

BOB HART

The odyssey of a
"Battling Buzzard"



*“Anything worth dying for ...
is certainly worth living for.”*

—Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*

It was August 15, 1944, D-Day for *Dragoon*, the Allied invasion of southern France. Fifteen-hundred feet above a drop zone shrouded in fog, the wind buffeted Bob Hart’s helmet the instant before he plunged into the unknown at 4:35 a.m.

“As soon as you got to the doorway all you saw was white. Most of us figured we were jumping over the Mediterranean. And for a split second all you could think was ‘I got 120 pounds of gear on me. What’s going to happen when I land?’ ”

But now he was falling.

“A thousand and one,” Hart said to himself as another paratrooper sprang from the doorway of the lumbering C-47.

“A thousand and two.

“A thousand and...”

Hart’s body harness jerked taut reassuringly as the primary parachute billowed. Had he got past “three” he would have yanked the ripcord for the reserve chute bundled on his chest. The business about paratroopers yelling “Geronimo!” was mostly bravado that got old in a hurry after jump school.

Descending in the eerie whiteness, the 20-year-old machine gunner from Tacoma fleetingly remembered how he and a buddy had signed up for the paratroopers 16 months



Pfc. Robert D. Hart in the fall of 1943 after he won his jump wings. *All photos from Robert Hart collection unless otherwise noted.*



Paratroopers prepare for a practice jump from a C-47.

earlier at Fort Lewis, reasoning they wouldn't have to do much walking. Fat chance.

After Hart landed hard in a farmer's field in the foothills above the Côte d'Azur, he ended up tramping 50 miles through hostile countryside on an aching foot that turned out to be broken. The parachute bundle containing his machine gun was never found, and one of the battalion's officers was rendered *hors de combat* on landing, sustaining a stake up his butt. Only about 20 percent of the U.S. Army's 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team landed within two miles of the drop zone. And the platoon's radio man didn't bring the battery.

Good morning, World War Two!

For days like that, the GI's invented an acronym that became part of the American lexicon: SNAFU (Situation Normal All F***** Up. Or, in polite company, "All Fouled Up").

"Luckily, we were over dry land after all, but the parachute's coming down over my head because there wasn't much wind, and I'm trying to assemble the two pieces of my M-1." Hart chuckles as he pantomimes struggling with his rifle while draped in 28 feet of nylon. When he emerged into what was literally the fog of war, he heard someone nearby. "I said the first part of our password—'Liberty' or something like that. You were supposed to answer with 'France.' And very shakily I heard the right answer. It was Lt. Carl Starkey, the toughest guy in the outfit. Of all the people in the world, he was the guy

I'd rather be with in this situation. And he was just as jittery as I was. We spent the next hour looking for my machine gun bundle. Finally, I said to myself, 'Well, I don't have to carry that goddamn machine gun any more!' Thirty pounds of dead weight.

"It took us three hours to find my assistant gunner and the ammo bearer. We trudged down the road leading to the crossroads village of Les Arcs and discovered that the gunner from the Second Squad has broken his back. His machine gun is there beside him in the ditch. So now I have a machine gun again."

He'd need it. Though the last large-scale night jump of World War II was off to a bumpy start, the "Battling Buzzards" of the 517th—some of the fittest, most resourceful soldiers in the annals of warfare—

did what they were trained to do: regroup, improvise as needed and engage the enemy. They proceeded to throw the Germans "into a state of chaos," repulsed a counterattack and dug in as artillery duels "echoed through the valleys of the Maritime Alps," their proud colonel wrote afterward.

"There's not many of us left who remember that," Hart says, leafing through a souvenir booklet marked "Passed by censors for mailing home."

Hart's wise and witty wife of 67 years, Kathleen ("Kath"), asked the historian if he'd like a toasted cheese sandwich, noting, "Bob likes baloney on his." Bob shoots her a wink. Here's something important you should know about Bob: There's mischief but not much baloney in his war stories. In 1944, he was the quintessential American GI, a genuinely



Bob in 1945.

brave, blue-eyed kid striving to stay sane—and alive—in a world gone horrifically mad. Bob tells the sort of war stories you seldom hear. Some are hilarious, such as the perils of second-hand sleeping bags and the card-shark priest who dispensed communion before emptying your wallet. Many are heartbreaking: A crumpled glider filled with dead GI's; a squad of buddies killed by Friendly Fire. "You see stuff like that and you wonder how you can go on," Hart says, shaking his head. "You felt bad, but there wouldn't have been an Army in Europe if you didn't think 'It's not going to be me.' That's why they like 18-year-olds as soldiers. You get up to 25 and you start thinking, 'Hey, they're trying to kill me!'"

They were definitely trying to kill him when the 517th made it to Belgium in the dead of winter, 1944-45. Feet frozen, Hart was evacuated during the horrific Battle of the Bulge, Hitler's last-gasp gamble to repulse the advancing Allies. Hart was awarded a Purple Heart for his broken foot and the Bronze Star for his role in the combat team's assorted acts of heroism. Nearly 70 years later, he received a handsome medal—the Legion of Honor—from a grateful France. "It's for not doing anything special other than surviving World War II in France," Bob shrugs, handing over the impressive decoration. "It's the only medal I've ever seen that's the same on both sides. Pretty neat. Napoleon designed it. I like the French. Kath went to Europe two years ago on a cruise. I almost went back twice, but then De Gaulle made me mad twice. So I wouldn't go."



