

508TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT

50TH ANNIVERSARY SPEECH

BY HANK LeFEBVRE

For Norfolk, Virginia reunion banquet October 24, 1992

This history of the 508 Parachute Infantry Regiment will tell you what these men we love had experienced. This will give you an understanding of what they did to give us the freedom we enjoy.

Normandy - Holland - Ardennes Alsace (Bulge) and Central Europe

America the land of the free - freedom is not free.

Many of you have received the attached history that was distributed at previous reunions. We want your family and guests to have a copy to understand what The 508 was all about.



How does one put 50 years of an organization like the 508 into proper perspective? When Jim Smith asked me to do this I told him I was concerned, and I still am. That it wasn't possible to somehow wrap up all of our history in a small package. Typically, Smitty said, "Just do it Hank", so here goes. Bear with me as I hope to reawaken some memories of times past.

This is roughly in three acts - 1. Organization; 2. Overseas and Combat; 3. Post War.

Act I - Organization

The order that got us going was dated October 20, 1942. It called for the organization of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment at Camp Blanding, Florida. It consisted of a small cadre of officers and men who were qualified jumpers and then there were the rest of us. We came from many other units and the bulk of the regiment came from the induction and recruiting centers where everyone had volunteered for the parachute troops.

The 508th was one of the first regiments to be organized, take basic training, and then go through jump school as a unit. Prior to this time, everyone went through jump school as an individual and then was assigned to a unit. We received many of you directly from the induction centers with tags around your necks as we all started the 508th together.

We soon learned that not only were we to get basic training, we were also introduced to physical training and running in particular. A minimum of two hours a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Woe be to anyone who fell out on a run. Each unit had its own punishment - in "A" company it was to carry a large rag doll to training all the next day! In addition to our regular PT, we also had Lt. Fleming to contend with.

He was in charge of PT for the regiment. He was also "Mr. Physical Culture of Connecticut of 1939". Those of us who were there still remember his booming voice saying, "You have to be in perfect physical condition to vault the walls of Berlin. Now, grab your partner in the fireman's carry and do 25 slow, easy deep knee bends." The men were restricted to camp and were getting restless. It was then that Colonel Lindquist made one of the few tactical errors in his career. He decided, or was persuaded, that because the men had performed so well in their basic training it would be a good idea to take them to Jacksonville in early December to do some "Christmas shopping". I put the words in quotes for, although Colonel Lindquist may have had shopping in mind that apparently wasn't what the men had in mind. Everyone was assigned to a certain bus # and seat #. Well, when we reached Jacksonville and opened the bus door that was the last we saw of lots of men for a few days. However, to Colonel Lindquist's everlasting credit - nothing was said or done. We just gathered in the men as we were able and got back to Blanding. It must be noted, however, that that was the last experiment of that kind.

We had a crab and lice infestation during our stay at Blanding and I want to tell the wives of the men of the 3rd Platoon of "A" company that I will bet that I have seen more of your husbands most private parts than you have!!! We finished our stay at Blanding with the 30 Mile speed march with full field equipment and everyone passed with record setting times.

The big day for all of us was the move to Ft. Benning and jump school. This was what it was all about — the mystique of the wings and the jump boots. When we were issued our jump boots it was spit and polish over and over again. We were excused from "A" stage (the physical training week) because we had been given our PT during Basic. This rankled some of the parachute cadre who were pretty proud of PT ability.

However, we proved to them that we were in good shape one afternoon during rigger training in one of the hangers. The troops were a little restless and the instructors decided to run us around Lawson Field as punishment. About three quarters of the way, the instructors began to tire and

called out "quick time, quick time" but we all just kept running and when we reached the hangers we came to a stop and waited. The instructors came straggling in, got us back in the hangers, and nothing more was said. We finally made our five qualifying jumps and there it was, we were paratroopers. Incidentally, Lt. Fleming, our PT nemesis, made his first jump at Ft. Benning and they say that the x-ray of his leg looked like shredded wheat!!! So much for PT ...

