

SEARCHING FOR PRIVATE GRUWELL

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Introduction

This is a report of the research methods used in telling the story of Private (Pvt.), Robert R. Gruwell, U.S. Army paratrooper assigned to the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment (517th PIR). This report emphasizes the holdings of the Military History Institute (MHI), and the Army Heritage Museum (AHM). MHI and the AHM are a part of the United States Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC). Admission to the USAHEC is free. In turn, USAHEC is a part of, but located separately from, the United States Army War College at the Carlisle Barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Resources, military, governmental and civilian outside of the USAHEC have also been utilized in telling Pvt. Gruwell's story.

Pvt. Gruwell was a member of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), which was a part of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team (PRCT). Pvt. Gruwell was Killed in Action on August 15, 1944 during Operation Dragoon, the Invasion of Southern France. He was buried by unknown person(s) in an unknown grave and to this day, his grave has not been found. The tragic story of Pvt. Gruwell is also used as a representative example of the fate of so many American Servicemen killed in all wars.

I encountered many twists, turns and dead ends in telling Pvt. Gruwell's story due to missing and incomplete information, varying reports of the same incident and the fact that since Pvt. Gruwell was a replacement paratrooper in the 517th PIR, he never had time to make lasting friendships. Nevertheless, Pvt. Gruwell, as the only member of the 517th PIR who is unaccounted for, has not been forgotten by his fellow Soldiers. In 1950, Pvt. Gruwell's remains were deemed "non-recoverable" by the Office of the Quartermaster General's Graves Registration Command. Long after World War II, veterans of the 517th PIR returned to France in an attempt to locate Pvt. Gruwell's grave. The information they gathered was sent to the MHI as a permanent record in the hopes that future researchers would one day use the information to locate his grave and give Pvt. Gruwell the place of honor he richly deserves. It was the discovery of the information provided to the MHI that prompted me to tell Pvt. Gruwell's story.

Induction and Parachute Training:



Private Robert R. Gruwell, Circa 1943

Private (Pvt.), Robert R. Gruwell was born in Los Angeles, CA on October 8, 1923. He was inducted into the United States Army (Army), on January 19, 1943, at the age of 20. He was assigned Army Serial Number 39277657 and was sent to Fort MacArthur, San Pedro, CA.

In mid-1943 Pvt. Gruwell volunteered for the Parachute Infantry and was sent to Camp Toccoa, Toccoa, GA for a thorough interview and basic parachute training. Once Pvt. Gruwell completed basic training, he was assigned to Company C, 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), of the 11th Airborne Division. He was sent to Fort Benning, Columbus, GA for further parachute training and qualification. Following this training, Pvt. Gruwell was sent to Camp Mackall, in Richmond and Scotland Counties, N.C. for more specialized training.



11th Airborne Division Shoulder Sleeve Insignia, Circa WWII.



511th PIR Pocket Patch Insignia, Circa WWII.

Replacement Paratrooper:



Parachutist Badge

Sometime in the first half of 1944, Pvt. Gruwell was sent to Camp Polk, Leesville, LA., then to Fort Meade, Ann Arundel County, MD and finally as of June 5, 1944, to Sicily, Italy as a replacement paratrooper. There, he attended the Airborne Training Center and requalified as a parachutist. About July 1944, Pvt. Gruwell was transferred to the mainland area of Rome, Italy and assigned as a “BAR” man (Browning Automatic Rifle), in Company G, 3rd Battalion, 517th PIR. The 517th PIR was known as the “Battling Buzzards.” The 517th PIR, as well as other units, were gearing up for Operation Anvil, later changed to Operation Dragoon, the invasion of Southern France. The rifle companies of the invasion regiments were assigned 5% over strength to replace casualties before they occurred. This most likely explains why Pvt. Gruwell was transferred to the 517th PIR.



First Airborne Task Force Shoulder Insignia, Circa WWII.



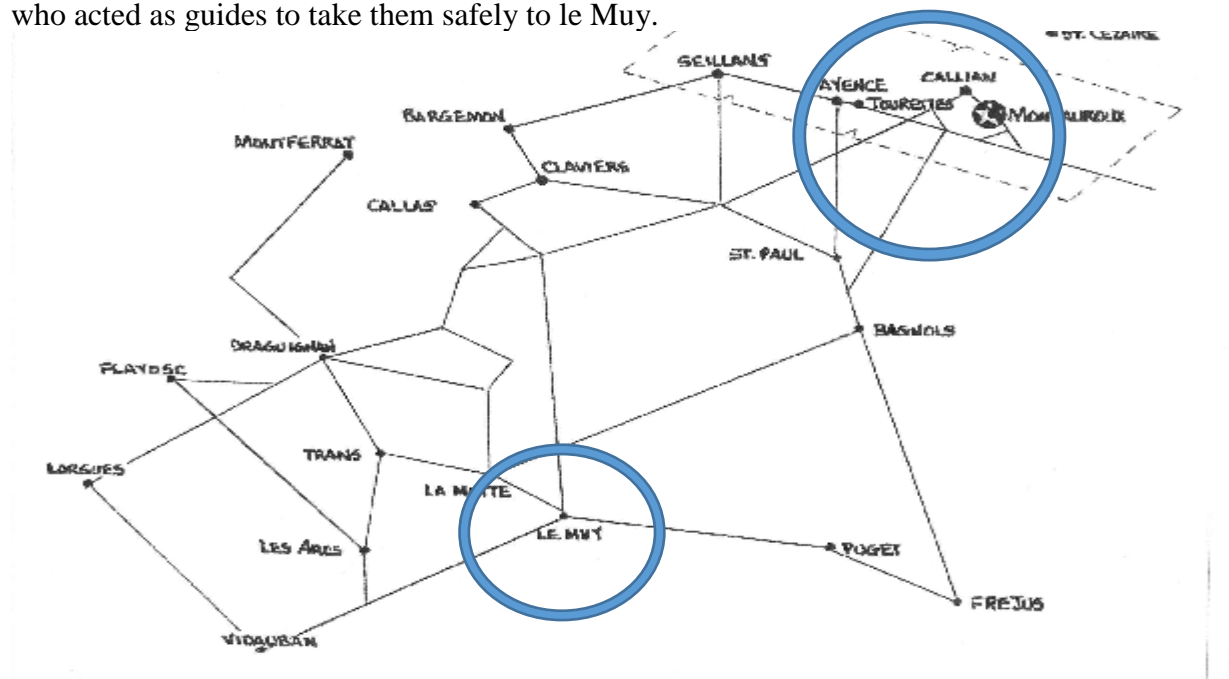
517th Pocket Patch, Circa WWII.

The 517th PIR was one of a very few parachute infantry regiments during WWII that were “independent,” meaning they were not attached to an airborne division. Near the end of WWII the 517th PIR became attached to the 13th Airborne Division. The 517th PIR was one of many units preparing for the invasion of Southern France. Very basically, the Order of Battle for the invasion was as follows:

The Division was known as the First Airborne Task Force, (FABTF). The FABTF was composed of American and British regiments, brigades, battalions and companies. The 517th Regimental Combat Team, (PRCT), was composed of the 517th PIR, 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion and the 596th Parachute Engineer Company.

Operation Dragoon – The Invasion of Southern France:

On August 15, 1944, Operation Dragoon, the invasion of Southern France began. The 517th PRCT left Orbetello Airfield in the Province of Grosseto, Italy at about 0230 aboard C-47 aircraft and parachuted into Southern France at about 0440. Due to thick fog with visibility less than a half mile, paratroopers from “G,” “H,” Service and Regimental Headquarters Companies of the 517th PIR landed in the area of Callian and Montauroux, France, about 30 miles northeast of their intended target of le Muy, France. These men joined up with French Resistance Fighters who acted as guides to take them safely to le Muy.



