

PFC Orren Worth Billington (1922-1944)

A name on a cross. A serial number on a piece of paper. That is unfortunately all the evidence that most of us see of the lives of those who have fought and died for the freedoms we enjoy. We grow comfortable, and sleepy, in our freedoms. It is, as Merlin said famously in the film *Excalibur*, "the doom of men that they forget."

It is the declared lifelong pursuit of Kevin Boldt, director of Roll Call of Fort Worth, Texas, to fight this sleepiness; this doom of man to forget. A few years ago, he worked to document those from Texas who were killed in action in the Second World War. Moving beyond that, it is his and Roll Call's goal to bring life to those who fell in defense of country and the freedoms it works tirelessly to uphold; to add flesh to the bones that rest in the ground of Mount Olivet Cemetery in Fort Worth, or in the fine sands of the Normandy coast.

One such soul is Private First Class Orren Worth Billington. He was born August 23, 1922, the third child of Marshall R. and Lily W. Armstrong Billington. Marshall was a machinist, the son of Elgin Riley Billington and Mary Parilee Moseley. Lily W. Armstrong was the daughter of Nancy Jane Franklin and Oren Worth Armstrong, after whom Orren Worth Billington was named. The younger Orren attended Paschal High School in Fort Worth, then worked as a machinist, following in the



footsteps of his father, although his enlistment papers of October 1942 show his profession as "Semiskilled warehousing, storekeeping, handling, loading, unloading and related occupations." He was fairly tall for the time, standing 5 feet 9 inches tall, and weighing 150 pounds. He was single and without dependents at the time of his enlistment.

Orren enlisted 12 October 1942 in Dallas, Texas, and was assigned to Company F of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR). The 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment was activated at Camp Blanding, Florida in 1942 under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Roy E. Lindquist. Colonel Lindquist remained in command of and led the regiment in combat throughout the hostilities in Europe and relinquished command of the regiment to Lieutenant Colonel Otho E. Holmes in December, 1945.

The regiment organized and conducted basic training at Camp Blanding until it was relocated to Fort Benning, GA on February 5, 1943. Basic airborne training commenced immediately and the regiment successfully completed this phase of its training. Billington enjoyed ten days furlough from 9 March to 19 March, 1943, thereafter moving on to Camp Mackall, NC where the regiment closed into its new home on March 25. From that period of time until December 19, 1943, the regiment conducted advanced and specialized training as well as spending six weeks on the famous Tennessee maneuvers, that time being interrupted with another furlough from August 8 through August 18. On November 16, 1943, General Order 58 awarded PFC Billington with a Good Conduct Medal for completing one year of service (one year was the requirement in times of war; three years otherwise) for "exemplary behavior, efficiency and fidelity in active service" that distinguishes him from among his fellow soldiers. At that time he was promoted from Private to Private First Class.

Camp Shanks, NY was the next and shortest stop (December 20 - 29, 1943) for the Red Devils. On December 29, the regiment boarded the US Army ship James Parker bound for northern Ireland. After

an uneventful crossing of the Atlantic, the James Parker docked at Belfast, Ireland on January 8, 1944.

After a short two month stay in Ireland, the regiment was once again on the move, this time to England and what was to become their home base and rear detachment until the cessation of hostilities in Europe. The regiment closed on Wollaton Park located on the outskirts of Nottingham, England on March 13, 1944. The regiment set up housekeeping and commenced training for what they knew would be their part in the invasion of Europe. Hard field training, parachute jumps and live fire exercises kept the Red Devils busy. Even so, there was time to visit the city of Nottingham and its citizens. The troopers of the 508th were warmly welcomed by the citizens of Nottingham and many warm and lasting friendships were established which remain in effect today. Many troopers still remember their visits to the Heart and Hand, the Jolly Higglers and The Admiral Rodney Pubs with fondness.

On May 29, the troopers were informed by their respective commanders that the invasion was imminent and the camp was sealed. Subsequently, the regiment was moved to three departure airfields, one of which was Folkingham. There the troopers were issued the necessary gear and detailed planning commenced to insure that all concerned knew their DZ, objectives, password and the many other factors involved in such an undertaking. Finally, on the evening of June 5, the regiment embarked on the invasion of Europe and initial elements landed on French soil at 0215 hours June 6, 1944.

