

Fighting for My President

The following is a **historical narrative** of the World War II experiences of **Herbert (Herb) W. Carls**, as documented by the undersigned (his nephew). The individual stories contained herein are primarily Herb's personal accounts of the events that took place during his military service, carefully tied to actual troop movements of the outfits to which he was assigned. Also interwoven within these stories are the accounts of other individuals who served with him (or to which he came in contact), as further verification of the events described.

I've always encouraged Uncle Herb to talk about his past, but never pressured him into talking about things that would make him feel uncomfortable. Over time I came to respect his right to express war experiences at his own pace. In many instances we would re-visit some of the same stories (on multiple occasions), to verify his recollections. This then, is my tribute to an **American Paratrooper**, who not only survived countless dangers during his military service, but returned home a hero (especially in the eyes of his nephew).

Wayne R. Carls

The Draft and Basic Training

In late November or very early **December of 1941**, but prior to America's entry into World War II, twenty-one year old Herb Carls decided to volunteer for military service, specifically to become a paratrooper. He first travelled to San Bernardino, California to enlist but was told he needed two year's military experience and two year's college in order to be accepted for training (as a paratrooper). Having neither of those requirements, he returned home disappointed. Within weeks, the surprise attack by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii would change everything.

Soon afterwards Herb was drafted into military service (in January of 1942) and **reported for duty at Fort McArthur (near San Pedro, Ca.) on Feb. 5, 1942**. At roll call the following morning draftees were asked if anyone was interested in volunteering for paratrooper training. Herb was surprised at the change in requirements but quickly volunteered. Regardless of who volunteered for paratrooper training, all the draftees were sent to **Camp Wolters, Texas for basic training**. Due to urgent wartime necessities for troops, basic training was quickly completed (in Herb's outfit it took only 8 weeks) but upon completion his platoon was held over for "cadre". The definition of "cadre" is a core group of trained personnel able to assume control and train others. The men in Herb's outfit apparently met the criteria because they were assigned to the **2nd Platoon, Company A of the 58th Infantry Training Battalion**.

In **late March of 1942** Herb's Battalion was photographed as a group, while stationed at **Camp Wolters, Texas**. The 58th Infantry Training Battalion was under the command of Captain D. K. Cumberland. A separate photograph of Herb's 2nd Platoon Company A, as led by 1st Lt. W. C. Eder, was also taken where Herb is shown standing on the top row (2nd from the right). A copy of that photograph (which follows) shows Herb standing to the left of the yellow arrow.



Over the next few months very little was mentioned about training as a paratrooper, which was frustrating to Herb, but he did recall seeing some training films that showed the kind of training paratroopers receive, (and shockingly) what happens when a parachute malfunctions. Apparently, that had some effect on the original number of volunteers at Fort McArthur because by **mid to late May of 1942** the actual number of trainees **sent to Fort Benning, Georgia (to begin parachute training)**, was significantly reduced.

Parachute Training

At Fort Benning Herb and the other volunteers spent the first couple weeks in intensive physical training (involving many kinds of tumbling and rope climbing techniques), with special emphasis working on an apparatus known as “the plumbers nightmare”. That turned out to be a complex pipe maze that required crawling and climbing thru a system of pipes 10 to 12 feet off the ground. Towards the later part of his training Herb learned to pack his own parachute and began more realistic jump training by being dropped from 250 foot steel towers (built by Ledbetter Construction Company of Birmingham, Al.). The trainees would be strapped to 32 foot parachutes (already opened) and hauled to the high point of the tower before being released.

Herb once talked about handing his instructor a “D-ring”, which to non-paratroopers requires an explanation. He explained that a D-ring is a handle that’s pulled to open a packed parachute. In the case of his tower training, the trainees were instructed that once they reached the top of the 250 foot tower, they were to count one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three and then pull the D-ring (which would release them and simulate the physical shock experienced by the trainee when a parachute opened during flight). In doing so from the tower, the trainee would freefall (Herb called it

“plummet”) for about 10 to 12 feet before the parachute would fill with enough air to simulate the normal descent. Trainees were instructed to hold onto the D-ring all the way down. In reality, that didn’t always happen. Many times the shock of being released and freefalling would cause trainees to let go the D-ring and it would rattle down thru the steel tower sending those on the ground diving for cover. Herb was proud of the fact that he held on to his D-ring, and handed it to his instructor “with a smile” saying “I forgot the count but here’s your D-ring”.

Actual jump training from an aircraft followed the tower training. Herb recalled that on his first jump the guy in front of him froze and refused to jump. The jumpmaster ordered Herb to take his place and as he was starting to give Herb the order to “stand in the door”, Herb leaped out of the aircraft. Apparently Herb was so determined not to freeze like the previous guy, he didn’t stop to think about it. Herb recalled his **first jump** was from a Douglas C-47 “Skytrain” and that it “was big stuff for this old country boy”, and a “hell of an experience”. After his first jump, the rest of Herb’s training jumps were more of what he termed “automatic”, except for one instance where he failed to aggressively push away from the doorway of the aircraft. He quickly found himself being slammed against the side of the aircraft (by the slipstream) and was horrified to see how close his chute came to being tangled on the tail of the aircraft. That was as he said, “an eye opening experience”, and not one he wanted to revisit anytime soon. Apparently fear can be a good motivator because subsequent jumps had his full and complete attention.

Herb completed training to become a **qualified “Parachutist”** at Fort Benning by **June 19, 1942** and was awarded his **certificate of completion** (signed by Colonel H. B. Wheeler). He was then **re-assigned to the 502nd Parachute Infantry**, which at that time **was part of the 101st Airborne Division**, and sent to **Camp Rucker, Alabama** for further training. Herb recalled that the military reservation at Camp Rucker was near the “Choctawhatchee River”, and approximately a 100 miles southwest of Fort Benning. By the following month (**July 1942**), the 502nd was transferred once again to **Fort Bragg, North Carolina** for more specialized training.

