



The 17th Airborne's post-dissolution newsletter No. 12

THUNDER MAIL CALL

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Date: March 2009 ---T. Warner Johnson issue **Vol. 12, PART 1 OF 2**

Theodore Warner Johnson, 193-AT/194-AT.



Warner Johnson with wife Joy

2007

Theodore Warner Johnson, 193-HQ/194-AT: "I was born in Buffalo, New York, on January 25, 1925. Most of my childhood was spent in Jamestown, New York. I graduated from Jamestown High School in 1942, and later completed classes at Jamestown Community College.

I enlisted in the Army in February 1943. After completing basic training with the 17th Airborne at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, I came home on furlough and married my wonderful wife, Joy. Jump training and maneuvers were completed at Camp Forrest, Tennessee, and my unit was deployed to England in August 1944. In December, the Germans shattered our front lines with everything they had, with their elite SS troops and their huge Tiger tanks. We were rushed immediately to Frances and then to the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes Mountains of Belgium to help stem their advance, which we did, but not without huge consequences. It is heart breaking to recall all the terrible sight during that battle. We were told that Belgium was experiencing the worst winter weather in 60 years. I remember seeing

so many of our boys lying in the fields with just their feet sticking up out of the snow. Some of the frozen bodies were stacked into piles, just like cordwood.

I also saw many dead German soldiers. It brings to mind a scene of five or six of them grouped around their 88 mm artillery gun—all dead with agonized expressions on their faces. That was not a pleasant sight, but at least they were not American soldiers.

After the Battle of the Bulge, came the Rhine River landing called Operation Varsity. The airborne landing over the Rhine River was the largest ever. It took place on March 24, 1945. I recall many gliders and planes crashing around me. Many of our gliders did not make it through. Very few were salvageable. One scene that will be forever etched in my memory was that of a burning C-46 carrier plane with the paratroopers still in their seats, all burned beyond recognition. The C-46 planes had exposed gas lines and unprotected gas tanks, which rendered them very prone to catch on fire. Many of them caught on fire in flight.

After the end of war in Europe, during the month of June 1945, I was transferred to the 82nd Airborne, which participated in the occupation of Berlin. I was assigned as a driver for a C.I.D (Counter Intelligence Detachment) interrogation officer. We traveled into the Russian Zone, to Paris, Munich, and throughout most of Germany. I returned home in December 1945 and participated in the Victory Parade in New York City. I also marched in the "Victory in Europe" parade in Berlin in conjunction with troops from Russia, England and France.

I have had many good experiences in the army. I have made many wonderful friends while in the service, and at the 'Thunder From Heaven' Reunions. The Lord has blessed me with my adopted brother, Bill Tom and his wife Linda. They will always remain special to my family and me.

After leaving the military, I worked as a sheet-metal engineer for Jamestown Blower Company, and later as a consultant for Johnson Air Design. I have been blessed with three wonderful children: Vaughn Wilson, Lorell Johnson and Michelle Stahlman. We have nine grandchildren to brighten our lives. They are Scott Johnson, Leigh Johnson, Aaron Johnson, Jennifer Rungee, Shannon Krater, Kerry Wilson, Shawn Proctor, Kara Moore, and Timothy Stahlman. Four great-grandchildren, Jared Krater, Adrienne Krater, Justina Joy Moore, and Alexander Rungee, brighten our lives. Unfortunately, my lovely wife, Joy, has already gone to Heaven.

I am thankful for the Lord's guidance in my life. He has brought me through the war safely, and He is with me each day of my life."

(submitted by T. Warner Johnson)

NOTE: The 193rd and 194th each lost so many men at the Battle of the Bulge, that the two regiments had to be combined to form one intact 194th Glider Infantry Regiment to participate in Operation Varsity. The 507th Parachute Infantry was attached to replace the 193rd. The Table of Organization calls for the 17th to have one Parachute Regiment and two Glider Regiments. Due to wartime expediency, the 17th went into Operation Varsity with two Parachute Regiments and only one Glider Regiment. It was towards the end of the war in Europe and new replacements were being shipped to the Pacific



Theater to fight Japan.

Warner and Bill did not meet until long after the war, when we agreed to meet for the first time at the Nevele Reunion while we toured the West Point Academy in New York. That agreement was made several months earlier while we were conversing with each other on Ham Radio, over a 2,000 miles distance. We both are Amateur Radio Operators. We met at the parking lot at West Point more or less by accident because we did not know what each other looked like. He thought I had blonde hair because I had visited Sweden. Our friendship matured very rapidly and we are each very happy to have found ourselves in a new airborne brotherhood relationship by mutual adoption of each other as brothers.

