



17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division post-dissoluion Newsletter

## THUNDER MAIL CALL

([Sprenger Edition](#))

Edited by: Bill Tom  
154 Stanford Hts Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94127-2349  
email = [kn6qd@arrL.net](mailto:kn6qd@arrL.net)

This newsletter was sent from [kn6qd@arrl.net](mailto:kn6qd@arrl.net) or from [thundermailcall@gmail.com](mailto:thundermailcall@gmail.com)

Our Website is <http://groups.google.com/group/17th-airborne-division> (currently under reconstruction).

Date: May 2008 'til the end of me ----- '

\*\*\*\*\*

**SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT --- A parallelism in battles.**

**Operation Varsity**, in which the U.S. 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division and the British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division jointly participated in the invasion of Germany across the Rhine River, was the most deadly of all the airborne operations in World War II. While Operation Overlord was related to the invasion of German-occupied France at Normandy, Operation Varsity was the actual invasion that led to the defeat of Germany itself when the Germans were actually defending their own soil, der Vaterland! It was like sticking our nose into a hornet's nest. Operation Varsity was the costliest of all our airborne battles, yet, it was hardly mentioned in our history books. Thus, the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne became the 'unknown airborne division' in America to the great disappointment of its members.

I think I know the reason for that.

Coincidentally, about 91 years earlier in 1854, there was another battle of similar disastrous import that had happened in the Crimean War when England was fighting Russia while Russia was attempting to take Istanbul

to gain an all-weather port. All of their other ports were frozen and unusable every winter. A British brigade consisting of the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers and the 13<sup>th</sup> Dragoons were lined up in battle formation.. An order was given for the brigade to attack a fortified position of Russian Artillery (re: Germans at Wesel). True to the nature of the British can-do spirit, they mounted that famous “Charge of the Light Brigade” into the Russian position in which the England suffered 35% KIA and many hundreds wounded. England eventually won that war. Ninety-one years later, a similar battle took place at the Rhine River in Germany with about the same results.

First, the US 13<sup>th</sup> Airborne (vs: British 13<sup>th</sup> Dragoons) and the US 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne (vs: British 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers) were to have been involved. The 13<sup>th</sup> US Airborne was withheld due to the lack of planes and gliders, but the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne was definitely committed.

In 1945, the German Army had fortified, with anti-aircraft artillery, augmented by machine guns, the perimeters of each drop and landing zones, much like the Russians did in Crimea. Instead of horses, we used planes and gliders. The Germans knew we were coming, as the Russians had known the British were coming.

At 10 AM of 24 March 1945, a mass charge of the lightly-armed airborne troopers begun. Many planes were on fire and the multiple gliders were crashing, but our airborne troopers broke through the Germany defenses and won the day as did the Charge of the Light Brigade. We lost a lot of planes and gliders, while the English in Crimea lost plenty of horses, and both had lost a lot of men – good brave young men, indeed!

Operation Varsity suffered terrible casualties because the Germans were alerted to the upcoming attack, as the Russians were during the Crimean War. The Russians could have seen the British cavalry lined up in attack formation. The Germans were tipped off as to when and where our airborne troops were to have landed. Axis Sally had broadcast on Radio Berlin to tell our paratroopers they won't need parachutes because they would be able to walk down on the umbrella of flaks sent up to greet them. They had fortified the various drop and landing zones with anti-aircraft artillery weapons. And the battle went on, and we lost many planes, many gliders and many troopers and pilots, but not much was ever said about it in our history books!

**Gene Sprenger** of the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Headquarters had proof that someone had leaked our Varsity plans to the Germans many days before. The Charge of the Light Airborne Infantry was a duplication of the Charge of the Light Brigade where so many brave men had to die so very young..

Indeed, there were 26,000 feet of movie film documentations of Operation Varsity taken by our news and combat photographers, but every inch of those films had been tagged 'Top Secret' by our War Department to protect someone's butt. It was a cover-up, but for whom? Perhaps it was far easier than trying to explain to the parents why so many of their sons had to die because of the laxity of security. We suffered over a thousand killed in that attack and more thousand wounded, while the Light Brigade lost 247 killed out of 673.ninety-one years earlier.