Upper Circle: The area near the village of Callian, France where the men of “G,” H Service and Regimental Headquarters” Companies of the 517th PIR landed about 30 miles off course. Just south of Callian is the area of the Ambulance Ambush in which Pvt. Gruwell was killed. Lower Circle: Intended Drop Zone for the 517th PIR.

The Ambulance Ambush – Killed In Action:

Early in the morning of August 15, 1944, some French Resistance Fighters and men of the 517th PIR, set up an ambush at a crossroads just south of Callian by blocking the intersection. A short time later, a small German convoy of vehicles, including a bus with red crosses painted on it, arrived at the intersection. Some, but not all, of the vehicles turned back. Seeing the red crosses painted on the bus, the resistance fighters believed that the men inside the bus may be sick or wounded, but some of the men on the bus were armed. Some resistance fighters believed that since some of the men on the bus were armed, they were not 100% sick. One resistance fighter believed that Gestapo men were attempting to escape.

Someone on the bus with the red crosses began firing and a firefright erupted. During this firefright, Pvt. Gruwell apparently threw a hand grenade at the bus and was killed in the resulting explosion. Exactly how Pvt. Gruwell was killed is not known. Did his hand grenade bounce off the bus and come back at him? Was he too close to the hand grenade when it exploded? Virginia Bunkofske, Pvt. Gruwell's sister, was told some time later, "that there was a 'dummy' German ambulance and my brother being too close to it, [the ambulance], when he threw a grenade at the ambulance." But, exactly how Pvt. Gruwell was killed is lost to history. Pvt. Gruwell was the only American soldier killed during this firefright. One American and one French Resistance Fighter were wounded. The Germans in the convoy suffered 5 killed, 9 wounded and 16 captured (In other reports, these numbers vary somewhat). Just how the firefright started did not become known until decades later when Jean-Loup Gassend (a French medical doctor who specializes in forensics), wrote a book about the invasion of Southern France entitled, *Operation Dragoon, The Autopsy of a Battle, the Liberation of the French Riviera in August and September 1944*. During his research, Gassend interviewed Helma Schuska, daughter of *OberGefreiter*, (Seaman First Class), Otto Hessert of the German *Kriegsmarine*, (Navy), who explained what happened the day of the ambulance ambush. Schuska said that at the end of August 1944, her mother, Emma Hessert, was informed that on August 15, 1944, her husband, [Otto], who was sick, was being transported in an ambulance to a rear area when the ambulance was ambushed by the Americans and he was killed in action. But, in October 1944, her mother received a postcard in the mail from her husband stating he was in an American Prisoner of War Camp. After the war, Otto Hessert told his family that on August 15, 1944, he was sick and being transported to the rear in an ambulance when they encountered a roadblock set up by French Resistance Fighters. Hessert said there was a very young German Soldier in the ambulance who was armed and began firing from the ambulance. When the fighting started, Hessert made his way to a ditch and surrendered when the fighting ended. The bus was a legitimate ambulance but one soldier who kept his weapon made for a deadly situation.



This low quality photograph depicts the scene of the ambulance ambush in which Pvt. Gruwell was killed. Circa Mid-August 1944.



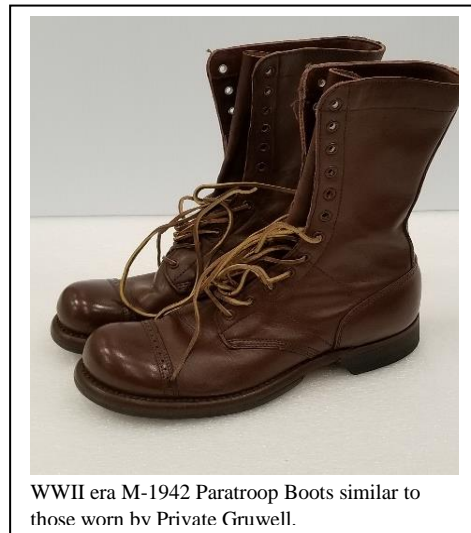
WWII era MK-2 hand grenade of the type used by Pvt. Gruwell.



Mitte: Otto Hessert * 1907, Weltkrieg II, Mittelmeer 1944
OberGefreiter, (Seaman 1st Class), Otto Hessert, (center), in 1944. He survived the ambush and firefight only to be taken prisoner.

The Aftermath – An Unknown Grave:

Private 1st Class [PFC], Clarence Karsten, “H” Company said in a later statement, that on August 17, 1944, he and PFCs Harold Tanner and Frank Istvanik, both of “G” Company, discovered the remains of an American soldier in the area of the ambush. No dog tags were found on the body. The deceased Soldier’s paratrooper boots were removed and stamped inside was the initial “G” followed by the numbers “7657.” (The letter “G” the first letter of Pvt. Gruwell’s last name and the numbers “7657,” the last four number of his Army Serial Number.) The Soldiers recognized this stamped information as belonging to Pvt. Gruwell. In addition, a BAR belt and clips were found nearby the body which helped to confirm Pvt. Gruwell’s identity as he was a BAR man. The body was left where it was found and the Soldiers went on their way. Evidently, Pvt. Gruwell was buried by unknown person(s) in a now unknown grave.



WWII era M-1942 Paratrooper Boots similar to those worn by Private Gruwell.