In 1975, I happened to be in Chattanooga, TN, alone on business, and I learned of the 17th Airborne having a reunion there. I decided to drop in to surprise Joe Quade. I arrived at the hotel and made



1st time attendee Bill Tom of San Francisco surrounded by the lovely wives of Co. C - 194th.

contact with his wife, Suzi, and I was invited up to their room to wait for Joe, who was not in at the time. It was the night of banquet, and Suzi was in the shower and I was looking at Mickey Mouse photos with little Kimberly when Joe walked in. Not having recognized me, he flew into a rage and nearly threw me out the window! **Joe!-**

Joe!, I am Bill, your good buddy in the army!. Joe, was profusely apologetic, but he and I tried to get me a seat at the banquet, without success. However, when I arrived at the 194-C social room, their lovely ladies took me into their arms and had this photo taken. I hadn't seen the guys for over 30 years since Camp Forrest, and they hardly remembered me, but I attended every reunion ever since just to be hugged by their lovely ladies.

24 Jan 09: Curt Gadd, 513-D, responded to my advice for him to stop smoking: *"Bill----I am pleased to report that I have not had a smoke since Jan 2nd, 2008!! I had heard that some Chinese guys a few centuries ago, had invented a system of sticking needles in you to cure a whole bunch of illnesses. They called it acupuncture (they had to call it something). I'd heard it was good for stop smoking, my neighbor lady said it cured her, anyway, I decided to give it a shot. This was the day before my collapse on the golf course. Magically, I left the acupuncture clinic with no feeling for a cigarette and throughout the day, no panic attacks, no sweats, no urges almost a feeling of euphoria. To this day, I still have no desire to smoke, well yes, I do think about it occasionally but it is so easy to resist. So that is it. I'm coasting free and feel I will make it this time. Pills, patches, tapes, hypnosis are all for the birds and someone else to make money from. I recommend ACUPUNCTURE".*

REPLY: My congratulation to you on your wise decision. The tobacco companies gave us free cigarettes in our combat rations with no matches. We had to buy that Ronson cigarette lighter. It was their way to addict 16 millions of us young kids who were in military service. I was smoking cigarettes until I had to roll my own in college (short of cash). But I switched to smoking a pipe for a while. But I got wise and stopped smoking twenty-five years ago. Acupuncture is excellent for pain too.

John Ogden to Pavel Bergmann.pavel@stc.cz_{Cc:}

Mr. Bergmann, when I was looking through the recent electronic edition of the 17th Airborne newsletter, one of the pictures caught my attention. My father, the late Jack Ogden, was in the 194th HQ GIR, and my Mother visited him at Tulaoma, TN right before their unit shipped out to England in 1944. It is the picture with 3 men in uniform and 4 women. I cannot enlarge the picture to be sure, but one couple reminds me of my parents. Could you email me a better copy of the picture so that I can say for sure one way or the other? If the picture is at Camp Mackall, I know it is not my parents because Mother never visited in NC.

I have a number of Dad's letters from the war years, and they are quite interesting. I have been transcribing them and would like to find a publisher. I was the 1st baby born in his unit (12/28/1943), and his buddies had a collection of pennies in a large jar which was sent to Mother, and she purchased a savings bond and a carriage for me with the money. Many years later, I used the bond for a down payment on my first car. Best wishes, John Ogden

REPLY: John: You made me very happy that our newsletter had served a good purpose. Pavel Bergmann is a re-enactor of their version of 513-F in The Czech Republic. I met him at our Final Reunion in Virginia in October 2007. He is my counterpart in our association as being the medic in their group. If you are unable to receive photos from him, please let me know. I have a set of them.

REFERENCE: Pavel Bergmann, Czech Republic, purchased the following photos at auction. Could someone identify anyone in these photos, most likely taken at Camp MacKall.



Please acknowledge to the editor or directly to Pavel Bergmann at <Bergmann.pavel@stc.cz>

Michael Smith to me: Bill, I am the son-in-law of Thomas J. Lane, Member of the 17th Airborne, who passed away 2 years this June. I just want to say Thank-you for keeping me on your e-mail list. Your newsletters are fantastic historical documents that I read to all 5 children. My wife and I think it is so important that the children realize what a sacrifice their Grandfather made for them. Your stories about fighting and survival are more real than any TV show and make for serious discussions at the dinner table. If you ever have a fundraiser to help cover costs for your newsletter or for your travels back to Europe, please contact me. Best wishes and keep up the good work.

Michael J. Smith, 1050 Woodbine, Northbrook, IL 60062.

REPLY: Gosh, Mike, I got all excited! I thought, for an instant, that you were that beautiful Michele Smith! Thanks much for your generous thoughts. I am OK as a volunteer worker. I appreciated not having to shoot the enemy in the face, but, as a medic, I dreaded seeing what the enemy did to our own boys. I appreciated doing my medical duties in the war, and I enjoy what I have to do now. Much Thanks!

"D or P Lahmann" <lahmann@localaccess.com>

Hello Mr. Tom, Here is an addition for your calendar of events.

April 18, 2009 – VBOB NW Chapter (Veterans of The Battle of the Bulge) will be having their Spring Luncheon at La Quinta Inn, Tacoma WA at 1100. Please contact Doris Rodgers, Chapter Sec/Treasurer for reservations. 206 242 9028

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The VBOB chapter has two luncheons a year, Spring and Fall, and they meet once a month on the first Wednesday. The luncheons

Luther Davis, 513-D with Mary Kellenberger & Alice Miller

feature displays of various military artifacts and usually have a guest speaker to round out the day.

