alton and his group landed precisely on their targeted drop zone as did many of the other men of the 2nd Battalion, but still could not see the assembly light. 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. Good morning, Adolph! Two thousand rough and ready paratroopers from the elite 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment have just landed inside your formidable and impenetrable "Fortress Europa" ready to do battle.

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 New Hampshire. Moments later they were joined by PFC Joseph L. (Junior) Desmarais 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 Colonel Tom 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 farmhouse in Picauville. Alton was shot in the chest from the initial burst and the group withdrew to find another route to the causeway. Alton was helped back away from the road and the enemy fire by Shanley and Desmarais. 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, Desmarais, and the medic returned to Alton, and the medic administered first aid as best he could under the circumstances as Shanley and Desmarais stood guard while still being fired on by the enemy. They reluctantly left Alton, who was severely wounded, to return to the group and to carry on with their assigned mission. 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.

Some troopers landed in water and drowned. The Germans had flooded the lowlands just prior to the invasion as an anti-airborne obstacle. The 508th was awarded the Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation for its gallant defense of Hill 30 near Picauville, and remained in Normandy for 33 days fighting the Germans at Bauppte, Chef-du-Pont, and La Haye-du-Puits. The Regiment was relieved by American ground troops which had assaulted the beaches on the east coast of Normandy on D-Day and returned to its base camp in England about July 10, 1944. The casualty rate for the Regiment during its 33 days of combat in Normandy was 55 percent. Some of the wounded men returned to the Regiment as soon as their wounds healed.

Alton Webster was indeed a brave young man at age eighteen when he left the safety and comfort of his home and family during World War II to lay his young life on the line defending the freedom of American life, and to set free the long-oppressed peoples of war-torn Europe during the darkest days in our history. Alton was a good soldier with a great personality and I was proud to be one of his buddies.

Alton Webster's awards and decorations include the Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart Medal, Parachute Badge, Combat Infantry Badge, Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, Europe-Africa Campaign Medal with bronze invasion arrowhead and one bronze battle star, World War II Victory Medal, United States Distinguished Unit Citation, and the French Fourragere.

Portions of this biography were extracted from the "History of the 508th Parachute Infantry" authored by William G. Lord II, who served as a commissioned officer with this regiment during World War II.