

# "The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

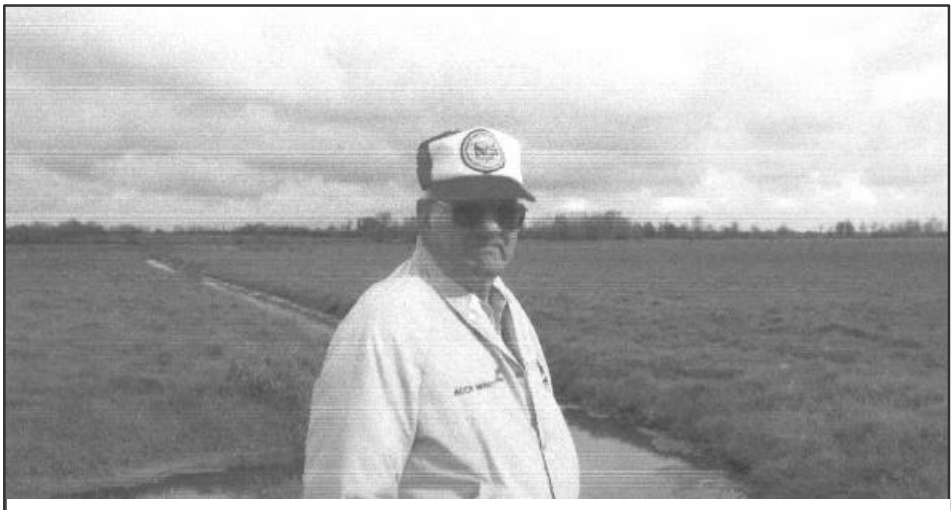
## Chapter V Return to Normandy -- 58 Years Later

April 2002

**I**n 2002, CSM (Retired) Kenneth (Rock) Merritt (Hq1) was invited by the 1-508<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Airborne Combat Team) to serve as a guide during its visit to the Normandy battlefields. 1-508<sup>th</sup> is a descendent of the First Battalion 508<sup>th</sup> PIR WW II.

On April 13, 2002, the 1-508 parachuted into the drop zone selected for the D-Day drop and assembly of the WW II 508<sup>th</sup> PIR. Very few of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men ever saw this drop zone.

On  
6, 2002,  
Merritt



August  
Rock

Rock Merritt - at the 508th PIR 1944 Drop Zone

presented a summary report of his visit to the Normandy battlefields at the American Heroes Museum in the Ramada Express Hotel and Casino, Laughlin, Nevada. The highlights of Rock's presentation are paraphrased herein.

"Reportedly In 1943 Field Marshall Rommel advised Field Marshall Von Rundstedt and Adolph Hitler -- that he believed the allied invasion would take place in Normandy.

Although Hitler did not agree with Rommel, he ordered Von Runstedt to strengthen the 'Atlantic Wall' that stretched from Cherbourg to Calais.

Rommel was tasked to defend Normandy while Von Runstedt concentrated upon the Calais area. Von Runstedt, like Hitler, was convinced the allied invasion would take place in the Calais area.

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Rommel had an impossible task - he received only ten percent of the additional men and equipment he requested - while Von Runstedt kept most of the available men and equipment in the Calais area.

As late as June 5, 1944, Rommel asked Hitler to give him the elite Panzer Tank Divisions stationed in Paris. When Hitler did release the tanks to Rommel it was too late, more than 15 allied divisions were ashore. This was the end for the Third Reich and Adolph Hitler.

I got involved in the destruction of the Third Reich when with two hours remaining before D-Day [June 6, 1944], I was one of the 2056 men of the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (508<sup>th</sup> PIR) on our way to Normandy - for our first combat jump.

Our regiment was part of a three airborne division armada comprised of American C-47 cargo planes and British aircraft carrying paratroopers or towing fragile gliders.

The armada was an awesome sight. It took 120 C-47s to lift our regiment and about eight times that number to lift and drop the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> airborne divisions.

When we got the order to jump, the skies over Normandy were ablaze with anti-aircraft and machinegun fire, and exploding airplanes.

I made a quick shuffle to the door and jumped. I had a helpless feeling of floating uncontrollably into German anti-aircraft, machinegun and rifle fire.

A quick hopeful glance at the terrain below was enough to tell most of us that we were not in the right place, but we were probably several miles away from our designated drop area and objectives.