And I am sending along a couple of pictures from the Auburn Veterans Day 2008 parade of Luther Davis and friends. Luther was in the 513-D. He has been riding with us in the parade for the last 3 years. Luther and I met because of Frederic Dehon of Belgium. Frederic got me started portraying the 17th at our historical displays and so I wore a 17th AB uniform to a Battle of the Bulge Luncheon and Luther and I struck up a conversation. He then joined us for the parade and I had the pleasure of seeing him and his wife at the last reunion. The women in the picture are Mary Kellenberger, she served as a WAC in Vietnam and Alice Miller in the Korean WAC uniform. Alice's father served in the 3rd Armored in WW2.

It may be of special note to 17th Veterans that you still have what it takes to have those good looking women chasing after you. Thank you to the members of the 17th AB for your service.

Sincerely, Peter Lahmann, Associate Member, Belgian Golden Talon Association

PS: Hello Bill, I will try to send the pictures from my home computer. If I sent them from my work computer, I have Windows Vista and sometimes that causes problems when sending files to someone with an older operating system.

As for Frederic Dehon, I met him 7 years ago at a display his group was doing at Chiveras Air base in Belgium. We stayed in contact through email and I have been to Belgium 5 times now in the last 7 years. I accompanied Frederic and his group for the 60th Anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge.

While Frederic portrayed the 17th, I represented another under represented group the 106th Division. Their two Regts. were almost totally wiped out in two days in the Bulge. Frederic had made me an honorary member of the Belgian Golden Talon Association and I try to support their efforts whenever and however possible. I came in handy at the Flamerige dedication in 2007 as an advisor to Frederic on things American. Hence the idea of yellow roses for the Veterans and family members to lay at the monument. This was a tough idea to get across.

I belong to a military living history group here in Washington called the "Friends of Willie and Joe" after Bill Mauldin's cartoon characters. We were formed about 15 years ago and do between 10 to 20 displays a year, including 2 a year for the Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge. I have now become the historian for the local VBOB Chapter. They felt they needed to have someone with an interest to pass the items on to, so that they did not end up in a box in the storage room at a museum. At the next VBOB luncheon, I intend to do a display with their artifacts, instead of things from my collection.

I have been doing historical military displays since 1987 and currently own 6 military vehicles, 4 of which are running. I hope this was enough information. If anything was left out please let me know and I will fill you in.

I am planning on attending Flamerige and Bastogne this year for the 65th Anniversary.

I saw in your newsletter that Frederic put out an invitation. I am not sure of the exact particulars, but if anyone wishes to attend please contact Frederic or myself and we will be as helpful as possible.

If any of the Vets or families can attend, I will attest that you will not find a more helpful host than Frederic Dehon. He will do his best to make their stay in Belgium memorable.

Sincerely, Peter Lahmann

THIS IS THE 64TH ANNIVERSARY OF OPERATION VARSITY.

Harold Tsuchiya and Sedlacko, both 513-HQ3, said they were at the Operation Varsity planning meetings. They said that P-38 pilots



reported that in their reconnaissance flights flew over the designated drop and landing zones, they saw movements of antiaircraft and machine gun batteries into those zones. American 9th Army General Simpson was not in favor of an airborne drop to support his crossing of the Rhine River, because all seven Allied Armies (Canadian 1st, British 2nd, American 9th,

Sedlacko and Harold Tsuchiya, 513-HQ3.

American 1st, 3rd and 7th, plus the French 1st) will be crossing the Rhine at the same time. However, British General Montgomery insisted on the airborne support for fear of German Artilleries hidden in the Dierfordster Forest in his zone.

Thus, the 17th Airborne and the British 6th Airborne dropped into a hail of a welcome on 24 March 1945. The order was for the paratroopers and gliders to drop at 400 feet to avoid the

anti-aircraft barrages. That made all the planes and gliders very vulnerable to anti-aircraft defenses. It became an airborne carnage!

26 Jan 09: From **Richard Smejkal, son of Richard V. Smejkal (155-D)**: Hello Bill Tom, Thank you for the back issues. It's difficult to read the past history of what my father, yourself and others had to endure but who served our country at a time of need to keep us safe and others around the world. My father passed away October 8th, 2007 I didn't get to talk to him about his service since he and my mother were divorced when I was four years old, but I do have his Purple Heart, Bible, compass and some pictures. Richard v. smejkal and his brother lumir smejkal were in the same unit (i think) and trained at Camp McKall, NC, because my aunt sent my mother a post card dated December of 1943 from Hamlet, NC. I was born in March of 1942. I received a call from Col. Del Townsend who also sent me a letter stating my dad and his brother Lumir Smejkal was in the 17th Airborne Division in 155-D.

