



## 517<sup>th</sup> Parachute Regimental Combat Team



PARACHUTE REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM

### MailCall No. 2016

October 11, 2010

*517th Parachute Infantry Regiment  
460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion  
596th Parachute Combat Engineer Company*

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### *Earnest Gilbert, F Company*

I have the unfortunate task of advising of the loss of another 517 Warrior. I was advised on October 9, 2010, by Wade Gilbert, of the departure of his father **Earnest (Earnie) Gilbert**. I learned over the many years how deeply Wade Gilbert, and the family loved their father. As with the Gilbert family, our friendship with him made a better person of all of us. He possessed an uncanny ability to express sentiments we all shared, however were unable to put into words. Earnie did that on every occasion with a laugh leaving most of us saying, "I wish I could have said that."

His most memorable statement to the question, "Were you in the war?" He replied, "Oh, we certainly were. They called it WWII. You probably heard about it. It was in all the newspapers."

Three of us served in the same 517th, Parachute Infantry squad, from it's initial organization in 1943, to all of the conflicts, until the end in 1945. The three, **Gary Davis, Earnie, and myself** shared many frozen buried foxholes. None us us would have made it through the night's without sharing the warmth of each others bodies lying on the ground. Remember, our troops (with few exceptions) fought with totally inadequate winter equipment. I speak of no sleeping bags, no poncho's (only the German's possessed poncho's, boots, and adequate winter equipment), no ground pads, poorly designed gloves, no parka's, and boots that were quite adequate in preserving the airborne ego in garrison – however, a disaster in sub-freezing and wet conditions. I speak of this today being an experienced mountaineer. I realize we survived together. At this moment with my best friends recently departed, their warmth, has allowed me to exist to this today. They and all the men of the 517 were good soldiers, good fathers and great men. I feel their presence. Thank you Gary, and Earnie, for your friendship. We all love you. May you rest in peace.

PFC Gene Frice 2nd Platoon, F Company



**Earnest and Mary Gilbert  
Sparks, NV 1991**



**Click below for Earnie's interview for The 517<sup>th</sup> Movie "A Cut Above"**

**[Interview with Earnest Gilbert](#)**



## *Two WWII Soldiers Meet*

### **World War II Memories, and an Instant Connection**

Just before Benjamin Klein's open-heart surgery, his surgeon told him not to be afraid. Mr. Klein, who is 90, scoffed.

"He said, 'There's nothing you can do that I can't get through — I've been through Normandy,' " recalled the surgeon, Dr. Leonard Girardi.

That could have been construed as puffery to some civilians, but not to the man in the next bed, Victor Allegretti, 86, who later heard Mr. Klein tell hospital staff members about his war service.

"My ears perked up like a canary," said Mr. Allegretti, who took such interest because he, too, fought in Normandy during World War II.

The two old soldiers began talking and realized they shared more than that. They were both in the 82nd Airborne Division of the United States Army, and both rode gliders, in flights several hours apart, into battle on June 6, 1944 — D-Day.

Those flimsy aircraft were crucial to the success of the invasion forces at Normandy's Utah Beach. They were towed by plane from England, soaring over the beaches, and were dropped down under heavy enemy fire to skid dangerously onto the blood-stained fields and into the raging combat of the historic fight.

And so two old soldiers, who stormed Normandy 66 years ago, had serendipitously crossed paths in a preoperation room at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center on the Upper East Side, awaiting another daunting situation: open-heart surgery, which for the elderly can be especially risky.

In that room, they shared D-Day memories and realized "we could literally have been a mile away from each other," Mr. Klein said.

Meeting for the first time last week, they struck an immediate connection, having both made it through some of the bloodiest battles in military history.

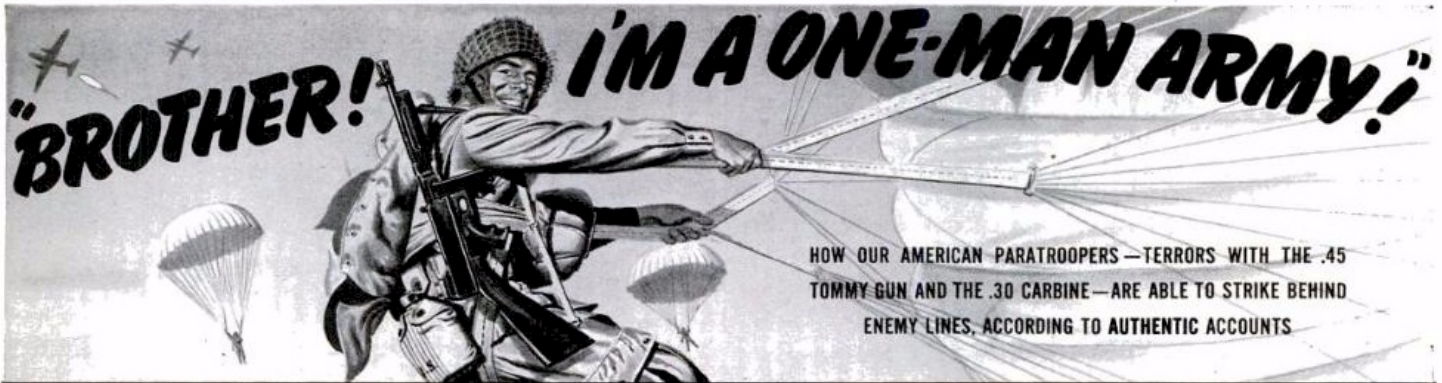
[Read the full story from the New York Times here](#)