You should have a clear picture of Bob Hart by now. He lives at serene Lake Limerick a few miles from Shelton in Mason County and has many friends and admirers, especially at the Saints' Pantry Food Bank where he was for years a dedicated volunteer. Bob, unfortunately, is also a member of a club with dwindling membership. What he said when the

historian called—“You’d better hurry”—sums up the urgency of compiling the oral histories of World War II veterans. Bob, happily, was overstating things. He has rebounded from a couple of nasty falls. The VA has finally agreed to pay for an acupuncturist for his aching back. He also developed arthritis around the bone he broke in his left foot. Bob buys Bengay in bulk. At 91, he regrets that his freewheeling motorcycling days are over. The flip side, he observes, is that most people his age “are either dead or a lot worse off.” Hart has out-lived all but a handful of his fellow paratroopers. “You’re also lucky that you have all your marbles,” the historian said. “No,” Bob said mischievously. “I’ve lost *three*. But I still have the aggie”—his shooter. “That was always my lousiest game—marbles.” Then the grin receded. “The kid who always beat me all through grade school was wounded at the battle of Anzio. I wrote a letter to him while he was in the hospital. I was on the Bulge when I received it back marked ‘deceased.’ ”

Here’s the rest of the story, including how Bob got to the Bulge, the largest battle in the history of the U.S. Army, and lived to tell about it:

Three of the four branches of his family tree are Germanic. His father’s parents and his mother’s father arrived in America during the first half of the 19th Century, together with nearly a million other Germans. That Bob Hart’s job during World War II was “to kill Krauts,” as he puts it, doesn’t strike him as ironic because it boiled down to democracy vs. dictatorships, not the German people.

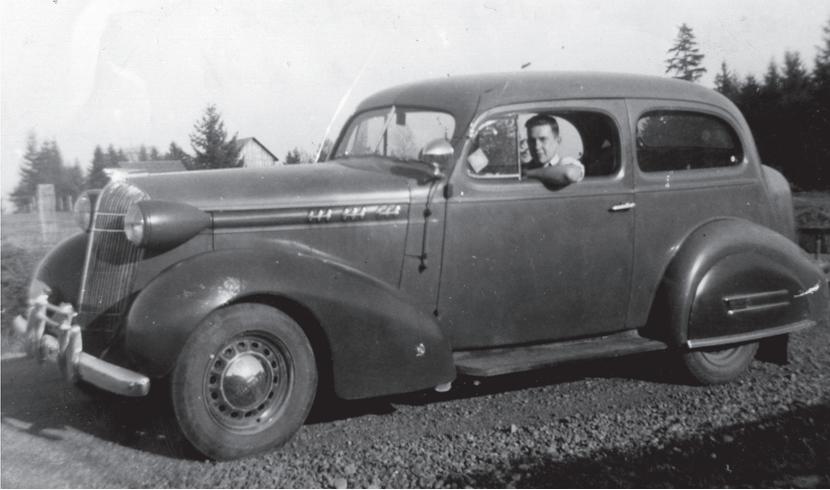
When you plug a 91-year-old into Ancestry.com, it’s a time machine to a rustic world fraught with hard knocks. Bob’s dad, William Hart, had a falling out with his stoic farmer folks in Wisconsin and left home when he was 13. Bill bounced around the West, tending bar and working for the Northern Pacific railroad. Around 1900 he landed in Billings, Montana, and met Inez Barkdoll, an industrious young woman whose girlhood was spent near the Custer battlefield at the Little Bighorn. Bob grew up hearing that Calamity Jane, the celebrated frontierswoman, was a frequent Barkdoll houseguest, though

her personal hygiene left a lot to be desired.

The Harts lost their first child, a daughter named Frances, to mastoiditis in 1919 when she was 9. Before the advent of antibiotics, the agonizing middle ear infection was one of the leading causes of childhood deaths. “Can you imagine the pain?” Bob says of the sister he never knew. The grief-stricken parents moved from Montana to Midland near Puyallup in rural Pierce County the following year. Bill became a carpenter for the railroad.

Robert Darrell Hart was born in the summer of 1924, three years after Bill Jr. When the Depression hit, the Harts nearly lost their home. Bob’s dad finally found a job through the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration. Bob’s mom, with help from her boys, “peddled eggs door to door in South Tacoma. She had a regular route. She’d go all the way out to Yelm in her Model T Ford. You really had to crank that that damn thing!” Bob says, cussing under his breath at the memory. “Somehow they managed to make house payments all through the Depression. It was a tough deal. With thousands of chickens, we never went hungry but we all worked hard. My dad would get up at 4 in the morning and stoke the brooder to keep the baby chicks warm. Then he’d catch a ride with another guy to go to work in South Tacoma. He worked hard, and I can’t remember my mother not doing something, too. Every Friday night and every Tuesday night I’d wash eggs, then she’d deliver them. Midland was about eight miles out of town, so it was a long haul.”

Bob was a handsome, wiry kid, 5-11, 150 lbs. He missed out on sports and socializing at Lincoln High School in Tacoma because he was always working—delivering papers, washing eggs, greasing pans at a bakery every night after school; cleaning turkey houses for two-bits an hour on Saturdays. He still made a lot of friends, including three Japanese boys he met in the machine-shop class overseen by an old Scot who was a fine machinist. That was Bob’s goal. He liked history, too, and figured Stalin was a fool to think Hitler wouldn’t turn on Russia when the time was ripe. If he had any free time, Bob went to King Roller Rink where the kids skated to the strains



Hart's prized possession as an industrious teenager in Tacoma: A second-hand 1936 Oldsmobile with fender skirts and spotlights.

of a Wurlitzer organ. He gave most of his earnings to his folks, but saved enough to buy a 1936 Oldsmobile with fender skirts and twin spotlights. All the girls thought he was cute. "That's possibly because I had the only car in the neighborhood," Bob suggests.