I thank you and all who served and are serving now for the commitment of keeping us all safe from our enemies. Thank you for your service of being a medic. I couldn't imagine the sights you had to endure Gods Blessings to you. Richard A. Smejkal

REPLY: Thanks for your remarks. The medics were bound by a Code of Silence of what had happened during their watch. But we can talk about them now; otherwise we would all be gone someday and no one would ever know. There was nothing more severe to look at until I saw a plane load of paratroopers burned to a crisp, like fried chickens. I was not able to eat fried foods for many months afterwards. The C-46 transport planes used to drop paratroopers did not have puncture-proof gas tanks. One tracer bullet and the entire plane was engulfed in flames. Had the fire not killed them, the crash landing would certainly had. Some graves held two bodies because there was no way to separate them to maintain an integral intact body for burial.

A Medic's view of battle

I had served as a medic, but I was preliminarily trained as a rifleman. Consequently, I have two views of combat. Had I stayed a rifleman, my duties would have been to shoot the enemy soldier in the face, or bayonet him in his belly and would have felt glory and patriotism for killing another person who was bent on killing me. However, as a 19-20 year old unsophisticated small town boy assigned to be a medic, my views become compassion and sorrow for those other young men who was killed or mutilated, whether he was friend or foe, when they all had parents, wives, children and grandparents waiting at home.

My medical training was primarily watching black and white films of gunshot wounds, how to apply a bandage, tourniquet, splint, sulfanilamide powder and injecting a 'morphine' syrette into an orange. My other training was in erecting huge canvas tents, digging slit trenches for latrines, and marching while carrying heavy loads, and was the 'dummy' for other medics to practice pushing a needle into my veins. I had exceptionally large veins because I was so thin. Very seldom was I given experiences of carrying a person in a litter, or running with one under simulated combat conditions.

Suddenly, the sky turned red and the shooting started. It was all blood and guts, body parts, an arm or head that were detached from another soldier under such thundering explosions, screaming, screeching sounds and stifling smokes.

In most cases, I have shunted my experiences into the fantasy realm so that I can look back to those traumatic scenes to envision events that had now become unreal and imaginary. Otherwise, I would have become insane or at least withdrawn to suffer the effects of post-traumatic symptoms. It is very difficult for me to talk about an entire planeload of paratroopers all burned to death when their C-46 were shot down and caught on fire to have crash-landed, or to tell about a poor rifleman who picked up a bazooka trying to stop a tank. He pulled the trigger and the entire bazooka blew up on his shoulder. He perished with half his torso torn away and had become an unidentifiable unknown soldier. There were many other instances of bomber crews risking their lives to drop bombs on Germany. After the war was over, hundreds of unexploded bombs to discover that those bombs were not fused to explode, only because somebody did not put in the fuse. It hurts me to think that many of our military died unnecessarily due to our internal unwise decision of not putting self-sealing gas tanks in our C-46 cargo planes, or due to sabotage from among our labor force.

The net effect on me today is that I felt I had not done much in the war. I was in combat and yet I was not. I had only to rely on the fact that this skinny scrawny Chinese boy was promoted to a Staff Sergeant rank in a highly competitive environment as having been the only Chinese-person in that unit. I must have been a very good medic and a very dedicated one to have earned that distinction. I was a Private all through the war, so it was more as an afterthought by my superior officers. I could have earned a medal of some kind, but I had not done an obviously heroic deed, so I did not deserve such an honor. I was happy with my Staff Sergeant rating because it was a promotion in higher pay and benefits. At that rank, I was eligible to receive three bottles of whiskey a month after the war on payday, but it was not such a beneficial award since I did not drink at all. I traded my three bottles of scotch for three bottles of Coca Cola. I was very popular on payday for that, but I was also dreaded because everybody had to expose his genital to me on the mandated "short-arm inspection" before getting paid. It was the army regulation of the time that nobody got paid if he had a venereal disease. (Bill Tom, Medic)

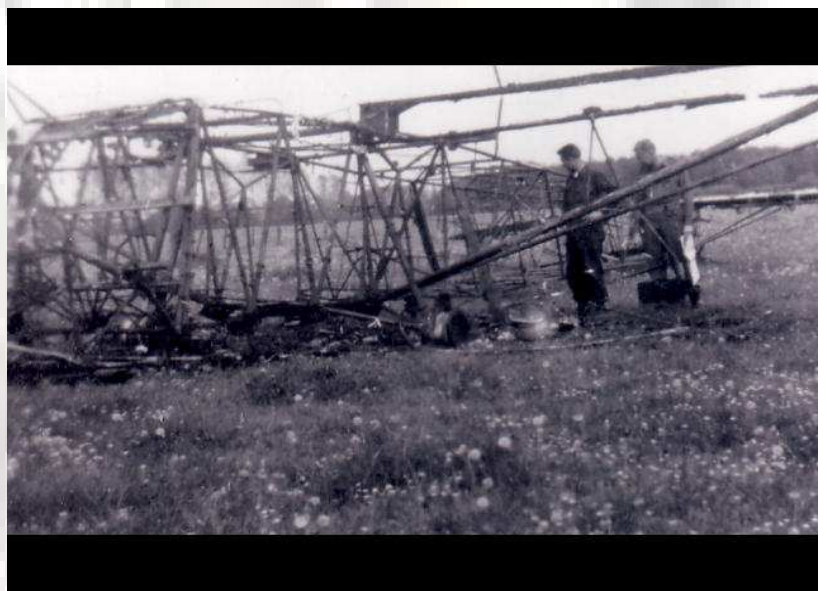
THE FLYING COFFINS



Waco CG4A G

Maximum Speed: 150 mph.
Span: 83 feet, 8 inches
Weight: 7,500 pounds maxi
Length: 48 feet, 4 inches

