

# "The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

## Chapter IV



### 1975 to 2004

The 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment Association was established in 1975 to:

- ?? Renew the friendships, trust and confidence the members of the regiment had shared during WW II.
- ?? Perpetuate the memory of all that served in the regiment.
- ?? Commemorate those who now "Rest in Peace."

Over the next 30 years, volunteers operated the association - enhancing the welfare and progress of the membership.

Hq1 veterans consistently provided leadership and contributed to the development and operations of the association. They held office, sponsored reunions, and performed important studies. For example, Owen B. (O.B.) Hill (Hq1) founded the Association.

O.B. started in 1974 with the names and addresses of five Hq1 veterans. He also had a 30-year-old address book with additional names and addresses.

O.B.'s initial mailing produced about 25 additional names and addresses of WW II 508<sup>th</sup> PIR veterans. A second letter mailing produced more names and addresses.

The letter writing process coupled with many phone calls; and notices in VFW, American Legion, and the Static Line magazines, resulted in a listing of 227 508<sup>th</sup> PIR WW II veterans.

O. B. sent letters to all 227 men suggesting that the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR WW II veterans meet in Chicago over the July 4, 1975 weekend.

On July 4, 1975, 133 508<sup>th</sup> PIR WW II veterans, wives and family members assembled in Chicago and the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment WW II Association became reality.

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During the Chicago meeting, officers were elected and plans were developed for organizing the association. By 2001 the association roster contained a membership of 1270 members and associate members.

The association held a reunion every year from 1976 to 2004 always rotating the reunion sites - the attendance at these reunions ranged from 176 to 621 members and guests.

O.B. Hill (Hq1) served as President of the association in 1975 & 1976. He also chaired five reunions, and served as the Association's National Chairman until he died June 10, 2002.

Kenneth (Rock) Merritt (Hq1) was elected Association President in 1980, 1995, 1996, 2002, and 2003.

Fittingly, Rock Merritt presided over the Association's retirement on October 19, 2004 at Camp Blanding, Florida.

Rock also served as Vice President several times, and as Association Parliamentarian for many years. Additionally Rock and Sally Merritt co-sponsored the Association's 1977 reunion with an attendance of 358.

In 1995 and 1996, Kenneth (Rock) Merritt supervised a major revision of the Association's Constitution and By-laws (C&B) that resulted in improved operations, increased membership participation, and the recognition of individual achievements. For example, the revised C&B provided for:

- ?? Appointing O.B. Hill National Chairman for life.
- ?? Reelecting the President and Vice President. Previously the president was elected for only one year and was automatically replaced by the Vice President.
- ?? Defining three classes of association membership:
  1. General Members – men who had served with the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR during the period October 1942 to December 1945.
  2. Director Members - persons elected, or appointed to serve as directors.
  3. Associate Members – spouses and relatives of members living or deceased, and bona fide "friends" of the association.
- ?? Defining the roles, functions, and responsibilities of Company Representatives.
- ?? Providing for retiring the association when the membership determined it no longer could function effectively, and for transferring its memorabilia and assets to the Camp Blanding Museum and Memorial Associates, Camp Blanding, Stark, Florida

In 1995, based upon the revised Association Constitution & Bylaws, Hq1 members recommended that the Board of Directors assume responsibility for administering the Association Memorial Certificate program and, that the program be expanded to include members' wives. Thereafter, an association memorial certificate was presented to the next of kin of deceased members and wives.

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Thomas Gintjee (Hq1) was a charter member of the association. Tom was a commercial artist in San Francisco. He voluntarily designed the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Association's logo, stationary, envelopes, membership applications, and much more. Tom Gintjee died January 3, 1994, his invaluable contributions have endured throughout the life of the association.

In 1995, the association established the "O.B. Hill Award" program. Tom Gintjee suggested the program. Hq1 members developed the award certificate and selection procedures. This program recognized members of the association who contribute in some special way to the welfare of the membership and progress of the association.

Annually each company selected a recipient for the "O.B. Hill" award.

The award in the form of a certificate was presented during the annual reunion memorial breakfast.

The first O.B. Hill Awards were presented in 1995. The Hq1 recipients of the awards over the years were:

1995 - Tom Gintjee, 1996 - Thomas Broderick, 1997 - Kenneth (Rock) Merritt, 1998 - Arnold Foster, 1999 - Margaret Hill, 2000 - Mike Wargo, 2001 - Joe Bressler, 2002 - Ray Kennedy, 2003 - Van Walker, and 2004 - Warren R. Brown.

## Epilogue

In 1946 the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was relieved of its mission in Frankfurt, Germany and was transferred by battalion to the United States.

The First Battalion departed Frankfurt with orders to proceed to Fort Bragg, NC as the regimental advance party. It carried the regimental colors.

Upon arriving at Camp Shanks, NY, the Battalion Commander and Executive Officer were relieved of command by Camp Shanks officials, and informed that the battalion would be deactivated at Camp Shanks.

The officers and men were processed for reassignment or separation depending upon their qualifications and desires.

The regimental commander in Germany was stunned when informed of the First Battalion situation.

Official records indicate the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment WW II was deactivated November 24, 1946 at Camp Kilmer New Jersey. However, no records exist that show the regiment was afforded opportunity to case and retire its standard and battle streamers with the honors it earned in WW II.

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These honors were rendered to the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR WW II Association almost 58 years later at Camp Blanding, Florida on October 19, 2004, witnessed by proud regimental veterans, and their families and guests.

A replica of the WW II 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment standard and battle streamers was retired to the Camp Blanding Museum where it is on public "display." [The 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, NC is the official custodian of the original 508<sup>th</sup> PIR standard.]

The 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment Association 1942-1945 was retired October 19, 2004 - at Camp Blanding, Starke, Florida. Its assets and memorabilia were transferred to the Camp Blanding Museum and Historical Associates (CBM&HA) for preservation and display in the museum.

The association was retired with the dignity and honor, and the pomp and ceremony the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR WW II richly deserved.