

# "The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

## Chapter II

### Combat Operations Normandy June 6 - July 13, 1944

#### "Overlord"

It took only two hours for the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR to change station from Nottingham, England to Normandy, France. The almost uneventful flight over the English Channel quickly turned chaotic when the close flying C-47s encountered low clouds.

The regiment had planned to drop in four serials on a field north of Piquaville. However, when the C-47 formations became shrouded in clouds, many of the planes broke formation to avoid midair collisions.

Moments later, the C-47s still in formation ran into very heavy antiaircraft and machinegun fires and many of them dispersed.

Unfortunately, only the leading C-47s in each formation had electronic instrumentation calibrated to home on the equipment operated by the pathfinders that had dropped earlier. The trailing planes in each formation were expected to follow the leader. Therefore, the C47s that were out of formation lost their primary capability for finding the drop area. As the result, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men were dropped all over Normandy.

The majority of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men dropped astride the Merderet River, east of the drop zone and some of the men landed as far away as nine kilometers south of Cherbourg.

As the result of the disastrous drop, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was unable to assemble into a cohesive fighting regiment for several days. Aggravating the 508<sup>th</sup> PIRs' dilemma was the loss of the regiment's equipment bundles. Many of the bundles were lost forever when they landed in the Merderet or Dourve Rivers.

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men never forget those first days in Normandy. For days, they were fighting alone or in small groups, killing Germans, and disrupting traffic and communications. Always looking for Americans or friendly units and moving toward their objectives.

Initially, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR evolved into four fighting groups. Each group consisted of officers and men from the 505<sup>th</sup>, 507<sup>th</sup> and 508<sup>th</sup> regiments, and men from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. The first letter of the leader's last name identified each group, as follows.

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Colonel Roy Lindquist led group "L". The group was about 200 strong, and assembled near La Fiere.

Major Shields Warren led group "W". It fought to within 500 yards of Picaucville, and held the high ground south of Gueutteville.

Lt. Col. Thomas Shanley led Group "S." The group of about a platoon of men fought off a reinforced German battalion. Near noon the group broke contact with the Germans and moved east to Picaucville, on the way, it picked up 150 officers and men. Later, Group S and Group W merged. The new group totaled about 400 men but lacked weapons. It had only three light machineguns, one Browning automatic rifle, and one 60mm mortar tube. During that night, the group moved to Hill 30 west of the Merderet River and south of Gueutteville, and organized to defend the hill.

Group G was commanded by Captain Novack. Company G was the only unit of the 508 that landed intact. It quickly secured the east end of the causeway across the Merderet River at Chef du Pont and routed a German infantry company from the bridge at Ste Mere Eglise.

In summary, the June 6, 508<sup>th</sup> PIR assault into Normandy evolved into a series of uncoordinated, serendipitous actions by heroic men, united by the common objective -- prevent the Germans from reinforcing the defenders of the Normandy beaches.

This album was prepared to permit a few of the available Hq1 men to present their memoirs. Some of their recollections follow.

Kenneth Merritt a Hq1 LMG Squad Leader says, "I recall flying over the English Channel. It was full of ships. I did not think there were that many ships in the world, but they sure looked good.

When we approached what I thought was our drop area, we came under intense antiaircraft and machinegun fire. When I left the plane, I could hear and feel bullets or shrapnel zinging past me.

I landed in a briar patch and immediately started receiving machinegun fire. While on my back, trying to get out of my parachute harness, I saw a burning C-47 coming directly at me. It passed over and crashed.

I got clear of my parachute and set out to find our equipment bundles. I quickly located our two equipment bundles. I took the light machinegun and all the ammunition that I could carry and started to leave the area, although I had no idea where I was.

Within minutes, I was challenged. My challenger was a Chaplain. He said, 'Corporal, what are we going to do?' I told him he could help me carry some of the machinegun ammunition, and we started moving in the direction where the plane had crashed and burned.

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Shortly, we heard people moving on the other side of a hedgerow and I challenged them. It was Lieutenant Abbott from Hq1 with 17 men.

By daybreak, we had assembled 35 more men. A short time later, we met Captain Adams, "A" Company Commander. He had ten men with him and took command of our group directing us to proceed to Hill 30.