The Call-up for England

Herb had hardly settled into his new surroundings at Fort Bragg when he was chosen to be part of a group of 141 personnel scheduled to **join the 2nd Battalion (Bn) 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR)** already in England. The 2nd Bn. 503rd PIR was under the command of Lt. Col. Edson Raff, who had originally departed for England on June 4, 1942. Among the 141 additional personnel were 12 officers, 110 paratroopers and 19 members of the Regimental band. The additional personnel left Fort Bragg mid-July and traveled by train to New York where they boarded the **HMS Queen Elizabeth**. The **QE** as it was better known, was bound for Scotland and would be unescorted by other warships due to its great speed.

Upon arrival in **Glasgow, Scotland in late July, 1942**, Herb and the additional paratroopers were transported by train to **Chilton Foliat, England** where they hooked up with other members of the 2nd Bn 503rd to receive specialized training for their first mission. Initially the additional paratroopers were placed in a rear detachment commanded by Lt. Bud Siegel. Herb was then assigned to a **Demolitions**

Platoon under Lt. John Martin. During its time in England the 2nd Bn. 503rd PIR was **attached with the British 1st Airborne Division**, but the British and American paratroopers trained separately. Lt. Col. Raff stressed physical preparation and conditioning as one of his highest objectives so the 503rd trained extensively (including night training and speed marching). Speed marching typically involved 10 miles or more to and from each training area, at a rapid rate. Herb stated that on one long training assignment they covered 32 miles in 11 hours. Apparently that assignment left a lasting impression because he had no problem remembering the specifics of that accomplishment.

During their time at Chilton Foliat some Hollywood celebrities (including Al Jolson) made an appearance on **August 29, 1942**, which prompted Lt. Col. Raff to set up a **demonstration jump** (what the British called a “jolly good show”). As a result, Herb and others in the 503rd took part in what was later described as the **lowest altitude mass tactical jump** in military history (according to some estimates they exited the aircraft at 143 feet). Specifically on Herb’s flight he recalled their jumpmaster (“likely Captain Medlin”) slipped in the doorway of their C-47, and as he fell from the aircraft the rest of the paratroopers followed him out (either by instinct or as they were trained to do). It’s possible that mistake may have been the real reason this jump took place at such a low altitude.

Another interesting incident took place while the 503rd was based at Chilton Foliat, and involved a “prank” perpetrated by a couple of paratroopers in Herb’s demolition platoon. Although not responsible for the actual act, Herb soon found himself accused of being one of the responsible parties. The **“prank” occurred in town at a pub** while some of the 503rd were on leave. According to Herb, Milton Colvin and another paratrooper made off with a “nude painting” that hung over the bar area of the pub, aided by some other paratroopers who managed to create some kind of diversion or distraction. Word got back to camp that the townsfolk were really upset about the disappearance of “their painting” so when it finally surfaced in camp (likely as a trophy), Herb decided he’d better attempt to return it before charges were filed on his buddies. Unfortunately, by returning the painting, suspicions fell on Herb as being one of the perpetrators. He recalls doing “a lot of talking to convince the pub owner otherwise”. However, being a good demolitions man, Herb was somehow able to “defuse” the situation without having to divulge who was really responsible.

In **mid to late October of 1942**, as the 2nd Bn. 503rd PIR was staging for Operation Torch (the Allied invasion of North Africa), **First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt** made a surprise inspection of troops at Hungerford, England. With the paratroopers being the focus of her attention, Herb clearly remembers that Mrs. Roosevelt was not more than “an arm’s length in front of him”, as she passed by. He was impressed the First Lady “would come all that way to review his outfit”, and represent the President.

Shipping out for North Africa

As most of the 503rd was leaving England, and flying to North Africa to make America’s first combat jump (on Nov. 8, 1942), they had no knowledge they’d just been designated the **2nd Battalion, 509th Parachute Infantry**. That designation had actually been made effective on Nov. 2, 1942, but orders weren’t made known to the troops until sometime after the combat team had left the southern tip of England for Tafaraoui Airfield, Algeria. Herb’s detachment (representing most of the additional paratroopers who

had joined late) remained in England, responsible for transporting the remaining equipment and supplies to North Africa. By early **December 1942** the rear echelon **left England by ship for Gibraltar, Spain**, and then proceeded to **Casablanca, French Morocco**. Amazingly, after nearly 75 years, Herb remembered the name of the ship that transported him and his fellow replacements to Morocco. It was the **“SS Borinquen”**, which had been built by the Bethlehem Shipyard in Quincy, Massachusetts. That ship had been requisitioned by the British to carry troops from England to North Africa, and was later utilized for other military operations including efforts to secure Sicily.

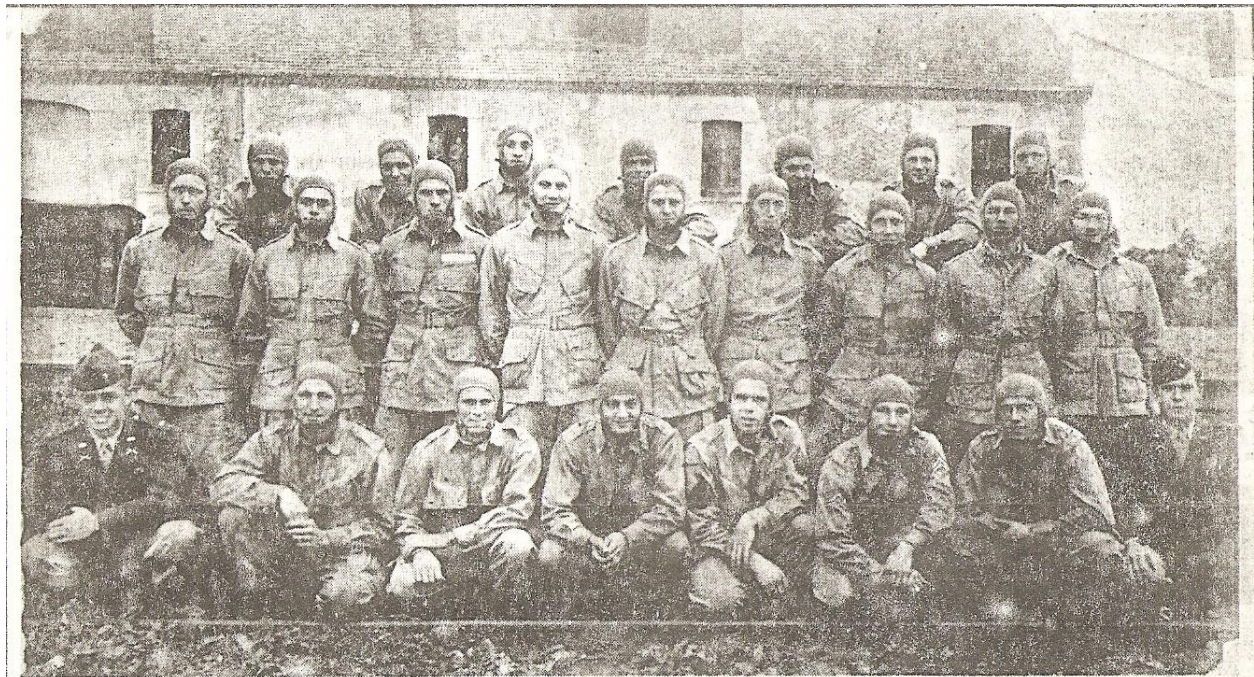
Once the rear detachment (**now part of the 2nd Battalion, 509th Parachute Infantry**) arrived in Casablanca they boarded boxcars for a **lengthy rail trip**, first to **Oujda, Morocco**, and then eastward across Algeria to the capital **Algiers**. On **Christmas Eve of 1942** Herb's platoon arrived in Algiers and he remembered bivouacking in an abandoned movie theatre. Unfortunately, the movie theatre soon came under **“friendly anti-aircraft fire”**. Apparently several 20mm rounds from Allied gunners (trying to fend off enemy aircraft) fell on the theatre and some of Herb's platoon members were wounded. Because of increased enemy aerial resistance in the area the 509th was first withdrawn to **Mascara, Algeria**, until getting orders to proceed to **Maison Carree, which is near Boufarik, Algeria**. While Herb was among those billeted at Maison Carree, other 509ers were located closer to Maison Blanche Aerodrome (which is about 8 miles southwest of Algiers).