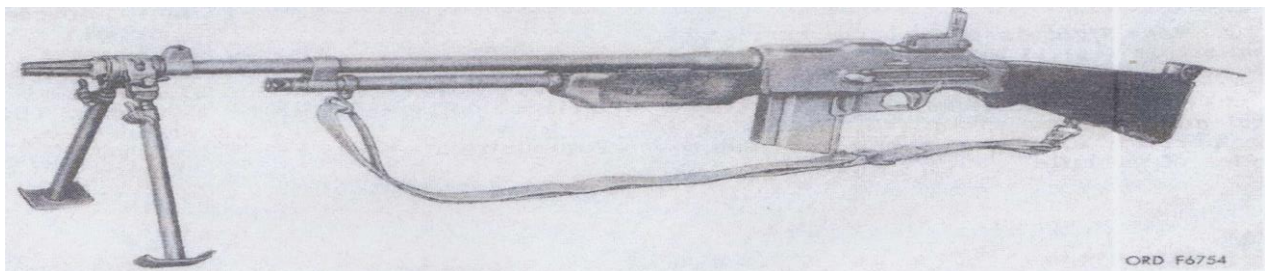
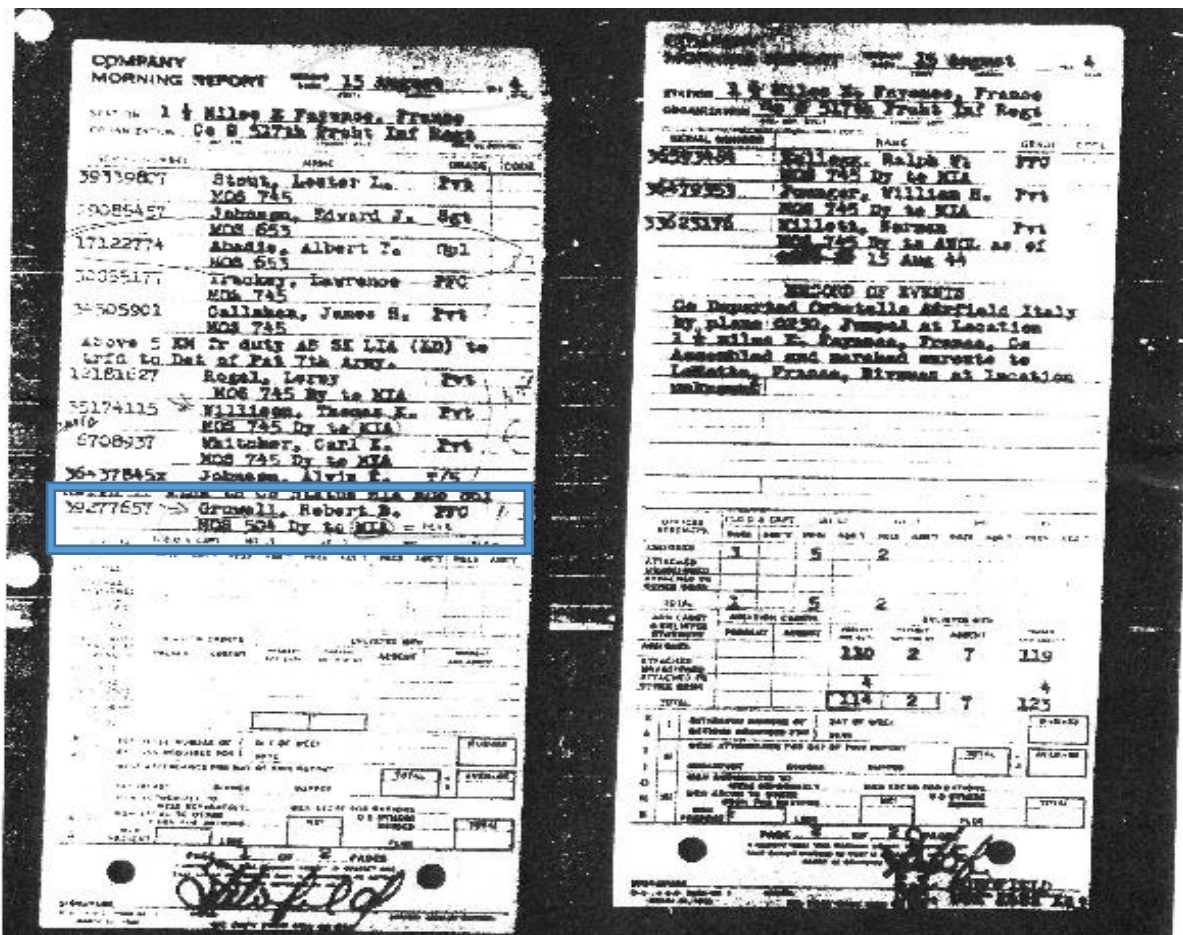


Figure 1 World War II era Model 1918A2, 30 Caliber Browning Automatic Rifle of the type used by Pvt. Gruwell.

As with many combat situations throughout history, reports of exactly what happened during a fight is muddled by varying reports by those who took part. This situation has become known as “the fog of war.” This was the case with the firefight in which Pvt. Gruwell was killed.

The closest the undated 517th PIR After Action Reports, (AARs), of the time comes to explaining what happened, simply states that 30 Germans were trapped on a highway in a bus and ambulance. The AARs stated that 5 Germans were killed, 9 wounded and 16 captured. The AARs also state that one American was wounded. There is no mention in the AARs of any American Soldier being killed. The truth of exactly what happened to Pvt. Gruwell will never be known – “lost in the fog of war.”

Company “G” (517th PIR), which was then stationed 1 ½ miles east of Fayence, France, on August 15, 1944, prepared its typewritten Company Morning Report listing Pvt. Gruwell as “Dy,” (Duty), and then to MIA (Missing in Action). Added sometime after the Morning Report was completed is a handwritten notation next to the MIA that states, “= KIA” (Killed in Action). The “Record of Events” section of the Morning Report states; “Co (Company), Departed Orbetello Airfield, Italy by plane 0230. Jumped at Location 1 ½ miles E. (East), Fayence, France...”



The Morning Report of “G” Company 517th PIR, dated August 15, 1944. The area of interest boxed in blue, lists PFC (Pvt.) Gruwell from “Dy”, (Duty) to MIA. To the right of this entry is a hand written but hard to see entry, “= KIA.”

The question of why Pvt. Gruwell’s body was never recovered, or at least placed in a temporary grave by his comrades is lost to history. Perhaps, after the firefight, the remaining paratroopers feared a German counterattack and left the area in an effort to join up with the rest of the regiment at le Muy. Perhaps they did not know Pvt. Gruwell has been killed. Was Pvt. Gruwell’s body lying in an area that was not easily seen? Was Pvt. Gruwell later buried by fellow troopers

who neglected to report the burial? Was Pvt. Gruwell buried by sympathetic Frenchmen who forgot where his grave was? Was Pvt. Gruwell buried by German troops who returned to the area once the Americans left? And, what happened to Pvt. Gruwell's dog tags? Generally, one dog tag is removed from the body and forwarded to the appropriate authorities and the other is left with the body along with an identification tag. Perhaps the situation was so rushed that someone, an American or a German Soldier, just grabbed the dog tags and left the area in a hurry. Another possibility is that Pvt. Gruwell's dog tags may have been blown off when the hand grenade exploded. If the spot where Pvt. Gruwell was killed could be located, perhaps his dog tags can be found still lying on the ground.

The War Ends – The Search for Pvt. Gruwell Begins:

For the men of the 517th PRCT and all allied fighting men, the fight continued. The 517th PRCT fought through France, Belgium and Germany. At the end of the war they returned home, married, found jobs and began raising families. Between October 1949 and June 1950, Investigators of the Graves Registration Command conducted a search for Pvt. Gruwell's remains. They thoroughly searched the area of the firefight and local villages all the way down to le Muy. They also interviewed military and civilian personnel to no avail.

In April and June 1950, they sent letters and a map of the area of the ambush to former PFCs Harold Tanner and Frank Istvanik requesting they provide a written statement of what they saw and did when they discovered the Soldier's remains on August 17, 1944. Neither of these men responded. In April 1950, the same letter and map was sent to former PFC Clarence Karsten. In May 1950, Karsten responded. He reconfirmed the story about them [he, Istvanik and Tanner], finding a deceased Soldier in the area of the ambush and determining the Soldier was Pvt. Gruwell by checking his paratrooper boots. Karsten then said that they discovered Pvt. Gruwell's body lying about 20 feet from the road on a 6 to 8 foot embankment. He said the body was on a road coming from Callian toward Draguignan, just over the highest ground. He also said that about a half dozen German vehicles had been destroyed in the immediate area. Karsten then said that Captain [Marvin D.] Morris, Commanding Officer of "H" Company recorded all of this information at the time. Karsten also circled the pertinent areas on the map he was given and returned it with his letter. It can be presumed that this map was used by the searchers to try and locate where Pvt. Gruwell was found. Sadly, this map appears to be missing. On December 14, 1950, the remains of Pvt. Robert R. Gruwell were determined to be non-recoverable and this status remains so to this day.