The CG-4A was the most w
U.S. troop/cargo glider of V
with more than 12,000 pro
Towed by C-46s or C-47s, t
were used in the invasions
France and in other airborn
in Europe and Asia. The C
displayed at the Silent Wing
Lubbock, Texas, is painted in
invasion markings.



German anti-aircraft defense had a field day when planes and glider came in at 400 feet.

Many gliders were set on fire by tracer bullets hitting the canvas walls of the glider or had exploded in mid-air. During the double tow of gliders, one glider hit the tow-line of the other glider, and the wing fell off. The glider went into a spin and glider troopers were flung out of the glider to fall to their death onto a Germany cemetery—of all places.

What was a glider in World War II? It is an aircraft that did not have an engine or propellers. It can be lifted airborne only when it was towed by a bomber or cargo plane (also known as a tug plane). The American Waco Glider can carry 13 soldiers, plus the two pilots. It can carry a Jeep, ammunitions, gasoline canisters, an artillery piece and just about anything. The use of gliders was in the plan to quickly evacuate wounded soldiers off the battlefield by having a tug plane fly over to snatch the elevated towline to pull the glider back to an evacuation hospital for immediate treatment. That use was found to be unsatisfactory because, in training for that procedure, the occupants in the glider all ended up at the tail end of the glider. There was no way to strap down a wounded man to avoid the inertial response when the glider speeded up to 150 miles per hour in a few seconds from a standing start.

The British had larger gliders, the Horsa and the Hamilcar. I believe both were constructed of plywood and were much sturdier than our Waco. The British gliders can carry more than 30 troopers. One fault in the Horsa glider was that it had the tendency to end up on its nose. Their remedy for that fault was to install explosive charges in its tail structure for the pilot to blow off the tail end for the troop to exit the glider. Unfortunately, my Company C lost an entire platoon of troopers when they were training in a Horsa glider in England, and the explosive charge might have accidentally ignited in mid-air to cause the death of over 30 of our troopers.

Glider were used to silently deliver soldiers behind the enemy lines. In actual combat experiences, most of the gliders used in combat were destroyed or were damaged beyond repair. After the battle, army recovery crews were sent in to salvage gliders for use in future operations. Almost none of the gliders were re-usable. Almost all had been damaged, either riddled with bullet holes, or were damaged on landing, or had caught on fire by tracer bullets, or had crashed with total loss of lives. It was almost criminal that our soldiers had to go into battle using equipment that were always manufactured by the lowest bidders, when making a good profit was the primary and foremost ingredient. These flimsy gliders were designed to be cheap, easy to put together and, unfortunately, just as easy to fall apart. When the first Waco glider came off the assembly line in St Louis, there was an official ceremony to commemorate the initial flight of the first Waco glider. The Mayor and most of the city's council members boarded the glider. It lifted off without any problem amidst cheers from the crowd, but one wing suddenly fell off. The entire city's political assemblage was wiped out in a horrifying crash scene. But, the Waco glider was approved by the army for our use. But cheaper bidders were often very good. Our M-1 Garand Rifle was made by cheapest bidders.

The glider had no engine and must be towed by a tug plane using a nylon towline from a standing start. When the glider was over enemy territory, the towline was cut and the glider pilot must guide his glider silently to a flat area free of obstructions and to land with a squad of glidertroopers. The flat areas were usually farmlands, littered with fence posts, telephone



poles, trees, cows, horse, sheep, pigpen and occasionally a farmhouse or an outhouse. The Germans often planted steel rods, known as Rommel's Asparagus, throughout open fields to rip off glider wings when they landed at up to 100 miles per hour. Gliders were used to ferry in jeeps, ammunitions and explosives. An errant tracer bullet would surely turn the glider into a explosive vehicle. So dangerous was the use of gliders was discontinued in favor of using helicopters in subsequent wars. The photo shows the size of the tow rope used to pull the glider airborne. There were electrical wires buried inside the tow rope. Since the rope will stretch and the wires do not, the later used tow ropes had loose wires wound around the outside.

The Nylon towline for towing the glider

VARSITY TRIAGE, by Bill Tom, medic

Like a chaplain, a medic was non-denominational when it came to caring for the well-being of our troops. Both were obligated to provide care for every wounded or injured soldier, regardless of unit, rank, friend or foe. They worked well together in a common goal in WW II to heal so large a percentage of our casualties, spiritually and physically. However, there were circumstances when the medic had to make a moral choice that differentiated him from a chaplain because of a medical term called "triage". A chaplain will never give up hope on a man's soul, but a medic was sometimes forced to give up on the life of a man.