Training continued for the 509th in North Africa and Herb took part in several practice jumps. One of those practice jumps was particularly dangerous when he volunteered to be a **“pathfinder”**. That training mission involved approximately a hundred C-47's that were scheduled to fly from airfields in and around Youk-Les-Bains, Algeria (near the Tunisian border), out over the Gulf of Tunis, around the **Island of Pantelleria** (about a 100 miles S/W of Sicily), and return to bases in Algeria and Tunisia. It was a night training mission intended to help improve navigational skills for the flight crews, but also to coordinate how a mass jump might be conducted (should it be required for the invasion of Sicily).

Aboard each aircraft was a single paratrooper. Near the conclusion of the mission each paratrooper would jump from their respective aircraft hoping to hit a designated location, and flight crews would then return to their original departure points. The training mission went according to plan until the aircraft were on their return flight from Pantelleria. Knowing that navigation at night was a significant issue, Herb was particularly concerned as to when he would be ordered to jump. With the return flight from Pantelleria being entirely over water, flight crews hoped for a clear indication when they'd be over land. That didn't happen on Herb's aircraft, but he was still given an order to make his jump. Seeing nothing but blackness from the open doorway Herb stated it was the only time in his military service that he ever **disobeyed an order to jump**. He somehow sensed the aircraft was still over water, and he was right. Some time passed before Herb could see the outline of water breaking onto a shoreline below. Recognizing he was now safely over land he made his jump, having no idea where he might be. Fortunately he landed near an airfield, although it was still the middle of the night. Finding his way to a guard post he presented himself to some shocked military personnel. Fortunately the parachute he was still carrying helped to convince them how he had **“appeared out of nowhere”**.

From December 1942 until June 1943 the 509th trained in North Africa (at various locations in Algeria and Tunisia), in preparation for the Allied invasion of Sicily (Operation Husky). That operation was being

scheduled for July of 1943. During that time, on **March 2, 1943** Herb's 509th **Demolition Platoon** was photographed as a group in **Boufarik, Algeria**. A copy of that photograph was first printed in an issue of "Static Line" magazine, and subsequently published (on Page 111) in a book entitled "Stand In The



DEMOLITIONS PLATOON—HQ & HQ CO. 509th PCHT INF. BN TAKEN MARCH 2, 1943—BOUFARIK, ALGERIA. 1st Row, L. to R.—2nd Lt. Chas McKinney, Asst. Plat Ldr., Sgt. Lloyd Bjelland, Sgt. Romus Holder; Sgt. Louis Catizone; S/Sgt. Rby Cagle, Plat Sgt.; Cpl. Reynolds; Cpl. Olesh; 1st Lt. J. R. Martin, Plat Ldr. Standing, L. to R.—PFC Carls; Pvt. McGrath; PFC Durand; Pvt. Porter; Pvt. Guy Jeanes; Pvt. Green Presley; Pvt. Grieder; Pvt. Wilson; Pvt. King; Pvt. Szalamacha; Pvt. Marshall; Pvt. Sousa; Pvt. Murray; Pvt. Curtis; Pvt. Holcombe; Pvt. Bowers. Missing from picture—Poindexter, Piper and Cpl. Woodhead.

Door", by author Charles H. Doyle. While the men of the Demolitions Platoon were not identified in the book, they've subsequently been identified in the above photograph, with Herb located in the second row directly behind Lt. McKinney.

In May of 1943 Herb's outfit was back in Oujda, French Morocco, and located in tents at an area they called Camp Kunkle. In a V-mail to his older brother Sgt. Dorris E. Carls on May 20, 1943 he wrote that he was "ready to see some other country", and "a bit homesick". On June 27, 1943 the 509th boarded French boxcars for a lengthy week long trip to Kairouan, Tunisia, arriving there on July 5th. By August 2nd the 509th had moved again to El Alem, Tunisia. During the invasion of Sicily, the **509th was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division** (or as the 509th humorously stated, the 82nd Airborne was attached to them), but **held in division reserve** and therefore saw no direct action during that campaign. Once Sicily was secured by the Allies, the **509th was flown to Licata, Sicily on Sept. 5th** to continue training for the invasion of Italy.

