

JAMES PRATT 'S STORY
OF HIS WWII EXPERIENCES WITH THE 508 P. I. R.
Interviewed at the Blue Top, D-Day observation/meeting, Stevens Point, June 5,1993.

“I was a member of the 82nd Airborne Division, 508th PIR. I joined the service in Feb. 1943. I took my regular basic training in Camp Roberts, California. It was regular basic infantry training. I entered the service from the state of Wisconsin and I finished basic in May of 1943. After that I signed up for the ‘Paratroops’.

We were immediately shipped to Fort Benning, Georgia. We went through the jump school there. It is a funny thing how I came to get signed up for the Airborne. There were about six of us guys together in basic that were always up to some hi-jinks or other in the barracks. Always into something together. Kept the place and the Non-Corns hopping to keep us in control. We had a lot of fun out of it all. Basic is dull enough without a sense of humor and fun, and this story got to be ‘something else’!

The six of us heard that we could volunteer for the Airborne and we all figured it would be a good way to go to get out of the general ‘meat market’ G. I. Pool before they sent us someplace we didn’t want to go! So we all agreed we would sign up for the Paratroops. We all trooped down to the Company HQ and lined up to sign up. And old Jim Pratt, y’know, was right up front to get in the fun. We were at the orderly room and I went right in and signed up for the transfer. When I straightened up and looked around behind me, the other five guys were gone. They seemed to have led me on and took off as soon as I was committed! To them, a real good joke.” (Ed note: The joke was on those ‘pals’ of his. They missed out on being part of the most famous and effective Airborne units ever deployed. I’ll bet they are sorry now!)

“Anyway, come the 1st of June our packet got shipped to Fort Benning. We started jump training. Everything went along just fine. I got to my first jump, the chute opened, somewhat to my surprise. Like everyone else, it is always a bit of a surprise! I had a good jump, classic deal; I sprained my ankle on my first jump! And joined the ‘walking, crutching, wounded’ that you saw in those days, all over Benning.

I was lucky, as I understand it. We never got sent to the old ‘Frying Pan’ area! We went right off to the ‘1st P.T.R.’ down on the edge of the main post. That’s what they called it then. The ‘1st P.T.R.’.

So I made my first jump in July ‘43. By golly I think it was actually the 5th of July at that. With the sprained ankle I was off for about two more weeks. Then I went back, and all this time off I was thinking, “Do I really want to go this route or don’t I?” At that time a guy could make the first four jumps and still resign without too much prejudice, y’know. Some of the guys did do that. But I finally got back and finished the five jumps. When we started out in our class, I forgot the class number; we had about 1,000 guys. Somewhere around 450 actually made it and finished to qualify and get wings.

After we finished jump school, 18 of us had to hang around there until September. Why that was I don’t know. Everyone [else] in that class got shipped to Airborne outfits right off. Why we were not, I can’t figure. But 18 of us hung around there for months.

So we had a nice deal. We had a class ‘A’ pass. We could get up in the morning when we wished, more or less. Wander up to the main post and get breakfast at the service clubs, etc, and read the papers, loaf around, then come back to the company area in time for mail call. Then go up to the main post swimming pool in the afternoon. Then into class ‘A’ uniforms and off to Columbus, Georgia at night! This was one hell of a good deal!

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Pretty soon the CO says, "Well, if you guys' shipping orders don't come in by noon Thursday, you can have a three-day pass." So we got class A'd and off to Atlanta, GA for the three days. That was a blast until the money ran out!

This pattern ran on until about the third week of September '43. Let's see, I finished jump school in July and then we, two of us I think it was, got shipped up to, ah, Camp Mackall, where we were assigned to the 508th PIR. Which I stayed with all the way through the war, up till I got my second wound in the winter of the 'Bulge', that is.

Now that I think of it, it reminds me, I got to interject a bit here. There was about 25 of us guys. We all came from different outfits. They told us we were all going to become 'experts' in all weapons. "You are going to the ranges and stay out there till you qualify on every infantry weapon! So get your gear together, you are going out in the field and fire the B.A.R., Tommy gun, M-1, mortars, carbines, light machine guns and you will stay till you are experts!"

And we did! It rained and rained, but we kept at it. And sure enough, finally, we all qualified on all that stuff and then, it had been 10 days sleeping in the old pup tents, y'know, 'shelter halves', etc. (Bill Clinton's recipe for his new Army of 'togetherness' and all that.) Boy, you sure can get crowded in those, especially when it rains all the while! Well, they all got qualified as 'experts' and so when we got back we all got furloughs for ten days to go home.

My folks lived in Milton Junction, Wisconsin, then. Big city! We were home for 10 or 12 days and then back to the routine. Further training with the 508th, until we left to go overseas on about the 22nd of December '43.