Camp Mackall—March - December 1943

It was on to Camp Mackall, North Carolina, a desolate spot between Pinehurst and Rockingham. Here we got more lessons in "beautification of the area." our mission was to conduct Advanced Individual Training and that we did. Training was the name of the game from early morning till late at night. You were either training or on sick call. We were introduced to night training and spent lots of time stumbling around those scrub pine trees in the area. We also had some day and night jumps into those pinewoods. No plowed drop zones for us. It was also getting hot and those of you who were there remember all those watermelons from the farmer's fields that we "put away." It seems like we were always taking up a collection to pacify those irate farmers. Up until this time, all of our training was within the 508. We got our chance to compete against the "leg soldiers" in the Tennessee Maneuvers in September 1943. We found out that, by gosh, we were not only in superior physical shape, but we were well trained. We had a night jump, which the Air Force loused up (shades of things to come). The 1st Bn. was scattered along a 15-mile area along the river. Scattered or not, we were able to put about four Signal Battalions out of action. Imagine a 15 mile line of people about 100 yards apart taking a bundle of wire, tactical administrative and umpire and hacking it into 100 yard segments. What fun ...

In the critique afterward, I was sitting with Lt. Col. Harrison, our Bn. CO when a Signal Bn. CO sat next to us, looked at our parachute insignia and got up and moved to another area. We really found out in Tennessee that we were better trained and in superior physical training than our contemporaries.

Act II Overseas & Combat

On the 20th of December 1943 the regiment moved to Camp Shanks, New York in preparation for overseas shipment. Passes were issued for two nights and then the 508 was alerted Christmas day. We loaded onto the USAT James Parker on the 27th and early on the morning of the 28th we started drawing overseas pay. Lots of money changed hands in crap games and poker and we also had lots of mal de mer. We arrived in Belfast, North Ireland on January 8, 1944, and ended up in the little town of Pt. Stewart. It got dark about 4:30 pm and didn't get light until about 9:00 am in the morning. Also, the higher you got into the hills, the wetter it got. We learned what peat bogs were all about. We all found out where that old Irish saying came from. "If you can see the hills it's going to rain. If you can't see the hills it's because it's raining." We did lots of night training ... not hard considering the time of year and our location.

Someone on high must have heard our pleas to get out of Ireland and on March 10th we arrived in Nottingham, England...what joy!!! Here we were in the middle of a large industrial city in the Midlands. Don Jakeway said it best. "You can imagine our joy when we first set foot in this wonderful city, after spending a couple of months in that barren, cheerless area of North Ireland. We busted our butts during the daylight hours getting the camp ready, but once the sun set, we hustled those same butts into town."

Everyone who was in Nottingham has his own story to tell about the fine people in that city. About friendly pubs and families that took us in and, of course, we reciprocated as best we could. The English had not seen citrus fruit since 1939, so we all smuggled out as much fruit as we could and those 10 lb. sticks of bologna that all went into appreciative hands. Notice how diplomatic I am about not mentioning the beautiful young ladies of Nottingham. But they were there ...

We all knew that something big was about to happen and that we would be part of it. England was coming apart at the seams with men and equipment. We were busy day and night. We had a couple of night jumps with just jumpmasters in the planes. We should have anticipated later problems, for we were scattered all over on landing. Nevertheless, we suddenly got our orders to move to Folkingham airport and we were sealed in. The security about the move to the departure airfield must have been pretty good because two of our sterling soldiers, O.B. Hill and Davey Jones, didn't get the word. They arrived back at Wollaton Park in the wee small hours only to find that the regiment had moved. They found their way to the airfield and each took off one of their sergeant's stripes on the inside when they stood side by side, the sergeant's stripes still in place on the outside. They reported to Captain Ruddy, "Sir, Sergeants Hill and Jones reporting in from AWOL." They then switched sides with no stripes showing on the outside and said, "sir, Privates Hill and Jones reporting for duty." Of such did we win the war...