Eugene Sprenger verified that the Operation Varsity Plan had been leaked to the Germans, but he was not able to discover the source. Our troopers, Sedlacko and Tsuchiya, had heard P-38 reconnaissance pilots saying that they saw Germans moving anti-aircraft artillery and other weapons into the area surrounding the drop and landing zones. Our Generals knew it and General Simpson, US 9<sup>th</sup> Army Commander, opposed the Operation Varsity drops for that reason, but British General Montgomery insisted on it because he had the wider part of the Rhine to cross, with a forest on the opposite shore that might have heavy artillery concealed in place. Perhaps that was the reason why General Miley ordered the parachute drop at 400 feet so as to lessen the effects of flaks on the paratroopers coming down. The 17th Airborne and the British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne suffered a terrible time, as terrible as the British Light Brigade had suffered in the Crimea. General Gavin, who observed Operation Varsity from a B-17 bomber flying at a higher altitude said, "It was a terrible waste of planes, gliders and valiant men, but it was a good lesson well-learned." Apparently, the lesson was to not use gliders anymore. Helicopters were safer?

# EUGENE SPRENGER

**Eugene Sprenger (17<sup>th</sup>-DIV-HQ)** passed away on 23 June 2007 at age 91. I had a personal interview with him at one of our reunions. He was the Intelligence Officer at our Headquarters. He was the one who had told me that someone at our Headquarters had leaked our Operation Varsity plans to the Germans prior to the landing on 24 March 1945.



He cited the following biography of his army service in World War II. He was drafted in June 1940 to serve a year of active duty. He reported at Camp Upton in Long Island, NY. Then came Pearl Harbor. He was one of the 500 recruits sent to Fort Bragg, NC, for basic training in Field Artillery and was dumped into the sand hills and pine trees in the area known as "The Lost Battalion", a camp of tents. He was assigned to a tank destroyer unit using the new M-10 Tank Destroyers, fielding a 3-inch (75mm) gun. Sprenger was deployed to England in May 1944 to later land on Utah Beach on D-Day to join the 325<sup>th</sup> Glider Infantry at St.

Mere Eglise, later reassigned to the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry and went all the way to the Metz area. While patrolling in the village of Gravenmacher, Sprenger was wounded and fortuitously two medics found him and provided him with medical care. However, he still has shrapnel pieces embedded in his upper right leg and chest. He eventually ended up in Paris in the chain of medical evacuation. He was later reassigned to Military Intelligence, by fact that he spoke fluent German, since he had immigrated to the U.S. only five years before. He arrived at Chalons sur Marne at the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Headquarters to receive glider training. He was kept under tight secrecy and was briefed in the plans of Operation Varsity. On the

morning of 24 March 1945, he was awakened at 4 AM and offered a steak and egg breakfast. The upcoming drop into Germany was supposed to surprise the Germans, but the Germans surprised us instead.

*After the war, he was interviewing captured German Generals at a prisoner of war camp. German General der Panzer Truppen Freiherr Heinrich von Luttwitz, Commander of the German 57<sup>th</sup> Panzer Corps walked up to Sprenger and pointed to his Talon shoulder patch, asking, "You are with the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division? Have you been to Wesel? Were you surprised? He then laughed saying that his Intelligence unit worked wonders and he knew the day, month and hour of the landing.*

Indeed, the landing was successful, but we paid heavily in equipment and the loss of so many good troopers and pilots. Someone had leaked our secret plan to our enemy! To date, no one knew who!

Sprenger spent 3 years after the war in Germany to be near to his parents and relatives, and to marry his wife and returned to the states in 1948. They have two daughters and several granddaughters. He was almost 90 years old at this writing, but he was having serious health problems, spending much time in hospitals. He thanks God every morning when he woke up and able to get out of bed. Sprenger assured me that someone had leaked our Operation Varsity plans to the Germans, but he had no idea who did it, since General von Luttwitz refused to tell the source of his intelligence.