**Next page is from Life Magazine 1944**





# 517<sup>th</sup> Parachute Regimental Combat Team



HOW OUR AMERICAN PARATROOPERS—TERRORS WITH THE .45 TOMMY GUN AND THE .30 CARBINE—ARE ABLE TO STRIKE BEHIND ENEMY LINES, ACCORDING TO AUTHENTIC ACCOUNTS



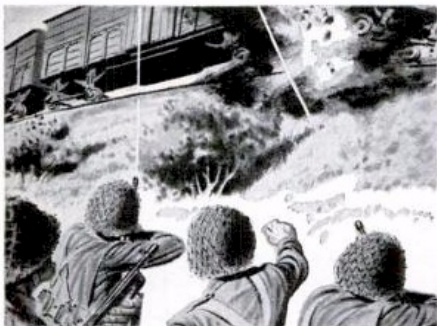
**"H" hour is midnight.** Yes, you're a paratrooper. You thought you were good—until you got overseas and the final training began. 'Chute jumps over simulated enemy objectives, hours of crawling on your belly under live ammunition . . . hours checking your gear. Now you're keyed for the big moment. *This is it!*



**"Go!" shouts the jumpmaster.** And you hit the silk. Then, with the sweetest jolt you ever felt, your 'chute canopies. In 15 seconds you'll drop the 500 feet to enemy territory. You're bulging with grenades, knife, compass, water, K rations—everything from sulfa pills to "ammo" clips. Brother, you're a one-man army!



**You're a Tommy gunner.** You cover your group landing . . . chase off a Nazi patrol with hot bursts. This allows your boys time to collect the precious, watertight boxes of "ammo" and supplies. You divide up this stuff . . . load a fresh clip of shells into your .45 or light powerful .30 . . . and hike for your objectives.



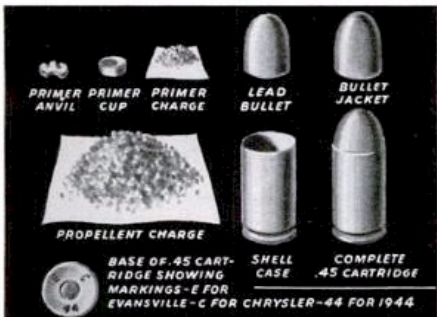
**Roaring toward the front,** an enemy ammunition train is spotted by aerial observation. You get the report and cut across country to intercept it. No time for demoralization, so you fling grenades at the wheels . . . pour in Tommy gun and carbine fire. The "ammo" train plunges wildly, catches fire. You push on.



**Nazi counter-attack** drives toward a vital bridge. Your comrades lay down protective fire as you move in. Then, at a 650 shots-per-minute rate, your Tommy gun really blasts 'em. And every enemy fighter hit with a .45 bullet really goes down! The Germans pull out, and your "demo squad" blows the bridge sky high.



**Clearing the way into "X".** Your job was to destroy communications. You never expected to capture a town. But here you are. Grenades got three Mark IV's. You'll wash up the snipers with Tommy guns and carbines—nothing like 'em for close work. Then, wait'll the General finds you sitting in the town hall!



**46 stages of manufacture** and 334 inspections are required to produce each bullet. Each has 7 parts. The finished bullets must be scratch-free—dimensionally exact to within .001 of an inch. Chrysler Corporation's Evansville Ordnance Plant is turning out millions of these bullets a day for our fighters the world over.



**Test firing for accuracy,** velocity, pressure and function is vital among the precautions Chrysler Corporation takes to assure perfect ammunition. Chrysler Corporation was the first to produce in quantity small arms ammunition with steel cartridge cases for combat use by the United States Army.



**Chrysler Corporation plants** are producing tanks, trucks, ammunition, guns and other war equipment. These same plants in peacetime built the Plymouth, Dodge, De Soto and Chrysler passenger cars and Dodge Job-Rated trucks now providing America with essential transportation. BUY MORE WAR BONDS.