Prior to starting out, we were receiving machinegun fire from our right front. Lieutenant Abbott turned to me and calmly said, 'Corporal, take two men and go knock out that machinegun' like, take two men and fill up water cans. I picked Private James and Fairbanks. Fairbanks and I pinned the Germans down, while James destroyed the machinegun.

On the way to Hill 30, our lead scouts were killed and we were pinned down by fire. After many attempts to eject the enemy, we deployed and made radio contact with Lt. Col Shanley on Hill 30.

After several more attempts to break out of our 20 acres of real estate, the decision was made to hold our position.

For the next four days, we fought off countless night and day attacks. We even came under American artillery fire.

On the second or third day, we received an urgent radio message from Hill 30; they desperately needed blood plasma. We had recovered some medical supply bundles and had the plasma. Captain Adams asked for volunteers to take the plasma to Hill 30. 1st Lieutenant Roy Murray, Corporal Green, and Private First Class Circelli from Hq1 volunteered. They strapped blood plasma pouches to their bodies and during the night left our completely surrounded area. They did not get through to Hill 30.

Lieutenant Murray (508) was killed. Corporal Green (unit unknown) was found in a hedgerow a week later completely dazed from the effects of a concussion grenade. PFC Circelli made it back into our position shot in the neck, several bullets in his arm and with his lip and chin shot off.

We had been under siege for four days and had jumped with three days rations and some D-bars (high protein chocolate). While I was using a blood plasma tube to give water to Circelli, I looked up and saw an American truck coming toward us. It was from the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

The 90th Infantry Division troops evacuated our wounded and Captain Adams moved our group to Hill 30 where the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was assembling.

We had our first hot meal in five days, spent the next three days getting weapons, resting and preparing for our next mission. We were provided with water-cooled .30 caliber machineguns. We had never seen this type of machinegun but we were expected to employ

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them in the next few days. Some old timers taught us how to use the guns and pack the barrels to keep water from leaking out.

I was promoted to Sergeant to replace my Section Chief, Sergeant John Pavlick who had been killed.

Thereafter, from June 11 to July 9, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was an effective force. We captured causeways, rivers, Hills 130, 195, 95, and many others.

We had one bath, one change of clothes, and no replacements in our 33 days in Normandy."

## Silver Star Medal

Kenneth J. Merritt, 18161638, Corporal, 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment is awarded the Silver Star medal for gallantry in action 4 July 1944, northeast of La CUIROTERIE, FRANCE.

While attacking through the village of La CUIROTERIE, one of two heavy machineguns commanded by Corporal Merritt, Headquarters Company First Battalion, 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment was knocked out by enemy fire and its crew wounded.

To equalize the firepower in his sector, Corporal Merritt assaulted the machinegun position and knocked it out with hand grenades.

His action enabled the battalion to maintain its line at that point and repulse two counter attacks with his remaining machineguns.

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David Jones, Hq1 S2 Section recalls his first days in Normandy. "I was number 13 in the 18-man stick. I could not stand up and hook up until the first ten men started out the door.

On the flight across the English Channel there was a profound silence in our plane. I know my thoughts were all very personal. I remember passing the Guernsey and Jersey islands with many red flashes showing on the ground. I think our C-47 made it all the way to the jump area without getting hit by flak; I am sure no one in our plane was hit before the drop.

I remember, the Jump Master ordering us to 'stand up and hook up,' getting rid of my Mae West and jumping. I looked down and everywhere I looked was water.

There was not much time to think. I prepared to drown. I could not swim. Not that it would have done any good for the way we were loaded down with equipment we probably would have gone under and stayed there anyway.

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I was lucky a breeze caused my parachute to billow above the water, and I aquaplaned toward a tree-lined causeway. Eventually, my chute caught on the trees lining a roadway and I pulled myself onto dry land. I am certain many of the men from my stick drowned in the flooded areas.

I was involved in building the sand tables used to orient our troops, I knew generally, where I landed in relation to the causeway, and I knew in which direction I had to go to get to our assembly area.

