

Combat Medic with the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment

Harry Russell Mayer

I was born April 28, 1923. I was drafted on January 14, 1943 and reported to the Reisterstown Draft Board where I boarded a bus for Camp Meade, Maryland. At Meade I was interviewed, had my immunization shots, and was issued my Army uniforms. One afternoon I, and others entering the Army, loaded a railroad coach that was setting on a siding when we were hooked up to a train heading south. That evening at supper someone asked me, "Did you volunteer for the paratroopers?" I answered, "No!" Many others in the group also said they did not volunteer for parachute duty and we all wondered why we were being sent to a paratroop unit. There was one fellow in our group who did say, "Yes."

When we arrived in Jacksonville, Florida the next morning we found ourselves setting on a siding. Looking through the coach windows we could see a group of paratroopers waiting for us. The paratroopers unloaded us from the train and took us to Camp Blanding, Florida where they were forming the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Shortly after arriving at Blanding, I was interviewed again, this time by a Major who asked me if I would like to be a paratrooper. I said, "No." Because I was curious, I asked the Major why I was sent to a paratroop unit when I did not volunteer for paratroop duty. He replied, "Well, you have a dangerous hobby--that of being a volunteer fireman--and we thought that maybe you would like to jump out of an airplane." I said, "No, not at this time." He then said, "Well, we have other jobs here other than jumping out of airplanes. We'll give you your basic training and then we'll assign you to a non-jumping job."

While receiving basic training we watched a film that had been captured from the Germans on how they jumped off the Nijmegen Bridge in Holland and captured the bridge intact, and then rolled down through Holland. The Germans didn't have to build any bridges as they rolled along--they used the ones they captured. After basic training I was assigned as a cook. The Regiment then moved to Fort Benning, Georgia in February 1943 where the rest of the fellows received their jump training. From Benning we were transferred to Camp Mackall, North Carolina in March 1943 where the paratroopers continued to train and I continued to be a cook.

Setting up a field kitchen one day for a training exercise at Mackall, the heavy lifting caused me to have a double hernia. I reported for sick call the next morning and was taken to the post hospital where I was operated on. After a few days in intensive care the lights came on and I noticed that the hospital staff was scurrying around. Finally, a nurse said, "Some of your buddies were seriously hurt." I found out that the Regiment made a night jump and that a few of them landed on a highway. When you jump, and while you are floating down to earth, if you realize that you are going to land in water, you slip out of your parachute harness just before you hit the water, so you won't become entangled in the shroud lines. It was a bright moonlit night and these injured paratroopers thought they were about to land in water, so they started slipping out of their harnesses before they realized that they were over a highway. The next day I overheard one injured paratrooper pleading with his buddy, "Take the court-martial! Get out!" Because after you make the five qualifying jumps, you automatically have to jump or else you are court-martialed for refusing to obey an order.

After spending one month in the hospital, I was given a 30-day sick leave. I spent that time at home in Maryland and then returned to Camp Mackall when my leave was up. The Captain informed me that if he had his way he would give me a year's vacation but he couldn't. So he sent me back to my outfit, the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, for limited duty. Well, limited duty is not much in the service--the only thing I couldn't do was to go to jump school. We continued to train at Camp Mackall and also went on maneuvers in Tennessee. I spent the weekend with a friend of mine, Austin Schildwhacter, who was

studying at a seminary, and then I went back to Camp Mackall.

In late December 1943, the Regiment was transferred to Camp Shanks, New York for final overseas processing, and then on December 28, 1943 we loaded aboard the United States Army Transport (USAT) James Parker at the New York City harbor for shipment to Europe. We debarked at Belfast, Northern Ireland on January 9, 1944 and moved to Port Stewart for two more months of training. We were then ferried from Northern Ireland to Scotland and then by train to Nottingham, England to our new base camp at Wollaton Park on the outskirts of the city. We lived in six-man squad tents and our camp was enclosed by a stone wall on the front and barbed wire at the back. It is rumored that Wollaton Park was part of Sherwood Forest where Robin Hood and his merry men roamed while they stole from the rich and gave to the poor.

Around the beginning of June 1944 the Regiment moved by bus to Saltby Airbase not too far from Nottingham to prepare for its first combat jump, and on June 6, 1944, D-Day, between 2:00am and 2:30am they jumped on Normandy France near the towns of Ste. Mere Eglise and Picauville about ten miles west of the Omaha and Utah beaches. The mission of the 508th was to prevent the Germans from getting to the beaches to reinforce their troops there. The rest of us were taken to an English port to load onto boats for a crossing of the English Channel. We landed at Omaha Beach on June 7 and caught up with our paratroop unit. I remained with them acting as an infantryman and as a cook. Then we were sent back to England by boat and then by train to Nottingham on July 13, 1944 to prepare for our next mission. Of the 2,056 men of the Regiment who jumped into Normandy, 1,161 became casualties as a result of this operation.