We were shipped overseas, I can't recall the name of the ship, or the class. That was a 12-day trip. We shipped out of Camp Kilmer. It was bigger than a Liberty ship. We were stacked 5 high with the chain and canvas bunks all slung over each other. Right on top of each other. We landed in Northern Ireland. We were stationed there in around Fort Rush and Fort Schole etc.

Then we got more training, which meant being out there in the rain and the peat bogs. We didn't make any jumps there. It was ground training. It's coming back now. We were taken out in trucks and 'jumped' off them all over the countryside at night. Then we were to find our way home! Well it didn't take us long to figure out how to benefit from this one!" *(Ed note: We all well remember this technique. It was actually due to a shortage of C-47's to make training jumps at the time. For those who did get to make the plane jumps it turned into 'lost' guys who shacked up with the first farm family they could find. Where they would lay up and feast on eggs and home meals for a day or two, while the CO's thought they were actually lost! If there was a farmer's daughter thereabouts, so much the nicer for all! They finally had to put a limit rule on. Anyone who came in later than about 8 hours got extra duty, lost pass time, etc. This was an instant cure. Everyone got real good at reading maps and heading back to camp. Even to the point of stealing local bikes to make it faster. Which led to another scandal and registering bikes.)*

So back to Jim. "At the first farm we looked to find the nearest town and off we went to the first pub! We 'stacked arms' and drank beer for some time before we went back to camp. Then they shipped us from Northern Ireland to Nottingham, England. We stayed there, ah, we were there and got more training. We were there until the 31st of May and then we were taken out to an airport and, ah, on June 5th '44, about 11 o'clock at night we loaded in the planes and on June 6th we were dropped into Normandy. D-Day! It was H-minus four!

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Well we had these maps. They were about a two square mile area and they were useless. We lost two guys right off and about six of us got together. The two were killed right away. We got the maps out and saw nothing that even looked like the map. They were way off the 'DZ'. Our mission had been to blow these two bridges. And we ended up about two miles from Ste. Sauveur Le Vicompte, which was about eight miles from our drop zone! So anyway we finally managed, after about two days, we finally got back to the main body of the regiment. From there on, what can I tell you? It was pretty confusing. I can't recall anything specific. It was just move and fight all day and night. We never found the damn bridges! We later found out our regiment, no, battalion was supposed to take this one town. The battalion was assigned to take it by itself!

As it turned out, it took an entire regiment of regular infantry to take it. It was either Carentan or La-Haye du Puits, or some such." *(Ed note: Sounds like the history on Carentan, which actually was a terrible battle and no battalion could have ever done it. It actually took more than one infantry regiment also, because it took Division Artillery to bust it up. A lightly armed bunch of Airborne can do miracles, but that was a bit too much to ask, in any event.)*

"So everything was going along until the 4th of July. When, well, we were closing in on La-Haye du Puits. When we were dug in. Y'know, we say dug in. Well hell! I never dug a foxhole in my life! I just wouldn't do it! I only dug shallow, long, slit trenches, and they were not too deep either. That was when I learned that perhaps I would be better off if I dug the hole like we had been trained to do! So it was 6 AM and they said we were to start moving out. I had just started to get out of my slit trench when a Kraut shall came in. It was an '88'. You got little or no warning with them. They came so fast you couldn't hear them coming. And that is when Jim Pratt's luck ran out! They got me! I picked up a bunch of shrapnel. I got hit more or less all over. It broke the large bone in my lower leg and put little pieces [of shrapnel] all up and down my body. My right leg, face and both legs. Those were kind of minor compared to the broken leg. It hurt! Well, then they loaded me up in some old LST or such and back to England. It was a British ship. I was in the hospital there for a while and they finally put a walking cast on me. What a hospital that turned out to be! They said, "Well, as long as you can walk, all you guys walking can go on KP now." Well, I gave them such a hard time about all that, that they shipped me out to, back to, oh what the heck did they call that outfit? Oh yeah, a 'rehabilitation center', to get me back in shape.

So I'm there and y'know, I don't recall where the first hospital was. The 'rehab' was a decent set up. I can't recall the town it was near. We were just outside the town. So I finally got the walking cast off. My wounds were pretty well healed over and they put me through four stages, D-C-B-A. And once you got in 'A' stage, you got shipped back to your outfit.

Well, the second week I was [in the hospital] they came up with, "Anyone who gets the Purple Heart gets", well, they were handing them out and that was to be this Saturday. So we were, there were 8 of us, so this Colonel is coming along handing them out. He kept asking what the guys wanted and he says if there was anything anyone of us wanted he would try real hard to get it for us. Well, this one guy he asked said, "I just want to get out of this Army!" He said, "I am 39 years old and I want to get out!"