Veterans of the 517th PRCT:

From 1949 through 2016, veterans of the 517th PRCT held reunions around the country. To be sure many stories of their time in the Army were told...the intensive selection process to become a paratrooper...the very tough and demanding physical training...the first jump as a paratrooper...wondering when they would deploy to a combat zone...their first combat in Italy...becoming battle hardened veterans...their combat jump into Southern France...some funny...some sad... remembering those who gave their lives. It is certain that Pvt. Gruwell was remembered by some of his fellow Soldiers. Most assuredly some members wondered if Pvt. Gruwell's grave would ever be discovered and given his place of honor in a military cemetery or sent home to his family. Some veterans of the 517th PRCT wrote histories of the unit and its individual components; the 517th PIR, 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion and the 596th Parachute Engineer Company. The histories covered stateside training, first combat in Italy, Operation Dragoon and fighting throughout France, Belgium and the Battle of the Bulge, on into

Germany and the end of the war. These histories refer to Operation Dragoon in a general way and mention the ambush at the crossroads near Callian, France. But, none of these histories refers to Pvt. Gruwell or what they believe became of him. Since Pvt. Gruwell was a replacement paratrooper who most likely joined the 517th PIR just prior to the invasion of Southern France and, being killed in action on the very day of the invasion, he did not have the opportunity to develop any lasting friendships with his fellow Soldiers. However, Pvt. Gruwell was not forgotten by his compatriots.

Pvt. Gruwell Is Not Forgotten – The Search Continues:

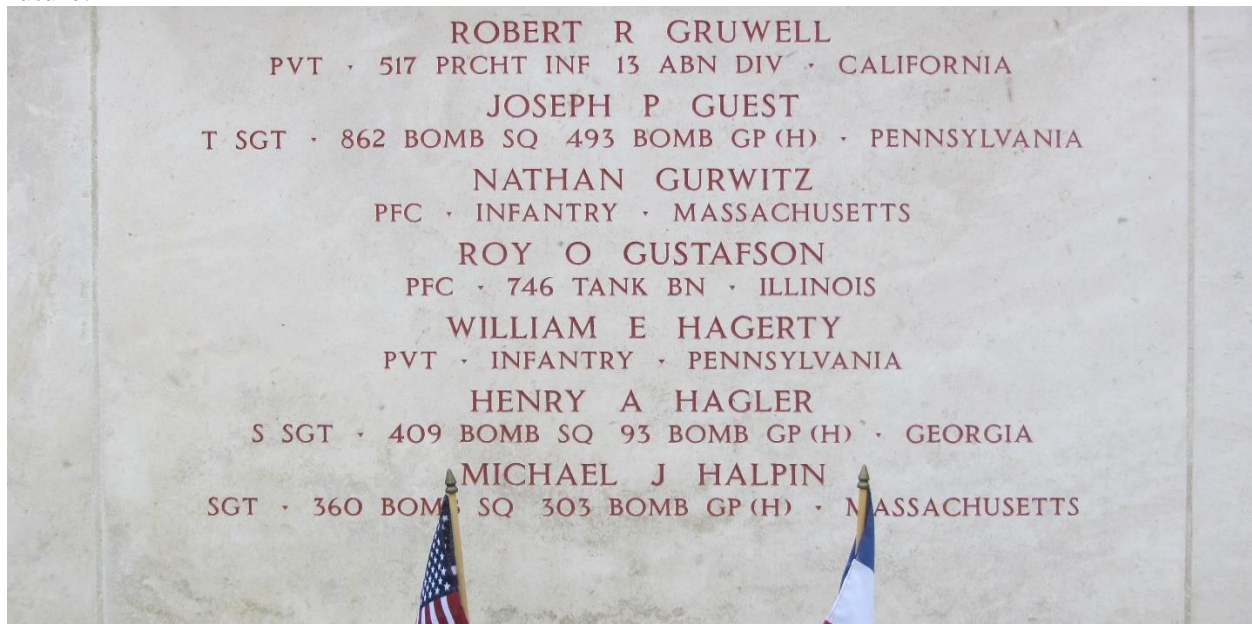
In about 1970, the 517th Veterans incorporated the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team Association, (Association), (www.517prct.org/association.htm), and elected Lt. Colonel William J. Boyle, former Commander, 1st Battalion, 517th PIR as its president. Officers of the Association published a newsletter known as *The Thunderbolt*, held reunions around the country and collected memorabilia from their members. In the mid-1990s, some members of the Association traveled back to Southern France to reunite with the civilians who helped them in the days when the invasion began and to try and locate Pvt. Gruwell's grave. They obtained from the Office of the Quartermaster General, a copy of Pvt. Gruwell's file, which had been compiled by the Graves Registration Command. They interviewed the mayors and residents of the local villages who might have any knowledge of Pvt. Gruwell and where he was buried. In spite of their efforts, the location of Pvt. Gruwell's grave remains a mystery. Pvt. Gruwell is the only member of the 517th PRCT who remains unaccounted for.

Pvt. Gruwell Memorialized:

Members of the Association requested through the Director of Memorial Programs, National Cemetery System, that a marker be placed in honor of Pvt. Gruwell. This marker should have been placed in the Rhone American Cemetery, Draguignan (Southern), France where Soldiers killed in action during the Invasion of Southern France are buried. But, Pvt. Gruwell's name, listing him as MIA, was placed on the "Tablets of the Missing" at the Brittany American Cemetery, Saint James, (Northeastern), France where Soldiers killed in action during the Normandy and Brittany Campaigns of 1944 are buried. Why Pvt. Gruwell's name was placed at this cemetery is a mystery.

In July 2002, Association members compiled all U.S. Army information they had concerning efforts to locate Pvt. Gruwell's grave and sent it to the Military History Institute, (MHI), at the Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA in an effort to make these records available to researchers should someone take up the search for Pvt. Gruwell. These records are now archived and are a permanent part of the holdings at the MHI. The surviving members of the 517th PIR may not remember Pvt. Gruwell personally during his short time with the regiment, but they never forgot the sacrifice he made for freedom and they ensured he will be memorialized into the

future.



Pvt. Gruwell is memorialized on the Tablet of the Missing at the Brittany American Cemetery, Saint James France.

The 517th PRCT Association is Disbanded:

Within the last few years the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team Association disbanded as an official corporation. They donated their assets to the Camp Toccoa/Currahee Military Museum in Toccoa, GA. In about 2009, former Pvt. Benedict J. Barrett, “H” Company, 517th PIR, created a web site, www.517prct.org, as a tribute page for the veterans and families of the 517th PRCT. Mr. Barrett also sent out a monthly newsletter to fellow veterans and their families called, “*Mail Call*.” At that time, Mr. Barrett said:

“I hope that our children and grandchildren will continue to remain in touch with each other. Our regiment was a brotherhood and learning about its contribution to World War II is important.”

Mr. Bennett passed away in 2010 but the web site tribute and the “*Mail Call*,” newsletter have been continued by Mr. Barrett’s son, Robert Barrett. Mr. Barrett’s wishes have been ensured and Pvt. Gruwell continues to be remembered. Pvt. Gruwell’s family, the veterans of the 517th PRCT, both living and deceased, along with their families, friends and the United States as a whole will not truly rest until Pvt. Gruwell is found and is buried with full military honors.

“They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old.
Age shall not wither them nor the years condemn.
But at the rising of the sun and the going down of the same,
We shall remember them.”

Charles Lynn Brown, Chaplin, Major
Regimental Chaplin, 517th PRCT

There is Hope:

In June 2017, acting on information provided by Jean-Loup Gassend, author of *Operation Dragoon, Autopsy of a Battle, The Allied Liberation of the French Riviera, August-September 1944*, members of the Department of Defense's POW/MIA Accounting Agency (www.dpaa.mil), contacted Mr. Barrett requesting information concerning Pvt. Gruwell because they were scheduled to go to the area of Montauroux, France and search for Pvt. Gruwell's remains. The information provided by Mr. Gassend was that sometime after the ambulance ambush in which Pvt. Gruwell was killed, his body was taken by French civilians to the village of Montauroux two kilometers away. They most likely took his body to Montauroux because there was an American aid station there. Pvt. Gruwell was buried in the Montauroux cemetery in one of a number of family plots. The exact plot is unknown as the civilians who buried him were all killed in some sort of "civil unrest" after the liberation of Montauroux. Members of the Graves Registration Command did not know Pvt. Gruwell was buried two kilometers away from where he was killed and consequently they never searched there. The "fog of war continues." Hopefully, they will find Pvt. Gruwell's remains and bring closure to his family and the remaining Veterans of the 517th PRCT.