Days later, we ascertained that shortly after we had jumped about six divisions [over 175,000 men] had started landing on the beaches of Normandy. Within four or five days, elements of the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division started to link up with 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men. This enabled the regiment to assemble as a fighting force. Thereafter we fought side-by-side with the seaborne landed invasion forces. You know the rest of the story!

The Normandy campaign ended August 25, 1944 the costs were high:

?? Allied Forces - 39,978 killed and 209,000 wounded

?? German forces - 24,000 killed and 450,000 wounded

In September 1944, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR parachuted into Holland, and in December we were committed in the Battle of the Bulge.

In May 1945, the war in Europe ended. After 16 months of occupation duty as security forces and honor guards for General Eisenhower's headquarters, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was returned to the United States and deactivated.

A few years ago, the First Battalion 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry was activated as the 1-508<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Airborne Combat Team) and stationed in Italy.

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As I had been a member of the original 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment's "First Battalion" and had parachuted into Normandy, I was invited to be a guest of the 1-508 when it visited Normandy, and to serve as a guide during its tour of the battlefields.

I was delighted. This would be my first opportunity to return to Normandy since I left there 58 years ago.

On April 13, 2002, the 1-508 parachuted into the drop zone we missed on June 6, 1944. We were fortunate, the Germans had flooded the area with over four feet of water, and many of the heavily loaded parachutists that landed in the area had drowned.



The 508th PIR D-Day Drop Zone - as it looked on April 13, 2002.



1-508th Infantry Parachuting into the WW II Drop Zone

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**A Soft Landing!'**

Today in Normandy you can visit a unique memorial dedicated to the heroic men of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR that held Hill 30, a 508<sup>th</sup> PIR D-Day objective.

This composite group of men from a variety of units, heroically held Hill 30 against repeated strong German attacks.

Around D-Day + 4 elements of the 508 reinforced Hill 30 ending the desperate German siege.

The heroic assault to capture the heavily fortified Hill 131 was another significant accomplishment of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR. The regiment's Second and Third Battalions were ordered to seize and occupy Hill 131 - by July 4.

The First Battalion moved to the base of Hill 131 and was ordered to hold the area at all costs, until the assault battalions could pass through.

A and B Company were placed on line with Company C [consisting of 37 men] in reserve. It rained throughout the night of July 3 and we fought off numerous strong German attacks. Despite the heavy rain and desperate German attacks, the First Battalion held the area and helped the two battalions launch the attack. By 1000 hours on July 4, Hill 131 belonged to the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR.



**Rock Merritt is pointing to names of heroic comrades listed on the wall.**

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The next major 508<sup>th</sup> PIR mission was to capture Hill 95. This mission was assigned to the Second Battalion. At the time, all the field grade officers in the battalion had been wounded and evacuated. The Hq2 company commander, Captain Chester Graham was commanding the battalion.

Hill 95 was unusually difficult to take. It became a 24-hour battle of fire and maneuver with depressing withdrawals and heroic counterattacks. After a desperate night attack the hill was taken."

Throughout his 2002 Normandy visit, Rock was impressed with the children. The kids were especially interested in World War II and demonstrated a deep understanding about the war. They asked intelligent questions and paid attention to the answers.



Rock Merritt and School Kids

The friendly people of Ste. Mere Eglise say. "If you are looking for a paratrooper in our town, look in the STOP BAR." [Rock found it.]



Rock Merritt Outside the Stop Bar

These same friendly people never miss an opportunity to honor the American paratroopers that helped liberate their country.

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The Mayor of Ste. Mere Eglise invited CSM Rock Merritt to join with him in placing a colorful flower wreath at the Ste. Mere Eglise monument honoring the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Paratroopers.

Note: Rock Merritt's presentation was more eloquent, colorful, and comprehensive than can be replicated herein.

Rock described the Rangers heroic assault of the Point Du Hoc heights to destroy the large guns overlooking the Omaha Beach.



**Ste. Mere Eglise Airborne Monument**

He held the audience spellbound with his explanation of the British Commando's detailed planning and arduous training to seize the essential Pegasus Bridge, and their heroic successful attack to capture it.

Rock visited all of the airborne monuments in Normandy, and the cemetery where many of his comrades are interred. Rock says that he especially enjoyed the Normandy people and their hospitality.

Additionally, Rock says, "I will be forever indebted to the 1-508<sup>th</sup> for an unforgettable opportunity to visit Normandy. I was truly impressed with and proud of the 1-508<sup>th</sup> men – they are truly "Red Devils. "