The attack on Pearl Harbor came midway in Bob's senior year at Lincoln. He was heading for the rink when the news came over the car radio. "It started out as a normal Sunday. But from then on, nothing was normal," he remembers.

Hart was troubled that spring when the West Coast's Japanese residents were sent to internment camps. "It was terrible. I also don't know what would have happened if they hadn't. There might have been killings because so many people panicked and believed the Japanese were all spies. One of my classmates' dads owned a hotel in Tacoma. He lost it when the family was sent off to a camp. The Japanese farmers in Fife who had developed beautiful farms were really screwed over. Just a rip-off! They had hundred-year leases, and that [the outbreak of war] was the way the property owners could break the leases. That was a terrible way to treat people. When I was fighting in Italy, we saw action with Japanese-American soldiers from the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the

100th Infantry Battalion—guys whose families were being interned back home. The 442nd relieved us during one battle, and the next day they were ambushed by the Germans. They were fine troops and one of the most decorated outfits in the history of the U.S. Army.”

Bob’s brother joined the Army Air Forces and became a B-17 flight engineer. Bob signed on as a sheet metal worker at Todd Pacific Shipyards in Tacoma, helping build warships. The workforce soon topped 20,000. They kept giving him promotions. “It was essential war work, and I could have stayed there, but I finally told the boss, ‘I’m going in.’ Everyone wanted to kill Germans or Japs and get it over with.”

Bob and Elmer Shipton, a guy he’d known since first grade, were inducted into the Army in the spring of 1943. “On the second or third day of orientation at Fort Lewis they marched us over to a big building and gave us a lecture on the importance of GI insurance. Then an officer walked in and asked the sergeant if he could make an announcement about the paratroopers. It sounded as if



An Army recruiting poster.

all you did was ride around in airplanes and wear those neat jump boots. Elmer nudged me and whispered, ‘We won’t have to walk!’ When they asked for volunteers, two guys stuck up their hands out of the 200 or 300 in the room. Elmer and me. So what the hell! We never heard the rest of the lecture. They drug us out of there so fast you couldn’t believe it. They gave us another series of shots. Elmer passed out cold, even though we’d already taken a bunch in both arms. I carried him back to the barracks. They rejected him and took me!”

As the prospective paratroopers arrived by the trainload at Camp Toccoa, Georgia, the weeding out intensified. Each

group of 50 to 150 men “was met at the station and trucked to the parade ground where a 34-foot-tall parachute ‘mock tower’ had been erected.” When you climbed to the top and donned the harness, “they’d tap you on the rump, and you’d better jump,” Hart remembers. “Anyone who hesitated was washed out right then and there. I had no fear of heights, so I passed that test. Then they gave us another physical. We were all standing around butt naked. The guy who’d been put in



Hart at basic training at Camp Toccoa, Georgia, in the summer of 1943.

charge of our trainload on the way to Georgia had tattoos all over his body—even his penis. When the doctor saw that, the guy goes, ‘Pretty good, huh?’ And the doctor goes whoosh, ‘You’re out of here!’ ”

To be a paratrooper you needed intelligence to match your bravado. Those who’d signed up because of the “jump pay”—an extra 50 bucks a month—were also soon back on the train. Yet a former juvenile delinquent who could box his heart out and the wise-ass Italian kid who could do a hundred one-arm pushups became superb parachute soldiers. “Every guy who went to the 517th was interviewed as to his aptitude for the paratroops,” Hart says. When he was being considered for a spot as a machine gunner in the Second Battalion, Hart had to pass muster with its commander, a lieutenant colonel.

At the apex of World War II, becoming a paratrooper meant surviving what still ranks as some of the most rigorous



Paratrooper recruits pose after a three-mile run at Camp Toccoa, Georgia, in the summer of 1943. Hart is third from left in the back row. The muscular GI at the end of the row, Charles McDade, died in the Battle of the Bulge around Christmas 1944.

training in U.S. military history: Six-mile runs, an obstacle course, night marches in full field packs, relentless calisthenics, mock hand-to-hand combat, bayonet drills and exacting marksmanship practice. For Hart, “the hardest thing in Georgia was Mount Currahee.” At 1,700 feet, it was a molehill compared to the majestic peaks he’d grown up with. It was, nevertheless, three miles to the top. “You got up at 5 o’clock and, no matter how cold it was, you ran up that mountain. Then you ran back down. I was in good shape, but I hated running. I had never run in my life. *Jesus!* And then in the beginning you did it again practically every afternoon. Our officers—some of them not much older than the rest of us—did everything they expected us to be able to do. Lt. Starkey—probably the toughest man I ever met in my life—was also a nice guy. Just no hanky-panky. He was leading the platoon on my first day up the mountain. He hated to see anybody ahead of him, so he stepped it up. By this time I’m gasping. And I fell out. That was no-no. I just laid down in the dirt next to the road. A corporal told me to get with the program. Starkey saw what was happening. He fell out and declared, ‘Get back in that goddamn formation!’ And I said,



Three new paratroopers in combat gear before shipping out for Italy in the spring of 1944. From left, Hart, Edward Meingasner and John Bonner. Looking on from the window is Corporal Charles Twibell, “who was wounded three times and evacuated to Paris, only to be run over by a truck,” Hart remembers.

‘Screw you!’ I was just a dumb recruit who didn’t realize you couldn’t talk that way to an officer.” Starkey glowered, turned on his heel and sprinted back to the front of the formation. Angry and energized, Hart dusted himself off and rejoined the runners. He made it back to the barracks with the rest of the platoon and was surprised when nothing more was said of the incident. “After four or five days I could run the mountain as well as anybody. You got used to it. You felt like you could do anything. There was *esprit*.” Decades later at a 517th reunion at Palm Springs, Hart visited with Starkey. “I says, ‘Lieutenant, why didn’t you kick me out of the outfit?’ And he said, ‘You got

up and got back, didn't you?' ”

When the surviving recruits moved 200 miles south to Fort Benning, the sprawling home of the Army Infantry, a general observing their arrival was amazed and impressed. Instead of barking orders, their officers and NCOs “used whistles to form them up and marched them to the barracks without a single verbal command.”