*(This biography was verified as being true by Bill Tom who met Sprenger at one of our reunions. Bill had also treated the wounds suffered by German soldiers. Two of them told him that they knew when and where we were landing, except one of them thought it was at 10 PM, rather than in the morning. He thought it was suicide to come in broad daylight.*

f

*COMMENT: I am sorry to learn of Gene's passing. Eugene and I had a wonderful meeting at one of our reunions. Unfortunately, much of our nation's history was made from the sacrifice and the death of our military men, young and old. That is part of our destiny to experience until we slowly mutate to more peaceful ways. Perhaps God designed our lives with initial violence to ensure the survival of the fittest, to eventually repopulate our world with wiser and sturdier people to slowly learn how to live in a future of peaceful means.*

*At the Final Reunion in Hampton, VA, I had a conference with Harold Tsuchiya and Cyril Sedlacko to reconfirm their story about the reconnaissance reports of our P-38 pilots. The pilots did report the German were fortifying the various drop zones and landing zones. Therefore, the officers in charge of planning the invasion were alerted to that fact.*



A consultation meeting at the Final Reunion with Harold Tsuchiya, Cyril Sedlacko, both of 513-HQ, to firm up the story of the leakage of our Operation Varsity plans to the Germans.

The full story of the debacle at Wesel, Germany, will be revealed in year 2015 when the “Top Secret” status of Operation Varsity is lifted under the 70-years rule. We, and our parents, will all be gone by then, but our grandchildren might get to read about it in their history class in college to finally have pride in their old grandpa’s mighty effort in that ancient World War II. Someone might make a movie of it some day, titled, “The Great War Deception”, with actors playing the roles of Tsuchiya and Sedlacko and a multitudes of men playing our roles.

## ***Mail Call***

**Gene Howard, 155**, writes to Joe Quade: I think of you often with deep appreciation for the service you have rendered to the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne. The few of us that are left standing have a heritage beyond compare. How many of our people had stood eyeball to eyeball with a formidable enemy and brought home the unconditional victory.



I am teaching a couple of classes of 30 students of master gardeners interns. I am enclosing a poem I had composed.

*REPLY: Gene. our new format for this email version of Mail Call is to devote our pages to actual biography of the few of us left, plus sick call, and obituaries, since we do not now have the resources for a full-schedule newsletter. Thank you.*

**Joe Campagna**, submitted two photos of an airborne statue erected in Omaha, Nebraska. There was no indication as to who had proposed that project, but we credit that very nice memorial as a dream of Joe and Pauline Campagna that came to life. The statue itself is a bronze paratrooper at the door ready to jump into the fight.



*Joe at the Statue and Pauline is making sure which division she favors.*

**(There was to have been a re-run message from Clifford East's daughter, Sandi Davis, to include photos, which never arrived. Cliff East was killed at Operation Varsity, before Sandi was born.)**

20 Mar 08: **Cenda Brzek, honorary-cz**, email =<cenda101@gmail.com>  
Subject: **Pfc. Gerald C. Reed**

*We have one more request on You. In the last days we have adopted the grave of Pfc. Gerald C. Reed, 507th PIR, 17th AB Division, Personal Number : 37482229.*

*The grave is in Holland, in the town of Margraten and we will try to take care of him and to honor the trooper as good as we can.*

*But we are missing more information about the trooper and on the Internet we couldn't find any, so we are asking You to look in Your database and if You find some more Info about this trooper, we would appreciate that. Or if You could post a note in Your newsletter, so anybody who knows more about this trooper could give You or us some info.*

*I have sent the same e-mail to Del Townsend, but he is probably very busy, so if You find some time, I would appreciate every info.*

*Thank You in advance, best regards, Cenda Brzek*

NOTE: Information about Gerald Reed could be sent directly to Cenda's email or to me at my email or postal addresses.

**Patti Highfill, wife of deceased Bill Highfill, 17th HQ** writes, *Bill, I hope*



*you are doing well...and what can I say about the last hurrah for the 17th and their publication...only that it has been one of the most wonderful associations I could possibly have ever thought about...all of you, those friends from Europe...those friends from reunions ( like you Bill and your lovely wife)) how important to me...thank you for letting me a part of this wonderful association...the 17th is always with me in spirit...thanks for*

*allowing that to happen...much love and caring to all...*

Comment: *Bill Highfill, passed away very suddenly without previous medical problems, shortly after returning home from the final reunion.*