There was a problem, the Germans had machineguns at both ends of the causeway, and I thought by staying slightly below the roadway I could stay out of their line of fire."

Jones continues, "In Ireland during one of our night training patrols while we were warming ourselves at a roadside pub, a fellow parachutist and I got into a fistfight. As our group separated us, my opponent vowed he would get my ass when we got into combat.

Naturally, you can guess whom the first American paratrooper was that I met while crawling along the edge of the roadway. Right, he had me looking down the barrel of a Thompson submachine-gun.

After we hugged and slapped each other on the back, telling each other how fortunate we were to have made it this far, we started off together along the causeway toward a group of houses at the far end of the road.

By the time we reached the houses, we had picked up eight more paratroopers. The German machinegun at our end of the causeway had been silenced by someone, (not me), and we assembled behind a farmhouse wondering what to do next.

When you are in a group your confidence seems to return somewhat. Although you do not feel completely out of danger, you feel more comfortable. We all agreed that the next logical move was to eat, and we opened one of our K-rations, which we had carried during the jump - mine turned out to be 'chopped egg' but the four cigarettes were great.

We also agreed the time had come to clean and oil our weapons, which had been in water during the drop. No sooner did I get my M-1 rifle stripped and laid out to dry, than someone yelled 'Tanks.'

I finally got my rifle assembled and watched while three tanks rattled up the roadway toward the farmhouse where we were hiding. They were French Renault tanks, probably the smallest tanks used during the entire war. However, to me, they were larger than life.

The hatch of the lead tank was open with the tank commander exposed from the waist up. I cannot explain why in the world I said it, but I said to my companion, 'I think it's time to get our war started.'

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A discussion followed as to what the results would be if we did fire on the tanks, the comments were not encouraging. I fired at the tank commander with an armored piercing round which hit the turret. I can still hear that ricochet.

The commander disappeared, the hatch clanged shut, the tank backed up a few feet -- and our group scattered.

I had missed my first shot of World War II and was now confronted with where and how to hide. The tank fired a 20-mm shell into the farmhouse and continued up the road where someone from an upper story window dropped a gammon grenade on it, demolishing the tank. [See Raymond Hummel later]

Our group had grown to 32 men, including a Staff Sergeant and two Sergeants. We began working our way through hedgerows toward our assembly area.

We arrived at a hedgerow facing a farmhouse at an intersection. We soon learned a large squad of Germans occupied the farmhouse. Whenever they showed themselves, we fired at them. Subsequently they forced their prisoners, our people, to yell at us 'You're killing us!'

We decided to set up a perimeter defense in a large apple orchard. It was a good position with a flooded area behind us, a hedgerow on both sides and a rock wall adjacent to the hedgerow."

Gene Hull, S-2 section, "I graduated from jump school January 1, 1944 and was sent to New York. I sailed to Ireland and then went by boat and train to Nottingham, England. I was assigned to the 508 with duty in the Hq1 Battalion S-2 [intelligence] Section. I reported to Hq1 in time for a night jump and maneuvers.

A few days later, the S-2 section was bussed to an airfield where we prepared sand tables from recent aerial photos, of what was to be our drop area in Europe.

The flight from England to Normandy (we were told we would drop in Normandy after we were on the plane) was uneventful. Everyone appeared preoccupied with their own thoughts. Perhaps, some were praying.

As we crossed the Normandy coastline, we heard antiaircraft shrapnel hits on the wings and fuselage of our plane. The shrapnel got worse as we flew further inland.

As we watched a C-47 go down in flames, we were ordered to "stand up." I quickly moved to the door to jump. When I got to the door, I saw the crossed tracer bullets on the ground and could hear shrapnel hitting the plane from exploding antiaircraft shells.

I jumped, my chute opened and just as quickly, I was on the ground. I landed in a small fenced area adjacent to a farmhouse that was located 50 feet from the junction of two large fields with a hedgerow between them.

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I heard a machinegun firing, and heard men on the driveway of the farmhouse. I walked through a barn until I came to a door that opened on the driveway.

I saw a squad of Germans; one man was pounding on the farmhouse door. A light came on and the soldier and the farmer talked. Then the light went out and the Germans marched out to the main road and turned back toward the way they had come.

