

"The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"

INTRODUCTION

This album contains a brief history of a World War II airborne company. It describes significant activities that occurred during its short life of four years, one month and four days. It includes memoirs contributed by the men of the company or their families.

The album contains an overview of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment Association WW II - founded in 1975 by Owen B. Hill from Hq1. This association revived friendships among the men who served in the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (508th PIR). For almost 30 years, the association operated effectively – and then it was retired October 19, 2004.

The album also contains a unique report of Kenneth (Rock) Merritt's return to Normandy after 58 years. This priceless addition to the album contains a photo of the 508th PIR drop zone that the majority of the regiment failed to land upon during the D-Day parachute assault on June 6, 1944.

The memoirs provided by the men of Hq1 or their families provide a credible perspective of Hq1's wartime experiences. However, much of the information in the memoirs has lain dormant in the minds of men for over 60 years, and their recollections may be incomplete or repetitious.

Kindly consider that these men traveled the same route, they shared the same combat actions, often earned identical decorations, and they often recall and describe identical happenings. The consequence is redundancy.

Most of the individual memoirs emphasize the camaraderie the men shared, the heroic actions they witnessed, the sorrows they encountered, and they consistently point up the love and respect the men had for each other.

Seldom do the Hq1 men describe in any detail their introduction into combat. An act that requires a high degree of mental and physical discipline, and courage.

For WW II paratroopers, it usually meant hurling oneself from a speeding plane into a violent night, illuminated by anti-aircraft shells, machine-gun tracer bullets, and exploding aircraft. For example – envision **YOUR** participation in the following scenario!

Eighteen of you are sitting in a dimly lit C-47 airplane, nine men on each side. The plane holds formation among scores of closely flying planes. You sit quietly, laden with assorted combat equipment, a parachute, reserve chute, rifle or submachine gun, ammunition, grenades, land mines, first aid packets, rations, canteens of water and maps, and perhaps a radio, or a bazooka. More than a hundred pounds of equipment that you must carry with you to the ground.

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This is probably the last long waiting period for you and the other men - and their faces and eyes are blank. Each man's thoughts are entirely private, the lucky ones sleep or pretend to sleep, there is nothing more to do, everything that can be done is done, everything that can be known is known - it is a good time to sleep, if you can!

All of you freely climbed into this plane, paratroopers are volunteers. You have had months of preparation and training for this ride, and you could have chosen a less risky method to enter combat. In the beginning, during basic training and parachutist training, you had a rigid course of physical training to harden you and teach you this new trade. After you qualified as a parachutist, the training was even more vigorous; nothing that could be taught was left untaught.

Your confidence in yourself and your comrades grew daily, everyone demonstrated pride, always prepared to prove they were the best. Now the time for payment has arrived.

You have been briefed; every man knows what is expected of him -- and what might go wrong, a parachute might fail to open, legs and backs could break, a man could be shot as he floated to earth, or he could be hung in a tree, a helpless target.

You know that wherever you land the enemy will be waiting and you hope that darkness and surprise will give you the time necessary to assemble, and fight.

Suddenly, the time for thinking and knowing is past - the red warning light is flashing -- the Jump Master gives the command:

"Stand Up and Hook Up!"

Seventeen men rise and hook their static line to the main cable.

"Check Your Equipment!"

"Sound Off for Equipment Check!"

"... Number ten Okay! ... Number nine Okay!" The voices continue the count off shouting above the noise of the C-47's motors, and perhaps flak and bullets hitting the plane.

"Close In the Door!"

The Green Light flashes and you hear the final words:

"Let's Go!"

In seconds, you leap from the aircraft and descend into the black night.

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We hope that our album provides researchers, historians, students and others a reasonable profile of the kind of men who went to war as WW II paratroopers.

The complete story of Hq1 can't be told - unheard are those who ought to be heard and honored - our comrades who made the supreme sacrifice on the battlefields in France, Holland, Belgium and Germany, and those who have died in the postwar years.

The 508th PIR did not single-handedly defeat the Third Reich in WW II --- far from it. However, we accomplished more, with less equipment, less food, and without transportation, than comparable units.

We were in combat for only one hundred fifty-four days. When we did go into battle the fighting was tough, the costs were high - two thousand and seventy battle casualties of whom six hundred and twenty-two men were killed and/or died of wounds, and two hundred and fifty-four men were reported missing in action.

We never forget them!