Hart works out with a 90-pound barbell at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, in the fall of 1943.

They graduated to 40-foot training towers, then to the 250-footers. They learned to pack their own chutes. Now came the litmus test: five jumps from a transport plane, the workhorse C-47 that a year later would drop 50,000 paratroops during the Normandy invasion.

“Jumping didn't scare me,” Hart says. “Landings were what I worried about.” They were taught how to approach the ground with feet spread and tumble on impact. Easier said than done. “We were one of the first groups that went through training wearing steel infantry helmets, instead of the old football-style leather helmets. On my third or fourth jump I came in swinging backwards. My heels caught and I hit hard. I could see stars and my head was ringing inside the helmet. The next thing I knew, a medic was standing over me saying, ‘You all right?’ And I went ‘wawawawa!’ I could barely talk. That was the only bad one.

“Everyone passed, which was unheard of. That told you what kind of outfit we had become. They gave us our silver jump wings and we got to ‘blouse’ our pants—tuck them into our jump boots, which were beautiful brown spit-

shined leather. That was the day everyone was looking forward to. Getting your wings and boots was the most important thing in your life. *You'd made it.* There were maybe 30 guys in my platoon. Real fast, you become attached to two or three or four. There was lots of camaraderie. You had the confidence that everyone was as ready as he could be. These were guys you'd risk your life with. You had to feel that way or you wouldn't have gone into combat.



You always had somebody at your back. And a machine gunner especially counted on that because the whole outfit was built around the machine gunners and the mortar men. I had the best score in the regiment with a machine gun.”

The .30-caliber, air-cooled Browning machine gun—a mainstay of World War II, Korea and Vietnam—weighed 31 pounds. It became Bob’s burdensome baby; also a lifesaver. The gunner carried its tripod; the assistant gunner was supposed to carry the gun, while the ammo bearer toted the cartridge boxes. “Unfortunately my assistant gunner, Mickelson, weighed about 30 pounds less than I did. The ammo bearer, Duggan, was about the same size I was. His arms got longer and longer as the war progressed. I carried the gun probably 70 percent of the time.

“In basic training, the practice targets were only one inch square. You had a row of five. You set your sights on that first square. The idea was that if you got good enough you could close your eyes and still pop off an accurate shot. It was almost automatic once you got in the rhythm.” Things were different when someone was shooting back. “When we got into combat, I had Mickelson there next to me with the binoculars. He’d go, ‘Up one click. Down one click, etc. The adrenalin was flowing but you needed to stay steady.”

Next stop was the Army's new Camp Mackall, 40 miles east of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. While the training was no less intense, the needling diminished. They were real soldiers now. They ran hard, passing every test, physical and mental, with the highest scores the Army's inspectors had ever recorded. And they played hard every chance they got, lieutenants and privates alike. The risks they took to blow off steam were part of their cheeky self-confidence. Several paratroopers snuck away from a map-reading exercise, detoured to a nearby golf course, "stuffed their M-1s in the golf bags and played a spirited nine holes." When Hart returned a day late from a furlough, some martinet tossed him in the stockade. "But two guys I knew were guards. The next day they left and gave me a gun to guard the others. So it was a short stay."

March of 1944 found the 517th "shivering and knee-deep in mud" in the woods of Tennessee for full-scale war games staged by the Second Army. "Everyone was tired of pushups and playing war," Hart remembers. "We were well-trained and in terrific shape—a bunch of young guys who felt they were immortal. We were anxious about how we'd do in real combat—anyone who tells you otherwise is lying—but after a year of getting ready we wanted to get on with it."

Most of the 517th Parachute Infantry arrived at Naples on the last day of May on a former luxury liner. It seemed like an incongruous way to go to war, but no one was complaining.

They cooled their heels and trained some more in the crater of a dormant volcano awaiting the combat team's artillery. "Naples was pathetic," Hart remembers. "The Germans had sunk everything afloat and the harbor was clogged. It was a wide open city. You could do anything you wanted. People were desperate. Some kid would tug your sleeve and say, 'Follow me Joe, I've got a girl for you.' They were selling 12-year-old girls—sometimes their sisters—for a couple of cigarettes. Hungry kids—some only 2 or 3 years old—were everywhere. It broke your heart. They'd wait at the end of the chow line where guys dumped off what they hadn't eaten. A lot of us would give the kids anything we could. I

Hart and some pals in Naples in May of 1944. Standing from left, Edward Meingasner, Hart and John Bonner; kneeling, Frank Wayda.



hated Naples. It was the garbage can of the world.”

Rome was liberated on June 5, the day before D-Day. While some American soldiers were being hugged, kissed and showered with flowers and Chianti, others, including the 82nd and 101st Airborne, were poised to enter savage combat at Normandy.

On June 18, 1944, a bright Sunday morning, the 517th finally got its chance. From Civitavecchia, a battered port city 45 miles north of Rome, the paratroopers began pursuit of the Germans, who were conducting a tenacious if disorganized rearguard action. Hart’s outfit, the Second Battalion, outflanked the enemy and made a series of surgical thrusts, inflicting heavy casualties and collecting dozens of hollow-eyed prisoners. Every valley, wheat field and hill looked alike, Hart remembers, but the 517th captured higher ground, dug in at a

517th paratroopers on the day before their first combat jump into the south of France.



strategic hilltop village and held it “despite desperate attempts by the enemy to dislodge the troopers by artillery fire.”