I decided to move away from the farmhouse and go looking for our men. I walked down the driveway and crossed the road to the hedgerow. I moved along the hedgerow until I found a clear spot with less growth on the top and rested for about a half an hour. I heard plenty of gunfire (machineguns and rifles).

At daybreak, I moved around the field to see where I was and what was around me. As I walked along the hedgerow, I came to a clear spot and saw two Germans walking up to my field. They were about two hundred yards away. I think we saw each other at the same time because we fired our rifles. A bullet nicked my elbow. I fired two more shots and the Germans hit the ground and did not return fire.

I saw eight to 10 Germans moving out of a stone barn about 200 yards away. So I scrambled over the hedgerow and looked out into water. There were several dead paratroopers floating fifty to seventy-five feet from the shore.

I thought the water looked very shallow with no place to hide. I got into the water and was standing up to my neck. I moved to a large tree at the water's edge, put my rifle in shallow water and hunched down. About ten minutes later some Germans came and stood on each side of the tree.

At one point, I slowly moved my head to see one of the German soldiers dressed in a gray-green uniform. He had a machinegun slung over his chest. The Germans stood there for 10 -12 minutes and then moved back over the hedgerow.

I waited about an hour or more before I got out of the water and into the hedgerow. I stayed hidden in the hedgerow until after noon when I saw paratroopers coming into the field.

Over the next three days, we collected 27 men from the 508 and other units. We were in that field five days when a combat patrol from the 90th Infantry Division crossed the causeway and relieved us.

During our time in the field, we captured two Germans and lost two of our men. Subsequently, we were led to the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR assembly area."

Owen (O.B.) Hill message center chief. "We had a relatively smooth flight over the English Channel until we crossed the Normandy coast. Then, we encountered heavy clouds, and our C-47s broke formation to avoid mid-air collisions.

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We were standing and hooked up, and when the green light went on, we jumped knowing we were not over or even near our drop zone. I landed in the Douve River— about five miles from the drop zone.

When I landed in the river and stood up I was in waist deep water and Germans were shooting at me. I submerged myself with just enough of me sticking up to breathe.

After the firing had stopped, I was able to assemble my equipment and started getting out of the river. It was still quite dark and there was action taking place all around where I had landed, so I kept as quiet as possible and started in what I thought was the direction of our drop area.

Soon I heard someone walking toward me - not knowing whether a friend or foe was approaching, I stopped and lay flat on the ground. Then I realized that I was at the edge of a ditch, which, was about four, or five feet deep and the approaching men were Germans walking in the ditch. I remained absolutely still as they passed - I could have touched their helmets as they passed, and I was sure they could hear my heart pounding.

As soon as the Germans passed, I jumped the ditch and continued to walk until I heard someone say FLASH. I did not even try to recall the correct response, which was THUNDER, but said 'OH SHIT!' I just couldn't remember the password. I was lucky again. The challenger was Corporal William F. Brown from Detroit. We agreed we were going in the right direction and continued down the path.

As we walked we met more paratroopers. We found men from the 505 and the 507 regiments and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division.

Just before daybreak, we encountered a group of German soldiers at a crossroad and engaged them in a fierce firefight for about twenty minutes before we drove them off.

We continued moving in the chosen direction. We had been trained for this and had been told what to expect, but experiencing it first hand was not a good experience.

We fought off Germans two more times before we reached a main road. We were outnumbered each time. The only explanation for our coming out ahead is that we were more determined, and perhaps better trained, although we did lose some of our men.

At about 1000, D-Day morning, we arrived at a crossroad outside the village or Beuzeville on the East Side of the Douve River. We were at the bridge, which our unit was supposed to destroy, but we did not know it at the time.

We were still under the impression that we had landed on the East Side of the Merderet River, and had no real idea where we were until later in the day.

A pocket of German soldiers was positioned at the crossroad and we discovered more paratroopers were across the road from us. We drove the Germans off and crossed the road to join the other group.