Well, the Colonel had this Lt. with him and he told him to see what he could do. So then he asks if there was anything he could do for me. I said, "Well, I would like a three-day pass to go back to my outfit." He took my name down and by God, about three weeks later I got me the three-day pass. I hopped on the train and went back to the 508th HQ area at Nottingham. The second day I am there some guy comes down with measles!

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So they told me I had to be quarantined with the rest for another three days. So I got an extra three days! Well that was ok with me. I was there five or six days in all.

When I reported back to the 'rehab' hospital there was a real chicken 2nd Lt there and he was set to really ream me out! I was AWOL and all that! Well, I had a slip from a Warrant Officer in the 508th HQ that told about the quarantine, and of course that really saved my butt! Anyway I was there from, till, the 17th of September. I will never forget that.

We were goofing around outside the wards and all at once here comes this unearthly roaring. We looked up and there was the 'sky train' for the Holland invasion going over. It seemed to go on forever. Thousands of planes, gliders. That was the beginning of 'Market Garden'. Well I thought on all that and finally couldn't stand it any longer. Like an old fire horse, I had to get back to the guys and all. So I went to the doc and told him there is really nothing wrong with me, and so he turned me loose and sent me back to the 508th HQ. They still didn't send me to Holland. I did duty around the HQ area till they finally shipped the HQ back to Sissonne, France, the new Division Base HQ.

We had a lot of new replacements. We trained these guys and did general stuff around. Then we were there until the 'Bulge' hit. A little thing we did while goofing around there, some of us went down to Regiment Supply and swiped a couple of bandoleers of ammo for M-1s and we went rabbit hunting. Poor rabbits. By God we got eight rabbits!

We started back for camp and this one guy could speak French. We found this little tavern there out in the middle of nowhere. We talked it over with the owner and we swapped seven of the rabbits for all the booze we could drink. We went back, still had one rabbit. Luck was with us and a 6x6 came by and gave us a lift back to camp.

We put that rabbit on the pot bellied stove and cooked that bugger. I don't know who ever ate it. We were all so blasted with booze that we didn't know anything and were trying to sleep it off. Well, passed out is more like it.

About midnight they came in hollering, "Off your butts. The Krauts have broken through the lines up in Belgium and we are on the trucks at 9 AM." Well, they packed us like sardines on cattle trucks. All of us, standing up, no room to sit or lay down. December 17th, '44. We were on those trucks, no tops or sides with no cover. I don't know how many hours we were in those trucks.

Finally everyone was slopped down, laying on top of each other, beat out. No one could care less. We were freezing our asses off! It seemed to go on forever. We didn't have any real winter clothing at all.

I don't recall even to this day where they dumped us. All I know is our mission was to protect the highway and keep the Krauts from moving on the road from St. Vith and Houfflieze, and we saw a lot of action there. It was cold and the snow was a white Hell. Plenty of frost bitten feet and still no winter clothing. Jump boots aren't too good for cold weather, at least not below zero, day and night.

In spite of all that qualifying on all those infantry weapons back in training, I still had the old M-1. I got to use it a lot. I don't recall the specifics, we got into it with the Krauts a lot and eliminated as many as we could. Some of us got through it. We had so many replacements by then that we were, Hell, there were only about four of us left in the platoon that I went overseas with. Then there were only two and I was one! There had been, well, two besides myself Evans, Roseberry and Pratt!

That's the way it wound up. Everyone had either been killed, wounded or captured, or frostbit! Oh Jesus! There was a lot of that! There was a lot of that! I can't

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remember the specific fights too well, it was continuous. Just that when they attacked us we fought like Hell and did what we had to do.

The only time we ever had to 'back off' was when there was 'leg' infantry divisions to each side of us, and when the Krauts drove them way back on both sides and left us sticking out there with our bare asses hanging out unprotected. Hell, I remember THAT all right!

They told us the 2nd Battalion would be moving back and our platoon would stay and cover the pullout. That was Lt. Hall it was. So there we were, totally alone, with what was left of a platoon. And there wasn't much by then. They said, "Hold for three hours and then you guys pull back. Try then to catch up with us." We had only 12 or 14 guys by then and we were supposed to cover the butts of the whole battalion's line.

Well, we lucked out on that deal. The reason I say that is that we all made it back! I guess the Krauts were so busy mopping up around the sides and trying to figure out where the battalion had gone, that they neglected the frontal pursuit and all and missed us. So we got out too! That was the only ground the outfit ever had to give up! We didn't run into any opposition as we backed off, so it was a good day in spite of all that. Then we had to turn around the next day or so and take the same damn landscape again.