RESEARCHING PVT. GRUWELL

In 2013, while researching World War II Soldier stories in the United States Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC), Military History Institute (MHI), Storage Bays, I was looking in a box labeled, "WWII Veterans Survey Collection, Airborne Separate Regiments/Battalions, Box 2 of 4." I noticed the 13th Folder in this box which was labeled, "13th Airborne Division, 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, Company G, Official Papers, Letters of Inquiry, Gruwell, Robert R. Pvt." The words, "Official Papers, Letters of Inquiry," caught my eye. I looked in the folder and found documents related to the combat death of Pvt. Gruwell and attempts made by the U.S. Army and the 517th PRCT Veterans to locate Pvt. Gruwell's remains. Immediately, I thought that Pvt. Gruwell's story should be told. I discussed my thoughts with my supervisor. He thought presenting Pvt. Gruwell's story was a good idea and that it should be written and presented on the USAHEC web site, (<http://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/>). He also suggested that I should document the research steps I took in writing the story which would give people some idea of the holdings of the Military History Institute and the Army Heritage Museum. This would give people an idea of how a Soldier's story is researched. While thinking about my next steps, I began thinking of Pvt. Gruwell's story from another direction.

Knowing that Pvt. Gruwell was initially listed as Missing in Action (MIA), then Killed in Action (KIA), I began thinking about the reaction of his family to this tragic news. Then, in 1950, I wondered about his family's reaction to being informed by the Army that not only was he KIA but his remains could not be located. Pvt. Gruwell's death in action was certainly bad enough news, but not knowing where his body lay must have been overwhelming. Pvt. Gruwell did not have a place of honor in a military cemetery nor was his family able to bring his body home for burial.

Certainly, Pvt. Gruwell's situation is not unique in history. Many a Soldier, Airman, Sailor, Marine and Coast Guardsmen are in the same situation. And, I am sure their families had a similar reaction to that of Pvt. Gruwell's family. In some cases, such as Sailors and Airmen lost at sea, their bodies will never be recovered. In other cases, efforts were made to locate the bodies or graves of others when they were lost on land and when located, were identified if possible and buried in a military cemetery or sent home for burial. In other cases, remains were found but never identified for one reason or another and they were buried as Unknowns. But, there are very

many cases similar to that of Pvt. Gruwell's when someone is known to have been killed, but that the location of their grave was lost to history. The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), in Washington, D.C. has a continuing effort to locate the remains and identify Americans killed from WWII onward. As of April 5, 2018, the DPAA Website Portal listed a total of 16,759 United States Army Personnel Not Recovered and a Grand Total of 72,934 of All Service Personnel Following WWII.

I thought that the tragic case of Pvt. Gruwell could be used as a representative example of the fate of so many American Servicemen killed in all wars. Many people here in the United States are certainly aware that when Soldiers go off to war that they may be wounded or even killed. Because of the "POW/MIA" efforts ongoing in today's world, these Servicemen and their families remain in the thoughts and prayers of the people of the United States and with the people in the countries that were liberated from tyranny by their sacrifices.

Researching the Military History Institute and the Army Heritage Museum (AHM):

My first task was to search the holdings of the MHI and the AHM for Pvt. Gruwell, anything related to the 517PIR/PRCT and Operation Dragoon. The MHI and AHM holdings include more than 1 million photographs, more than 865 thousand books, more than 20,000 linear feet of manuscript pages and more than 75,000 artifacts. I conducted a search through the USAHEC web site, <http://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/>, Library and Archives and found the following potential sources of information:

- The "WWII Veterans Survey Collection, Airborne Separate Regiments/Battalions, Box 2 of 4," the 13th Folder, labeled, "13th Airborne Division, 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, Company G, Official Papers, Letters of Inquiry, Gruwell, Robert R. Pvt.:"

This is the information that started my search for Pvt. Gruwell. This information was sent to the MHI by the 517th PRCT Historian Clark Archer in July 2002, for the benefit of the Army and future researchers. The information contained in this folder listed Pvt. Gruwell's basic personal information and reported on the events prior to and leading up to the invasion, the discovery of Pvt. Gruwell's body and subsequent identification by fellow Soldiers as described above. But, there was nothing specific about the ambulance ambush or how Pvt. Gruwell was killed. There were some rough maps of the area in question, one of which is included above showing the area where Pvt. Gruwell was killed and the area of the intended drop zone. There is a copy of the "G" Company Morning report, dated August 15, 1944 as shown above. There are statements made by French officials to the personnel of the Graves Registration Command while they were searching for Pvt. Gruwell's body. There are letters sent to French Officials by Mr. Archer in 1997 when the 517th PRCT in a further effort to locate Pvt. Gruwell. Mr. Archer recorded a few notes about a telephone conversation he had with a former member of the 517th PIR who also came to Italy as a replacement and requalified as a parachutist with Pvt. Gruwell before being assigned to the 517th PIR. The file also documented all of the Graves Registration Command's efforts to locate Pvt. Gruwell before determining that his remains were Non-Recoverable.

I was hoping to find at least one photograph of Pvt. Gruwell to help bring his story to life. I found and searched through the following collections at the MHI:

- Colonel (Col.) Rupert D. Graves Photograph Collection:

Col. Graves was the Commanding Officer of the 517th PIR WWII. There are 133 photographs in the box taken during Col. Graves' Army career including photographs concerning Operation Dragoon and the days after the invasion, but no photographs including Pvt. Gruwell were found and none were relevant to his story.

- Melvin Zias photograph collection:

Major Zias was the Commanding Officer of the 3rd Battalion, 517th PIR, to which Pvt. Gruwell belonged. There are 2,281 photographs in 18 boxes in this collection. There were no photographs of Pvt. Gruwell in this collection but many photographs leading up to, during and after the invasion of Southern France.

- The Thomas R. Cross photograph collection:

Major Cross was the Executive Officer of the 2nd Battalion, 517th PIR. There are 325 photographs in this collection but none relevant to Pvt. Gruwell's story.

- *First Airborne Task Force: A Pictorial History of the Allied Paratroopers in the Invasion of Southern France* by Michel De Tez:

There were no relevant photographs in this book.

- The WWII [Army] Signal Corps Photo Collection:

There were no photographs concerning the invasion of Southern France.

- *511 Pictorial Review of the Five 551, 1943*, written by several members of the 511th PIR to which Pvt. Gruwell was assigned prior to being transferred to the 517th PIR:

There is a very small photograph of Pvt. Gruwell in "C" Company. This photograph was too small to be used. At least I had a good idea of what he looked like.

- *Training Manual, TM 9-1005-208-35, Department of the Army Technical Manual, Rifle, Caliber .30, Automatic, Browning, M1918A2:*

I found the photograph of a Browning Automatic Rifle as shown above.