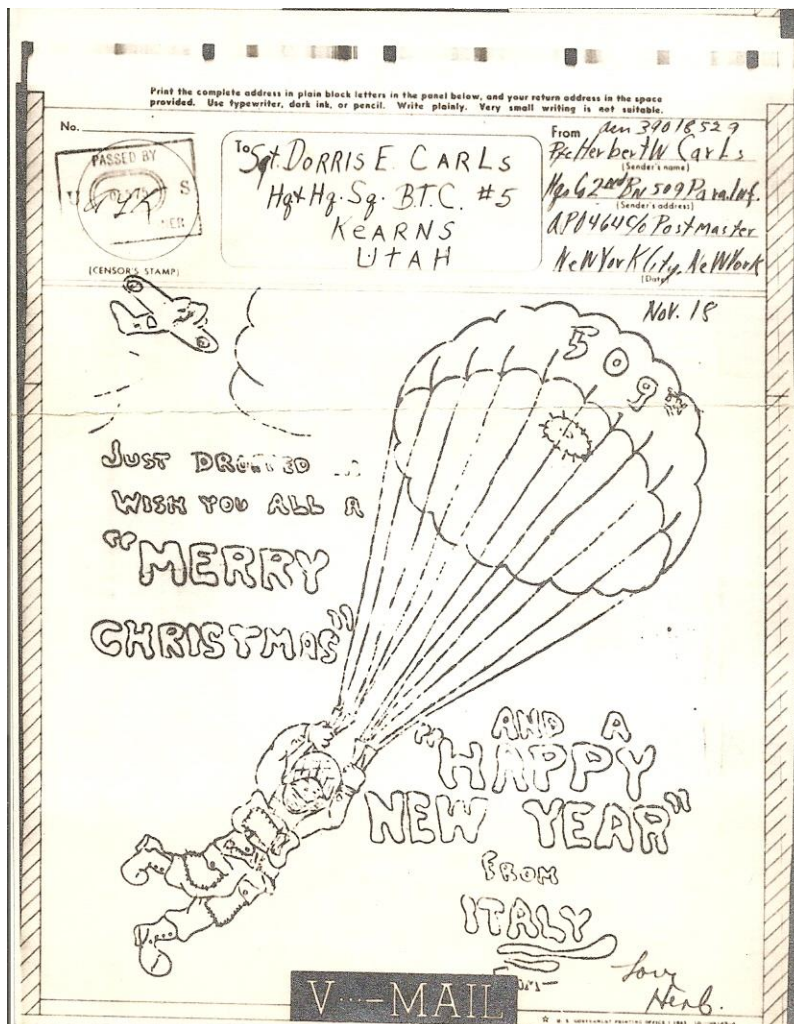
Invasion of Italy

The invasion of Italy (Operation Avalanche) began in September 1943, with an amphibious assault by the Fifth Army at **Salerno, Italy**. The **509th was initially attached to the Fifth Army but held in reserve**, while **part of the 82nd Airborne Division** (or visa versa). However, when the beachhead at Salerno was

determined to be in danger, orders came that the 82nd Airborne Division would be dropped inside American lines, to reinforce the beachhead, whereas the 509th was specifically tasked with a mission of cutting enemy supply lines behind German defensive positions. Herb's Demolitions Platoon was dispersed among the rifle companies of the 509th so that each rifle company would have demolition support. The night assault into the area around **Avellino, Italy (about 20 miles north of Salerno)**, was **Herb's first combat jump**, and it took place on **Sept. 14, 1943**. Interestingly, Herb recalled singing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" while he was getting ready to make his jump, prior to arriving at the drop zone (DZ). With all the engine noise and rushing wind from the open door, he doubted anyone could hear him, so it became his way of dealing with all the stress. What the 509th didn't know at the time was that their DZ was located in a valley occupied the night before by the 6th German Armored Panzer Division. While most of the 509th was able to evade capture, individuals were scattered all over the place and a large number spent several weeks behind German lines. Some paratroopers managed to assemble in small size elements but were fortunate if they were able to hook up with just a few others. What this did achieve however, was a lot of disruption in the rear areas of the German Army. During this time Herb and another unidentified 509er managed to capture a German corporal (and a Frenchman who had been forced into service under the German). While trying to scrounge for food and water they managed to avoid capture themselves, while taking turns guarding their prisoners. To avoid being surprised by their captives, one of the paratroopers had to be awake at all times, until returning to the American lines. It took 13 days (as Herb noted in a V-mail to his older brother) but they were finally able to hook up with other members of the 509th and turned over their prisoners to military intelligence for interrogation. Herb and his fellow paratrooper were exhausted from the ordeal so immediately went looking for other members of their demo unit (and to obtain food and shelter). The following morning they received word that both the German corporal and Frenchman had been shot "supposedly trying to escape". Herb was livid and never forgave the military personnel responsible for their security. He felt that if his captives had wanted to attempt an escape they would have done so during their time with him, not while being held for interrogation. Footnote: As an indication of how this personally affected Herb, at a 509th reunion held at Fort Benning, Ga. in 2008, Herb happened to spot one of the individual's involved in the "interrogation". After 70 years he was still too upset to confront the individual. That person will remain nameless but we later learned he admitted having some responsibility for what happened and how it turned into an "escape attempt". Not knowing or understanding the details of what actually took place, Herb was left to speculate that it may have been an "unconscionable act", but hard to prove during wartime.

The remnants of Herb's outfit finally managed to re-assemble in the area around **Salerno, Italy** by **September 28, 1943**. After working their way towards Naples, Italy, where the 509th lived primarily in tents, Herb and a few other platoon members were fortunate in being able to move into a school that was located in **Piscinola, Italy** (a northern suburb of Naples). While staying at the school, men of the 509th were able to conduct training operations for an amphibious landing being planned for Anzio, Italy. According to a recollection by Ned E. Dillwith, another 509th paratrooper, he and Herb bunked together while at the school, and they would likewise share a foxhole (for many days) later in the war (near St. Vith, Belgium).

On Nov. 18, 1943, and knowing how long it would take for mail to reach home, Herb had someone in his outfit sketch a cartoon paratrooper on a V-mail that he would send home to his older brother for Christmas. If anyone should recognize the artist of this Christmas greeting, we'd like to know.



On **December 10, 1943** remnants of the battalion were reorganized and **re-designated as Company A, 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion**, but most importantly they were finally recognized as an independent unit. During this period, October through December 1943, the battalion began operating with **Darby's Rangers**, and fought as a mountain infantry unit on the high ground above **Venafro, Italy**.