Back in England, we received new recruits and supplies, and I went to jump school in England. I completed jump training on August 30, 1944 and returned to my Regiment, the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment. I was interviewed by a Captain from the Medics who asked me if I would like to be a medic because I could no longer be a cook. I said, "Why not, why are you asking?" He said, "Well, we see that you were a volunteer fireman and did ambulance work and you already have your first aid training." I said, "Why not!" He replied. "You'll be an asset to us."

Now as a member of the Medical Detachment of the 508th, we continued to train at our base camp in Nottingham for our next mission. We were given instructions about our medical responsibilities and they showed us a training film. I said, "I have already seen this film back at Blanding." We jumped into Holland just south of Nijmegen on a beautiful Sunday afternoon September 17, 1944 and there were only three sprained ankles. As I looked below while floating down to earth in my parachute, I could see many slit trenches apparently dug by the Germans, and I thought, "Oh Oh!" But there was no need to worry as we encountered little resistance on the drop. I landed safely on the ground and assembled with my unit. We went off to our assignment and set up our medical aid station near a two-acre field of turnips. We stayed there for about a month and when we got ready to leave the turnip field was pretty much picked clean.

My Regiment had completed its initial mission in Nijmegen by capturing the Nijmegen Bridge which was the prize of the entire operation. During our first few days in Holland, the British armored units had been winding their way north from Belgium, through the strategically-held positions of the American 101st Airborne Division along their route to Holland. The mission of the British armor was to reinforce and relieve the British and Polish paratroopers who had jumped north of Nijmegen to capture the bridge at Arnhem where they were having the heck kicked out of them. At three o'clock in the afternoon, the British stopped. Their tanks stopped and I checked to see what was going on. I knew they hadn't gone over the bridge yet. They got out of their tanks and set up little fires and had tea and crumpets. They stopped to have tea and crumpets!!! After tea time, they got back in their tanks and continued on their journey north, but they were too late. The British and Polish paratroop units at Arnhem were greatly outnumbered and had been decimated. We stayed in Holland for about a month and then pulled back to a new base camp at Sissone, France. When we were back in France, I got a

three-day pass to go to Paris.

And then, on December 16, 1944, we were alerted to load onto tractor trailer trucks and make a quick overnight trip to Belgium where the Germans had broken through our front lines to make one final last-ditch effort to turn the course of the war in their favor. This campaign would later be called the Battle of the Bulge. The 82nd Airborne Division moved quickly to take up defensive positions on the northern sector of the Bulge and the 101st Airborne Division wound up at Bastogne. On January 9, 1945 while still in the Bulge, my Medical Captain came to me and said, "Mayer, you will go up to the front line and get the injured together and I will send you ambulances and trucks to bring them out." So, that's what I did! The following night we loaded the wounded onto the trucks and ambulances and the next day we were back at our Battalion Aid Station. The Captain said to me, "It sounds like you are catching a cold. Come with me. I'm going back to get re-supplied at Regimental Headquarters where they have a kitchen set up. They always have a pot of soup and some bread." So, that's what I did. I got some soup and bread and went to the other room and sat by the fireplace and started eating. My feet started tingling so I loosened my boots. I loosened and loosened and loosened until I almost had one off. The Captain came in and said, "What are you doing?" I replied, "I am doing what you told me to do. I am eating some soup and getting something hot in me." He said, "No, I'm not talking about that. What are you doing with your boot off?" I said, "My feet started tingling and my boots got tight." He then told me to take the boots off. When I took my boots off he said, "Uh Uh! Your feet are frozen. You are going on a little vacation." He put a tag on me and I ended up in Liverpool, England with frozen feet. After spending a few months there, they decided to send me back to the United States.

I returned to the states on the same ship, USAT James Parker that I went over on. It was a troopship going to Europe and a hospital ship going back. I debarked at New York City May 13, 1945 and was then shipped to Camp Butner, North Carolina. I was there for several months when they decided to give me a medical discharge. In so doing, they informed me that I had been awarded a Purple Heart on February 5, 1945 for injuries received January 9, 1945. A Bronze Star had been awarded to me December 26, 1945. I was separated from the service August 1, 1945. On September 24, 1945 I was sworn in as a Police Officer on the Baltimore County Police Force and stayed with them until October 2, 1965 when I retired as a Sergeant. I married Zelda Grey Holcomb in July 1948. We have one son, David Russell and one daughter, Jacqueline Grey, five grandchildren, and one great grandchild due in January 2005.

Awards and decorations I received during my military service are the Bronze Star Medal with oak leaf cluster, Purple Heart Medal, Good Conduct Medal, World War II Victory Medal, National Service Medal, US Army Senior Parachutist Badge, Combat Infantry Badge, Combat Medical Badge, American Campaign Medal, European/African/Middle East Campaign Medal with invasion arrowhead and four bronze battle stars, US Distinguished Unit Citation, French Fourragere, Belgian Fourragere, and the Militaire Willems Orde Degree of Knight (Dutch Orange Lanyard of the Royal Netherlands Army).