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We thought that more 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men were located up the road from us. Mel Beets from Hq1 volunteered to go up the road and bring them back to us. We later found out the men up the road were Germans, and Mel Beets was captured. Days later Mel escaped during an air attack. Our merged group assembled in fields behind a row of about seven houses along the Beuzeville road. Staff Sergeant Raymond Hummel from Hq1 was the senior noncom and took command.

Ray Hummel decided to get up in one of the farmhouses to get a better view of what was around us. Ray Hummel, Jim McMahon and I went to the farmhouses.

We shot the lock off the back door of the fourth house from the river. It was occupied. The people in it were scared, but did not interfere with us.

Ray and I went up the stairs just inside the back door followed by Jim McMahon. We went to a window overlooking the road at the front of the house that we were surrounded on two sides by floodwaters. We could see where the Merderet and Douve rivers came together, and that we were surrounded on two sides by floodwaters.

We saw three French Renault tanks approaching the houses. The middle tank stopped directly below our window and opened the turret hatch to allow the commander to stand up and look around. While he was surveying the area, I handed Ray a gammon grenade, which he dropped into the tank and knocked it out.

While the other two tanks milled around we quickly left the house and joined our group behind the farmhouses. If the two remaining tanks had pursued us we would have been in great difficulty instead the tanks quickly moved east going away from us.

We soon learned that we could not cross the river to the West and could not cross the floodwaters to the South. There were German machineguns in both directions and no cover for us to let us get near them.

Our only choice was to move east across the hedgerows. As we started out, we were plainly visible so we went two at a time while the rest tried to keep watch on the road.

We made it to the next road, which we discovered led to the causeway going to Chef du Pont. When we got to the last field before the road, we were pinned down by German machinegun and rifle fire. We deployed along the hedgerows in front and behind us. Ray and I dug in near the road on our north side; Dave Jones dug a hole immediately to our rear.

Germans occupied a farmhouse and barn directly in front of us, and we started exchanging fire. In the middle of the firing, we heard American voices shouting for us to cease fire or the Germans would kill them. We stopped firing at the house, but we were still being fired at from the road and Augustus Labate was killed.

Everyone in the group agreed that we would hold out until the end – no one wanted to be taken prisoner.

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On June 6, at the start of our ordeal, we had about 52 men. We lost 13 and had some wounded along the way, while we were pinned down.

In the five days we were in that field, the Germans consistently challenged us. We were determined and fought off every attack.

On June 11, late in the afternoon, we heard firing from the Chef du Pont causeway. A few moments later, a 90th Infantry Division Master Sergeant uttered the first friendly words we heard since we dropped, he yelled 'bring up that @#\$%#@ BAZOOKA.' We all stood up and cheered.

The sergeant said he would have our wounded evacuated and provide guides to lead us to our units. We owe that Sergeant and the 90th Division men. We were down to our last clips of ammunition and could not have held out for another day.



**"Hell's Half Acre" Survivors -- June 11, 1944 at Chef du Pont.** The Hq1 men that held out in "Hell's Half Acre" included George C. Baggett, Wm.P. Brown, Wm.H. Brown, Wm. B. Caton, H. DeCarvalho, Owen B. Hill, Peter R. Hillard, Gene Hull, Raymond Hummel, Arthur B. Jacoby, David Jones, Clifton Lowder, James J. McMahon, Lawrence E. Palmer, C. P. Reynolds, Glenn Sommerville, and Garfield Wilkinson.

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Hill continues, We were from assorted units; and had little equipment, little food and water, no communications, no officers and no information.

We were, however, a thorn in the side of the Germans opposing us and we surely kept them from trying to reinforce their troops defending the beaches or Germans trying to retreat from the beaches. We could not have done much more with what we had.

Those of us who were in that field refer to it as 'Hell's Half Acre.' S.L.A. Marshal in his book 'Night Drop' refers to us as 'A Pack of Strays.' I guess that's a fair description of our group, but we did some good with little equipment and no guidance."

Raymond Hummel was promoted to Hq1, 1st Sgt. and served throughout the duration of World War II.

During its independent operations, the "Hummel" band was near another isolated group commanded by Captain Jonathan Adams, which was having an equally rough time. Yet neither group ever felt the near-presence of the other and of Colonel Shanley's movements Adams knew nothing at all.