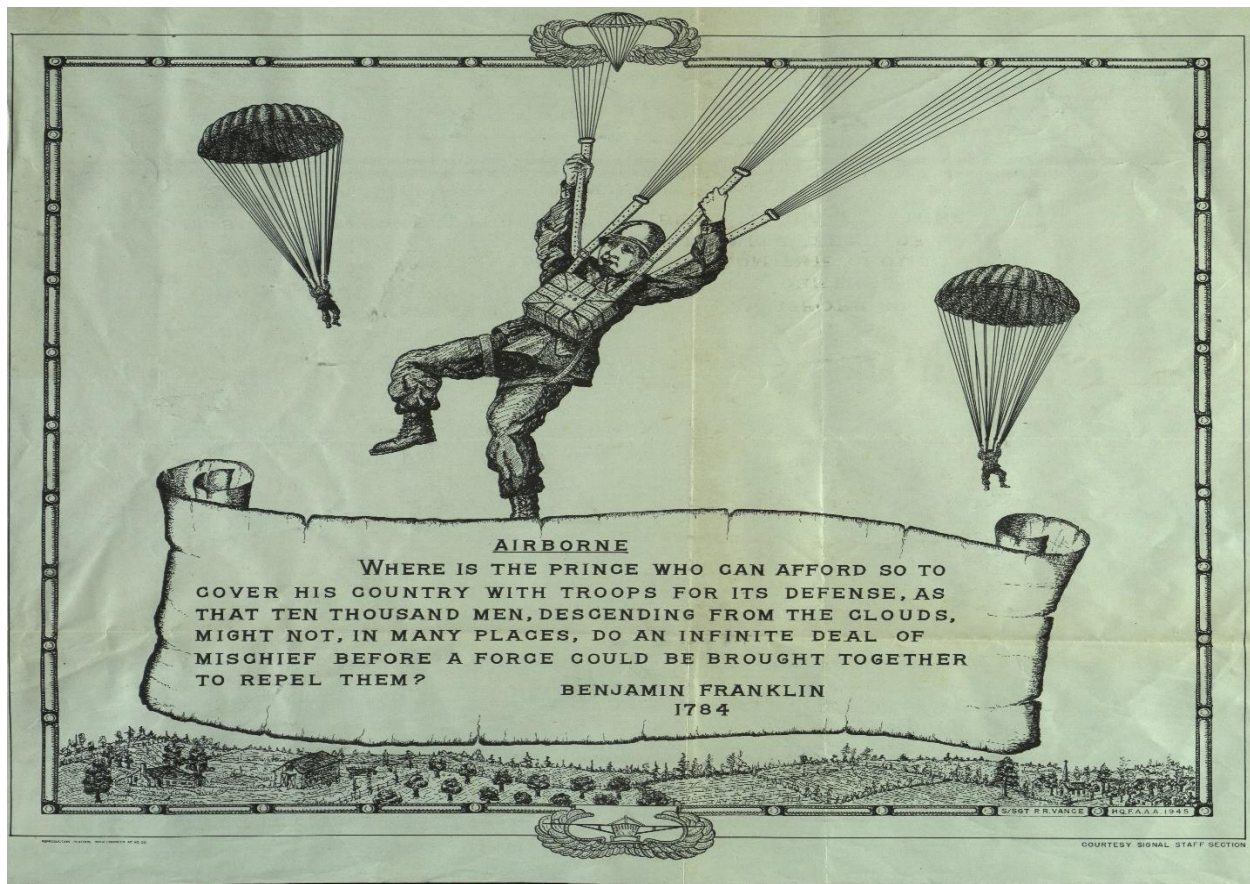
- The Army Heritage Museum supplied the below photographs for this story:

- 11th Airborne Division Shoulder Sleeve Insignia, Circa WWII.
- The Parachutist Badge.
- WWII era MK-2 hand grenade.
- M-1942 Paratrooper Boots.

I then searched the holdings of the MHI for archived papers and manuscripts:

- The Rupert D. Graves Papers, 1944 – 1953, One Box:

Col. Graves was the Commanding Officer of the 517th PIR during World War II. There are many papers, letters, citations and articles written by or sent to Col. Graves concerning the 517th PIR and Operation Dragoon, but there is no mention of Pvt. Gruwell or of he was killed. I did find a sketch in Folder 8, *Loose Clippings from WWII Scrapbook*, attributed to Benjamin Franklin concerning the concept of airborne troops in combat.



- Infantry – U.S. – 517th Regimental Combat Team Papers, 7 Boxes:

In the front of Box 1, labeled, La Chausee Memoir, Dearing Papers, MS (Manuscript), Unit History, *Trial by Fire*, I found a copy of *Trial by Fire*, written by Captain Charles E. La Chausee, former Commanding Officer of “B” Company, 517th PIR and Edited by Archer Clark, Unit Historian. In Chapter II-(Page) 15, was the information renaming Operation Anvil to Operation Dragoon. Chapter II-17 gave information that additional troops were requested from the United States. This was most likely the situation that sent Pvt. Gruwell to the 517th PIR as a replacement paratrooper. Chapter II-19 also gave information concerning the establishment of Le Muy, France as the designated drop zone for the 517th PRCT. Chapter III discusses the preparations for the paratroop assault, take off from Italy and subsequent airdrop of the troops over very foggy terrain which caused most of the paratroopers to be dropped far from the designated drop zone. In Box 2, William J. Lewis, Unit History Documents, of the 517th PRCT Papers in Folder 4, William J. Lewis; Support Material for Unit History, I found the poem, “They shall grow old...,” above written by Charles Lynn Brown, Chaplin, Major, Regimental Chaplin, 517th PRCT. The above was the only information throughout these 7 boxes I could find that were even remotely concerned with the story of Pvt. Gruwell.

- *Report on Airborne Operations in Dragoon*, by the Allied Forces, Mediterranean Theater, Allied Force Headquarters, 25 October 1944:

This report confirmed that the First Airborne Task Force (FABTF), was given a five percent overstrength in personnel by the use of replacement paratroopers. The report also confirms the heavy fog in the area of the parachute drop.

- The below listed collection of papers within the MHI were searched with negative results:
 - Robert E. Coffin Papers, 2003, one box.
 - The Cross Family Papers, 1865-1981, 6 boxes.

- William B. Goddard Papers, 1944-1982 (1944-1945), one box.
- Oscar S. Reeder Papers, 1955, one box.
- Robert E. Seale Papers, 1999-2001, one folder.
- *Operation Dragoon, Autopsy of a Battle, The Allied Liberation of the French Riviera, August-September 1944* by Jean-Loup Gassend:

Mr. Gassend very graciously sent me the portrait photograph of Pvt. Gruwell and the photograph of OberGefreiter (Seaman First Class), Otto Hessert shown above.

Mr. Gassend also very graciously allowed me to use the material in his book to write Pvt. Gruwell's story:

- Chapter 3 - The Operation Dragoon Parachute Drops:

This chapter describes the composition of the First Airborne Task Force along with a brief history of the units involved. This Chapter describes the preparations for the parachute drops, the type of parachutes used and the uniforms and equipment carried by each Soldier. Mr. Gassend recounts the reminiscences of many of the Soldiers, both American and German, as well as French Resistance Fighters and civilians.

- Chapter Four – The Unintentional Parachute Drops in the Fayence and Montauroux Region:

This chapter describes the highway layout in the area and the firefight in which Pvt. Gruwell was killed. Included are reminiscences of many of the paratroopers involved to give the reader a sense of the confusion encountered during combat. This is the chapter that describes the ambulance ambush in which Pvt. Gruwell was killed.