*Norvel Lucas, 513-B, in an entourage of such beautiful people to greet and welcome his visit at Margraten Cemetery.*

*The home of **Irma Rohler** was a medical aid station for the 194<sup>th</sup> Regiment during the Bulge. Her home was home sweet home for many of our wounded freezing troopers once upon a time. Irma is holding a photo of me as an honorable memento of another time of her young life when her home had served such great urgent needs in the battle for her freedom.*



*NOTE: The net effect of our participation was the eventual creation of the European Union, such that neighbors no longer need to invade each other's country every generation or two. So far, we have gained the friendship of those who had been so salvaged, and had gained several plots of land to bury those of our troops who had never returned home.*

***Down memory lane with 193<sup>rd</sup> Reunion of May 1989.***



*L-R: Bud Boyer, Jim Rhoads, Irvin Youngblut, ?, Shiky, Hermann  
Others were: Dubsky, Brand, Marczyk, McFadden, Taylor, Cavanah,  
Not shown were Morris, Krause, Kreuzer, Barnett,,Summers, Rhoads,  
Aytes,Heckner, Strandlund, Campagna, Smith, Smyth, Jackson, Pyle.  
The active roster for the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne, including honorary members and  
widows is roughly 2,000 as of March 2008. Of that number only. 12%  
have access to an email address.*

***From: "Diane Fortier" <gdefortier@cox.net>***

*30 Apr 08: To Dominic T Biello, Thanks for replying to my question.*



*Here is my dad's picture. Dad was **PFC Raymond Fortier (194-I)**. He was wounded on March 28, 1945. He died in 1968 so I never ask him how he got wounded but it was the same time Sgt Hedrick got killed in taken Lembeck Castle and they were in the same company so I could assume it must of been in the same action.*

*Sincerely, Gary Fortier*

*NOTE: The original letter was not forwarded to me, but I assumed it was a search for information about Ray Fortier. Ray Fortier might have been wounded at the same time when Sergeant Clint Hedrik was wounded at the Lembeck Castle. Hedrik died of his wounds, but*

*he was to earn the Medal of Honor posthumously. Could anyone from 194-I clarify this situation?*



1 Apr 08: **Lora Jacobs**, 127 Palm Drive, Barrington, IL 60010.

My grandfather was **Martin Engelsman (513-E)** who passed away in 1990. I'm not sure of his platoon. I think I was able to find him in the photos you printed in your response to me. I used to attend the reunions



Picture: 1st PLATOON E. COMPANY PLUS THEIR MORTAR SQUAD  
Lisenbee, Wounded in Action; Heriford, Wounded in Action; Preston, Wounded in Action; Stryker, Wounded in Action, Killed in Action; Parton, Killed in Action; S/Sgt Haynes, Wounded in Action; Kessler, Wounded in Action; Jones, Wounded in Action, Middle — Edwards, Wounded in Action; Rosen, twice Wounded in Action; Maley, Wounded in Action, Killed in Action; Scott, Wounded in Action; Sgt Crapps, Wounded in Action; Front — Demko, Wounded in Action; Chander, Wounded in Action; Veluscius; Burt, Wounded in Action, Killed in Action.