Combat

Normandy was to be the culmination of twenty-two months of real hard continuous effort on all our parts to be prepared and not to be found wanting when the chips were down. It was a dramatic transition from the friendly environment of England to the sky full of tracer bullets we encountered at our jump altitude of 400 feet. Standing in the door, I really understood the meaning of the phrase "a sea of tracers." we took them through the wings and through the fuselage with that peculiar color and sound as they passed through. We were all grateful for the green light and more than willing to take our chances on the ground. I have never forgiven the Allied Intelligence for not telling us what a hedgerow was really like in Normandy. The fact that you could be having a life and death struggle in one of those 50x50 fields and someone in the next field could be taking a break not knowing what was going on next door. Each one of us who was there had his own story to tell. We were scattered, but we accomplished our mission. There were acts of heroism and bravery beyond belief. Lou Mendez got the DSC for his action at Pretot and it should have been the Congressional Medal of Honor. We had the terrific shock of seeing our comrades killed and wounded and we all matured far beyond our years that day and in the days that followed, and names unknown to us a few days earlier would become part of our life... St. Mere Eglise, Hill 30 and 95, the Douve and Merderet rivers, Chef du Pont, Baupre, Beauzville la Bastille, Pont l'Abbe, and Picauville. Whenever I think of that time, I think of Churchill's comment about his RAF pilots during the Battle of Britain "uncommon gallantry was a common virtue."

On the 15th of July, the 508, or what was left of it, loaded on two LSTs and returned to Nottingham. Of the 2,056 men who had jumped on D-Day, 918 returned to Wollaton Park. One happy footnote was that many were captured and wounded and not KIA. In fact, I did not see ten men from my platoon that jumped into Normandy until the reunion in Chicago some 32 years later. Following a week's leave, the 508 came together and reorganized. We had great replacements waiting and were soon into training for our next action. After an "almost jump" into Belgium we became part of Operation Market Garden and jumped into Holland on the 17th of September 1944. How different from Normandy... It was a daylight jump and I landed about 50 yards from the point that was shown on the sand table in England. The 82nd was to capture and secure the bridge over the Waal River near Nijmegen. The Dutch people were grateful and always helpful and tried to assist us in every way. As always, we had more than our share of action and each one of us who was there remembers vividly our part of the story. We accomplished our mission as always with much individual and unit bravery and professional skill. Once again, names unknown to us before the Holland jump would remain with us forever... Nijmegen, Berg en Dal, Beek, Devils Hill, Groesbeek, Wyler, den Heuvel woods, and Voxhill. One interesting sidelight was the discovery in 1985, quite by accident, of a young man, Bert Jakobs, who in 1944 was hiding out in an attic of a farmhouse in den Heuvel woods with his mother, father, and sister. They had been in the attic for 25 months. It had a skylight and they saw us coming down that Sunday morning." like angels from heaven."

North of the river we were attached to the British 50th division and soon got to know meat and kidney stew and treacle pudding. On the 11th of November we were relieved and sent to Sissone, France. Of 2,000, 696 were KIA, MIA, or wounded.