Hart’s battalion emerged from its first week of combat with light casualties and a ton of confidence. “Axis Sally,” one of the turncoat American women whose radio broadcasts were calculated to undermine GI morale, acknowledged that the green paratroopers had done well. “You men of 517 are much better than we anticipated,” she purred. “But you are foolhardy. ...You will lose men!”

Hart traces the combat team’s movements on a map in his memorabilia-filled den. “At the end of June ’44, we were pulled back to Frascati just outside Rome to get ready for the worst kept secret of the war—the invasion of Southern France.”

Hitler knew it was coming, just not when. Early planning had envisioned simultaneous Allied amphibious landings at Normandy and along the Mediterranean. Eisenhower coveted the port cities of Marseille and Toulon. An intractable Churchill wanted to seize the oil-rich Balkans. Ike prevailed, with the unwavering support of his mentor, George C. Marshall, the

U.S. Army's chief of staff. The invasion along the Côte d'Azur—code-named *Dragoon*—was postponed for 10 weeks because there weren't enough landing craft for both operations. "So we trained half the time and played the rest," Hart says, smiling. "If we hadn't all been so young" interspersing mortal combat with R&R would have seemed more surreal.

The paratroopers descended on Rome and sampled everything it had to offer. "The people were glad to see us—and really fed up with Mussolini," Hart remembers. Two of his buddies were Catholics, so he went with them to see the Vatican. A devout few managed an audience with the pope. Most went sightseeing, gawking at the Colosseum and Pantheon before hitting the cafes and bars. Any unattended jeep was fair game. "If they had a key in 'em they were gone," Hart says. "The British wised up and finally started putting a chain on the steering wheel, so you could turn it only so far. Sometimes you'd go one block, then turn again, then turn again. Maybe you'd end up in a total circle. So you'd abandon that jeep and steal another one. Our officers loved it when we would return with a requisitioned jeep. When we left Frascati, which had been the German headquarters in Italy, that hillside was like a used car lot!"

On August 14, 1944, Frascati was abuzz with last-minute preparations for the first combat jump by the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team. It also would be their last. "None of us imagined that at the time," Hart remembers. "We figured we'd be jumping all the way to Berlin."

A scale-model of the drop zone had been created in a closely-guarded tent. The paratroopers visited it in clumps. Then they donned their battle gear, pretending to be nonchalant, checked their chutes and received "escape kits" that included French currency and waterproof maps. At 1 a.m.—0100 hours—nearly 400 twin-engine C-47's loaded with paratroopers began to lift off from dirt runways and drone off into the darkness toward the French Riviera. The 1st Airborne Task Force assembled for *Dragoon* consisted of some 6,000 paratroopers, including the British 2nd Parachute Brigade and 2,500 men

from the 517th. The paratroopers' mission was to bottle up the German units beyond the beaches so no reinforcements could get through to repulse the Allied landings.

Dragoon got off to a ragged start. In the pre-dawn skies above the foggy hills and vineyards beyond the coast, some C-47s got lost. Several pathfinder units were dropped too soon or too late and couldn't set up their radio beacons and lights in time to assist the pilots. The 517th pathfinders landed in the woods 3½ miles from the drop zone and came under immediate enemy fire. Much of Hart's battalion, unable to see the ground, landed haphazardly. Some paratroopers were "scattered as far as 44 kilometers from their objective."

As luck would have it, the amphibious assault and glider landings later that morning met with scant resistance from a ragtag German army group. "Instead of a bitter battle of attrition akin to Anzio or Normandy, *Dragoon* quickly turned into a headlong retreat by German forces up the Rhone Valley, with American and French troops in hot pursuit," Steven J. Zaloga writes in his 2009 book about France's often overlooked "other D-Day." By day's end the Allies controlled the beaches. The Airborne's casualties were light—382 Americans and 52 British dead.

But when Bob Hart untangled himself from his parachute and put weight on his left foot hurt, it hurt like hell. "I thought it was just sprained, so when Lt. Starkey and I hooked up, adrenalin flowing, we soldiered on, looking for our other guys." All three battalions soon regrouped. Buttressed by 80 British paratroopers, they ambushed a large German convoy racing toward the coast. They held the strategic village of Les Arcs, despite being badly outnumbered, and seized the offensive. The Germans fell back to the medieval town of Sospel, nestled in a valley along the French-Italian border.

"We went up, down and around," Hart remembers. "The Germans were retreating to the Italian border, but we had to fight for every town. Somewhere above Grasse, the perfume capital of the world, I couldn't walk any more. And Duggan, my ammo bearer, had boils all over his body. French water might have been good for Frenchmen but we weren't adapted

to it. They called it the ‘Champagne Campaign.’ We would have been a lot better off drinking it instead of the water.”

Hart and Duggan were evacuated to an aid station at the beachhead. An X-ray revealed a broken bone. Hart was lucky it wasn’t worse after all that walking. He was taken to former German military hospital at Marseille and spent the next three weeks with his foot in a cast. “All I could think of was that I had joined the paratroops because I wouldn’t have to walk.”

Hart rejoined D Company in the Maritime Alps about a month later. Deprived of supplies, Sospel finally fell at the end of October after a 51-day siege. “With the Germans captured or gone, they billeted our platoon in a chateau. Then we went into Nice on a pass. When we arrived back around 4 a.m. the chateau next to ours was rubble. The Germans had left a time bomb. Seven of our guys were killed, and a buddy of mine lost a leg. We slept outside our chateau that night.”