During the First World War, the French army, swamped by the large numbers of casualties, had to devise a priority procedure, known as "triage", to guide their medics. A medic was to determine the severity of the wounds and treat them in an orderly priority. As far as the individual soldier was concerned, his own wound, no matter how comparatively slight, was always the most serious one. Therefore, a triage policy had to be instituted for a medic to summarily segregate those who needed to be treated first, since there had to be a wound that was far more serious than another with regards to survival. Yet, there could be a wound so serious that we cannot devote the time or effort to care for, as brutal as it may sound. That was what triage was all about and how it was to ease the battered

conscience of the medic who had to make that drastic decision.

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

★ Friday, July 3, 1998 A-11

"Had we not won World War II, we would not have a July 4th to celebrate."

— Bill Tom, World War II veteran

anese spy.

As a medic, he worked in triage, assigning priority to injured soldiers.

Then 20, Tom said the bloodshed was overwhelming — and has never left him.

"When you see bodies torn apart like that, it is quite a thing to take," said Tom, now 74.

He remembers one soldier who had such serious wounds that his heart was exposed — but still beating. Doctors could not save him, and he was at the "hopeless stage of triage."

In the long hours that the soldier's heart palpitated, Tom said he stayed by the blood-soaked stretcher, consumed by helplessness and guilt.

"I still think of him," Tom said. "And the real problem is that (Army policy dictated that) we were not allowed to talk about this because it would have been demoralizing to the troops," he said.

He also felt the stories would be too upsetting to his own children, which is why he has never candidly shared his experiences with them.

"Now we can freely talk about it," he said.

To remember the sacrifice

Tom decided to contribute to the Internet site as a way of making sure that younger generations do not forget the enormous sacrifices so many soldiers made for this country's freedom.

Site creator O'Donnell hopes people will take a few minutes from their Fourth of July festivities to read oral histories such as Tom's.

"It was certainly the seminal event for this century, because through their acts — and those of the Allies — the world gained independence from tyranny," O'Donnell said.

And, Tom added, "Had we not won World War II, we would not have a July 4th to celebrate."



Army medic Bill Tom stands ready for duty in 1945 in Belgium.

I was initially trained as a rifleman, but, at the last moment, I was converted to a medic. I was fortunate to have had some Red Cross training in emergency first aid and minor wounds while in high school. But, in the rush of war, the army gave me a minimal of exposure to actual wounds, with some hands-on experience in giving injections and sterile technique. There were a few black and white documentary films on treating gunshot wounds and how to pitch a hospital ward tent. The rest was strictly on the job training under fire, but I became a very dependable and dedicated medic. Initially, I comforted myself into thinking that a medic had a greater chance of survival in combat. It was not until many years after the war that I learned that 20,000 of our medics were killed in World War II, including some women nurses.

My first few days in combat were a horror beyond all description or expectation. Not every wound turned out to be a simple gunshot penetration as demonstrated in the films. Furthermore, the wounds were no longer black and white images, they were gory gooey bloody red, and was terrifying and gruesome with torn off limbs and detached body parts. Life was in full vivid color of spurting blood, the sickening smell of warm blood; and the squishy feel of flesh and clots as we try to stem the loss of blood. Each new casualty meant another nice handsome young soldier cut down so early to become disabled or dead, but, yet, most of them were seemingly able to survive their wounds with some after-effect, thanks to the diligence of our medical service. However, a few were severely hampered for the rest of their lives.

I will never forget the very first seriously wounded soldier I had encountered and whose life had to be triaged out of his favor. He was so grossly wounded that he

was immediately beyond hope. He was a young infantryman who was found with an entry wound in the back with a gaping hole from the back through his chest cavity, with most of his right rib cage and his right lungs torn away. His heart was exposed and weakly pumping, but he was alive. We had no facility or replacement parts to keep him alive, and our entire supply of whole blood and blood plasma would have been insufficient to replace what he had already lost.

According to witnesses, that young soldier was dug in at a protected position during the battle. When a P-47 flew over, he got up out of his position to wave at that fighter which was brand new to that area at the time. The P-47 turned a loop and came back with his guns blazing. A ricochet 50-caliber round, perhaps, hit the soldier squarely in the back on the right side, exiting through the front. When viewed from his front, all I saw of him was his back bone, his heart in this gaping hole next to his bloody left chest cavity. His main aorta was still intact and the blood loss was reduced to an ooze by his diminished blood pressure and a massive blood clot that had filled his body cavity. His heart was still pulsing weakly and his left chest did not appear to be moving, but he did not die. There had to be a reason why his heart

did not stop. He was brought to the 113th Evacuation Hospital where several doctors had a good look at him and they each shook their head to signify that the hopeless stage of triage was in effect. There was nothing that can be done out in the field, for certain, and there was nothing to be done even in a major hospital of that time, or at any other time.