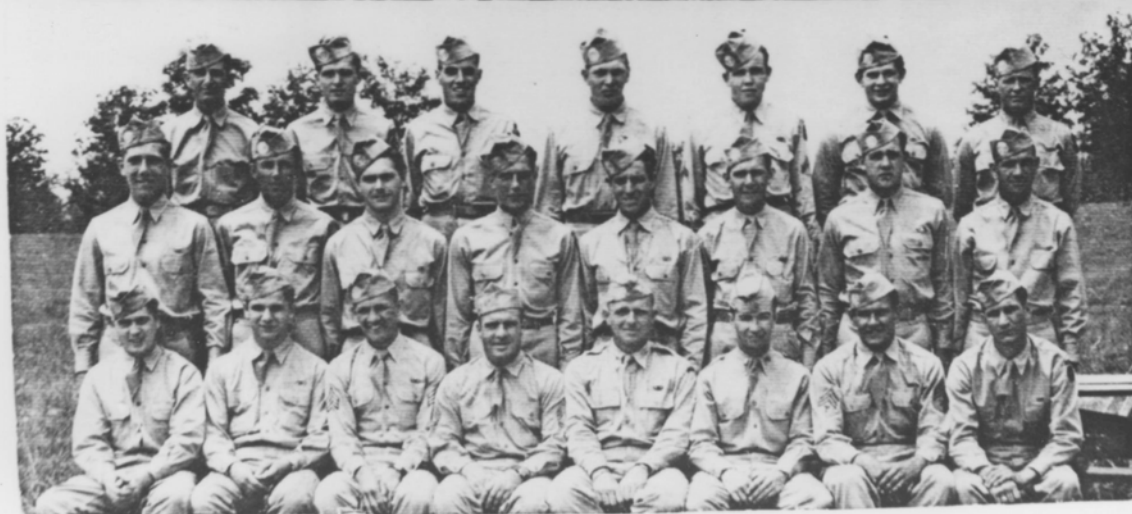
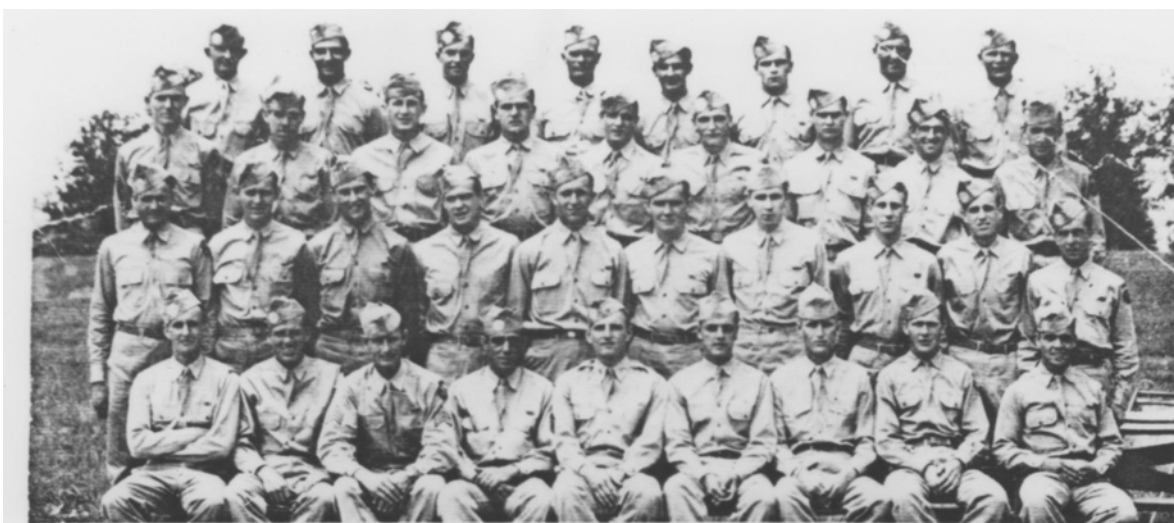
with my grandparents in the late 70's early 80's. I know some of his platoon buddies were Frank Lis, Andy D'Ambra, Reb Rainer, Heriford, Hanes, John Scott and many others. Any information, photos, or fun stories that anyone has to share would be interesting to hear. I would love to hear from any of the children of these men that I hung out with at these reunions. As a pre-teen/teenager attending those reunions I had no

idea what a privilege it was and what history I was in the middle of. I never heard any first hand accounts from my grandfather about his experiences in the war. I now have regrets that I never took the opportunity to learn more. I can be contacted at this e-mail LoraViers67@yahoo.com or by mail at: 127 Palm Drive, Barrington, IL 60010

I was surprised to hear back as I assumed your organization has long been dissolved. Can you lead me to a source where I could find out some information about the specifics of his company and his particular involvements. I do have his dog tags. I found one undated photo on the internet of his company but he was not included. Perhaps it was before he was assigned to the company. I did recognize a few of the guys names. Any information you can send me would be appreciated.