The 517th lunched north by rail in French boxcars—the stubby “40 et 8’s” designed to carry 40 men or eight horses. “They’d been shot up so much they were full of holes; the floor was strewn with straw and it rained all the way—500 miles,” Bob remembers with a shiver. “It took us three days to get up to Soissons, which was as far as the Germans got in World War I.” Holding the line in 1918 had cost the Allies 32,000 soldiers during four terrible days. The Germans lost nearly 57,000. History was about to repeat itself on the Western Front.



In December of 1944, the 517th and thousands of other GI’s lunched north by rail in French boxcars—the stubby “40 et 8’s” designed to carry 40 men or eight horses. *Regina Tollfeldt Collection*

The paratroopers arrived at Soissons, an ancient town northeast of Paris, on December 12, 1944. They were happy to learn they'd be quartered in barracks. One wag observed that there were "only 12 shopping days 'til Christmas."

Hitler, who was 55, looked 70. His hands trembled, his shoulders sagged; he couldn't sleep. "Yet he was still capable of sizing up his foes and sensing their weaknesses, as he demonstrated by recognizing that Allied forces in France and the Low Countries were overextended and vulnerable to a counterattack," Neil Kagan and Stephen G. Hyslop write in their fine book, *Eyewitness to World War II*.

"I have just made a momentous decision," Hitler informed his top commanders. "I shall go over to the counterattack!" Pointing on a map to Germany's border with Belgium and Luxembourg, he added: "Here, out of the Ardennes, with the objective—Antwerp!" ... Since taking Paris, Allied troops had advanced northward into Belgium and seized the vital port, but it remained closed to shipping because the Scheldt Estuary between Antwerp and the North Sea was mined and menaced by big German naval guns. Once the Allies secured that estuary, they could use Antwerp to supply troops preparing to invade northern Germany. Until then, supplies unloaded at more distant ports like Cherbourg and Marseilles moved slowly along roads that were heavily congested because the French rail network had been shattered by Allied bombers. ... Hitler planned to exploit this situation by massing armor and infantry in the Ardennes and sending his forces barreling across Belgium to Antwerp."



A member of the 517th struggles with a frozen machine gun at the Bulge.
National Archives

To the dismay of his generals, Hitler demanded that they throw 10 Panzer and 14 infantry divisions at the Allies' weak center in the forested Ardennes plateau in the dead of winter. Heels clicked to a resigned chorus of "Jawohl, mein Führer!"

"Eisenhower suspected something was afoot," Churchill remembered in his stately prose, "though its scope and violence came as a surprise." A year earlier, Ike had bet Field Marshal Montgomery £5 that the war with Germany would be over before Christmas of 1944.

On the cold, foggy morning of December 16, "We were getting ready to go on R&R in Paris when all hell broke loose," Hart remembers. Two-thousand artillery pieces opened fire as hundreds of tanks and 250,000 German soldiers swept through the Allied lines. The "bulge" quickly grew 60 miles deep and 40 miles wide. At Bastogne, a vital crossroads, the 101st Airborne Division found itself encircled and heavily outnumbered. Cold-to-the-bone in the frozen snow, the paratroopers were low on ammo, short of food and medical

It was slow going at the Bulge in the winter of 1944-45. *United States Army Center of Military History*



supplies and facing possible annihilation one way or the other. (The Waffen SS had massacred 84 prisoners up the road at Malmedy.) Their commander's laconic American response to a German surrender demand, "Nuts!"—shorthand for "Go to hell!"—is now legendary. Hart has one word of his own for the stand by the 101st at Bastogne: "incredible."

Eisenhower mustered all his reserves and ordered Patton's Third Army to attack the Bulge's left flank and relieve Bastogne. The 517th sped north to secure and hold at all costs other crossroads towns. "We tossed all our gear, including machine guns and mortars, on open semi-trucks and hit the road. At least we had overcoats," Hart says, "which was more than the guys in the 101st had."

They'd gain some ground, taking whatever cover they could find as artillery shells rained down. So fluid was the battlefield that some of the fire was "friendly," an occupational hazard. As the 517th moved into a crossroads village, hoping to seize a bridge, a popular sergeant died in a mortar blast. "He was killed right across the street from me. Things like that never leave your mind," Hart says.

Under fire, clumps of GI's would burrow into the snow, hide behind trees or hole up in hastily abandoned buildings. "Far more often than any commander would like to accept, the Battle of the Bulge broke down into an every man for himself," says military historian Gerald Astor. Before it was over, nearly 20,000 Americans had been killed, 47,000 wounded and 23,000 captured or MIA. The 101st sustained 2,000 casualties at Bastogne.

By Christmas Day the Bulge was shrinking. The weather had cleared and Allied aircraft were dropping supplies and bombs. "It was the first day in weeks that we'd seen sunlight," Hart remembers. "The sky suddenly was filled with bombers, thousands of them. It was horrifying when a B-17 got hit and spiraled out of control. You'd look for chutes. That poor tail gunner, he had to try to get out the side. And the belly gunner! How the hell would you get out from there? That day I and a lot of other guys said, 'Damn I'm glad I'm in the paratroops and not up there!' The losses they were taking in those B-17 squadrons were the highest of any branch of service. It was terrible!" It didn't occur to him just then that his brother Bill, a flight engineer with the 8th Air Force, might be up there. They didn't talk about it until after the war.