That unconscious soldier was simply left in a temporary morgue, on the blood-filled stretcher to die. But he would not die. His heart continued to pulse. I stayed up with him through most of the night, absolutely helpless and hopeless, and wondering why God had not interceded. I had wanted his mother to know that someone was with him at his most desperate hours. A chaplain came by to say a prayer for him. In the wee hours, I lapsed into a

sleep, being all wiped out from the day's terror. When I was awakened at dawn, I scared the craps out of the Grave Registration guys when they picked me up as a dead body.

That wounded soldier's body was being carted away. He had finally met his Lord, with half of his torso torn off. How sad it was, how helpless, how sorry I was. I pondered how his company commander was going to explain that to the boy's parents, or about his valiant cling to life. I deplored the pilot who might have

boasted how he had shot a German soldier that day.

Today, over sixty years later, that young man would now be about my age had he survived, but I still think of him as that young boy. I wish I could talk to him now to tell him how sorry I was for him. I will think about that young boy for the rest of my days, and I will feel great sorrow for him for the rest of my life. My only consolation was that while we were unable to save his life, a chaplain was there to save his soul. By Bill Tom, Medic. (Photo: **Bill close to Berlin on VE Day**)



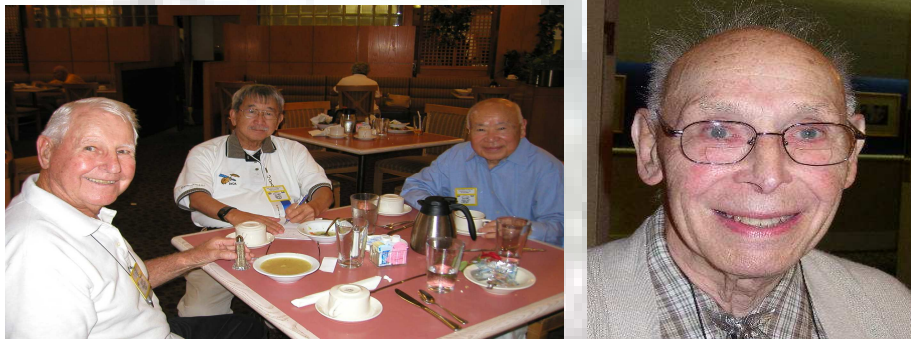
Bill Crehan, Joe Phillips & Bill Trenchard, all of 517-SG. Bill Trenchard was killed in a Glider crash at Operation Varsity. The pouches carried on their left side were gas masks, which were quickly thrown away as soon as we arrived overseas once we learned that we had more terrible gas weapons than the Germans did. We assumed that the Germans wouldn't have dared to start a poison gas war.

THE GERMAN 88mm ARTILLERY, the most deadly weapon.

The Germans had a most versatile and deadly weapon in their 88 mm anti-aircraft artillery piece. It was an excellent gun for shooting down planes and it was also used very effectively as an anti-personnel field artillery with its projectiles that can spray shrapnel at tree top level to decimate troops dug-in on the ground below. Most of our casualties in Europe were from the German 88 gun. Incredibly, this weapon was first built in 1928, known as Flak – shortened German term for anti-aircraft cannon! Philosophically, there were some security issues involving our airborne operations that needed to be discussed. When I, working as a medic, and was treating wounded German prisoners-of-war during Operation Varsity, I was to learn that the German Army knew exactly when and where Operation Varsity was to take place. Indeed, Axis Sally on Berlin Radio had previously taunted our troopers the day before of how stupid it was to try to

land on German soil in broad daylight. The Germans had ample opportunities to encircle the landing and drop zones with their 88mm anti-aircraft artilleries and machine guns to give the U.S. 17th and the British 6th Airborne Divisions such a bloody welcome.

With the rumor that our Operation Varsity plans had been leaked to the German Army, several German Generals were interviewed after the war. They reportedly said they knew of our plans in advance, but had refused to divulge the source of that leak. No effort was made to investigate that breach of security, since the plan was formulated at the highest level of our ETO Command Headquarters. At our 2004 reunion in Columbus, Georgia, I had the pleasure to meet Harold Tsuchiya, a Japanese Nisei paratrooper assigned to 513-HQ3 during Varsity, and also his companion, Charles Sedlacko.



Left: Sedlacko and Tsuchiya during an oral interview at our final reunion in 2008.
Right: Eugene Sprenger who interviewed captured German General officers.

They had confirmed my feelings that the German army had received prior leaks of our plan to do an airborne drop into Germany on 24 March 1945. Tsuchiya told me that P-38 pilots, who flew aerial surveillances over the drop zones the day before, told our Generals that the Germans were moving anti-aircraft batteries into the drop zones and landing zones. Eugene Sprenger in post-war interviews of captured German Generals to learn that the German Intelligence knew our plan in advance.