Sissone. France

Our brief time at Sissone was marked by passes to Paris!!! And Training. However, on the 17th of December word got to Field Marshal Von Runstedt that the 82nd was enjoying a rest and immediately he assembled his best divisions and ordered a tremendous counterattack through the Ardennes. It had the desired effect and the 82nd was alerted to move. What mass confusion ... we had 60 men standing in those big Semis moving through that terribly cold weather but no one was quite sure where we were going. It was cold ... no bed rolls ... no winter equipment ... few roads. It was probably our toughest campaign, certainly from the physical aspect. Here again, names we had never heard of, Vielsasm, Salm Chateau, Thier du Mont ridge, Bodeux, Haute Bodeau Abrefontaine, and Erria became part of our vocabulary. The 508 took a position on the northern flank of the bulge bending around the Thier du Mont ridge. The lines had to be straightened and on Christmas Eve our first withdrawal was made under cover of darkness and we were in our new positions on Christmas Day. A German attack was repulsed on the 28th of December and then we had the task of retaking our original positions on January 7. It was tough going, with German 88s being used against individual soldiers, but in the end we secured the position. On the 10th of January we were relieved and moved to a rest area near Chevron, Belgium. It was the first chance in almost a month for a hot shower, and to this day I do not take a shower without thinking back on that wonderful hot water, trickle though it was, and remembering a vow I made that day that whenever I took a hot shower after that I would remember those cold miserable days and be thankful for whatever I had. In less than a month, 900 Officers and men had become casualties of which more than 40 were victims of the weather rather than the enemy. It was a tough, physically demanding campaign that truly tested the mettle of the 508.

Central Europe

On the 21st of January, the 508 was back in the lines near Diedenbergl and on the 28th the 82nd was on the attack into the Siegfried line. At dawn on the 29th of January the 1st Bn. jumped off at four in the morning, attacking toward the small village of Holzheim. On their way to the town, while still in the approach march, two German wiremen wandering up the trail were captured. This seemed to indicate that surprise would be complete. "B" company attacked from the north, while "C" company approached the town from the southwest. The town was soon taken and about 80 prisoners with it. At about this time, 1st Sgt. Leonard Funk took the spotlight. As "C" company was entering the town, they received direct fire from light, self-propelled artillery weapons in the town. Sgt. Funk led the assault on these weapons and they were soon neutralized. A second Bn. contact patrol, captured by the enemy, was brought into town by some unsuspecting Germans. The German officer in charge took advantage of his ability to speak English and the snowsuit which hid his identity. He boldly approached the guards and bluffed his way to where the prisoners were and began to rearm them. Just as a counterattack was about to materialize, Sgt. Funk walked in. The German officer stuck a machine pistol into his ribs telling him to surrender. Sgt. Funk answered with a burst from his Tommy gun. Taking the lead from Sgt. Funk's action, the rest of the men in the area soon quelled the disturbance. Sgt. Funk was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his deeds. (Leonard is now fighting a greater battle with cancer.)

We were relieved and back in Sissone on the 20th of February. On the 3rd of April the 508 was alerted to move to an airfield near Chartres, France, for a possible jump to liberate our POW camps. It was feared that with the German army breaking down, that German civilians might endanger the POWs. Fortunately, the jumps did not materialize and we ended the war in Chartres.

After the German surrender, the 508 returned to Sissone long enough to prepare for movement to Germany where we were slated for Army of Occupation duty as guards for General Eisenhower's headquarters in Frankfurt. Bedecked in white parachute silk scarves and white gloves, the men of the 508 soon showed that they could be as good a garrison soldier as they were fighting men.

Among other duties, the regiment stood honor guard for visiting dignitaries. On the occasion of the Big Three meeting in Berlin, the Third Bn. stood honor guard for the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, and the Secretaries of War and Navy, all of whom commented on the fine appearance of the troops.

We have never claimed that we won the war. However, the fact that 9,654 officers and men were on the rolls of the regiment during the first three years of its life pays tribute to the fact that when the regiment did go into battle, the fighting was rough. We are proud of the fact that we were asked to do more with less equipment, on less food, and practically without transportation than any other outfit.

Act III - Post War

We must now pay tribute to two people, without whom we would not have, an Act Three, nor even be here today. O.B. Hill and Margaret gave of their time, money, spirit, and effort to get us together. O.B. and Margaret, we are forever in your debt...