The 509th next took part in the **amphibious assault at Anzio, Italy, on January 21, 1944** (as part of Operation Shingle). They were still operating with Darby's Rangers, and were part of the first assault wave of the invasion force. The Rangers sent two battalions against an elite German Armored Division on the beachhead, while the 509th was assigned a critical defensive position which they held despite heavy losses. For its heroic actions in stopping the desperate **German counterattack at Carano, Italy**, the 509th was awarded a **Presidential Unit Citation**, the first parachute unit so honored.

During a night attack on **March 14, 1944** the 509th was involved in a conflict where **Corporal Paul B. Huff became the first paratrooper to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor**. By the time the awards ceremony was held on May 11th, Paul had been promoted to S/ Sgt, and Herb recalled being at that ceremony. Herb and Paul had crossed paths much earlier (at one unusual point) when Paul was still a Corporal. Herb had been part of a **guard duty** detail when **Corporal Huff** was brought into the military stockade. Herb said that a rumor was going around that Corporal Huff was being held on charges stemming “from firing off a round at the feet of an officer”, but as rumors go it was more likely someone had embellished the story. What he later learned is that Corporal Huff was arrested for punching an officer (a new lieutenant). It was soon determined that Corporal Huff had been ordered (by the new lieutenant) to attack a position that would have placed his squad in needless danger. When the circumstances determined the order had been unnecessary, a senior officer countermanded the order and Corporal Huff was released. In any case, Herb always thought the rumor was much more amusing since it sounded “audacious”, and something that just might have happened.

Another of Herb’s recollections, while he was near Anzio, took place while fighting had bogged down and his squad had taken cover in some foxholes (simple trenches or holes dug to provide cover from enemy fire). While Herb was lying on his back in a foxhole he was witness to an air battle that took place in the sky directly overhead. Just as a **flight of B-24 Liberator bombers** was passing, they were jumped by German Luftwaffe fighters. In clear sight Herb witnessed 4 of the heavy American bombers being shot down. Herb recalled that sadly there were no parachute’s to be seen from any of the bombers (indicating no survivors). Because each bomber carried a crew of up to 10 men, that meant approximately 40 men died in just a few minutes, directly over him. As an airborne infantryman he knew what it felt like to bail out of an aircraft, but as he stated with a lot of compassion, “**those boys never had a chance**”. For Herb to witness that kind of carnage left a lasting impression when he realized what American flight crews had to deal with. For once he was glad his feet were firmly on the ground.

During his time at Anzio, Herb also described an instance where he was involved in taking a “**long range shot**”. Herb said he and several other men in his demo platoon had found cover in an irrigation channel, and were working their way upstream when they spotted something curious quite a distance away. A German soldier had exited some kind of structure and was getting ready to toss something out, what Herb thought might have been wash water from a pan. Herb didn’t recall if this was seen through binoculars or a scope, but said it was obvious the soldier felt he was beyond rifle range since he was going about his daily chores and was clearly out in the open. Herb seized upon the opportunity to let him know “**Americans were in the area**”, so he exchanged his carbine for an older model British .30-06 Enfield rifle (with iron sights) that someone else had been carrying. A quick discussion among the paratroopers determined the distance to be at least 1,300 yards. Herb recalled using a prone position (for better stability) and raising the sights accordingly, although he then added what he added “a touch more elevation just because it was so far away”. Herb recalled the iron sights on the Enfield rifle could be elevated for up to 1,500 – 1,600 yards, but figured it was nearly impossible to actually hit anything accurately at that distance. Nonetheless Herb fired the shot and said “it took a surprising amount of time before the German reacted”. Although he was untouched, the soldier was keenly aware he had

been the target of someone (since the bullet struck so near). Herb said the German immediately dove for cover but had no clue the shooter was at least ¾ of a mile away.

Southern France Campaign

After Anzio, the 509th conducted its fifth combat assault, spearheading an attack on Southern France as part of **Operation Dragoon**. The 509th was now part of the **First Airborne Task Force and their combat jump took place on August 15, 1944 at Le Muy, France**. Note: It wasn't until 63 years later that Herb would learn something very interesting about his specific landing site at Le Muy. He was relating the details of that particular jump, to several 509ers (at the 2008 Fort Benning, Ga. reunion), when he happened to mention that it turned out to be the **"softest landing he ever made"**. He had landed in heavy ground fog and found himself in an area of grape vineyards, but was in a small group of trees. Although unable to see much he released his harness and found he was hanging barely a foot off the ground. Unbeknownst to Herb, another paratrooper landed in the same trees. It turned out to be platoon Sgt. Robert N. Poindexter, who just happened to be at the 2008 reunion, and was sitting at the very same table as Herb. Robert immediately recalled his own soft landing, and stated it was unusual because the landing site seemed to be devoid of everything except grapevines and those few trees. Although practically landing on top of each other, neither Herb nor Robert had any idea (until 2008) that they had both landed in the same trees.

On **August 30, 1944 American paratroops liberated the city of Nice**. That was the official military version of what happened. However, Herb and two other 509ers, along with the citizens of Nice, France (who witnessed its liberation) tell somewhat of a different story. Herb tells it this way. It all started with a scouting mission to probe the German lines outside the city. It was actually **the day before (August 29th, 1944)**, that Sgt. Poindexter, their platoon leader Lt. Shaw, and Herb were on a road leading towards Nice. They soon came upon a French ambulance and driver. The driver claimed the city had been abandoned by the Germans and he was willing to show them. Lt. Shaw decided it was worth the look so the three paratroopers proceeded cautiously in the ambulance towards the city. Finding everything as they'd been told, and with the townspeople overjoyed for being "liberated", the citizens began celebrating by holding a large street party, with lots of wine being consumed. Herb indicated that Lt. Shaw was encouraged to give a speech in the town square, which he did so from a second floor balcony. Later, after the paratroopers had sampled some of the town wine, Lt. Shaw tried to tip someone for what he had consumed and became annoyed when they wouldn't accept his tip (the language barrier didn't help much either). Hoping to persuade whoever was offending him, Lt. Shaw got a bit animated with his sidearm so Herb decided to "disarm him before someone got hurt". Before things got further out of hand, the three paratroopers returned to headquarters to report that "anyone can walk right in to Nice", as it was unoccupied by Germans. The following day (August 30th) the 509th officially entered Nice and "liberated the city", and of course celebrated with another party. So now you know **"who really liberated Nice, France"**.