## *Name That Trooper*

Our mystery trooper was a Sgt. from the 3rd Platoon of the 596th Parachute Engineer Company. He spent a great deal of his time in the pursuit of removing unexploded munitions such as mines, bombs and other objects that go "BOOM". He must have had nerves of steel as he was awarded the Bronze Star for gallantry for diffusing a 500 lb. bomb that had been dropped from an aircraft and evidently had a faulty timing device. That is a job that will definitely test your pucker power.

During the Champagne Campaign the 596th and Sgt. X were called on to remove thousands of Teller Mines laid by the enemy in the area of the Nice Airport. He was quickly able to assess that the mines could not be successfully diffused so the only way to remove them was to very gently stack them in the back of large trucks for transport to more unpopulated areas. Many of the mines were used as explosives to demolish the remaining concrete walls and placements in the area. Many were detonated in the ocean. While Sgt. X was working several hundred yards away from the truck loading area there was a tremendous explosion that rocked the whole country side. The explosion deafened many soldiers that were a long distance from the blast site. People were pelted with debris and fragments from hundreds of yards away. Something had gone terribly wrong. The only way that a personnel loss count could be done was for Lt. Zavattero to call a formation and do a roll call. They had lost six dead and many injured. This loss of life added to the man killed on the jump, plus one man killed in a jeep accident came to a total of eight dead.

Another duty that our mystery trooper drew was near the Var river area where they were asked to remove unexploded ordnance in the form of 155 mm artillery shells that the Germans had strategically placed on poles strung together by wire spaced a few feet apart across the dry bed of the Var River. They were suspended by wire attached to the nose piece with a spring loaded detonator, the shells were allowed to dangle below freely. These were anti-paratrooper and anti-glider defense mechanisms. Crude but effective. Diffusing these took three men, one to gently hold the piece, one to line up the safety pin hole of the nose piece with the body and one man to insert the safety pin and snip the wire attached to the nose. This area was now desperately needed as a pathway for jeep and supply vehicles through the Var River bottom area. The best friend of our Sgt-X was a fellow by the name of Howie Janes, and he drew the unlucky duty of removing this particular hazard along with troopers, Ernie Coffelt and Leonard Mathis. Something went terribly wrong and the ensuing explosion killed all three troopers instantly. After getting the news that 3 of his men had been killed, Sgt. X went immediately to the explosion site to stay with the remains of his men until a Graves Registration crew arrived. He wanted to be there because the explosion of ordnance of this type is very powerful and the explosive force is directed in a completely horizontal path, meaning that only legs and torso's of the men were left for identification. He stayed to make sure that his men were correctly ID'ed. This brought the body count to eleven dead for the 596th.

Our mystery trooper was called to action once more as the war was winding down when the 517th discovered what would later become known as the largest mine field encountered in Europe during WWII. Near the Schmidt - Bergstein area where the Germans had been roused out by the 517th. That is when 517th troopers discovered through trial and error that the Germans had literally laid thousands of every type of land mine that they had in their arsenal. Our trooper and



his men were asked to clear a path for the 517th to get through the area. This would prove to be one monumental task according to Sgt.X. "We laid a white tape line and cleared a foot and a half on each side of it as we went. We went 36 hours straight without a let up." This mine field took a terrible toll on the personnel of the 517th as over 200 men became casualties, over one quarter of their previous troop strength. It took three days of non stop day and night probing and digging during harassing mortar fire to clear a small passage way to safety. Once again the 517th lived up to their reputation of getting the tough jobs done.

Our mystery trooper spent his last months of military duty serving with the 82nd A/B in Berlin as a member of the 82nd A/B football team. They played their games in the Olympic Stadium there. He later married and settled in California. He served one term as president of the 517th PRCT Association. Do you think you know this gentleman ?

"NephewOfABuzzard"

Answer to last week's Name That Trooper ([MailCall #2015](#)): Lt. Col. Dick Seitz, of course.

## *Administrivia*

- If you miss any MailCalls, they are all available online at <http://www.517prct.org/mailcall/>
- At any time, if you want to be added or removed from the MailCall list, just let me know.
- Send any news, stories, or feedback to: [MailCall@517prct.org](mailto:MailCall@517prct.org)
- If you send me email that you do not want included in MailCall, just label it as FYEO.
- I now understand how Ben could get confused about what he already posted and what he didn't. If I miss something, please just send it again.
- Donations for any programs involving the 517th should be sent to our treasurer:  
Leo Dean  
14 Stonehenge Lane  
Albany, NY 12203

***Save the date!***

**Annual 517th Reunion (probably the last one)**

**July 13-18, 2011  
Atlanta, GA**

**with visits to Camp Toccoa and Fort Benning**