Bastogne was relieved on December 26-27. Bolstered by their mastery of the skies, the Allies were on the offensive by New Year's Day, 1945, though it was still bitterly cold and the snow knee deep. Poorly trained Nazi conscripts, some as young as 15, some old enough to be their grandfathers, had been mobilized for the Bulge. Still, the Germans clung fanatically to any higher ground and dug in around farm buildings. The German artillery fire seemed relentless. Hart's platoon cleared part of the strategic village of Trois-Ponts house by house. That night, Hart crept out of what had been a butcher shop to answer the call of nature. He was walking along a riverbank on numb feet in a jumble of discarded weapons when he encountered a German soldier "frozen solid as a statue. That's how cold it was. And the trench shoes they gave us weren't much. We had one blanket. No sleeping



GI's with frozen feet doing an elevation exercise in a military hospital in England under the watchful eye of a nurse.

bags. Just a blanket in zero-degree conditions.”

When another platoon pushed ahead, it was caught in the open by heavy machine gun fire and overrun. Lt. Starkey, their much-admired company commander, and a dozen other Buzzards were wounded.

D Company regrouped. Pfc. Robert D. Hart's war all but ended a few days later. It's a lousy pun, but it really was the agony of the feet.

Winter boots were in short supply. The 517th had none. “I'd taken my shoes off maybe once or twice in two weeks. I was on guard duty at midnight the night we finally got our sleeping bags. So instead of leaving my shoes on I just wrapped the sleeping bag around my feet and stood watch. The next morning when I tried to put my shoes on, my feet were way bigger than my shoes. They called it ‘frozen feet.’ No feeling whatsoever.”

He was lucky he could be evacuated—and that his feet were not in worse shape. “The only time I saw Paris during World War II was out the back window of an ambulance. There went the Arc de Triomphe!”

From Cherbourg, Hart and thousands of other Allied casualties were taken by hospital ship to England. The ghastly wounds he saw made him feel fortunate. “My frozen feet may have saved my life. I was damn lucky to have survived the Battle of the Bulge when so many guys died or were crippled for life.

“Unless your feet were in really bad shape from



Hart, center, and four other GI's pose for a photo after being discharged from a military hospital in England in February of 1945.

frostbite, the treatment was to keep them uncovered and cool. Sometimes it looked comical, with row after row of guys with their bare feet up in the air. But some guys were losing toes that turned black." And some guys were losing feet. That "amputation was preferable to dying of gangrene," as one doctor told a young rifleman, was scant consolation for most.

"There were so many guys with frozen feet that they ended up putting some of us in the Section 8 ward with the mental cases," Hart remembers. "That was crazy in more ways than one. I concluded that about a third of the mental cases were muckin' (faking) to get out and go home."

After about a month in the hospital, Hart was able to rejoin the 517th, which was mopping up. "Once in a while you'd hit one town with a group of Nazi defenders who would fight to the last man. And in the next town they'd all surrender," Hart remembers. "There were thousands of POWs—some barely into their teens—and hungry people, most of them glad to see us."

Hitler's delusional gamble had cost him 100,000



From a 517th souvenir booklet issued at war's end.

soldiers and vital materiel. Abandoned tanks and artillery were everywhere. With the Russians advancing from the East, his malignant “thousand-year Reich” was being squeezed down to its last three months. Five million German soldiers, at least a million civilians and six million European Jews had perished.

“Patton was moving so fast that we never had the chance to make another combat jump,” Hart remembers with mixed emotions. “We had brand-new airplanes, too.”

May brought victory in Europe. Hart opted to join the Army of occupation in Berlin. After months of combat and two stints in hospitals, that struck him as preferable to heading to the South Pacific after a 30-day leave.

He was detailed to help guard a prison housing suspected war criminals—all civilians, including municipal officials, wives of Nazi leaders and American-born Nazi collaborators. “The wives of Nazi bigshots were indignant they were being held,” Hart says. “If they wanted to go the bathroom they’d take a tin cup and rake it across the bars. Then we’d have to go over and let them out one at a time. It was embarrassing to

them. We weren't too sympathetic. And when we took the male prisoners outside to police up the area (clean the grounds), we always put bayonets on our rifles because if we saw them trying to grab a cigarette butt they'd get stuck!"

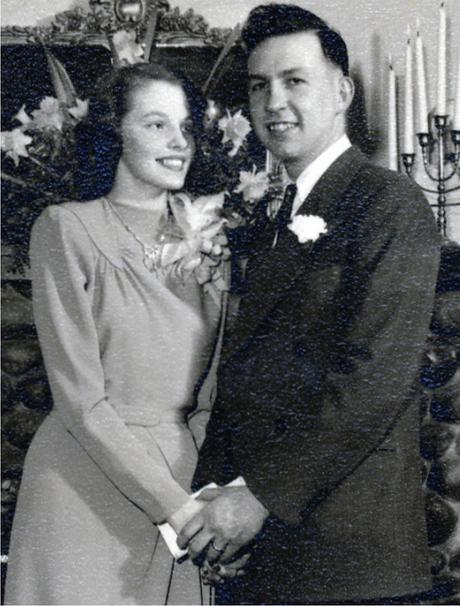
Hart was amazed at how quickly Berliners, including thousands of women—many shoeless and in rags—set about efficiently clearing the rubble. "At Naples nobody had done much to clean up after the bombing. But German women, despite having been raped half a dozen times by the Russians, were cleaning every brick and stacking them in neat piles.

"When I got to Berlin the subways were still filled with water up to the street level and bodies were floating by. People were so hungry you couldn't believe it. They'd do anything for a candy bar, and the Black Market was thriving. I sold my wrist watch to a Russian underneath the Brandenburg Gate for a thousand bucks—and it was a lousy watch!"* American GI's could get a hundred dollars for a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes. "At first, we could go over into the Russian zone any time we wanted. But within two weeks the Russians had restricted railroad traffic. We were allowed one train a day for our supplies. You could smell the cold war coming."

Hart arrived back in the U.S. on an aged Liberty ship in January of 1946, flew home from New Jersey and was discharged from the Army at Fort Lewis where his paratrooper odyssey began.