At some point, while the 509th was working their way northeast along the French coast, Herb recalled being involved in combat because the Germans had violated the neutrality of the Principality of Monaco. The Germans had retreated to positions inside the Principality, but the 509th had obtained permission

to make “forceful entry” until the situation was cleared. In the book “Stand in the Door”, by Charles H. Doyle he states on Page 295 that the reigning monarch Prince Louis II readily provided Captain Walls of the 509th with an official letter allowing them to “expel the Germans”. To this day there is a commemorative plaque where the Principality honors the 509th for their “liberation”. Herb recalled one other interesting note about his time in Monaco. Once the Principality had been liberated of any Germans, Herb said he and a few other 509ers had an opportunity to actually see some of the “treasures” they had helped to protect. In what was later determined to be a residence of someone in the royal family (but at the time thought to be a museum), they were privileged to actually see how the monarchy “was getting by”. Herb noted that the Germans would have “loved to get their hands on some of that”.

The 509th continued fighting their way northeast towards the French Maritime Alps (north of Nice, France and near the Italian border). By this time Herb had received a **field promotion from Private First Class (Pfc) to platoon Sergeant**. He was proud of that fact, since his promotion skipped the rank of Corporal.

The Belgium Campaign (Battle of the Bulge)

With the campaign in Southern France winding down, it was early **December of 1944** and the **509th was ordered attached to the 101st Airborne Division**. They were subsequently moved by rail and truck to an area approximately 50 miles northeast of Paris, referred to as **Villers-Cotterets**. When the surprise German offensive (known as the “Battle of the Bulge”) took place in the Ardennes Forest of Belgium (on **Dec. 16, 1944**), the 509th was immediately called up from France to help repel the German advance. They were hurriedly assembled, most men without proper winter gear, and transported northwest by trucks to one of the besieged areas known as **Manhay, Belgium (northwest of Bastogne)**. Upon arrival on **Dec. 23rd the 509th was first attached to the 3rd Armored Division**, then fell under the control of the **VII Corps**. Herb’s Demolition Platoon (as part of Headquarters Company) was assigned to reinforce A Company and to block an important crossroads into Manhay. Fighting continued for several days until the German advance was able to be halted. Herb’s outfit then moved towards the village of **Trois-Ponts** and by Dec. 27 they were at Erezee (west of **Sadzot, Belgium**). While attempting to secure Sadzot (which is located approximately 20 miles north of Bastogne), the 509th held out until December 30th against two Panzer Grenadier Battalions (among Germany’s most elite mechanized infantry units). Some of the fiercest fighting to drive back the German attack took place in and around Sadzot. For its actions the **509th was awarded its second Presidential Unit Citation**.

It was also in the area around Sadzot, Belgium that Herb received his **only battle wound**. Although Herb is listed in several publications as being “the only man who never missed a day of combat with the Battalion”, it almost didn’t happen. Herb was actually **grazed by a German bullet** in what could be described as “fortunate circumstances”. Herb said his outfit was relocating “from one hell hole to another”, and were hiking along a road. When his squad was told they could “take a break” and “smoke em if you have em”, Herb decided to keep moving. As he continued in motion a bullet tore thru his left sleeve (just above the sergeant strips on his jacket), which left Herb with a 3 inch streak that “burned like crazy”. He first expected to see a lot of blood, and briefly thought it might be “his ticket

home”, but the wound never drew any blood because it basically cauterized itself. Not wanting to make a big deal out of a “nasty burn”, he simply sought some field dressing and went back to his squad. According to Herb, it was his willingness to keep moving that probably saved his life. His final comment was, “if I had been standing still that bullet might have caught me right between the eyes”. It was just one more reason why his guardian angel can take credit for Herb never missing a day in combat.

By **Jan. 4, 1945** the 509th and Herb’s demolition platoon were finally relieved of their **frontline defense at Kin and ordered to Lorce, Belgium**, where they would be considered Corps reserve. By **Jan. 12, 1945** they were once again called to action and **ordered attached to the 7th Armored Division**, moving to attack German positions south of **St. Vith, Belgium**. Eventually the 509th was able to secure the remaining territory (originally lost to the German offensive) and siezed the high ground west of Born, Belgium (near the German border). It was near St. Vith that Herb and Ned E. Dillwith shared that foxhole (mentioned earlier). Soon afterwards Ned was wounded in the leg when men of the 509th suddenly stood up and attacked German positions in what they referred to as “**marching fire**”. As a result of those actions, Herb was among only forty-eight enlisted men (and seven officers) who remained combat ready (from the entire battalion).

What the 509th didn’t know (at the time) is that they had fallen victim to reorganization. Orders from the War Department in Washington had actually been issued back on Dec. 1, 1944, that the **509th Parachute Infantry Battalion** should be **disbanded**, but those orders weren’t fully implemented until much later because the 509th had been rushed into action in Belgium. Throughout December of 1944, and into January of 1945, the troops of the 509th never got word they’d been disbanded and were **now (once again) part of the 82nd Airborne**.

One specific recollection during his time near **St. Vith** took place around Jan. 23rd when Herb was awakened at about 2:00AM by an officer and ordered to knock out a machine gun nest (supposedly located in a barn) less than two miles away. The 509th had been ordered to set up several road blocks S/O St. Vith and this obstacle needed to be cleared. Thru the early morning silence, Herb could hear short bursts of automatic gun fire but it sounded isolated to just one area. As a platoon Sergeant Herb had been requested to select a “squad” (typically 4 to 12 men) to do the job, but decided that because conditions were so terrible, he would take only two men to accompany him. It was bitter cold, not unlike any other night in the Ardennes at that time of year. With little sleep, and a good chance that someone might be injured or killed, they made a silent approach to the suspected machine gun nest. Herb recalled seeing short bursts of flame coming from a barn. Crawling through snow to get close, Herb still had no idea how many soldiers they might encounter. It just seemed he and his two men were terribly outgunned. None of the paratroopers had any automatic weapons with them, and in the darkness it was impossible to see much. Herb had two hand grenades strapped to his chest and decided to toss them both into the barn, if he could get close enough to hurl them. He purposely tossed them into different corners of the barn, to increase his odds of hitting something. Somehow he managed to find enough cover to toss both grenades into the barn, while his men provided covering fire. Both grenades exploded and the gun fire immediately stopped. Herb figured he’d be asked to confirm the “machine gun” was disabled, so carefully crept into the barn to see what damage had been done. As dawn was approaching, he was finally able to see the body of a dead German officer (Herb stated the