- The below listed books within the MHI were searched with negative results:
 - *517 Parachute Combat Team*, Paris: Schneider & Cie, publisher, (1945?)
 - *Battling Buzzards: the Odyssey of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team, 1943-1945*, 1993, by Gerald Astor.
 - *Chronicle, 517 Parachute Regimental Combat Team: 517 Parachute Infantry Regiment, 460 Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, 596 Parachute Combat Engineer Company: Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, between 1980 and 1984*, by Archer Clark.
 - *Invasion of Southern France: Report of Naval Commander, Western Task Force, 1944*, by Henry H. Hewitt.
 - *Operation Dragoon*, Norfolk, Va.: Armed Forces Staff College, publisher, 1948.
 - *Operation Dragoon: the Allied invasion of the south of France*, 1987, by William B. Breuer.
 - *Operation Anvil Directives*, 1944, by A. M. Patch.
 - *Operation Dragoon 1944: France's Other D-Day*, 2009, by Steve Zaloga.
 - *Report by the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean, to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the Operation in Southern France, August 1944*, Washington, U. S. Government printing Office, publisher, 1946.
 - *The Champagne Campaign*, 1969, by Robert H. Aldeman.
 - *The French Riviera Campaign of August 1944*, 1981, by Alan F. Wilt.
 - *The Invasion of Southern France, Operation Dragoon*, Armed Forces Staff College, publisher, 1949.
 - *The Strategic Consideration of the Allied Invasion of Southern France, 1944*, by Carl R. Morin.

Researching Outside Sources for Information Concerning Pvt. Gruwell:

At this point I had exhausted all of the sources within the holdings of the MHI and AHM and realized that I would have to search sources outside the MHI and AHM.

I did an internet search for any web site related to Operation Dragoon, the 517th PIR or 517th PRCT or an association of those units and this is what I found:

- www.517prct.org/association:

This is the unofficial tribute page of the 517th PRCT. This site listed the officers of the Association between 1970 and 2013 and the by-laws. The site is not active any longer.

- www.517prct.org:

This is the site maintained by Bob Barrett. I sent a message to Mr. Barrett through the site's "Mail Call" newsletter asking if they had a photograph of Pvt. Gruwell. I was informed that an author in France named Jean-Loupe Gassend (a doctor specializing in forensics), was writing a book about Operation Dragoon and it was believed that he (Mr. Gassend), had a photograph of Pvt. Gruwell.

Mr. Barrett informed me in a general way that this site was created when the Association was disbanded as a continuation of the tribute to the 517 PRCT. The site offered a lot of information concerning the formation of parachute regiments, their training and combat experiences, a lot of photographs and personal reminiscences of the veterans. I read through the 517th Unit Overview, the Short History and the History and Archival pages for information. This information was valuable in telling Pvt. Gruwell's story in that there was some new information or confirmed information from other sources that I already knew. I also found several After Action Reports (AARs), (also known as Record of Events), from many of the Companies of the 517th PRCT. The AARs of the 517th PIR "G", Regimental Headquarters and Service Companies gave information concerning the departure from Italy on the morning of August 15, 1944. The AARs also mention the firefight at the intersection south of Callian, France but only in a very general way. There is no mention of American troops being wounded or killed.

I did locate an incomplete collection of "G" Company Morning Reports (MRs), for the period, June 1 through October 2, 1944. The MR for June 11, 1944 states that Pvt. Gruwell and 12 other Soldiers were assigned to the Airborne Training Center (Sicily, Italy), as of June 5, 1944 and they would join the 517th PIR by July. On August 12, 1944 the 517th PIR was moved to Orbetello Field, Italy and remained there until they departed by air for the invasion of Southern France on August 14, 1944. As shown above, the MR dated August 15, 1944, lists Pvt. Gruwell as "Dy," (Duty), to MIA, (Missing In Action)," but without the added handwritten notation next to the MIA that states, "= KIA" (Killed In Action), which was added sometime later. The 517th PIR left the Callian / Montauroux area on August 22, 1944. Unfortunately, the MRs for the "H," Service and Regimental Headquarters Companies are not available at this time. Perhaps one of those MR will give useful information concerning Pvt. Gruwell's death and burial.

On the site I found the above photograph that depicts the aftermath of the Ambulance Ambush in which Pvt. Gruwell was killed. The photograph was taken by Lt. Warren Caulfield of "F, H and I" Companies. The photograph was submitted to the site by Lt. Caulfield's daughter, Shelly Caulfield Azeff, who very graciously granted permission to use the photograph.

Additionally, Bob Bennett also allowed me to copy the 517th PIR Pocket Insignia, circa WWII as shown above.

- LTC Thomas F. Finley III, United States Army (Ret.): Gave the information that the 517th PIR was an independent Parachute Infantry Regiment. LTC Finley also provided the photograph of the First Airborne Task Force shoulder insignia which was worn by his father, First Sergeant Thomas F. Finley, Jr., Headquarters Battery, 460th Parachute Field Artillery

Battalion, 517th PRCT. On August 15, 1944, upon parachuting into Southern France during Operation Dragoon, First Sergeant Finley fractured his fibula and tibia when he landed. First Sergeant Finley was transported to Italy for treatment and then to the United States for further treatment. He was discharged from the Army as the result of his injuries

- Tribute site of the 11th Airborne Division and 511th PIR, www.users.owt.com/leodonna:

This is a tribute site maintained by Leo F. Kocher, for members and families of the 11th Airborne Division and the 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment to which Pvt. Gruwell was assigned prior to being transferred to the 517th PIR. Mr. Kocher told me that Pvt. Gruwell was most likely sent to the 517th PIR as a replacement paratrooper. Mr. Kocher then told me of the existence of the *511 Pictorial Review of the Five 551, 1943*, which was written by several members of the 511th PIR. A copy is held by the MHI in which there is a photo of Pvt. Gruwell. Additionally, Mr. Kocher allowed me to copy the 511th PIR Pocket Insignia, Circa WWII as shown above.

- National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, MO, www.archives.gov:

I requested a copy of Pvt. Gruwell's Official Military Personnel File. What I received was a photocopy of the memorial to Pvt. Gruwell from the American Battle Monuments Commission, Tablets of the Missing, Brittany American Cemetery, St. James, France. I also received a very blurry and hard to read copy of a letter dated March 10, 1945 from the European Theater of Operations to the War Department referring to Pvt. Gruwell and that a report would follow in 15 days. It is most likely that the remainder of Pvt. Gruwell's Army Personnel File was destroyed in a fire in 1973.

- U.S. Army Human Resources Command, Fort Knox, KY, <https://www.hrc.army.mil>:

I requested a copy of Pvt. Gruwell's Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF). Within the IDPF I did find copies of the letters to PFCs Frank Istvanik, Clarence Karsten and Harold Tanner in April and June 1950. These letters also included a map of the area in which Pvt. Gruwell was killed as described above. The IDPF also included a copy of Mr. Karsten's letter which describes finding Pvt. Gruwell's body along with a map of the area where his body was found as noted above. Pvt. Gruwell's IDPF also contained a list of all of the Army posts to which he was assigned in the United States and his dental chart which may prove useful should his remains be found.

- American Battle Monuments Commission, ABMC, (www.abmc.gov):

Since Pvt. Gruwell was memorialized at a cemetery in France. I searched for his name on the ABMC web site. The site also told me that Pvt. Gruwell was memorialized in the Brittany American Cemetery, Saint James, France (<https://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials/europe/brittany-american-cemetery#.WpWro0xFxdg>). The ABMC sent me the photograph of the panel of the Tablets of the Missing on which Pvt. Gruwell is memorialized. But, there remained a big question in my mind as to why Pvt. Gruwell is memorialized in the Saint James Cemetery in Northern France when he should have been memorialized in the Rhone American Cemetery, Draguignan (Southern), France where Veterans of the invasion of Southern France are honored.