Kathleen Williams, Bob's future wife, was dating a teenage sailor from Minnesota when Bob and two dashing paratrooper pals "came stumbling into a Tacoma bowling alley," having toasted their civilian-hood at several earlier stops. "He was cute, and I admired his shiny boots and all of

* In an article on the Black Market in postwar Berlin, historian Kevin Conley Ruffner notes: "Russians loved watches for a number of reasons. They always have been associated in the Muscovite mind with affluence and an established, even exalted, position in life. Peasants never owned watches. ... Watches soon became a universal commodity because troops had no confidence in Russian currency. Also, a soldier could send a watch home and his wife could barter it for a cow. ... Some Russian soldiers wore a half dozen watches. A Mickey Mouse watch was worth more than a jewel-studded trinket from Cartier."



The Harts on their wedding day, January 29, 1948, at the Tacoma home of Kathleen's parents. And today.

his medals. A couple of days later, his friend called and wanted to know if I would like to go skiing with them. So our first date was skiing. And the following week I sent my boyfriend back to Minnesota.”

The GI Bill helped pay for Bob's degree in light-aircraft engine maintenance from Clover Park Vocational-Technical Institute. He lived with his folks and unloaded grain boxcars at Sperry Flour Company in Tacoma. He and Kath were married on January 29, 1948. Their first home was in Everett, where Bob bluffed his way into a job with Alaska Airlines at Paine Field, overhauling engines for 95 cents an hour. “I'd never worked on a big airliner engine, so I was lucky they didn't ask more specific questions. They were flying on a wing and prayer in those days.” He and a partner wrangled a loan and built a service station that expanded into a fuel delivery business in Snohomish County. By 1953, the Hart family included two sons. The lure of aviation prompted Bob to acquire a private pilot's license. He became a flight line mechanic with Pacific Northern Airlines, then the largest carrier on the Alaska route. The Harts moved to Browns Point at Tacoma and added a third son. Bob ended his career with Western Airlines, retiring in 1984.



Hart is congratulated by Jack Cowan, the honorary consul, at the French Consular Agency in Seattle in 2013 after receiving the Legion of Honor.

As their kids were growing up, the Harts were active in Indian Guides and Little League. Bob became a volunteer firefighter, donated blood for 40 years and volunteered at the American Lake Veterans Hospital near Tacoma. He was a stalwart at the Saints' Pantry Food Bank in Shelton until he took that nasty fall in the garage in 2013. Getting old is doubly frustrating for Bob because he was always such an active guy—flying his plane, riding motorcycles, working out at the gym. “We’ve had a good life,” Bob says, smiling at Kath. Yet there was a tragedy, too. They lost their middle son, Karl, in a car crash in 1974. “His love for life will always be remembered by his parents and bothers,” Kath says.

Their eyes glisten. You’re not supposed to outlive your kids.

“Time,” Dick Cavett once observed, “is the star of every reunion.” Hart remembers the 517th get-togethers when all of a sudden no one was young any more. There was always catching up to do—wives, kids, jobs. Invariably the talk turned to what happened when they were young—the dimwit with the tattoo on his penis; Mount Currahee at the crack of dawn; their first jump; the day they rounded a bend north of Rome and first heard “the snap of hot lead as it passed over their heads”; the day when their sergeant got killed at Trois-Ponts.



Hart at the Saints' Pantry Food Bank in Shelton where he was a longtime volunteer. *Mason County Journal/Gordon Weeks.*

Mickelson, Meingasner and McDade; Duggan, Bonner, Hill and Gallucci—the push-up king of the 517th. When Hart says their names he still sees them the way they were in 1943 when they arrived in Georgia from all over America. The average Joes who had grown up washing eggs, pumping gas and picking berries during the Depression turned out to have the smarts and courage to win World War II. Afterward, some got rich as lawyers and land developers; Terry Sanford was elected governor of North Carolina and ran for president. A disconcerting number—carrying too much baggage from the Bulge or unwilling to surrender to declining health—took their own lives. That strikes Bob as especially sad. In any case, “they’re practically all gone now. Except me.” He says it not so much wistfully as matter of fact.

Hart is proud to be one of the 517th. Once a paratrooper, always a paratrooper. They were—still are—elite soldiers. He made the grade and helped defeat fascism. “We did what we had to do.” That said, he believes “the Greatest Generation” moniker is over-reaching. “Let’s talk about those guys in Vietnam,” he says, leaning forward. “I can’t image what they went through: the terrain, the jungles, the heat, the insects,

the snakes—everything I hated! And when they got home they were disrespected. Vietnam was a terrible war! Why we got into that I have no idea. Why we thought we could do something the French Foreign Legion couldn't do."

Bob's on a roll now: "And look at what's happening today. These guys fighting in the Gulf are amazing soldiers. How they can have the attitude they have, knowing that when they come home to their wife and kids—if they've got 'em—that they're going to go right back again after a few months ...one tour of duty right after another. That's courage. All the while, we have so many young punks sitting around drinking, doing drugs, getting fat and getting tattoos. I just read that the military plans to relax the enlistment standards to attract more volunteers. So I imagine if you weigh 280 pounds from all the junk you're eating then that's going to be OK. I think they should bring back the draft. It's a crying shame that these young guys are having to go over four, five, six times. I give to the Wounded Warriors. It's the least I can do. But I can't understand why [charity programs like that] are necessary. If you're killed or crippled while fighting for your country or tormented by PTSD, your country ought to take care of you and your family."

His back hurts but there's fight left in the old Battling Buzzard. And his sense of humor has never failed him. Time for a toasted cheese sandwich. With baloney.

John C. Hughes
Legacy Washington
Office of the Secretary of State
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