Perhaps General Miley was aware of the security leak and had ordered a 400-foot drop for our paratroopers to minimize our casualties. It was reported that General William Simpson, U.S. Ninth Army Commander was not in favor of the airborne drop, but he was overruled by British General Montgomery who was then the overall Commander of the Northern Zone. Montgomery had the task to cross the Rhine River North. Since his previous victory in Africa, he had not been too successful in taking Caen on D-Day, and then he failed at Market-Garden airborne strike to cross the Rhine at Arnheim. Perhaps, he was fearful that his Canadian 1st Army, the British 2nd Army and the U.S. Ninth Army under his command might not be too successful at Wesel because of the wider Rhine River and a nearby Forstendorf Forest that could harbor German artillery to stop his crossing. When the Germans opened the dams on the Roer River to flood the Roer Delta to stop the US 9th Army, the excess water overwhelmed the Waal River in Belgium. Indeed, Montgomery's simulated Rhine crossing

practice attempts at the Waal River failed due to the high tide, so he might have been a bit edgy. He smoked the Rhine River for several days before he ordered his Armies across between Wesel and Dusseldorf. Our engineers had built several pontoon bridges at that area, with one bridge dedicated to retrieving our wounded soldiers for treatments in a score of evacuation, field and mobile surgical hospitals set up on the West Bank of the Rhine. Montgomery commandeered that medical evacuation bridge for his troop movements to cross the Rhine into Germany. Many of our wounded 17th Airborne troopers, as well as troops from other units, were stacked up for as long as three days on the wrong side of the Rhine, before they could be transported back across the Rhine River to receive surgical treatments.

The lack of security was also obvious too at the Battle of the Bulge. It was also reported recently that a farmer in Belgium had found a crate of operational maps of the Battle of the Bulge that were simply left abandoned out on his field when the 17th Airborne pulled out to enter the battle. How that oversight had affected the end results of our participation cannot be determined. Such an apparent lack of security could have had a measurable impact on our casualty rate. It is now easy to critique the war when it was nothing but turmoil, urgency and confusion during the fight.

I still recall the confusion and urgency when over one hundred wounded and dying soldiers were delivered to the 113th Evacuation Hospital at one time when there was only one doctor doing triage. It was there that I earned by S/Sgt stripes.

27 Jan 09: **Linda Cotman**: Hi Bill, Happy New Year to you. I hope it's a good one for you and your family. Thank you for dedicating the last Thunder Mail Call to Dad on his birthday. That was quite a surprise! He really appreciated it. He's doing much better now with his ankle and other injuries--he just needs to try not to over do it too soon. Take Care, Linda Cotman

27 Jan 09: **Eric Molnar**" emolnar@twcny.rr.com



It was cold near Houffalize.

U. S. ARMY SIGNAL CORPS PH

I was wondering about one of the photo's in the hard cover book "Thunder From Heaven" on page 87 with the caption "It was cold near Houffalize" if the man with his face more towards the camera was identified ? Second from the right riding on the gun ? This person resembles my father **Wm. F. Molnar from 513 Co. B** so I thought I'd ask.. Thank you, Eric P. Molnar

From this photo, this was an artillery unit. We will let 513-B guys do the identification.

ANNUAL VARSITY REUNION

When: April 16 – April 19th 2009

**Where: Hampton Inn
51130 National Road
St. Clairsville, Ohio 43950**

Phone: 740-695-3961

**Rate: \$90.00 per night plus taxes (queen beds)
Includes free hot & cold breakfast in lobby.**

**When reserving your room, let them know you are with The 17th Airborne
to get the rate of \$90.00.**

Hospitality room opens everyday at 12 noon and closes when the last person leaves. We will provide ice, pop, liquor, scotch, wine, all paper products, munchies, snacks, coffee and tea. This year we are asking beer drinkers to bring their own beer. It was difficult buying a variety of beers to satisfy every ones tastes. Coolers and ice will be available to keep your beer cold.

Saturday night we will eat at Undo's Restaurant. (On the third floor of the hotel) As in the past we will order off the menu and each of us pay our own bill. (There is an elevator to take you to the third floor.)

This is a "no fuss" weekend. Just an old-fashioned get together.

Please let us know if you are attending The Varsity Reunion. If you are unable to attend, we would appreciate a note from you to read to your friends letting us know you are okay.

Airborne All The Way!

**Jim Lauria
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304-232-8889**

Midwest Operation Varsity and Battle of the Bulge Reunion, April 23-26, 2009, Branson, Missouri. Their flyer is too lengthy to reprint in this issue. The organizer of this reunion appears to be The Branson Grayline Company, at 155 Industrial Park Drive, Hollister, MO 65672, Telephone = 1-800-542-6768. Contact them for your own flyer, since it offers many options. It also appears to be a joint reunion with the 519th Army Military Police Battalion at the same hotel and same dates.

There is another Operation Varsity Reunion in Lancaster, PA, on March 22-25, 2009, hosted by Bill and Michele Smith. See Page B34, Part 2 this issue.

82nd Airborne is hosting an airborne reunion in Indianapolis, Indiana in April 19-22, 2009. See page B33, Part 2 this issue.

TMC #12 (March 2009 Warner Johnson) is continued in Part 2