In the beginning, the Hq1 Officers were not faring any better than the enlisted men were. Lieutenant Gerald P. Guillot (Hq1), landed 400 yards north of the Douve River, within a stones throw of Montessy village, where he assembled a small group of men.

Guillot, six men and six equipment bundles had landed in the same field, a coincidence among the many misadventures that first night. The equip-bundles contained three light machine guns and ammunition.

Guillot told the assembled officers and men "I know this is the Merderet River. It is useless for us to mount these machineguns with so few men. There are more paratroopers around here. I will stay here. You go out and round them up."

The searchers were unsuccessful, they did not find any men but they returned with three bazookas, another machinegun and more ammunition. It was 0430 AM and first light was breaking.

Guillot told the group, "We have no choice but to stash the heavy weapons and move out." They hid the weapons and ammunition and moved southwest, the wrong direction. At a farmhouse, they learned the river was the Douve and the location of a German headquarters, about 40 yards away.

Concurrently, about thirty paratroopers entered the village and charged the German command post killing four officers and capturing a clerk. The clerk gave them information on the German units in the area; they had walked into a box. A German battalion was deployed east and north of them.

Before Guillot could decide what to do, mortar fire exploded among the houses and everyone started digging, and patrols were sent to search for more men.

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These patrols returned with 50 men, a third of them injured on the jump. Later, a lieutenant arrived with eight 101<sup>st</sup> Division troopers. The group now consisted of almost 100 men and they organized their position near the farmhouses. That afternoon, Guillot decided to move the group to Hill 30 about two miles away. As the group marched past Etienville, they met Captain Adams and he took command. Several days later, the group reached Hill 30 after many confrontations with large German patrols.

Joe Bressler, Hq1 81mm Mortar Platoon recounts his days in Normandy. This experience demonstrates the camaraderie shared by the men of Hq1.

Joe says. "In April 1943 at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, I joined Hq1 and was assigned to the 81mm mortar platoon. I made several friends in Hq1. However, three of us were always together - Mel Beets from Texas, Joe Bressler from New York, and Oscar Prasse from Virginia.

I had a bad landing in Normandy, broke my ankle. I was immediately confronted by a German and killed him with a hand grenade. My ankle was bleeding badly and I could not use it. A paratrooper came to investigate my grenade explosion and said he would send help to me. A short time later Oscar Prasse arrived.

Oscar picked me up and carried me to an assembly area near Picaucville where we joined Major Warren's group. By daylight about 200 men had assembled in the area including ten of us wounded or injured.

Major Warren received orders to move to Hill 30 and join Col. Shanley's group. As the combat capable men prepared to move, all the ammunition was collected from the wounded and injured. Warren told the injured and wounded men 'We do not have the capability to take you with us. You will either have to surrender to the Germans or hide until friendly troops get here.'

When the group left, Oscar Prasse carrying me piggy-back tried to keep up with them. Then the troopers deployed as a firefight started.

When the fight finished the group assembled and continued toward Hill 30, I was left behind.

That night Prasse came back for me. He carried me about a quarter of a mile to an unoccupied house alongside a road. We moved into the third floor of that house and had a view of the road in both directions.

During the night, we heard an approaching motorcycle. Prasse was at the window and killed the rider with his rifle. He went out, dragged the cycle and rider out of sight, and returned with the German's Schmeisser (machine pistol).

Still later that night, we heard another motorcycle on the road. Prasse killed the second cyclist with his newly acquired Schmeisser. He hid the dead rider and his cycle and brought the German's Schmeisser for my use.

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I suffered terribly from my broken ankle and frequently used morphine to kill the pain, which caused me to have severe dysentery.

Oscar left to get medical help for me. He returned alone and told me Germans were all around the house. The Germans even searched the house but failed to find us.

About three days later, the Germans left the area. However, each night the German activity on the road increased. One night Prasse went out, shot another German, and from his body obtained cheese, bread and ammunition. About D + five or six, 90th Infantry Division troops arrived in the area. Oscar Prasse carried me out to the road and left to find the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR. Soon an ambulance picked me up and I was evacuated to Omaha Beach and to England.