- Find A Grave, (www.findagrave.com):

The site had Pvt. Gruwell's Army portrait photograph as shown above and a photograph of his name on the Tablets of the Missing at the Brittany American Cemetery, St. James, France. What I read on the site astonished me and sent me on a tangent that I never expected. In addition to a general description of how he was killed, I found this information:

“The reason his name is on the Wall of the Missing in Brittany is because his brother Roy, who was assigned to the 18th Infantry Regt of the First Infantry Regiment [sic] [Division], was killed the day before on August 14.”

The “brother” Pvt. Gruwell’s Find a Grave page is talking about is Technical Sergeant (TSgt.), Roy A. Gruwell, Jr. TSgt. Gruwell’s Find a Grave page states he entered the Army from California, the same state as Pvt. Gruwell, died on August 14, 1944 and is interred at the Brittany American Cemetery, St. James, France. If the information about these two Soldiers is true, that they are brothers, this fact makes the whole story much more compelling.

I sent a message through the Find a Grave site to the ABMC asking for any and all documents that may exist showing these two Soldiers are brothers. Apparently, there are no documents showing these two soldiers are brothers. The answer I got was that the family said they were brothers. Who in the Gruwell family made this assertion is unknown.

- American Battle Monuments Commission, ABMC, (www.abmc.gov):

TSgt. Gruwell’s page states that he was from California, was assigned to the 18th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division and died on August 14, 1944. There is no reference to his having a brother on this site.

- National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, MO, www.archives.gov:

I requested TSgt. Gruwell’s Official Military Personnel File in the hopes there would be information showing a relationship existed between TSgt. and Pvt. Gruwell. I was informed the file no longer exists as it was most likely destroyed in a fire in 1973.

- U.S. Army Human Resources Command, Fort Knox, KY, <https://www.hrc.army.mil>

I requested a copy of TSgt. Gruwell’s Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF). He was born in 1917 and entered the Army in early 1941 at San Luis Obispo, CA. TSgt. Gruwell was killed in action on August 14, 1944.

I had hopes that his IDPF would identify his parents and possibly siblings to match what I knew about Pvt. Gruwell. (Pvt. Gruwell’s files listed his mother, Virginia Bunkofske and a sister of the same name. But there is no father listed. He was born in 1923 and lived in Los Angeles, CA at the time he entered the Army.) TSgt. Gruwell’s IDPF lists his wife, Pauline Gruwell, who had since remarried, his father, Roy A. Gruwell, Sr., and his sister, Dorothy L. (Gruwell) Winters. But, there is no mother listed.

Were Roy A. Gruwell, Sr. and Virginia Bunkofske married at some time and then divorced? Were they never married but had sons, Roy A, Jr. and Robert R. and then separated. It is obvious that Virginia Bunkofske married sometime after Robert was born. It is most likely that all of the principals involved in the story are deceased and not knowing of any living relatives, I had to use whatever online resources available to find a connection between Pvt. Robert R. Gruwell and TSgt. Roy A. Gruwell, Jr.

- Ancestry web site, www.ancestry.com:
- Family Search web site, www.familysearch.org:
- Fold 3 web site, www.fold3.com:

These three sites and some lesser sites, were extensively searched for any birth, marriage, divorce, death or census records which could possibly prove that Pvt. Robert R. Gruwell and TSgt. Roy A. Gruwell, Jr. are brothers or at least half brothers. In a nutshell, I have not been able to find any information whatsoever that they are brothers. I did discover that TSgt. Gruwell’s younger sister Dorothy L. (Gruwell) Winters’ mother was not Virginia (Gruwell?) Bunkofske, but they may still have a mother and father in common. It is, however, more likely that they are not related. A lot more searching and perhaps some good luck has to go into this question, but I must call a halt at this point.

Conclusion:

I could not have written the story of Pvt. Gruwell without the very kind assistance and encouragement of the archivists, curators and librarians at the Military History Institute and the Army Heritage Museum. They cheerfully pulled books and manuscript boxes for me, scanned photographs, shared their knowledge and made suggestions to help tell this story. I hesitate to name these many people only out of the fear that I may leave someone out. Thanks so very much to them all.

I also could not have written the story of Pvt. Gruwell without the very kind assistance of Jean-Loup Gassend, author of *Operation Dragoon, Autopsy of a Battle, The Allied Liberation of the French Riviera, August-September 1944*. He never got tired of my constant emails and freely allowed me to quote from his book and use photographs. Anyone interested in World War II in general or Operation Dragoon in particular, should read his book. One of the best researched and written books I have ever read. For more information, refer to Mr. Gassend's blog, www.autopsyofabattleblogspot.com. Thank you very much.

Thanks to Bob Barrett who maintains the 517th PRCT tribute page, www.517prct.org. Mr. Barrett also never tired of my many emails. He shared my questions and information with the members and gave suggestions. Much of the information about Operation Dragoon I got from this tribute site in the form of After Action Reports and Morning Reports and the photograph of the World War II era 517th PIR pocket patch. The membership also put me in touch with Mr. Gassend who was an invaluable resource. Mr. Barrett lovingly and willingly puts much time and effort into maintaining this tribute site carrying on his father's wishes. Many thanks.

Through Mr. Barrett and the 517th PRCT tribute site, I received permission from Shelly Caulfield Azeff to use the photograph of the aftermath of the ambulance ambush taken by her father, Lt. Warren Caulfield, in which Pvt. Gruwell was killed. Thank you.

Thanks also to LTC Thomas F. Finley III, U.S. Army (Ret.), for the information that the 517th PIR was an independent regiment and for the FABTF shoulder insignia worn by his father, First Sergeant Thomas F. Finley, Jr, 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, 517th PRCT.

Finally, my thanks to Leo F. Kocher who maintains the tribute site of the 11th Airborne Division and the 511th PIR, www.users.owt.com/leodonna, who pointed me to the 511th PIR yearbook for 1943 with Pvt. Gruwell's photograph and also giving me permission to use the World War II era of the 511th PIR pocket Patch.

I chose to write the story of Pvt. Robert R. Gruwell to be a representative example of the stories of so many American Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, Marines and Coast Guardsmen who suffered a similar fate. I hoped that during my writing of his story I could report that his remains had been found and interred in a military cemetery or repatriated to the United States. That has not happened...yet! I also hoped that I could definitively say that Pvt. Robert R. Gruwell and TSgt. Roy A. Gruwell, Jr. were brothers since this fact would make this story even more compelling as they were killed in Action in France just one day apart. I have to assume at this point that they are most likely not related genealogically, but are related in the sense that they both served their country with dignity and honor and made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of freedom.

Update, June 2018:

In June 2018, Amanda Neal, Office Manager of the Army Heritage Center Foundation in Carlisle, PA offered to do genealogical research to determine one way or the other if Pvt. Robert R. Gruwell and TSgt. Roy A. Gruwell, Jr. were brothers, related in some other way, or not related at all. Amanda has extensive experience in such research, as she has researched her family going back many generations.

Amanda has determined conclusively that Pvt. Robert R. Gruwell and TSgt. Roy A. Gruwell, Jr. are not brothers or even step-brothers. Some of Pvt. Gruwell's and TSgt. Gruwell's descendants have been traced back to Indiana and California, but no common ancestors were found. The possibility exists that they may be distant cousins, but much more research would have to be done.

Still left unanswered is the question of which of Pvt. Gruwell's relatives told the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), that Pvt. Gruwell and TSgt. Gruwell were brothers. This question may never be answered as it appears there is no record of any communication between a member of Pvt. Gruwell's family and the ABMC.

As I said in my conclusion...that they are most likely not related genealogically, but are related in the sense that they both served their country with dignity and honor and made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of freedom.