Following the war we all went our separate ways until O.B. took it on himself to get us all together. The following is almost verbatim from a letter I received from O.B. Our present association really started On June 6, 1974; Bill Gowdy and O.B. were visiting the graves of all men from their company in the Normandy cemetery. It was the first visit for either of them and quite an experience. They had secured a list from the curator which gave the location of each grave. Their company Commander, Capt. Ruddy, was buried there and it was at the foot of his Grave that O.B. decided to try and organize a reunion for all the 508 Men he could find. He was working for Hughes and had access to a typing pool as well as a secretary and a Watts line. The start was with 5 addresses. He advertised in all of the veteran's magazines. Tom Gintjee was located and did all the artwork for the present stationary, membership cards, and applications. Funds for all this activity came from O.B.'s father's account. He had passed away leaving an inheritance, and being proud of his paratrooper son, O.B. felt that his dad would be happy to know that his funds would be used to get the reunion started. O.B. and Margaret decided that Chicago would be a good central location and they made four trips there. The Marriott proved to be the best spot and they helped in all the arrangements. As a result, 133 people attended the first reunion over the 1975 July Fourth weekend. During that reunion, it was decided to do it again. Our roster was growing and there were 170 present in July 1976.

Our roster was growing steadily. One of the big reasons for this growth was Don Lassen's Static Line. He has given the 508 a column and this has brought in a large portion of the names we have on our roster. We are eternally grateful to Don for his assistance. (Thanks Don.)

Presently we have over 1300 names on our roster, including widows and honorary members from our overseas friends. The first meeting was held around the pool at the Marriott. It was decided that we should be a last man organization. It was also decided that, if possible, we should operate on contributions from our members. Anyone who served In the 508 between October 1942 and December 1945 was eligible for membership.

Over the years, we have completed numerous projects in the name of the 508 Parachute Infantry Regiment of WW-II. In Chef du Pont, we have built a park and caused a monument to be erected at the entrance. Across the road from the park, is a monument erected by the people of Chef du Pont honoring the 508.

Virtually every town hall in our area of Normandy has a 508 plaque on the wall. The main street through Chef du Pont is now named Rue Rex Combs of our "A" Company. There is also a Rue Zane Schlemer named after Zane of our Headquarters' 2nd.

In Nottingham, England, we have a monument and a tree in Wollaton Park. Also, in one of the buildings is a mini museum in honor of the 508. There are numerous monuments throughout Belgium in honor of the 508. These were erected by the citizens there to show their appreciation for our efforts there during the Battle of the Bulge.

In Beek, Holland, there is a beautiful monument in the center of another park. This park is named after John Foley of "A" Company for his action on Devil's Hill during the liberation of Holland in September 1944. It is perhaps the most beautiful tribute to our regiment and the men who served in it. Throughout the years, fresh flowers are always present on the monument. As in France, the city halls in both Belgium and Holland have 508 plaques on their walls. It is doubtful if the 508 will ever be forgotten in England or Europe.

And so, there it is ... 50 years of our regiment. We can be proud of the fact that we have set the standard by which all future 508ers will be judged. We were forged in the crucible of a wartime situation and we were found to have "the right stuff". A Presidential Unit Citation and special recognition by France, Holland, and Belgium attest to our professionalism.

It was our wartime association that developed this special bonding of love and affection that binds us so tightly together and continues to become stronger as the years go by.

Today, we remember with sadness those who gave their lives for their country, and for us, as well as those who have passed away since then, And yet, we also have a sense of joy and gladness for having known them and having shared a very special time with them.

Fortunately, memory works like a good silver polish, removing all the dark tarnish of anxiety, exhaustion, loneliness, and even to a degree the recollections of pain and horror from the wartime experience. What remains is a partly burnished glow of pride in having met personal demands greater than any that peacetime was to pose. What remains as well is a kind of focused nostalgia for the innocence, the certainties, the idealism, the shared and agreed sense of purpose, That now sometimes seem to have been delayed casualties of the war.

Keep us ever mindful of that sense of giving of oneself and sharing with comrades that characterized our wartime service. And now, let us continue to live our lives in such a manner, that those who know us will continue to say, "those guys are really special"... Thank you.

Written and delivered by Hank Lefebvre on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment at Norfolk, Virginia, October 24, 1992.