emblems on his tunic signified a rank equivalent to Captain). The officer had with him a Schmeisser Machine Pistol, which according to Herb could fire up to 600 rounds per minute. Whether that was the weapon being fired in short bursts or another was hard to tell. Although short bursts from the Schmeisser might have been perceived as “a machine gun”, it was unlikely since they had a distinctly different sound. It also seemed unlikely that an officer would have been responsible for all the gunfire. Something just didn’t add up and Herb said that he and his men were “scared to death” others were in the barn, so didn’t want to go “nosing around in the dark for more trouble”. They figured they’d been real lucky up till then, so just wanted to “get the hell out of there” in one piece. As they did, Herb decided to take one quick check of the officer, to see if he was carrying anything important. In the officer’s tunic jacket Herb found a Walther P-38 pistol, but before he could check further they “got the crap scared out of them”. From another part of the barn they heard moaning and calling for help (in German). Apparently Herb’s hunch had been right, that there were others with the officer, and they had likely been injured by the second hand grenade. Not knowing what else they were facing in the pre-dawn hours, Herb and his men decided to beat a hasty retreat and report knocking out at least one machine gun (a pistol) which due to their haste was left behind.

The following day, Headquarters Company sent out a larger force, to do an assessment of the damage in the barn, and to see if anyone might still be there (and possibly wounded). Herb didn’t take part in that effort, but was later called in for a “debriefing”, which meant he was asked to describe exactly what happened the night before. After doing so the officer grinned and said to Herb, “well you must have been in a hell of a hurry to get out of there, because you missed a third pistol the officer was carrying....., a LUGER”. Herb was stunned this guy was so heavily armed, but also surprised he was the only person found in the barn. The other soldiers (although likely wounded) had somehow managed to get away on their own, and likely took the Schmeisser with them.

The amusing part is that Herb (now 97 years of age) is still unhappy for overlooking the Luger pistol, which guys in combat considered a real collector’s item. He believed it was more valuable than the Walther P-38 pistol he’d “confiscated”, and turned over as evidence of their encounter. All Herb knew was that “he and his boys had done what they were ordered to do, and all lived to see another day”.

By Jan. 29, 1945 remnants of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion were moving southwest from St. Vith, Belgium, back to Trois-Ponts (for some much needed R & R), when a remarkable and heartwarming event took place. Late one afternoon, as Herb’s demolition platoon was settling into a schoolhouse to bivouac overnight, someone informed Herb that a Catholic chaplain was looking for him. Herb had no clue why a Catholic chaplain would be looking for him, especially since he was Lutheran by faith. Within minutes the chaplain, accompanied by Herb’s **younger brother Wilbert** (also known as Webb) appeared out of nowhere. The chaplain had heard that the 509th PIR was somewhere in the area of Webb’s unit and had commandeered a driver and jeep to help him locate Webb’s brother. Having successfully reunited the brothers, the chaplain suggested to Herb that he seek permission to return with his brother for a longer visit. Herb’s commanding officer at first denied his request, but the longer he thought about it the more compassionate he became. Finally, Herb stated (after a few agonizing minutes) the officer said, “Aw hell, grab your weapon and get outta here. You got a day but if we’re gone when you get back, it’ll be up to you to find us. Can you do that?” All Herb said was “I’ll do my

best sir". With that permission the driver, chaplain and two brothers piled into the jeep and headed for Webb's outfit.

At this point it should be noted that brother Webb was simply fortunate to be alive. He had been in charge of an M-16 half-track vehicle (that carried a quad mount anti-aircraft gun), which was part of the 447th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion. That unit had been with Battery B of the 107th Field Artillery Battalion only a month prior, and had been assigned to the 110th Infantry Regiment of the 28th Infantry Division (known as "The Keystone Division"). When the surprise German winter offensive (the Bulge) began on Dec. 16, 1944, Webb's guncrew was in a relatively safe location (supposedly) near Consthun, Luxemburg (about 10 to 12 miles east of Bastogne, Belgium), but things quickly turned deadly. The initial attack by German forces had quickly overrun Webb's position, but remarkably his gun crew had survived thanks in part to the concealment of an underground position. Somehow, Webb's gun crew managed to evade capture and remain hidden long enough until nightfall, where they were able to sneak back thru German lines and re-locate elements of the 110th Infantry Regiment near Wiltz, Luxemburg. That was the good news. Unfortunately, their position of retreat still left them in the area of Bastogne, which was soon surrounded by German forces. They remained surrounded until Gen. George S. Patton and the Third Army were able to break thru and relieve them by Dec. 26, 1944.

Once the German advance stalled, Herb's brother had been relocated to a **crossroads (believed to be near Taverneux) which is north of Bastogne**. From this new position, it turned out that the brothers units were **barely a half hour's distance apart**. Thanks first of all, to an unnamed chaplain who recalled that a specific paratrooper unit was in the vicinity, and an unnamed officer who allowed Herb to actually leave his unit, this improbable reunion managed to take place. Herb recalled being so excited that he failed to take much with him, except his helmet, carbine and musette bag. The reunion was joyous and although it was late before the boys arrived at Webb's point of bivouac, it was hardly a concern. They sat up all night smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee to stay awake. Herb had failed to grab any rations with him (because he left so quickly), but recalled he "must have gotten something to eat the next morning with Webb's gun crew". Food was the least of his concerns. The brother's spent the morning and part of that day together as well, but Herb remembered starting to feel "real antsy" that the 509th might be "pulling out". If they had, finding his outfit was going to be tricky so he said his goodbyes and left in the early afternoon. Imagine the anxiety he had in leaving, not knowing whether he'd ever see his brother again, wondering if his own outfit would still be where he left them, or how he would find them if they had moved on. This time there was no jeep to transport him, he was on his own. He first headed down a dirt path on foot (for about a mile) before reaching a main road. Fortunately he was able to hitch a ride on a 1 ton Army truck "headed in the right direction". About a half hour later he arrived back at the schoolhouse (where the 509th had bivouacked the evening before). Approaching the schoolhouse he realized how fortunate he was. His outfit was loading their gear onto trucks and "pulling out". He had "arrived barely in the nick of time".