In general, the mission of the 82nd, of which the 508th was part, was to drop astride the Merderet River, clear the western portion of the beachhead area between the sea and the Merderet from the Douve River north to Ste. Mere-Eglise, and establish a bridgehead on the west bank of the Merderet. The 505th was to capture Ste. Mere-Eglise, secure the crossings of the Merderet near laFiere and Chef-du-Pont, and establish a defensive line north from Neuville-au-Plain to Breuzeville-au-Plain to tie in with the 502d Parachute Infantry of the 101st Airborne Division. The 507th and 508th, dropping west of the river, were to consolidate the two 505th bridgeheads and push out a defensive line about three miles westward, anchored on the south at the crossroads just west of Pont l'Abbe and thence extending north in an arc through Beauvais. Both regiments would be prepared to attack west on order.

Both the 507th and 508th were widely scattered over the Normandy countryside and were unable to muster their forces in strength in order to occupy the west bank of the river in force. The drop zones lay in the triangle at the confluence of the Douve and Merderet Rivers - an area of about twelve square miles, and along the outer perimeter of the VII Corps planned beachhead. The presence of the enemy in the scheduled drop zones prevented the pathfinders from marking them, and the pilots of the two regimental serials, looking in vain for the markers, in most cases delayed flashing the jump lights until they had overshot the zones. Dropped in the swamp lands along the river the heavily laden troopers were absorbed with the basic problem of assembling and tended to collect along the embankment of the main railroad from Cherbourg to Carentan, both because it was high ground and because it was a recognizable terrain feature. Gathering in small groups the troopers continued to fight.

Perhaps the most significant action involving a number of Red Devils occurred at Hill 30. Elements of the 508th, amounting to about two companies of men under the command of LTC Thomas J. B. Shanley, commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, were the most important of at least four groups of paratroopers who assembled west of the Merderet, but who for the most part, being forced to fight for survival, could contribute little toward carrying out planned missions. Dropped near Picauville, LTC Shanley gathered a small force of troopers - too small to proceed with his mission of destroying the Douve bridge at Pont l'Abbe. He tried during the day to join other groups in the vicinity with whom he had radio contact, but under constant enemy pressure he was unable to effect a junction until late in the day. It had then become apparent to him that he was engaged with an enemy force of at least battalion strength, and he decided to withdraw to the battalion assembly area on Hill 30. In fact, the Germans, elements of the 1057th Regiment, had been pushing eastward in this area most of the day under orders to counterattack in order to wipe out American parachutists west of the Merderet. Once he was firmly established on Hill 30, he formed a valuable outpost against continuing German attacks and a few days

later would be in position to contribute substantially to establishing the Merderet bridgehead. For LTC Shanley's success three enlisted men have received a large share of the credit. They were CPL Ernest T. Roberts, PVT Otto K. Zwingman, and PVT John A. Lockwood who, while on outpost duty in a building at Haut Gueutteville, observed the forming of a German counterattack by an estimated battalion of infantry with tank support. They stayed at their posts holding off the enemy attack for two hours and allowing the main body of Shanley's force to establish an all-around defense at Hill 30.

The 508th continued to regroup and consolidate and remained in contact with German forces until relieved on July 7 when they became the division reserve force. On July 13, they were transported back to England via two LST's and returned to their station at Wollaton Park. Of the 2056 troops who participated in the D-Day landings, only 995 returned. The regiment suffered 1061 casualties, of which 307 were killed in action.



Among the 307 killed in action was PFC Orren Worth Billington, who died that first day, June 6, 1944. He is buried in the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial, Colleville-sur-Mer, Departement du Calvados, Basse-Normandie, France, in Plot H, Row 2, Grave 39.

History of the 508th taken verbatim from the website of the 508th Airborne Chapter, 82nd Airborne Division Association, Inc. http://www.red-devils.org/regthist/abn_1951.shtml, except to insert items specific to PFC Billington.

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