So that went on until 29 Jan. '45 when we went out and ran across this little town. Boy, we really ran into it there! This one guy, Smitty was his name, he was wounded and laying out there about 30 or 40 yards to our front. I never really thought about it. I just had to get out there and get him back in. So I crawled out there in good infantry style on my belly in the snow and mud and started to pull him in. I was bringing him along and some Kraut was hid in like a hedgerow there, and he started firing his 'Schmeiser' machine pistol, burp gun, at me. And he got me! Right through the chest! Oddly enough it was only one round. Generally with the Schmeiser if you got it with one you got six or eight. It was that fast. So I was lucky at that! Surgeons later told me it was 1/8th inch from my heart. Well, about five guys all opened up on the guy in the hedgerow. That was all for him. But it was too late for Jim Pratt. That was the end of the war for old Jim! That really hurt. I had been laying and dragging this guy and so it didn't knock me down. I was already down. When these Krauts are out there about 600 yards and still firing on us, well then this guy popped off at me from the hedges and so I rolled up on one side to tell the guys to cover me and get that guy in the hedges. Well, that was my mistake. It exposed me sideways and my chest was easier to see. So he popped me right there. When they say, keep you head down, it's good advice. You live a lot longer.

Anyway, there I was out in the snow, all bloody. They picked us up and put us in an old barn, but there was no roof on the barn. They covered me with an old blanket. It was snowing like Hell. I'll never forget, this guy says, "Hey, is Pratt dead yet?" It made me mad and I said "No! You SOB! Pratt ain't dead yet!" Boy it got awful quiet. I finally remember I was in the 'meat wagon' ambulance, someplace, and they took me back to the hospital. They took me to Paris, to La Visonet? That was a great outfit. They really took great care of us there. Ten miles outside Paris.

So there I was and about the middle of May, from December yet! Well, that nurse, they told us we could go to Paris. No booze, no women, no nothing! Just take in the sights and take it easy. They gave us a pass to go then that wonderful nurse, geez, I'll never forget her. Marie something, I know it was Marie. She was an American, but she was French. Marie, from Maine or so. Lt. Mashaw. (*Ed note: Phonetic spelling due to a lack of French on Jim's part.*) Christ, I can't spell it. But she was American. After the doc got out of there she came over and said, "Hey. Jim, here is a quart of Scotch for you

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guys. Have a good time. You are safe enough.” I had had a lot of surgery to get the punctured lung fixed and all that. They took out two ribs. They didn’t grow back yet!

So they sent me to some bakery outfit. I couldn’t go back to the 508’. It was in ‘services or supply’. Well, those guys had a great war. They really knew how to work the system and how to live.

The first morning I got there, I got up, they said to go on in and get breakfast. Well there was this cook, Touchirelli was his name, he said, “What did I want for breakfast?” Well, I wasn’t used to that. No one ever asked you what you wanted to eat. Well, I got anything I wanted. Cereal, bacon, eggs, all that stuff to order! I first thought he was a wise guy so I said, “OK, give me three or four eggs and bacon.” Damned if he didn’t go and do it!

Well these outfits were set up in big ration dumps. And this stuff would come through in separately wrapped shipments for the higher officers, etc. Hams, steaks, pork chops, fresh eggs, what a setup that was. And we could get everything right off the top. And did.

So that is the way I spent the rest of my time until September ‘45. Then they shipped me home. That was really great. Oddly enough I came back to where I left from. Camp Kilmer, NJ, USA! A great day! I wasn’t six barracks away from where I went in at!

That did it for old Jim Pratt. I got out the 1st of October ‘45. I decided I had to do something in life. I thought there were no jobs that paid over 20 bucks a week and a vet could get that on the ‘52/20 club’. I decided to get into college and learn something. I had seen enough ignorance and waste and such in the war and wanted to do something better.

A guy had told me many years ago, “You can either work with your back or your head, so make it easy on yourself, use your head. Make it easy on yourself.”

So that is the WWII history of old Jim Pratt..

(Ed note: There is a hell of a lot this reluctant hero doesn’t say in here. It is strange that, overall, these guys who did such fantastic things and endured so much that was so horrible, seem to relegate it to ‘just doing what had to be done, nothing so special’. Maybe that is why they are so special. They have all set another set of traditional behaviors that our young troopers will have to live up to! Present generations are being cheated by the educational/cultural degenerations of their birthright., in not being exposed to this history. I guess we of WWII generation had the advantage of knowing the history of the sacrifices of our forefathers to draw upon, when we were badly needed to protect, not only our country, but the entire world.)

Source: South Central Library System, Madison WI (www.scls.lib.wi.us)