The German Campaign

The 509th officially ceased to exist on March 1, 1945, so the remaining able-bodied men from that unit were parceled out to various airborne units. Most (including Herb) were **reassigned to the 505th PIR** and

continued their fight northeast into Germany. The only positive thing to happen was that German resistance was seemingly less and less. Herb also described it in a different way. He said he was finally able to “scrounge for a few things without so much fear of it being bobby trapped”. He recalled one time where he and his squad were searching house-to-house (in some unnamed village) when they came upon a cobblers shop. Searching thru some drawers for weapons or contraband Herb came across an entire drawer of **chocolate bars**. Not wanting the chocolate to go to waste, and to be sure it didn't melt when he carried it next to his body (like in a knapsack), he hit upon a great solution. Finding a 4 or 5 inch howitzer brass shell casing nearby he packed the chocolate bars tightly into the casing and made off with the whole package. Herb recalled those chocolate bars as being the best kind of “trading material” (because who doesn't love chocolate).

Herb had several other recollections about his final days of service during World War II. On or about April 14th, as his outfit was on the road, word came down that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (**FDR**) **had suffered a stroke** and passed away. Even as a Republican, Herb had a special wartime admiration for both the President and his wife. Later in the war, Herb learned that FDR's death had actually been on **April 12, 1945** (at the summer White House in Silver Springs, Georgia). That event had a profound effect on Herb because as he put it, “**he had lost his President**”. Note: In July of 2008 (after leaving the 509th Parachute Infantry reunion held at Fort Benning, Ga.) he travelled with his nephew Wayne to Silver Springs, Ga. to visit the summer White House, and to see the actual room where FDR passed away. Even though FDR had passed away 63 years prior, to be standing in the same room where it occurred was still deeply moving. This was the place where Herb's “commander-in-chief” had died, and Herb had fought for that President for nearly 3 years.

By **mid-April of 1945** everyone knew the war was nearly over (and just trying to survive to go home), but what Herb remembered most was suffering miserably from the effects of a very bad cold. Herb said his squad was bivouacked in some damaged buildings to the west of the **Elbe River in Germany**, where he was trying to “**self-medicate**” (with his own choice for a cold remedy, a dose of cognac). As he was trying to sleep off the effects (both of the cognac and the cold), he was startled awake by a lot of noise, with sounds of metal banging together. Finally able to wake up long enough to look outside the building, he spotted a long column of German soldiers coming down the road, remnants of the German Army. They were mostly old men and young boys, loosely marching along but without weapons. Apparently they had discarded their weapons and were simply headed toward the American lines. The war in Europe was nearly over and these weary men and boys were carrying the only possessions they still had (mostly cooking gear). Their appearance was surreal according to Herb, because “none of them looked threatening”, but they were “still considered my enemy”. They were in such bad shape that Herb said he couldn't help but feel some compassion for them. They had somehow managed to survive a brutal war that few of them wanted or deserved. Most German military objectives had ceased by this time and this remnant of the German Army was as Herb put it “in survival mode”. They had one objective.....to survive Russian capture. With so many German soldiers surrendering, the American Army soon found themselves in a new role, that of guard and protector.

Link-up with the Russians

Within just a few days Herb's platoon would cross a pontoon bridge over the Elbe River and make contact with the front lines of the **Russian Army** (who were coming into **Wittenburge, Germany**), but there was little celebration. The few paratroopers that remained from the **original 509th were still part of the 505th PIR, and they were assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division**. With all the rumors floating around about the Russians, Herb said his outfit was very cautious at making new friends. For Herb in particular, the irony of the situation was a bit overwhelming. Many of **Herb's ancestors** had originally immigrated from Mecklenburg, Germany (in the 1870's and 80's), which was literally within 60 miles of his location. What he couldn't help but think was that just days before he may have seen distant family members now fleeing these same Russians. Germany was still their country, but it was in total ruin and there was little hope of any future under Russian domination.

Heading Home (and Discharge)

The war in Europe (**VE-Day**) **officially ended May 8, 1945** but Herb's outfit remained in the area of **Hamburg, Germany** as part of the **occupation forces until June of 1945** when the men who had served the longest began being released for **return to the States**. Herb travelled by train back to Le Muy, France and from there he boarded a troop ship for New York. From New York he travelled by train to the **Separation Center at Camp Beale, Ca.** and on **June 26, 1945** he was released from military service. Herb's Separation and Honorable Discharge papers reflect that his **last unit** was with was the **505th PIR**. He had been in military service for a total of **three years, four months and twenty-two days**, and amassed a total of 23 parachute jumps (training and combat jumps). Although nearly all of his jumps were from Douglas C-47 "Skytrain" aircraft, he did recall one jump as a Special Forces volunteer from an unknown aircraft, and another from one with a set of double doors (possibly a Curtiss C-46 Commando). His discharge papers state that he was mustered out at the rank of Private First Class.

His separation however, does not reflect the fact that he previously received a **field promotion to Platoon Sergeant**, which **took place as the 509th was being attached to the Fifth Army**. Also of significant importance is the fact that this promotion came prior to issuance of the Dec. 1, 1944 document that **officially disbanded the 509th**. In that document, as ordered by Copy No. 113 of the Adjutant General's Office in Washington, D. C., it states under Article 2, b. that **"No enlisted man will be reduced in grade as a result of this action"**. That document has become the rallying point for what his nephew considers the last and most deserving chapter of Herb's military service.

Epilogue

At the time of his release from military service, Herb was simply thrilled to be a civilian once again, so he never pursued restoration of his military rank (to what it had once been). However, if you believe in the military code of honor and justice, you'll agree that the rank of this American Paratrooper should be restored to that of Sergeant, as he appears in this cherished photograph (note the Fifth Army patch just above Herb's Sgt. stripes indicating the timeframe of his promotion).