Prior to boarding our planes in England, each man received 200 francs, including a 100-franc note with their name penciled in for distribution. As Oscar and I had lived in the farmhouse for almost six days, eating food and sleeping on the beds, in gratitude, I left one of 100-franc notes under a flower vase."

The story of Joe Bressler leaving his 100-franc note behind has become legend in Normandy. The farmhouse owner, Leon LeGrand, still has the note his father found.

John Boone, LMG Platoon recalls. "In the first few days in Normandy, my closest friend was killed while leading a column of which I was bringing up the rear. Shortly thereafter, we were forced to pull back and set up a defensive position in an apple orchard. At which time, I learned of my friend's death.

Toward dusk, I decided I couldn't leave my friend's body lay abandoned in a field. This prompted me to move out of our area to find him. Not too far out, I saw a trooper waving frantically from an open farm shed. I could tell he was wounded.

I got this man over my shoulder and carried him back to our area. He told us of three other wounded men that were brought back to our position.

So the intent of my errand was not realized due to darkness - perhaps that was what was intended. I could not have helped my friend. In reality, he warranted the Bronze Star medal I received, not me. Had it not been for his death, I would not have left our defensive position."

In the subsequent days, as communications improved and more men found their way to 508 led groups, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR became a war-fighting capable force. It accomplished many difficult missions including major attacks, defense of critical areas, and extensive combat patrols. Every mission assigned to the regiment was efficiently accomplished.

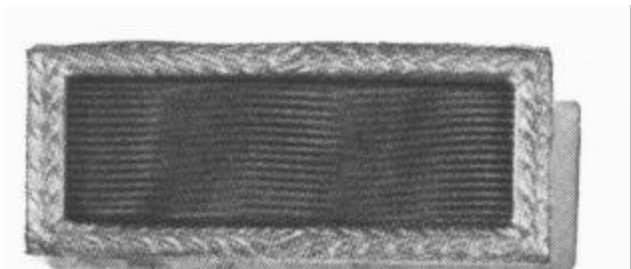
On July 12, 1944, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR utilizing two LSTs, departed Normandy across the UTAH Beach bound for SOUTHAMPTON, ENGLAND, and thence by train to a "heroes" welcome in Nottingham.

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The 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation, and the French Fourragere with Croix de Guerre for its outstanding accomplishments fighting in Normandy. The Award citations follow.

## Distinguished Unit Citation

"The 508<sup>th</sup> 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 opportunity to throw reinforcements to the east where they could oppose the beach landings. The troops on Hill 30 finally broke through to join the airborne troops at the bridgehead west of La Fiere on 9 June 1944. They repelled continuous attacks from infantry, tanks, mortars, and artillery for more than 60 hours without re-supply. Other elements of the 508<sup>TH</sup> Parachute Infantry fought courageously in the bitter fighting west of the Merderet River and in winning the bridgeheads across that river at La Fiere and Chef-du-Pont. The Regiment secured its objectives through heroic determination and initiative. Every member performed his duties with exemplary aggressiveness and superior skill. The courage and devotion to duty shown by members of the 508<sup>TH</sup> Parachute Infantry are worthy of emulation and reflect the highest traditions of the Army of the United States."



Distinguished Unit Citation Ribbon

# "The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

The President of the Provisional Government of the French Republic authorized the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment to carry the Fourragere in the colors of the Croix de Guerre, 1939-45. The citation signed in Paris on 6 April 1946 by Felix Gouin reads as follows:

## 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment

"A magnificent unit, reputed for the heroism and spirit of sacrifice of its combatants and which has made proof of the greatest military qualities during the battle of Normandy. It was part of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division which, after having occupied roadnets and waterways commanding access to the Cotentin landing places, sacrificed itself on the banks of the Merderet and the Douve, at Saint Sauveur-le-Vicomte and at Etienville from 6-20 June 1944 in order to restrain at all cost the German reinforcement's infinitely superior in strength and fire power, forced them to revert to the defensive and thus permitted the arrival of the bulk of the Allied Forces. This citation includes the award of the Croix de Guerre with Palm."



French Fourragere