Thank you again,

*Note: I attach a photo of 513-E, the format indicated that it was probably taken before going overseas. If grandpa had trained with the 513-E, he should be among those pictured. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon photo above, every trooper, except one, was either wounded or killed. In another month, check my Website (Chapter 9-Biography-part 1) to read Buck McKendrick's detailed actions of the 513<sup>th</sup>. Website (currently rebuilding)= <http://groups.google.com/group/17th-airborne-division>*



*The three platoons of 513-E Company, with First Platoon on top.*

7 Apr 08: **Lou Zoghby**, <Sir.Zog@comcast.net>

Bill, You are to be thanked for keeping the spirit of the 17th Airborne



going. There are still many of us still active and we should try our best to help you. At the LAST reunion in October, four troopers met for the first time in 62 years. You were kind enough to take a picture of us. I have attached a picture. From left to right - Lou Zoghby, Ray Palmer,

Hawley Smith and Bob Krieger.

We were all in F Company, 194th. We have agreed to try to meet each year and have tentative plans to meet in September perhaps in Chicago. Keep up the great work. the best to you, from Lou Zoghby

REPLY: Thank you for your encouragement. Doing up a newsletter is quite a bit more work than I had figured. I now admire Joe Quade even more for what he had done for 45 years doing TFH. Merging photos, without proper software, into the text on the computer turned out to be more complicated than what I thought, but it does give the text more meaning.

From: Michele Smith <micheles@reinardinsurance.com>

Subject: THUNDER MAIL CALL

Good Morning Bill, You did a BEAUTIFUL job (more like a feat I'm sure)



on the newsletter!!!!!!! I printed it out late last night and even on my ancient printer, the pictures came out great. I know my Dad and Mom wait anxiously to receive it. I'll be making some copies for a few of the troopers I know do not have email (I've stressed to them to at least get their children or grandchildren to sign up and hopefully they have done so - when they see what you have accomplished with this newsletter I'm sure they'll do so!) Thanks for a job PERFECTLY done! Hope you are well and my best to Linda! Love, Michele



REPLY: I thank you and Rose for doing such a good job at our reunion registration desk, and for the bag of survival rations you had prepared for me.

PS: **Bill Smith's 2008 17th Airborne Varsity reunion** party is finally set for Sunday 6/8/08 - 6/11/08! enjoy four (4) days and three (3) nights at the Oeanfront Golden Inn located in beautiful Avalon/Stone Harbor, New Jersey.no doubt some of us will extend our stay during this delightful summer time of the year. The rates are \$521.00 for double occupancy and \$411.00 for single occupancy. This includes three (3) breakfasts and two (2) dinners per person and all taxes and gratuities! (incidentally, during this period i contacted the Taj Mahal and a couple of other hotels including Valley Forge where we held our big reunion and their costs far exceeded the great deal the Golden Inn is offering us.)

The big problem: the Golden Inn is the region's most popular hotel all year round and many of the rooms are already reserved so - it is extremely important and urgent that you call me (Bill Smith) immediately at (610) 649-9850 to let me know if you will be attending.the Golden Inn has been quite gracious in once again reserving a limited number of rooms for the 17th. This very popular hotel will be booked solid with no room for us unless we act fast, so please respond to me right away. Call your buddies who do not have email and have them join us. You will not be disappointed - This is a terrific way to enjoy gathering with your old friends in a beautiful vacation setting. Airborne All The Way! Bill Smith, 610-649-9850

Charles M. Beckwith, Jr, <17thairborne@sc.rr.com>

Subject: Fw: The first Newsletter, titled "Thunder Mail Call"

Hello, Bill! Thank you so very much for your first Newsletter ... it was very interesting, informative, and the pictures very clear. We were able to read it in its entirety; and saved a copy in 'My Documents' until it can be copied to a CD (we have yet to learn how to do that).



Thank you for all you have done over the years to hold the 17th Airborne families together ... and your devotion to continuing to disseminate information after the Final Reunion. We greatly appreciate your efforts; and will look forward to each future issue.

Also, thank your children for the wonderful job they did in taking and displaying photos of all the attendees at the October Reunion ... they were superb! All the best to you and your family. God Bless!

AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY!! Sincerely, Sharon and Charles M. Beckwith, Jr 466-C

REPLY: Thank you, both, for your assessment. Charles, you have a flair for choosing encouraging words, as you are in selecting your beautiful Sharon.

**GO ON TO THUNDER MAIL CALL, SPRENGER, PART 2. May 2008**